

**ENGL 559**  
**Ecocriticism: A Seminar in the Public Humanities**

Instructor: Jesse Oak Taylor  
(Office Hours by Appointment)

Class Time: T/Th 11:30 – 1:20  
Location: Communications 202 (Simpson Center Seminar Room)

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**Course Overview:** This seminar offers an introduction to ecocriticism, or the study of literature and the environment. Our organizing principle will be *ecocriticism* as opposed to more open-ended terms like “environmental humanities” in part because doing so foregrounds the political and ethical practice of criticism. “Eco” has its roots in “oikos,” meaning home or dwelling, while the critic is one capable of judgement or discernment. Hence, *ecocriticism* is not simply a method of interpreting texts or other cultural artifacts, but rather of dwelling critically, turning the lens of critical interpretation upon the world outside the text, attending to sites of reading as well as the contexts of composition. Ecocriticism is a practice, a mode of action as well as contemplation; it attempts not merely to understand the world, but to change it; to imagine new worlds, and to make worlds bearable; to mourn what has been lost and cling to all we can still save. We will devote particular attention to the question of what it means to practice ecocriticism here, in Seattle, and how our analyses operate across multiple intersecting scales, from the particularities of a given text or class discussion to the “deep time” of the planet.

The course will also serve as an introduction to the public humanities. We will think about the intersections (and divergences) between ecocriticism and activism, and how to deploy critical insights in political debates and/or more applied work on environmental issues. These discussions dovetail with the inherently interdisciplinary nature of environmental studies and the distinct position of ecocriticism as a subfield within it. Hence, we will consider several aspects of ecocriticism that make it distinctive among literary studies methodologies, including the demands of scientific literacy, and a penchant for fieldwork. At the same time, we will think about the distinctive contribution that literary analysis can make to environmental studies and an interdisciplinary endeavor cutting across the humanities, sciences, and social sciences.

Assignments will be designed to facilitate experimentation with different forms, genres, and voices, while thinking about the media of critical intervention.

**Learning Outcomes:** This course has two primary goals.

- 1) Introduce students to the theory and practice of ecocriticism. Readings will focus primarily on work by prominent ecocritics in order to give students a robust grounding in the current state of the field, preparing them to write exams or dissertations in ecocriticism. Discussions will frame this work in terms of important topics and

discourses such as: energy humanities, the Anthropocene, new materialism, and extinction.

- 2) Introduce students to the theory and practice of “public” humanities, and help them think about how best to present their work to a variety of audiences. Writing prompts will provide an opportunity to play with different voices, styles, and genres. We will also discuss what aspects of the criticism we are reading might enable (or inhibit) its ability to speak to a broader audience, and the tradeoffs that different writing styles might entail.

**Assignments:** The course will include short weekly experiments/reflections, and a final project that allows you to expand on a particular topic in greater depth. Collaborative work is encouraged! If you would like to work on a team project, please let me know early in the term so that I can help you develop a plan.

- 1.) Weekly Writings. Each week will include an activity or prompt linked to a short writing assignment. These are meant to inform our discussion. Hence, while you will be invited to share them they are really for you, and offer a chance to experiment with different voices and styles. These will begin as stand-alone pieces, and then become more tailored toward scaffolding the final project beginning in Week 6.
- 2.) Final Project. The term will culminate in a final project, roughly equivalent in scope to a 10-15 page seminar paper. However, rather than taking the academic conference paper or proto-article as its model, I invite you to think about alternate formats for this project. These might include: a review essay, a podcast like [For the Wild](#) or [Facing It](#), an interview, think piece, a critical reading, a memoir, an [annotated edition](#), an [adaptation](#), an annotated map, photo essay or [audio project](#). In short, anything you want! You are welcome to collaborate, though I will want to talk with both (all) collaborators about your plan well before the end of the term. In general, I assume that these will be public facing in tone, modeled on the kinds of things that appear in venues such as [Avidly](#), [Yale Environment 360](#) [Public Books](#), [EdgeEffects](#), [Emergence Magazine](#), [Orion](#). For models of reviews, see [Public Books](#), [LA Review of Books](#), or [New York Review of Books](#).

