

American Studies 401
American Culture and Nature
Fall, 2008
Wednesdays, 4-6:45 in EC 11

Professor Michael Steiner
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The history of any land begins with nature, and all histories must end with nature.

J. Frank Dobie

Our American land is an artifact....people, affectionate or rapacious, have made the land their expression, their testament and legacy....We should learn the landscape's language.

Henry Glassie

When everything else has gone from my brain--the President's name, the state capitals, neighborhoods where I lived, and then at length my own name and what it was on earth I sought, and then at length the faces of my friends and of my family--when all has dissolved, what will be left, I believe, is topology: the dreaming memory of the land as it lay this way and that.

Annie Dillard

There has been Walden Pond, and there have been Yosemite and Tinker Creek. And on the re-imagined map of nature writing, there should be Los Angeles...L.A. is the perfect place to rewrite our nature stories exactly because it exaggerates our worst habits and thinking about nature.

Jenny Price

General Purpose of the Seminar:

As J. Frank Dobie, Henry Glassie, Annie Dillard, and Jenny Price stress, American culture and nature is an immense, ubiquitous, often taken-for granted condition. Whether we know it or not, whether living in the wilderness or the metropolis, in the wilds of Alaska or the circuit board complexities of Southern California, in seemingly secure Fullerton or Katrina-swept New Orleans, our collective and personal lives are embedded in nature. The natural and built landscapes of our lives, our sense of space and place, our biological inheritance --all exert a persistent, often silent, influence. From the indigenous responses of Lakota visionary, Black Elk, to the post-modern concoctions of Walt Disney's Imagineers, from Walden Pond to Los Angeles, culture and nature are entwined and implicated in every aspect of the American experience. The basic purpose of this seminar is to open our eyes to see and minds to understand the continuous interaction between culture and nature, from premodern to postmodern America.

To grasp the human (especially American) place in nature and to learn the landscape's language are impossibly ambitious, yet increasingly necessary tasks. And Southern California—the most “unnatural” of American regions—is, as Jenny Price argues, a most compelling place to study the many permutations of the persistent interplay between American land and life, culture and nature. In addition to these larger goals, specific seminar themes include: religious, mythic, and scientific interpretations of nature; native American and European perspectives; the cultural component of natural disasters; technology, capitalism, and the “control of nature”; gender and nature; and America as wilderness, frontier, garden, and city.

Readings: (Available at Little Professor, 725 Placentia Ave., Fullerton; phone: 996-3133.)

John G. Neihardt, [Black Elk Speaks](#)
 Donald Worster, [Dust Bowl](#)
 Jon Krakauer, [Into the Wild](#)
 Margaret Atwood, [Surfacing](#)
 Elizabeth Kolbert, [Field Notes From a Catastrophe](#)

Readings, continued:

**Recommended: William Cronon, ed. [Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature](#)

Collected Readings (30 primary & secondary sources; available at Copyco, 2438 Chapman Ave, Fullerton; phone: 680-9800)

I may place copies of several anthologies—Cronon’s Uncommon Ground, Wayne Franklin and Michael Steiner’s Mapping American Culture, and Michael Sorkin’s Variations on a Theme Park—on reserve in the Library. These books, along with other essays on reserve or in your Collected Readings, are meant to provide examples for your own research and may also supply materials for oral reports throughout the semester.

Seminar Requirements:

1) ***Reading, discussions, and attendance:*** In a class of this size, I look forward to the free, sometimes heated, intellectual exchange generated by our readings and our community of interest in understanding the meaning of nature in American culture. To set the stage for each discussion, I will provide a week beforehand a series of topics and questions related to the readings. To evoke discussion, I may as the spirit moves me, divide you into small groups each responsible for summarizing and critiquing chapters or essays from our common readings. It is essential to complete the readings as they come up for discussion; it is also crucial that you attend all of the seminar meetings ready to engage in critical analysis and informed debate. Missing more than two seminar meetings—except for serious and compelling reasons—will lower your final grade.

2) ***Response papers:*** You will be asked to write one 5-6_ page response papers that will help you capture and develop some of the fugitive thoughts sparked by our readings and discussions. This paper may also help inspire you toward focusing upon a specialized research topic for your larger paper. I will provide you with the response paper prompts--questions directly related to the seminar materials—several weeks before the papers are due. I will give you two opportunities to write this paper; you may, if you’d like, write both papers and only the highest grade will the count toward your final evaluation.

