

GESM 110: Seminar in the Arts
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Planet Earth Poetics

The nature poem occurs when an individual's sense of the larger Earth enters into the world of human knowledge. The main understanding that results from this encounter is the Eco-poetic: that the world's desires do not run the Earth, but the Earth does run the world. — Ed Roberson

. . . poetry is a river of history moving through the blood tree of the body . . . — Joy Harjo

. . . eco-poetics is not exclusively a writerly practice. It's the question of how creative endeavors can contribute to learning how to be at home on the planet, learning how to be better neighbors to our fellow species on the planet. —Jonathan Skinner

Course Description:

What is eco-poetics? If *eco* means *house* (from the Greek *oikos*) and *poetics* means *to make* (from the Greek *poiesis*), what might we make of the place that is our home planet, Earth? And how might the practice of eco-poetics help us to make a healthy, livable present and to imagine a sustainable, thriving future?

In this course, we will study and write poetry and prose that engages with our earthly house—bioregions and ecologies, both local and global. We begin with the idea of the interdependency of all living and non-living things: plants, animals, stones, and soil; plastic, technology, water, and weather. We will act as naturalists as well as urban ecologists, examining intersections of the natural world, history, science, human-made systems, and environmental responses. We will consider diverse perspectives and depictions of ecology and natural processes in conjunction with gender, class, race, and culture. We will ask such questions as: What does it mean to make art in a time of urgent environmental challenge? How might imaginative acts of language intervene with, shape, and change our relationship with the habitats in which we live, at once natural and artificial? What does it mean to be a citizen, a steward, an activist on behalf of the Earth?

Throughout the semester, you will read widely and wildly. You will take part in engaged discussion, asking questions, positing solutions, and wandering afield. You will write (which is to say *make*) an equally wide and wild range of experiments, field notes, and responses, along with one toothsome essay and an extended creative project guided by what most compels. You will discover and invent new ways of evoking nature's rich diversity through language; and in becoming more literate about the Earth, you will change the way you think, write, speak, and pay attention to the singular planet all earth dwellers know—and cherish—as home.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Aligned with USC's General Education Program Core Literacies for The Arts

- 1. Analysis:** Focusing on the intersection between ecology and human beliefs and behaviors, you will practice and fine-tune critical thinking through written and verbal analyses of environmentally-grounded poetry, prose, film, and related works of art.
- 2. Making:** In responsive dialogue with eco-thinking and related literary and artistic works, you will engage in creative processes whereby you explore, experiment, make, and arrive at new works, including poems, prose, and other related art objects.
- 3. Context:** The class will provide context and vocabulary for a range of environmental writing, starting with indigenous myth and lore up through late 20th and 21st century poetry and prose engaged with revealing, and questioning, our altered relationship to nature; and enacting justice to intervene with, if not always remedy, human-made damage.
- 4. Connectivity:** This class will enrich your ability to bridge creative and critical approaches to thinking and problem solving, and to appreciate a larger sense of interdependency between human, natural world, language, and how the relationships between these are in a constant flux of distinct connections.
- 5. Engagement:** You will take your ecopoetics practices beyond the page through "field work" in local ecologies, such as the Santa Monica Mountains, Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook, Will Rogers State Park, the L.A. River, desert, beach, and botanical gardens. You will also engage with contemporary environmental issues and creative production through attendance of at least one real life program/event/uprising in community with fellow Earth dwellers.

REQUIRED TEXTS

- Dunham, Rebecca. *Cold Pastoral*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2017.
- Mullen, Harryette. *Urban Tumbleweed* Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2013.
- Harjo, Joy. *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*. New York: Norton, 2015.
- Russo, Linda and Marthe Reed, editors. *Counter-Desecration: A Glossary for Writing Within the Anthropocene*. Wesleyan, 2018.
- Tucky, Melissa, editor. Forward by Camille Dungy. *Ghost Fishing: An Eco-Justice Poetry Anthology*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018.

Please note: You will also select from our course bibliography **one** film to view over spring break and **one** text to present in class in conjunction with your Seminar Essay.

Brief supplemental readings (single poems, nonfiction and fiction excerpts) will be posted on Blackboard and/or provided in class.