The core text or archive is up to you, *but you must have one*. I do expect it to be a work of ecocriticism in some form, and to provide you with a chance to think about criticism-as-practice. The earlier you can identify your text, artifact, or archive the better.

We will hold a final project showcase on the last day of class.

**Grade Breakdown:**

Participation: 25%

Weekly Experiments (graded only for completion): 25%

Final Project: 50%

**Participation:** A seminar is a collaborative enterprise. Please come to class prepared not merely to pose and answer questions from me, but to engage in frank, thoughtful, and respectful conversations with your fellow students. While I recognize that you may not be able to complete all of the reading, I do expect you to do a substantial amount of it, and have something tangible and specific to say. Because this is a small, discussion based course, you must speak up in class. Similarly, in order for everyone's voices to be heard, you must not dominate the discussion. If you feel excluded or marginalized by class discussions, please come talk with me about it. I am committed to fostering a classroom environment in which any idea or perspective can be discussed, and in which all participants are respected. To that end, we will adhere to the English Department's statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (posted below).

Given that we will be sharing writing, including experimental writing in forms that may be new to us, it is vital that we be generous with one another. This spirit also extends to the published works that we will be reading. Academic discourse often operates through critique. My hope is that we can find other ways of engaging with this material, focusing on what it does rather than dialing in on its shortcomings.

Nothing generates discussion better than questions. If you are confused by something in the reading, aren't sure what a word means (or who a theorist is), please ask. This is doubly important given that we are reading criticism about works that we are not reading together as a class. I guarantee you that no one in the room (me included) fully understands all of these readings. Nor will any of us have read every book discussed by every critic. We will rely on one another for guidance. To that end, a final stipulation: no name dropping. If you want to bring up a critic, theorist, or work of literature that isn't on the syllabus please be prepared to explain it, such that the idea is available to the group as a whole.

**Disabilities & Accommodations:** I want this class to be inclusive for everyone. If you have a disability or any other issue that needs to be accommodated, please ask. The UW Office of Disability Resources (<https://depts.washington.edu/uwdrs/>) offers a number of services for students, and I will be happy to work with them. If you have a DRS accommodation, please let me know at the beginning of the term. In addition, there are circumstances arise that press upon your ability to participate in the course, please tell me. This is particularly important given the field-based component of some assignments and (potentially) class meetings. If there are reasons why going outside, up and down stairs, etc. will be difficult for you, please be in touch. We'll work something out.

**Departmental Commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:**

The UW English Department aims to help students become more incisive thinkers, effective communicators, and imaginative writers by acknowledging that language and its use are powerful and hold the potential to empower individuals and communities; to provide the means to engage in meaningful conversation and collaboration across differences and with those with whom we disagree; and to offer methods for exploring, understanding, problem solving, and responding to the many pressing collective issues we face in our world--skills that align with and support the University of Washington's mission to educate "a diverse student body to become

responsible global citizens and future leaders through a challenging learning environment informed by cutting-edge scholarship.”

As a department, we begin with the conviction that language and texts play crucial roles in the constitution of cultures and communities, past, present, and future. Our disciplinary commitments to the study of language, literature, and culture require of us a willingness to engage openly and critically with questions of power and difference. As such, in our teaching, service, and scholarship we frequently initiate and encourage conversations about topics such as race, immigration, gender, sexuality, class, indigeneity, and colonialisms. These topics are fundamental to the inquiry we pursue. We are proud of this fact, and we are committed to creating an environment in which our faculty and students can do so confidently and securely, knowing that they have the backing of the department.

Towards that aim, we value the inherent dignity and uniqueness of individuals and communities. We acknowledge that our university is located on the shared lands and waters of the Coast Salish peoples. We aspire to be a place where human rights are respected and where any of us can seek support. This includes people of all ethnicities, faiths, gender identities, national and indigenous origins, political views, and citizenship status; nontheists; LGBTQIA+; those with disabilities; veterans; and anyone who has been targeted, abused, or disenfranchised.

