

English 497: Literatures of Environmental Justice

Spring 2017

Class: T/Th 10:50-12:05, BKH 102

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**Dr. Comer ([kcomer@rice.edu](mailto:kcomer@rice.edu))**

Office Hours: W/Th 2-3:30 + by appt.

Office: Herring 317

TA: Kevin MacDonnell ([ktm3@rice.edu](mailto:ktm3@rice.edu))

What are the prospects for democracy in an era of tough oil, rising seas, and widespread toxicity? What thinking and collective action contributes to new social worlds? How might grassroots movements create allies?

The above are questions of science and politics, but also of imagination. Given they ask us to respond to conditions that defy human ability to conceive them, our course turns for guidance to literature, film, and art. Organized into three sections – “Tough Oil,” “Toxicities and Well-Being,” and “Climate” – we take up contemporary novels, memoir, film, and science fiction (climate fiction) through critical approaches informed by movements for environmental health, racial, and climate justice. Feminist analyses from critical race, postcolonial, and indigenous fields of study provide particular departure points on questions of the royal environmental “We.” Our readings draw from across the Global South and North – showcasing relative powers and risks for writers who are environmental activists. Geographic range shows as well how new eco-activist audiences and publics come into being. Social media activism and genres of writing contribute to our theorization of activist world building.

Our focus is place-based and regional, even as our perspective is necessarily global. Data gathering, activist mobilization, toxic flows – all impact particular places, particular bodies. Factors of race, class, indigeneity, and geographical “home,” correlate to toxic burdens. We will learn about new forms of political affinity and social life, new ways to think about humans and non-human relations and about Green and Blue (Oceanic) Humanities. Related concepts: scale, critical regionalism, transcorporeality, slow violence, sovereignty, posthuman ethics and place inhabitation, kinship.

**NOTE:** Engl 497 satisfies English capstone, SWGS feminist or critical race theory, or ENST minor

### **Literature & Critical Theory** (available at bookstore)

Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (2003)

Everett, *Watershed* (1996)

Nixon, *Slow Violence* (2011)

Saro-Wiwa, *A Month and a Day* (1995)

Silko, *Ceremony* (1977)

Sinha, *Animal's People* (2007)

### **Film** (available on OWL-Space)

*The Great Invisible* (dir. Brown, 2015)

*Gasland* (dir. Fox 2010)

*Heart of the Sea: Kapolioka'ehukai*

(dir. Denker & LaGarde, 2002)

**See also:** critical, visual, literary, audio, and YouTube materials denoted by \*. Available on OWL-Space.

## **Course Objectives – Students will be able to**

- combine analysis of a body of literary or film materials with a critical approach informed by reading in secondary literary criticism, theory, and/or primary research in literary and historical contexts
- understand, critique, and build on major analytical and methodological orientations in environmental justice studies
- demonstrate significance of geographical location, region/place, to environmental concerns
- develop analytic writing skills and sustained argument in a longer critical paper
- identify specific sites of feminist inquiry as of importance to individual projects and demonstrate conversation with that inquiry/concern
- build on program objectives of the English major related to critical reading and writing, knowledge of genre, literary and cultural history, interdisciplinarity, and critical race “non-canonical” theory

## **Field Trip & Related Spring Events, Conferences, Lectures**

Field Trip – Required and Free

- February 5, Sunday. Port of Houston Tour. 2pm. Plan for 3.5 hours.

Related Spring Events and Lectures – Recommended

- January 20. Inauguration Day Teach-In, RMC. Come for any or all of the day’s events. Times TBA.
- February 4. Rice Student Environmental Society hosts an all-day career fair and conference in RMC. Topic: “Cities and Sustainability.” Begins 10:30am.
- March 2, 6pm. Cathy Cohen, “Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of Democratic Politics.” Gray Wawro Lecture on Gender, Health & Well Being. Location TBA.
- March 30, 6pm. Dian Million (Tuscan Athabaskan) “Generations, Indigenous Kin, the Sexual Nexus.” Gray Wawro Lecture on Gender, Health & Well Being. Location TBA.

## **Teaching Assistant, Kevin MacDonnell ([ktm3@rice.edu](mailto:ktm3@rice.edu)), Office Herring 238**

Kevin MacDonnell is a doctoral candidate in the English Department. His research is focused primarily on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature, with an emphasis on the origins of environmentalism, the relationship between humans and natural resources, and the histories of technology and science.

Office hours: Tuesday 12:15-1:15, Thursday 9:30-10:30, + by appointment. Herring 238.

## **Assignments & Grades**

- Research paper (40% of grade), 15-20 pages, due on the last day of exams, May 3rd. Students conduct independent research in consultation with the instructor and/or T.A. We break this bigger project into two smaller assignments of 4-5 pages (10% each). Due dates: Feb 13, March 22. Please see the handout on “Capstone Paper” on OWL-Space.
- Several shorter Reading Responses – see handout on OWL-Space (15% total). Due Jan 17 & 31, March 2.

