

## **EWP 311 Urban Environmental Literature**

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Office Hours: Tuesdays/Thursdays 12:30-1:45 pm

Or email me for an appointment. I can be available at other times, and we can meet by zoom if necessary.

### **Why Urban Environmental Literature?**

*“There is a growing body of cultural criticism engaged with urban ecology that tends to reject mainstream ecocriticism’s focus on the genres of nature writing and pastoral, insisting on the incapacity of those genres to represent the complex interactions between political choices, socio-economic structures, and the densely-populated ecosystems that shape urban environments.”*

Michael Bennett, Long Island University, Brooklyn

*“Urban ecocriticism confronts us directly with the interconnections between environmental degradation and issues of race, class, and gender.”*

Karla Armbruster, Webster University

Cities were once thought to be apart from, separate from nature. Nature writing used to focus places like the woods and the desert, open spaces with low population density. But the city is the place where the ecological crisis becomes evident and the study of environmental literature can no longer ignore urban areas, especially since 83 percent of the population in the United States live there. The city is the place where the borders between nature and culture fluctuate constantly. Urban literature often includes a critique of the social, political, and economic factors that threaten the health of our planet -- and as such, ought to be considered part of the canon of environmental literature.

Examining urban environmental issues means looking at the historical and contemporary societal factors that shape the development of individual and group identity involving race, class, and gender; analyzing the role that complex networks of social structures and systems play in the creation and perpetuation of the dynamics of power, privilege, oppression, and opportunity; and analyzing the social justice action that accompanies urban environmental issues.

Components of the course:

1) Urban nature writing. Poets and essayists write about the flora and fauna of an urban ecosystem, the wildness that grows in gardens, parks, and backyards, the effects of wildlife and weather, the trees and birds, the cut flowers and the baking bread, and the various ways city dwellers connect to nature. We will analyze the ways in which the canon of nature literature has privileged rare and endangered species over the more abundant urban creatures and plants: cockroaches, pigeons, dandelions, maples. We will examine the relationship between literature and the physical environment, the ways in which humans interact with and write about the cityscape, and the attachment to place that roots city dwellers. We'll read about city parks,

natural places which are also cultural products that reflect the ideologies of those who create them. For many writers, urban parks challenge the polarity of culture vs. nature.

2) Urban ecocriticism exposes the interconnections between environmental degradation and issues of race, class, and gender. Inner cities have often been constructed as racially demarcated urban wilderness areas. Such movements as ecofeminism and the environmental justice movement examine the ways in which the ecological crisis can be linked to other forms of domination.

3) Environmental literature must ultimately address questions about the future: urban planning, the role of technology, and ways in which humans in urban areas can live in a community of plants and creatures. We will look at literature that regards the city as an ecosystem that includes hydrological systems, predator-prey relationships, and energy transfers. We will look at urban literature from an environmental perspective and see if we can find the ecological component that is often missing from a cultural analysis of the city.

### **Books**

**City Wilds** edited by Terrell Dixon.

**Counting Descent** by Clint Smith.

### **All Assignments will be posted on BlackBoard**

You will have texts to read and written assignments for every class. Please check Blackboard for the assignment schedule.

### **Inclusive Excellence Statement**

As an institution, we embrace inclusive excellence and the strengths of a diverse and inclusive community. During classroom discussions, we may be challenged by ideas different from our lived experiences and cultures. Understanding individual differences and broader social differences will deepen our understanding of each other and the world around us. In this course, all people (including but not limited to, people of all races, ethnicities, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity and expression, students undergoing transition, religions, ages, abilities, socioeconomic backgrounds, veteran status, regions and nationalities, intellectual perspectives and political persuasion) are strongly encouraged to respectfully share their unique perspectives and experiences. This statement is intended to help cultivate a respectful environment, and it should not be used in a way that limits expression or restricts academic freedom at ESF.

## Learning Objectives

After completing this course, the student should be able to:

1. Identify and discuss works of contemporary American nature literature in which urban nature is not merely the setting, background, or casual reference point but a central subject.
2. Discuss literature (and other texts) in relation to the geographic and cultural aspects of place and identity in an urban setting.
3. Demonstrate knowledge of different literary elements and the creative process used by writers who explore urban environmental issues.
4. Describe the historical and contemporary societal factors that shape the development of individual and group identity involving race, class, and gender.
5. Analyze the role that complex networks of social structures and systems play in the creation and perpetuation of the dynamics of power, privilege, oppression, and opportunity.
6. Apply the principles of rights, access, equity, and autonomous participation to past, current, or future social justice action.
7. Use their own writing to summarize, analyze, or respond to a text.