3) ***Oral reports:*** I will ask each of you to present one report—five to ten minutes as an individual, ten to fifteen minutes or so as a small group—on an essay or chapter not assigned to the seminar as a whole. I hope to begin these reports by the third week of the semester. As with your response papers, these reports might inspire or relate to your research project. You can also do a second oral report if you’re not pleased with your first one. I will count the best report for your final grade.

4) ***Research project and paper:*** A relatively concise research paper (10-14 typed pages for undergraduates, 12-16 pages for graduate students) will allow you to explore a particular topic or problem related to American culture and nature. Although I will encourage, in fact require, some reference in your papers to relevant materials read in the seminar, I also ask you to pursue independent research. A basic purpose of this capstone seminar is to familiarize American Studies scholars with research techniques, and I hope that constructing this paper will be a valuable experience for you. I would like to discuss this project with each of you sometime before the middle of the semester. I am more than eager to give you all of the advice and encouragement I can muster. Brief project proposals are due Wednesday, October 15th. During the final weeks of the semester, time will be set aside for careful discussion within the seminar of each student's work-in-progress.

It is crucial that you do fresh research for this seminar--recycled papers are not acceptable, though you can build upon and move beyond previous work. Even with the incredible reach of web-based sources, it is crucial to engage directly with library based, peer reviewed, hard copy, published materials. We will have a Library Research Tour early in the semester, and issues of using and documenting web-based and more traditional sources will be carefully discussed then and throughout the semester. I also expect that all of your writing be completed by the end of semester. Incompletes will be given only for extremely compelling reasons

Grading, Participation, Attendance:

Your final grade will be based upon your written work, your oral report, the quality of your seminar discussion, and consistency of your attendance. Your response paper, oral report, quality of discussion, and attendance record will together constitute one half of your final grade; your research paper will make up the other half. It is important that all students attend every seminar meeting--unless there are unavoidable circumstances and/or you discuss the situation with me—and missing two or more without such reasons will drop your grade.

Response paper:	20%	or	20 points	(one 4-6 page paper or the best of two papers)
Oral Report:	10%	or	10 points	(5-15 minutes, individual or small group)
Discussion:	10%	or	10 points	
Attendance:	10%	or	10 points	
Research paper:	<u>50%</u>	or	<u>50 points</u>	(12-16 pages, fully cited, Chicago style, plus mid-semester proposal)
			100 possible points	

**I will be use the +/- grading option for the seminar.

Your total of 100 points will be graded on a standard 10% scale, with 100-90% ranging from an A+ to an A-; 89-80% ranging from a B+ to a B-; 79-70% ranging from a C+ to a C-; 69-60% ranging from a D- to a D-; and so on.

Seminar Outline:

W, August 27: Introduction to the seminar and to studying American culture and nature.

I. CULTURE AND NATURE (Four weeks)

The history of life on earth has been a history of interaction between living things and their surroundings.

Rachel Carson, 1962

You can never know the world aright till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens and crowned with stars.

Thomas Traherne, 17th century

You glorify Nature and meditate on her:

Why not domesticate and regulate her?

You depend on things and marvel at them:

Why not unfold you ability and transform them?

Hsun Tzu, third century B.C.

Where man is not nature is barren.

William Blake, late 18th century

W, September 3:

1. Definitions and distinctions: human beings and nature; our species and other organisms; culture and environment. Read: excerpt from Yi-Fu Tuan's "Man and Nature" (Collected Readings).

2. The relationship between culture and nature: Homo Sapiens as subordinate, conqueror, and member. Read: excerpts from Ellen Churchill Semple's Influences of Geographic Environment, George Perkins Marsh's Man and

Nature, and Robert Platt's "Environmentalism Versus Geography," (Collected Readings).

2. Varieties of environmental attitudes, values, and beliefs: Native American, African, Greek, and Judeo-Christian creation myths (Collected Readings).

3. Possible viewing of snippets of Werner Herzog's film, "Grizzly Man," which raises profound questions about the boundaries between human being and other species and a taste of the end of the semester's viewing of Sean Penn's film "Into the Wild."

W, September 10:

1. Environmental attitudes within Western Civilization: Read: Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" (Collected Readings) and continue our discussion of the environmental implications of Adam, Eve, and Genesis.

2. Religion and Nature: The Great debate: Lynn White vs. Rene Dubos, continue discussing White's essay and compare it to Rene Dubos's counter argument: Read: Dubos, "A Theology of Earth," and White, "Continuing the Conversation,"(Collected Readings).

3. Saint Francis, Saint Benedict, and Saint Walt: Three Approaches to Nature: Seminar debate and view excerpts of Bill Moyer's "Is God Green?"