- Class participation and attendance, including field trip, and respect for electronics policy (15%).
- Final Paper Proposal, 1-2 pages, (10%) due April 13. The Proposal should note why and how you chose this project, the specific theoretical and/or methodological issues at hand, what the research hopes to achieve. These queries should help to formulate a working thesis. Include an annotated bibliography of criticism/theory on one of the primary sources.

### **Disability Accommodation**

Rice University is committed to equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities. In keeping with the university's mission to provide an unsurpassed education, Disability Support Services (DSS) provides accommodations and support services. If you have a registered need, please see me and I will accommodate you; also be sure to visit DSS.

### **Policy on Electronic Devices in the Classroom**

Refrain from all electronic activities unrelated to our class while the class is in session. I take this policy seriously since our focused time together is a privilege and a group commitment. Individuals who violate the policy will be penalized by a reduction in participation grade. The policy intent is to allow laptops in the classroom but to ensure their use is exclusively educational.

### **Honor Code**

University policy requires Rice faculty to report suspected violations of the Honor Code to the Honor Council. Be sure to cite any source you use, especially in this age of Internet research.

### **Policy on attendance and late arrival: ALWAYS COME TO CLASS**

It's always best to come to class, even if you are tired, late, or underprepared. You will always do better in this or any class if you attend regularly. This is especially true during the most hectic parts of the semester.

### **Professor Office Hours**

Please note Professor office hours on page 1. I have scheduled times that should accommodate most students. If you want to talk about the class, your writing, an assignment, the English or SWGS majors, or some other matter, please visit. Sooner is usually better than later when you need help or have questions.

## **Framings: Terms & Politics**

Jan 10 Tu: Introduction: Literature, Environment, Justice

Who/What is "environment?" "nature?" "eco-criticism?"  
 Methods: Theory & Practice  
 Where We At? A Bioregional Quiz

- Jan 12 Th: The “We” of Global Environmental Discourse . . .  
Workshop I: Racial Geographies “Here”
- Gregory (via McIntosh) “Race and Class Privilege in the Environmental Movement” (2012)\*  
Mock, “Why Environmentalists Should Support #BlackLivesMatter” (2014)\*  
Al-Sareh and Arefin, “Doing Environmental Studies During Times of Racialized Violence” (2014)\*  
Robert Bullard, “Meet the Father of EJ”\*  
Robert Bullard, “Environmental Justice: An Interview (1999)\*
- Recommend Albert Pope, “Houston’s 5<sup>th</sup> Ward & Sustainable Urban Redevelopment,” Podcast, Cultures of Energy, a Project of CENHS (Center for Energy and Environmental Research in the Human Sciences at Rice University) 2016\*
- Jan 17 Tu: The “We” of Global Discourse . . .  
Workshop II. Slow Violence “There”
- Nixon, “Introduction,” *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) 1-44.
- READING RESPONSE DUE (in class)
- Jan 19 Th The “We” of Global Discourse . . .  
Workshop III. Where? Standing Rock & Sovereignty Claims
- “Standing Rock 2” with Nick Estes and Kristen Simmons. Podcast: Hosts Cymene Howe & Dominic Boyer, Cultures of Energy, a Project of CENHS (Center for Energy and Environmental Research in the Human Sciences at Rice University) 2016\*  
Patrick Wolfe, “Comparing Colonial and Racial Regimes” (2013) YouTube, 45 min\*
- Jan 20 F Inauguration Day Teach In**
- Jan 24 Tu The “We” of Global Discourse . . .  
Workshop IV: Feminist Environments
- Feminist Environmental Philosophy, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy \*  
Nixon, “Slow Violence, Gender, and the Environmentalism of the Poor,” from *Slow Violence*, 128-150 (Kenya’s Green Belt Movement, co-founded by Wangari Maathai, 2005 Nobel Peace Prize recipient)
- Recommend Alaimo, “Feminist Theory’s Flight from Nature,” from *Undomesticated Ground* (2000)\*  
Recommend Alaimo, “Dwelling in the Dissolve,” and “This is About Pleasure: The Ethics of Inhabiting” from *exposed: environmental politics and pleasures in posthuman times* (2016)\*
- Jan 26 Th Allies, Accomplices, Shields: “Staying with the Trouble” (Donna Haraway’s injunction)

All of Us:

Andrea Smith, "The Problem with 'Privilege'" (blog post, 2014)\*

George Lipsitz, "Walleye Warrior and White Identities: Native Americans' Treaty Rights, Composite Identities and Social Movements," *Ethnic and Race Studies* (2008)\*

Group Presentations:

