

**GESM 110G 35284 Seminar in the Arts: Ecopoetics, or Writing during the Anthropocene  
Spring 2022**

**Professor Susan McCabe**

**T/R 3:30-4:50**

Email: [mccabe@usc.edu](mailto:mccabe@usc.edu)

Location: CPA 258 {in person room}; online at least for first week!

Office Hours: by appointment

**Description**

What is ecopoetics? “Ecos” means *house* (*Gk* oikos) and “poetics,” meaning *to make* (from the Gr. Poesis), which leads to the question: how do we make this earth our home by making poems? Can the practice of ecopoetics help us create a healthier, livable present and a sustainable future? What does the Earth want from us? How are we implicated in the environment? We will examine the interdependency of all living things: trees, plants, animals, forests, stones, soil, water, and weather, as well as their relationship to man-made artifacts such as plastic, pesticides, carbon-emissions—our footprint. We will ask tough questions as we commune with the natural world in the present, and its transmission to us from earlier poets and writers and contemporary ones? I turn to the paradigmatic Romantic “nature” poet William Wordsworth, and his sister, Dorothy, who sought beauty during an industrial revolution; but mostly, this class focuses on contemporary poets seeking to halt climate change, and other related events. Contemporary poets have to acknowledge the oil spills, the extinctions, the man-made disasters as well as finesse how humans might sustain and renew and celebrate the “natural” world. How does gender, race, class, sex change how we read nature? How does imaginative writing change our relationship to habitats we live in, and finally, what activism can we imagine ourselves engaging in to preserve the planet? What does it mean to be a steward, citizen, writer activist on behalf of the planet?

We are reading primarily poems. Along with reading for the ecological elements, you will also learn about close reading of a text or a site; you will gain techniques for making your ideas visceral and embodied for poems.

**Required Texts**

Diaz, Natalie. *A Post-Colonial Love Poem*. Graywolf, 2020.

Hillman, Brenda. *Extra Hidden Life Among the Days*, Wesleyan 2019.

Mullen, Harryette. *Urban Tumbleweed Notes from a Tanka Diary*, Graywolf [see online ]Perez, Craig Santos. *Habitat Threshold*. Omnidawn, 2020.

Russo, Linda. and Reed eds. *Counter Desecration: A Glossary For Writing in the Anthropocene*. Wesleyan: 2018.

Simard, Suzanne. *Finding the Mother Tree*. 2021. <https://web-p-ebSCOhost-com.libproxy2.usc.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=b4d13724-b503-4a0f-8953-796dd7438720%40redis&cvid=0&format=EK>

Smith, Tracy K. *Wade in the Water*. Graywolf Press, 2018.

Thoreau, Henry David. "Walking" [Essay free on Project Gutenberg]

Whitman, Walt. *Song of Myself* (1892 version) 1-52 parts [free on poetryfoundation.org]

Wordsworth, Dorothy, *Grasmere Journal* (1801-1803)

<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/42856> (Read parts 4-6 from Grasmere)

Wordsworth, William

<http://triggs.djvu.org/djvueditions.com/WORDSWORTH/PRELUDE1850/Prelude1850.pdf>

Read first 32 pages...

## Requirements & Grade Breakdown

We meet twice a week, except for Spring Break. The class expectation is that you attend all classes to keep up with the in-class workshops and discussion. As an "arts" class, analyzing texts is meant to spur your own creativity. We will usually begin with an in-class writing prompt; class meetings include important interaction and discussion that cannot be replicated if you are not physically present or (on Zoom). There is no way you can make-up a class; to get the most out of the class, you must come prepared with the day's assigned texts, with responses to it. This is a major requirement. **Carefully consider if you are up to this contract, excepting of course documented reasons.**

### 1-Participation and in-class exercises.

20%

### 2-Ecological Attunement:

**Journal/Field Notebook with in-class responses as well as a section for "tree visitation"\* and walking meditations/ with other related entries, including in class prompts: each walk, take at least two entries, about a half to a page a week, at least.**

Try to take all notes by hand. You will need a medium to large **journal (not small)**, where you will respond to in-class prompts, and record your own pre-class responses to materials, or other free-writing you do towards completing an assignment. You can use the journal as well to write down ideas about ecology, about other writings you are reading, your reactions to writings, and so on.