**Recommended reading/possible report: Yi-Fu Tuan, "Discrepancies Between Environmental Attitudes & Behavior: European and Chinese Examples" or chapters from Tuan's Affection and Dominance: The Meaning of Pets.

W, September 17:

American Culture and Nature: A prelude and over view through seven primary documents (a possible response paper/ exercise)

a) *First impressions*: Columbus (1492) and Bradford (1620) plus possible snippets from Terrence Mallick's film, "The New World."

b) *Mid-nineteenth century*: Thoreau's "Walking" (1851) and Webster's "Opening of the Northern Railroad" (1847).

c) *Toward the present*: Spilhaus's "Control of the World Environment" (1956) Vick's "Artificial Nature" (1989), and Jennifer Cobb's "Cybergrace" (1998) (Collected Readings)

First response papers—option #1-- may be due; we may also have a Library Research Seminar during this meeting.

II. AMERICAN SPACE AND PLACE (Seven weeks)

I picked Anaheim because it had certain things that I felt I needed, such as flat land because I wanted to make my own hills.

Walt Disney

The American landscape has never been at one with the white man. Never. And white men have probably never felt so bitter anywhere, as here in America, where the very landscape, in its very beauty, seems a bit devilish and grinning, opposed to us.

D.H. Lawrence

The vision of a wholly artificial environment, man and society restructured by the power of the machine, is the American Dream.

Herbert Richardson

A The Spirit of Place: The Native American and the Land

“Hear me, four quarters of the world--a relative I am! Give me the strength to walk the soft earth, a relative to all that is.”

Black Elk

W, September 24:

1. Opening considerations: The American Scene and the Sprit of the Place.
Read: Read: David Lowenthal's "The American Scene," Paul Shepard's "Place in American Culture," and William Cronon's "The Trouble With Wilderness" (Collected Readings)

2. A Native American Vision: Begin Black Elk Speaks. Also read: Scott Momaday's "Native American Attitudes to the Environment," and Peter Guthrie's "Primitive Man's Relationship to Nature" (Collected Readings). During this and subsequent sessions, we will see parts of a powerful film, Godfrey Reggio's "Koyaanisqati: Life Out of Balance."

**Recommended reading/Possible report: Charles Mann, "1491" (Collected Readings), or a chapter from Shepard Krech, The Ecological Indian (1999).

W, October 1:

Finish Black Elk Speaks. We will see further portions of "Koyaanisqati." Also segments of Ken Burn's documentary, "Ghost Dance," and Terry Macy and Daniel Hart's "White Shamans and Plastic Medicine Men" on New Age appropriations of American Indian culture.

**Recommended readings/possible reports: Carolyn Merchant, "Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative," in Cronon's Uncommon Ground; selected chapters from Phillip Deloria's Playing Indian; Steven Simms's "Wilderness as Human Landscape"; Malcolm Gladwell's review of Jared Diamond's Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed; and a debate by Vine Deloria and others on Indians and environment, horses and buffalo—all available for interested students.

B. Newcomers Breaking and Remaking Nature: From Frontier to Dustbowl to Disneyland

“The problem is that one people’s frontier is usually another’s homeland.”

Kathleen Norris

“Something in the heart of the westerner must glory in the clamor of hammering, the squealing of saws, the rattle of marbles in aerosol cans. Something in the heart of the westerner must yearn for lost wilderness, once wilderness has been routed.”

Richard Rodriguez

W, October 8:

1. Sacred and Profane Legacies of the Frontier: Read: Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," E.V. Smalley, "Life on the Prairie Farms," and Mike Davis's "White People Are Just a Bad Dream" (Collected Readings).

2. The End of the Agrarian Frontier: Begin Donald Worster's Dust Bowl.

**Recommended readings/possible reports: Terry Tempest Williams, "Clan of One-Breasted Women" (Collected Readings), Wilbur Jacobs, "The Great Despoliation," Richard Rodriguez, "True West," Michael Steiner, "From Frontier to Region"—all available to students.

W, October 15:

1. Continue reading and discussing Dust Bowl; see Pare Lorentz's film, "The Plow That Broke the Plains" and perhaps "The River"; listen to Woody Guthrie and Gene Autry music, and see a smorgasbord of Farm Security Administration photos from the 1930s.

2. Project proposals are due.

**Recommended reading/possible report: Michael Steiner, "Regionalism in the Great Depression" (Collected Readings)

W, October 22:

1. From the Dustbowl to Disneyland: Final words on Worster's book; discuss the on-going power of global agribusiness and the cultural sources of natural disasters; read and discuss my article, "Frontierland as Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Architectural Packaging of the Mythic West" as a post-modern case study of the ever-present compulsion to fabricate nature.