**Readings:** This is a reading intensive course. It aims to introduce you to important (mostly) recent work in the field, and thus I included more rather than less for those who are interested in a deeper dive into a particular topic. The book listed *first* each week will be our primary focus.

The other readings are meant to flesh out a bibliography for further research, though in some cases I will hope to discuss them in class (which I will note). Excerpts from the recommended readings will be available as PDFs on Canvas or electronically through UW libraries.

Lauret Savoy, *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape*. Counterpoint, 2016. 978-1619028258

Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*. Norton, 2019. 978-0393358094

Bathsheba Demuth, *Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait*. Norton, 2020. 978-0393358322

Gillen D’Arcy Wood, *Tambora: The Eruption that Changed the World*. Princeton, 2015. 978-0691168623

Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. Oxford, 2013. 978-0190461973

Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard, 2011. 978-0674072343

Susan Scott Parrish, *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History*. Princeton, 2018. 978-0691182940

Daegan Miller, *This Radical Land: A Natural History of American Dissent*. Chicago, 2018. 978-0226336282

Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*. Chicago, 2021. 978-0226815459

## **Schedule:**

### **Week 1**

T. 1.4: Bate, "Introduction" to [Romantic Ecology](#) (ebook in library); Glotfelty, "Introduction" to *Ecocriticism Reader* (Canvas)

Recommended: Greg Garrard, [Ecocriticism](#) (e-book in library); "Economy of Nature" from *Romantic Ecology*

Writing Prompt: what brings you to this class? Take a few minutes to reflect on the journey (personal, intellectual, physical) that has brought you to this point, as well as the texts, images, or artifacts that have been particularly significant to you. We will use these as the basis for introducing ourselves to one another. They will also provide an opportunity to take stock of where we are as we begin the seminar together, situating our critical practice in personal experience.

Th. 1. 6: Thrush, "Haunted City" from [Native Seattle](#) (e-book in library); Klinge, "Prolouge" & Ch 1. from [Emerald City](#) (e-book in library)

Activity: If possible, please take the [Indigenous Walking Tour of UW](#) Campus on your own. I had hoped to do this together, visiting sites like the Drumheller Fountain with its view of Mt Rainier, that highlight the Romantic legacy of nature and landscape at UW. However, since we will be meeting remotely in Week 1 that will not be possible.

### **Week 2:**

T. 1.11: Savoy, *Trace: Memory, History, Race and the American Landscape*

Th. 1.13: Savoy, *Trace* (cont.); hooks, "Healing Talk" from [Belonging](#) (e-book in library)

Recommended: hooks, [Belonging: A Culture of Place](#); John Elder, *Reading the Mountains of Home* (Canvas)

Writing Prompt: Re-membering, Re-storying, Re-reading

Write about a connection between a place that has been important to you and an act of reading, or storytelling. Use it to think about the connections between story and place, whether that place is fictional or literal. Thus, you might think about a fictional setting and what goes into imagining it as real, or a literal place that is transformed for you through story.

### **Week 3:**

T. 1.18: Robert Macfarlane, [Underland: A Deep Time Journey](#) (2019);

Th. 1.20: Macfarlane, *Underland*; Burtynsky, *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (film)

Recommended: Anna Tsing, et al [Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene](#); Simon Lewis & Mark Maslin, [The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene](#); Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, [Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman](#) (2015); Dana Luciano, [“Inhuman Anthropocene”](#) (2015); Menely & Taylor, [Anthropocene Reading](#) (2017, “Introduction” on Canvas); Yusoff, [A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None](#) (2018).

Writing Prompt: What does the Anthropocene Look (Feel/Smell/Sound?) Like?  
What Does the Anthropocene Look Like? Modeled on the [“Anthropocene Viewer.”](#) Take photo with your phone and write one paragraph on what it means to treat that as an image of the Anthropocene, including the question of what it *doesn't* show.