## **Grading Rubric**

*Portfolios will be graded on your ability to demonstrate critical reading and critical thinking skills; the quality of your writing and ideas; and your ability to demonstrate you have achieved the learning objectives of the course.*

“C” grade: Written work demonstrates that you have done the reading and made a strong attempt to understand and engage with the literature. You demonstrate the ability to summarize, describe, and paraphrase texts, but fail to integrate upper level thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. You present some good ideas, but fail to develop them fully.

“B” grade: Written work demonstrates thoughtful engagement with the assigned texts. You share insightful comments that show a clear understanding of the material. You are able to discuss literature within the context of cultural analysis. Your writing shows moments of upper level thinking, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Your writing is clear, concise, and mostly free of errors.

“A” grade: Short papers are clear, focused, and coherent. The writing is polished, free of errors, and sophisticated. The content demonstrates a clear understanding of the learning outcomes of the course and reflects an in-depth engagement with literature. The writing demonstrates upper level thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation) and a thoughtful approach to the content. The student offers new insights, makes perceptive points, and makes connections between the text and the dominant culture. You link ideas in literature to concepts in other disciplines. You demonstrate the ability to integrate concepts, ideas, and principles. Your writing shows a breadth and depth of understanding. You were able to communicate information to your audience in a way that was creative and original. **You taught the class -- and the larger community -- something. You inspired us, excited us, engaged us.**

“D” grade: Writing demonstrates no upper level thinking (analysis, synthesis, or evaluation) and illustrates a superficial approach to the text. Student shows no sign of growth in thinking. Writing is not clear, concise, or coherent. Writing contains errors in standard written English that interfere with understanding.

“F” grade: Papers missing or incomplete. Student shows little evidence of engagement with literature and has little to contribute to class discussion. Student shows little understanding of the assigned texts and does not demonstrate any grasp of the learning outcomes for the course.

## STUDENT RESOURCE CENTERS

**The Digital Storytelling Studio (DSS)** is a support center for brainstorming, composing, and editing digital stories (podcasts, videos, photo projects) about science and the environment. The DSS offers free rental of camera and audio equipment, tutoring for students and faculty working on digital stories, computers equipped with editing software (Adobe Suite), and lectures and workshops that help frame an approach toward storytelling—both in and out of the classroom. Though the DSS does not create videos or gather audio or visual data for its visitors, the consultants will work with you to support the development and finalization of your own digital stories. The DSS has consistent hours M-F (located in Moon 014), but please be sure to visit website for details: (<https://www.esf.edu/es/dss/>). If you have questions, please contact the Digital Support Specialist Jason Kohlbrenner at [jakohlbr@esf.edu](mailto:jakohlbr@esf.edu)

**The English for Speakers of Other Languages Center (ESOL)** provides academic and cultural support for multilingual students and scholars at ESF. The offerings include individual writing support, language tutoring, free English classes, book club, pronunciation workshops, and a conversation partner program. The ESOL Center, located in the Moon library basement, is open Monday through Friday. For detailed information and updates, please check our website at <https://www.esf.edu/wrc/esol.htm>. If you have questions about tutoring, have problems accessing the schedule, or are interested in becoming a volunteer, please contact Dr. Jakhaia at [njakhaia@esf.edu](mailto:njakhaia@esf.edu).

**The Public Speaking Lab (PSL)** is a free student-to-student service located in 13B on the lower level of Moon Library. The PSL supports the development of our undergraduates' public, academic, and professional speaking skills. PSL student tutors will work with you to provide formative feedback on presentations and presentation materials (outlines, organization and visuals). To make an appointment, visit the PSL online scheduling system at <https://esf.mywconline.com> and create an account. Once your account has been created, select an available time which works for you. Be sure to check your email for a confirmation message.

**The Writing Resource Center (WRC):** WRC peer tutors work with students in individualized 25 or 50 minute interactive sessions focused on brainstorming, organization, drafting, and revising, as well as other writing-related tasks. Our mission is to help students succeed in a strong ESF writing community. Appointments can be made online (<https://esf.mywconline.com/>), using the Spring 2022 Writing Resource Center Schedule. Both online and in-person appointments are available throughout the semester. Instructions for making an appointment, as well as information and resources for writing, are available at <https://www.esf.edu/wrc/wrc.htm>. If you have questions about tutoring, have problems accessing the schedule, or are interested in becoming a tutor, please contact the Writing Resource Coordinator, at [jagedets@esf.edu](mailto:jagedets@esf.edu)