2. We may see portions of an acclaimed documentary, "Manufactured Landscapes" (2007) directed by Jennifer Baichal and Edward Burtynsky.

**Recommended Readings/Reports. On "technological pessimism" and other issues, Michael Steiner, "Parables of Stone and Steel"—available to students. Cronon's Uncommon Ground, and Franklin and Steiner's Mapping American Culture, contain other case studies--on the Nature Company, Sea World, Mount Rushmore and Yosemite, shopping malls, nuclear power plants, and many other manufactured places--that could serve as models for your own research or for further oral reports.

C. *The Open Road and the Call of the Wild in a Hyper Urban Society: Searching for Wilderness in an Unnatural World:*

"Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed.... We need wilderness preserved...because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed."

Wallace Stegner

"Once when I was little and Daddy gave me a whipping....I ran to the creek and stayed there until dark, and while I was there I thought I was getting revenge, for some reason. It's childish to run off to the wilderness to get revenge. It's the most childish thing in the world."

Bobbie Ann Mason

W, October 29 : Begin Jon Krakauer's Into the Wild; also read Leo Marx, "Pastoral Ideals and City Troubles" (Collected Readings).

Second response paper—option #2—may be due.

W, November 5: Finish reading Into the Wild, discuss Christopher McCandless's journey and compare Krakauer's book to Sean Penn's film version of it.

****Possible reports:** Chapters from Michael Johnson's book, Hunger for the Wild: America's Obsession With the Untamed West (2007)

****Note:** Hoping to compare male and female responses to wild nature, I have ordered Margaret Atwood's terrific novel Surfacing. I suspect that we may be running out of time to cover both sources and that in addition you will be in the midst of your research projects. With this in mind, let's see how things have developed. We may devote the rest of the semester to Atwood's novel; it is more likely, as outlined below, that we'll end with a focus on pressing environmental problems and possible solutions.

III. ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS, DYSTOPIAN VISIONS, AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS FOR OUR CENTURY (Four weeks)

"What would become of us if we walked only in garden or a mall?"
Henry Thoreau, 1851

"Pave paradise and put up a parking lot."
Joni Mitchell, "Big Yellow Taxi, 1969

"I like to play indoors better 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are."
Fourth-Grader in San Diego, 2005

A. The Land Ethic, the Life-Boat, and the Possible Death of Nature:

W, November 12 : 1. Two Classic Proposals: Aldo Leopold's "The Land Ethic" and Garrett Hardin's "Life-Boat Ethics" (Collected Readings)

Begin discussing and offering suggestions for research projects.

B. Global Warming, Technology, and the Fate of the Earth:

W, November 19: Selected chapters from Elizabeth Kolbert's Field Notes from a Catastrophe and portions of Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth."

Continue discussing research projects.

THANKSGIVING BREAK

W, December 3: Continue reading and discussing Kolbert’s Field Notes; final portions of Gore’s “An Inconvenient Truth” and glimpses of Spike Lee’s “When the Levees Broke.”
Finish discussing research projects.

W, December 10: Possible Futures: Two parables of Nature and Civilization: Read: E. M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops” (1909) and see, if possible, portions of Pixar’s “Wall.E.” (2008).

Final drafts of research papers are due, and a well-earned Winter Break.

****Note:** During our last few weeks, I will set aside time for each of you to briefly discuss your research papers (as they near completion) with the seminar. This will provide an opportunity for you to hear constructive suggestions and pointers from your colleagues. I will look forward to these and the rest of our sessions throughout the semester.

Overview of important dates-- firm and flexible, required and recommended:

- W, September 10:*** Research seminar in the Pollak Library
- W, September 17:*** First response papers—option #1—are likely to be due.
- W, September 24:*** Begin individual research conferences—sign up sheet passed around
- W, October 15:*** Research proposals are due
- W, October 29:*** Second response papers—option #2-- are likely to be due.
- W, November 12:*** Begin in seminar discussions of your research papers
- W, December 10:*** Final draft of research papers due

List of films—partial and entire—an ambitious but wondrous list: “Is God Green?” “The New World,” “Koyaanisqait,” “Manufactured Landscapes,” “Ghost Dance,” “White Shamans and Plastic Medicine Men,” “The Plow that Broke the Plains,” “The River,” “Grizzly Man,” “Into the Wild,” “When the Levees Broke,” “An Inconvenient Truth,” and “Wall.E.”

AND AN EXUBERANT, WELL-EARNED VACATION!