#### **Week 4:**

T. 1.25: **Class meets in the Burke Museum** Bathsheba Demuth, [Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait](#)

Th. 1.27: Demuth, [Floating Coast](#);

Recommended: Moore, from [Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital](#) (Canvas); Tsing, [“Unruly Edges”](#); JOT, [“Leopard in a Box”](#); Rose, Van Dooren, Chrulew, “Introduction” to [Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, Death, and Generations](#) (2017). On museums: Springer & Turpin, [“Vestiges of 125,660 Specimens of Natural History”](#); Das & Lowe, [“Nature in Black and White”](#) (2018); Gordon Sayre, [“The Alexandrian Library of Life”](#) (2017);

#### **Week 5:**

T. 2.1: Stephanie LeMenager, [Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century](#) (2014)

Th. 2.3: LeMenager, [Living Oil](#); Johnson, “Preface” “Intro” and “Ch 1” from [Mineral Rites](#) (2018)

Recommended: Miller, [Extraction Ecologies and the Literature of the Long Exhaustion](#) (2021); Scott, [Fuel: An Ecocritical History](#) (2018); Malm, from [Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming](#) (2016); Yaeger, [“Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power and Other Energy Sources”](#)(2011).

Writing Activity: Energy Wuz Here (and Still Is). Identify an energy archive and/or a piece of energy infrastructure, ideally one that enables you to think either about a form of energy conversion, the intersection of one energy regime with another, the laws of thermodynamics, or the idea of an energy “transition.” Describe how energy and its effects can be registered physically palpable, and/or what thinking about energy makes manifest in relation to a particular object or artifact.

**Week 6:**

T. 2.8: Gillen D'Arcy Wood, *Tambora: The Eruption that Changed the World*

T. 2.10: Wood, *Tambora*; Menley, Introduction & Ch. 1 from [Climate and the Making of Worlds](#);

Recommended: *New York Times*, "[Postcards from a World on Fire](#)"; Chakrabarty, "[The Planet: An Emergent Category for Humanists](#)"; Taylor, "Globalize" (Canvas)

Writing Prompt: Where in the planet is your archive?

By now you should have identified a text or artifact for your final project. What does it mean to situate an object, artifact, or archive within the Earth System? Begin making notes about what vision of the planetary your artifact affords. Think about what a rich contextualization of it might look like. What kinds of archives can you use to situate your artifact against a planetary horizon?

**Week 7:**

T. 2.15: Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011).

Th. 2.17: Nixon, *Slow Violence*; Wenzel, "Introduction" from *The Disposition of Nature* (Canvas)

Recommended: Chakrabarty, "[Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change](#)"; Baucom, "Of Forces and Forcings" from [History 4](#); Purdy, from *After Nature* (Canvas); JOT "[While the World Burns](#)"

Writing Prompt: Slow Violence in/and/as the Archive

What are the forms of attention that critical reading in a time of climate change demands? How does your artifact slow down, speed up, or otherwise respond to the temporal challenges of planetary time? How can those forms of attention be brought to bear on questions of injustice? Can your critical reading help account for the exclusionary quality of learned inattention, or denial?

**Week 8:**

T. 2.22: Susan Scott Parrish, [The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History](#) (2017);

Th. 2.24 **Class will Meet in Special Collections in Allen Library** Parrish, *Flood Year*; “[The Earthquake that Will Destroy Seattle](#)” (*New Yorker*, 2015);

Recommended: [PMLA Essay Cluster “The Year 2020”](#) (disclosure: JOT has an article in it)

Writing Prompt: What Does the Anthropocene Look Like? Media Edition.

What is the relationship between mediation and planetary disruption? How can our skills as critical readers be brought to bear on the *mediation* of environmental harm? How might your artifact resonate across different media, and how might that remediation help open it to different kinds of ecocritical awareness?

### **Week 9:**

T. 3.1: Miller [This Radical Land: A Natural History of American Dissent](#) (2018)

Th. 3.3: No Class: JOT at a conference. **Optional session with Elliot Stevens on public scholarship & Digital Humanities @ UW**

Writing Prompt: What is the “natural history” of an idea? A practice? A text? An image? Where is “nature” in your archive? Where is your archive in nature? What would it mean to conceptualize your critical project as a “natural history”?

### **Week 10:**

T. 3.8: Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*

Th. 3.10: Final Project Showcase **Class will meet in COM 218d**