

Reflections on Piedmont Project Syllabus Design

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I began the summer with a rough syllabus in mind for a course on “American Literature and the Transformation of the Environment.” I saw it as a course that would trace the historical evolution of environmental consciousness in American literature from the period of industrialization onward, and that would introduce some key terms in eco-criticism and environmental studies to help students generate analyses of these literary texts. The Piedmont Project helped me radically re-imagine the course.

First, I feel much less obliged to present the material “responsibly.” Our walks in the woods, our free-wheeling brainstorming sessions, and our cross-disciplinary conversations all encouraged me to loosen both the structure and the content of the course. I would like an element of wildness – a sort of intellectual wilderness – to surface and to break my containers. So I have scrapped the idea of a historical trajectory and am teaching books and essays, mostly from the 20th and 21st centuries, that I think will raise the temperature of the class: writings that look ecological change, catastrophe, and collapse squarely in the face and ask us to imagine how we got to this point and what comes after. Because this is a freshman course, I don’t want to take any chances with making this a dry or pedantic exercise.

The second major change is that I want to give students more ownership over the course. I am not an expert in climate change or environmental studies, so I will want to draw on their investigations as much as I will formally present ideas and information to them. To that end, I am having each student take control of two parts of the syllabus. First, although we will all be reading the *New York Times* to frame our discussions with contemporary ecological concerns, each student will be responsible for tracking one additional major media outlet (magazine, newspaper, TV news program, etc.) and reporting back to the class through Blackboard on how issues of environmental concern are framed. Second, each student will be responsible for selecting a “text” to examine in terms developed in the class: a poem, a brochure, an advertisement, a film, a website, etc. – anything that complexly, perhaps strangely, enfolds environmental issues in a broader discourse. Students will make a formal presentation and write a research paper based on their object.

Finally, I will have periodic “out of the box” days in which we brainstorm, walk in the woods, free-write, or talk with visitors. I hope that these days will interrupt our usual ways of relating to each other as classmates, students, and professor, and will allow us to respond to one another as citizens of the campus and of the planet.

**SYLLABUS
ENGLISH 190
AMERICAN LITERATURE AND THE TRANSFORMATION
OF THE ENVIRONMENT
Fall 2007
MWF 2:00-2:50
Woodruff Library 774**

Professor: Benjamin Reiss
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Office Hours

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Climate scientists agree that addressing the problem of global warming will require major changes in the choices we make: how we travel, how we stay warm (or cool), what we eat, what we purchase, how we light up the night. But perhaps most significant in combating climate change is culture change: how we imagine the human relationship to the natural world, how we imagine the future, and how we understand the history that brought us to the current crisis. In this course, we will be reading a handful of environmentally sensitive works of literature and criticism within the context of debates over global warming and the transformation of the environment more generally. Ranging from environmentalist classics like Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* to powerful contemporary novels by Richard Powers, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Cormac McCarthy, we will explore how writers have reflected upon and attempted to re-shape their society's attitudes toward and assumptions about the human place in the natural world. We will also be reading an environmental journalist's recent study of the science of global warming, and we will keep abreast of environmentalist news by careful reading relevant articles in the *New York Times* and other mass media outlets throughout the semester.

COURSE GOALS:

- 1) To make students more careful readers of literature, the media, and the natural world.
- 2) To sharpen students' writing skills.
- 3) To introduce strategies for incorporating research into literary and cultural analysis.
- 4) To engage students' creativity and intellect in thinking about the human place in the natural world.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Assignments

Papers and presentation: Students will write three short analytical papers on our readings throughout the semester, two of which will undergo revision based on the professor's comments. Students will also choose one text (this could be an advertisement, a brochure, a poem, a film, a website) to analyze in terms developed in the class. At the end of the semester, each student will make a presentation on her/his text to the class and will write an eight-page paper that develops the analysis more fully and incorporates research.

Media analysis: In addition to reading the *New York Times* daily for environmental coverage in every section of the paper, each student will choose one additional major media outlet (newspaper, magazine, television news program) to track throughout the course. Students will be responsible for reporting on this coverage periodically through class discussions and our Blackboard site (see below). Additionally, some of this coverage may be used to help frame essays written for the course.

Participation: Because this is a small, discussion-based course, participation of every class member in discussion is crucial.