-Kelly Hayes, "How to Talk about #NoDAPL: A Native Perspective" (2016)\*

-Standing Rock Solidarity Network\*

-Kohn, "This is What White People Can Do to Support #BlackLivesMatter" (2015)\*

-NOLA Feminist Allies\*

## Tough Oil

Jan 31 Tu Living Oil: Region, Bodies, Petroculture

LeManager, "Prologue" + "Introduction" from *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*, 1-19 (2015)\*

Alaimo, "Bodily Natures" (Chapter One) from *Bodily Natures* (1-25)

Tough Oil (very short) Stories, from *The Guardian*\*

Mohammed Hasan Alwan, "Oil Field" (2011)

Tim Gautreaux, "Gone to Water" (2011)

Recommend Mitchell, selection from *Carbon Democracy*\*

Feb 2 Th Documentary Poetics

*The Great Invisible* (dir. Brown, 2015) \*

**Feb 4 Sat Recommend: "Cities & Sustainability" Conference 10-5 RMC (Rice Environmental Society)**

**Feb 5 Sun Required: Port of Houston Tour**

**Houston Ship Channel, 2:30pm.**

**Details TBA – plan about 3 hours total, dinner included (English Dept. sponsored)**

<https://www.visithoustontexas.com/listings/sam-houston-boat-tours/22598/>

Feb 7 Tu Tough Oil: Fracking

*Gasland* (dir. Josh Fox, 2010)

Toni Jensen, "Women in the Fracklands: On Water, Land, Bodies, and Standing Rock" (2017)

Recommend: Arlie Hochschild, YouTube Interview on Wright Show, re: *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (2016)\*

READING RESPONSE DUE (in class)

Feb 9 Th Spring Recess (No Class)

Feb 13 M SECTION ONE PAPER DUE: "Critical Framings" (4-5 pages: incorporate Reading Response materials and comments, or write in new directions.)

Feb 14 Tu Political Memoir/Activist Mobilization  
Inventing a Public for the Niger River Delta Crisis of the Ogoni People

Ken Saro-Wiwa, *A Month and A Day: A Detention Diary* (1995)  
(read 1-50)

Nixon, "Pipedreams: Ken Saro-Wiwa, Environmental Justice, and Micro-Minority Rights," from *Slow Violence* 103-127

Feb 16 Th continue (pages TBA)

Feb 21 Tu finish Saro-Wiwa

### **Toxicities: Health, Well-Being, and the Politics of Science**

Feb 23 Th Transcorporeality & Feminist Science Studies

Percival Everett, *Watershed* (1996)

Stacy Alaimo, "Invisible Matters: The Sciences of Environmental Justice" from *Bodily Matters* (2010)\*

Feb 28 Tu continue Everett & Alaimo

March 2 Th finish Everett

READING RESPONSE (due in class)

**Lecture Gray/Wawro Lecture Series (SWGS)**

**6-7pm Cathy Cohen, "Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics"  
David and Mary Winton Green Professor of Political Science, University of Chicago**

March 7 Tu Indra Sinha, *Animal's People* (2007)

|                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                | Nixon, "Slow Violence, Neoliberalism, and the Environmental Picaresque" (45-67)                                                                                                                                          |
| March 9 Th     | continue                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| March 14/16    | Spring Break (no class)                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| March 21 Tu    | finish Sinha                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| March 22 W     | SECTION TWO PAPER DUE: "Analysis of Text(s)" 4-5 pages: Combine analysis of texts with critical approach of interest to you. Be thinking toward directions for final project.                                            |
| March 23 Th    | Storytelling, Healing, Decoloniality<br><br><i>Ceremony</i> , Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo)<br><br>Dian Million, "Introduction," <i>Therapeutic Nations, Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights</i> (2014) * |
| March 28 Tu    | continue Silko                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| March 30 Th    | continue Silko                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Lecture</b> | <b>Gray/Wawro Lecture Series (SWGS)</b>                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>6-7:30</b>  | <b>Dian Million (Tanana Athabascan), "Generations, Indigenous Kin, and the Sexual Nexus"</b><br><b>American Indian Studies, University of Washington</b>                                                                 |

### . . . Climate Issues

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|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| April 4 Tu  | Making Kin<br><br>Haraway, "Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Captialocene, Chthulucene" from <i>Staying with the Trouble</i> (2016)     |
| April 6 Th  | Speculative Futures<br><br>Atwood, <i>Oryx and Crake</i> (2003)                                                                           |
| April 11 Tu | Workshop: Prepare Final Paper Proposal<br><br>Present Draft: project rationale, selection of key texts, thesis in progress, bibliography. |
| April 13 Th | continue Atwood                                                                                                                           |

FINAL PAPER PROPOSAL DUE: 1-2 pages.

April 18 Tu finish Atwood

April 20Th Semester Synthesis