Blackboard: Students are required to make at least two paragraph-long entries in our Blackboard discussion site each week. At least one of these entries must be on the required reading for the course, and at least one must be an update on your own media monitoring. Ideally, many of the postings will blend the two strands together. Students are also encouraged to post links to interesting readings or websites relevant to the course.

GRADING POLICY

Short papers and revisions (total): 50%

Presentation and final project: 25%

Blackboard postings: 15%

Participation: 10%

(This is a rough formula to show that I will give more weight to some assignments than to others. I won't be using a calculator.)

Course Policies:

Attendance: More than three unexcused absences will be grounds for grade reduction. More than five unexcused absences will be grounds for failure.

Late Papers: Extensions will be granted, no questions asked, if the request is made at least 48 hours before the paper's due date. (The exception is the final paper, for which no extensions will be granted.) Papers arriving after the due date or extension date will be down-graded 1/3 of a grade for each elapsed class session.

Plagiarism: Students are expected to follow the college's honor code strictly. Suspected cases of plagiarism will be handed over immediately to the Honor Council. If you are ever in doubt about whether you are citing something correctly, please contact the professor.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Elizabeth Kolbert, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*
Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*
Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*
Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*
Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*
Richard Powers, *Gain*

SCHEDULE:

(**Note:** Some readings, particularly the short ones, are subject to change.)

Friday, August 31: Introductions

Monday, Sept. 3: LABOR DAY; no classes

Wednesday, Sept. 5: Elizabeth Kolbert, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*, 1-87

Friday, Sept. 7: Kolbert, 91-147

Monday, Sept. 10: Kolbert, 148- 187

Wednesday, Sept. 12: Lynn White, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis"

Friday, Sept. 14: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* 3-75

Monday, Sept. 17: McCarthy, 75-148

Wednesday, Sept. 19: McCarthy, 148-225

Friday, Sept. 19: McCarthy, 225-287; Cynthia Tucker, "It's Already Burning"

Monday, Sept. 24: Lawrence Buell, "Environmental Apocalypticism"

Wednesday, Sept. 26: OUT OF THE BOX

****5-6-page paper due**

Friday, Sept. 28: Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 3-75

Monday, Oct. 1: Thoreau, 76-131

Wednesday, Oct. 3: Thoreau, 132- 189

Friday, Oct. 5: 24: Thoreau, 190-254

Monday, Oct. 8: FALL BREAK; no classes

Wednesday, Oct. 10: William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature"

Friday, Oct. 12: CLASS CANCELED; Prof. Reiss at American Studies Association conference

Monday, Oct. 15: Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1-61
**** Revision of 5-6-page paper due**

Wednesday, Oct. 17: Carson, 63-127

Friday, Oct. 19: Carson, 128-198

Monday, Oct. 22: Carson, 199-261

Wednesday, Oct. 24: Carson, 262-297; Michael B. Smith, "'Silence, Miss Carson!' Science, Gender, and the Reception of *Silent Spring*"

Friday, Oct. 26: Giovanni Di Chiro, "Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice"

Monday, Oct. 29: OUT OF THE BOX
**** Proposal for research project due**

Wednesday, Oct. 31: Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*, 1-53

Friday, Nov. 2: Silko, 53-106

Monday, Nov. 5: Silko, 107-160

Wednesday, Nov. 7: Silko, 161-213

Friday, Nov. 9: Silko, 214-262

Monday, Nov. 12: Ulrich Beck, "The Politics of Risk Society"

Wednesday, Nov. 14: OUT OF THE BOX

**** 5-6-page paper due**

Friday, Nov. 16, Nov. 2: Richard Powers, *Gain*, 1-51

Monday, Nov. 19: Powers, 51-103

Wednesday, Nov. 19: CLASS CANCELED

Friday, Nov. 21: THANKSGIVING BREAK; no classes

Monday, Nov. 26: Powers, 103-221

Wednesday, Nov. 28: Powers, 221-272

****Revision of 5-6-page paper due**

Friday, Nov. 30: Powers, 272-320

Monday, Dec. 3: Powers, 320-355

Wednesday, Dec. 5: PRESENTATIONS

Friday, Dec. 7: PRESENTATIONS

Monday, Dec. 10: PRESENTATIONS

Tuesday, Dec. 18: **Final 5-6-page paper due**