\*Every week for about twenty minutes, you are required to visit a specific tree **twice a week**, discover all you can about it, its name, its genus, how it changes week to week, what is around it, and to note everything you sense about the tree. You can sketch, include photos (but observe first; photograph after), but you must write an entry every week in response to the tree of your choice. Please date and time stamp each entry in all journal entries. "Walking" is also a required aspect to the journal. Walk to your spot, and while doing so, pay close attention to all that you see, hear, and touch. Write notes about the notes in walking mindfully to your spot, then begin sensing what the environment (outside your own psyche) is telling you. Other field notes should be kept up for an additional entry will provide you with both a regular observational/writing practice and an opportunity to be mindfully present in local ecologies and environmentally-related

events/programs/exhibitions **A role model for a nature diary is Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journals*, one naturalist's example—for walking, attending, and planting seeds for her brother's poetry, the more famous William Wordsworth.**

20%

**3) Five Poems for Workshops and responses to your peers (to be printed and turned in as part of portfolio submitted at the end of class with journal);**

25 %

**4) FIVE 1-2 page typed responses** (carefully written, and not impressionistic, very attuned to close reading) to every book we read, as well as focus on a couple individual poems in the 21<sup>st</sup> century poetry we will largely read. Due on day of discussion of the text.

25 %

**5) Presentation: Activist “Plan”** presented to class on final week: what intervention would you want to make, if you could, to any environmental issue? Make your intervention very specific and original. How could a poem intervene with how people think and feel? What do you imagine yourself doing, if you could? Class presentation and handout

10%

**For a role model out of reach, watch this clip:**

**<https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2019/08/18/greta-thunberg-sails-to-un-climate-summit-zero-emissions-yacht-ndwknd-dnt-vpx.cnn>**

### **Workshop guidelines and etiquette:**

The poet Ross Gay writes: “If critique does not emerge from love, then I’m probably not interested in it. Meaning the critique has a kind of vision for transformation that emerges because we love one another. Let’s just figure out how to celebrate and make.”

Take up this spirit in your responses to others in the workshop: your responses should be substantive (not just “good” or “bad”), and pivot upon particular lines that are striking for beauty, difficulty, as well as commenting on your intuited sense of the writer’s aim in the whole.

One paragraph is sufficient; bring comments to class ready to share. We will all work to make the class a safe space for our feelings and thoughts, a space of play, intelligence, and creativity.

By Tuesday evening or Wednesday morning, submit your assignment to all your peers, as workshop will be on Wednesdays. .

**Please** submit on time your work with your NAME, DATE AND TITLE, page numbers, and send to all email addresses, including mine; have comments ready for class. Both your work, and your responses to your peers goes in your final portfolio.

There are **5 poems, 5 prose pieces, and 1 Presentation.**

**\*\*IMPORTANT Note –before class starts, listen as you read along to Wordsworth’s**

**Prelude (Book 1 and II)**

**<http://triggs.djvu.org/djvueditions.com/WORDSWORTH/PRELUDE1850/Prelude1850.pdf>**

**Read first 32 pages...**

**Listen online if it helps as you read:**

**--<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22go6dq1ong>**

**As a Romanticist dealing with industrial revolution, he holds the natural world as formative of his psyche in childhood. See if you can present in the first class an experience like the formative interaction with nature in his experiences.**

## Schedule of Readings & Assignments

### Week One

January 11 Introductions & Prospects; sketch forth one of your childhood experiences with the natural world as formative, that shaped you (à la **Wordsworth** reading and recording noted above), a first entry about a page for your journal, and for sharing it with class. **Before we meet, select one section of 4-15 line from Prelude that prompts a memory of your early encounter with natural forces.**

January 13 **Discuss** *Tumbleweed Tanka Diary* (excerpts on Blackboard)  
1 page prose response to four or five interconnected pieces in *Tumbleweed*. **Prose # 1.** Submit by email to me and peers, on all assignments. We will use these to discuss Mullen's poetic form and what it allows—ecologically.

**\*Poem #1 assigned** five interlocking Haiku (5-7-5 syllables per line) or three interlocking Tanka (5-7-7-5-7) for

These are acts of attention put into form to arrest the moment.

### Week Two

January 18 **Workshop #1 Reading and discussing Poem(s) #1**

January 20 **Continued**

### Week Three

January 25

Explore the glossary in *Counter-Desecration*. Either by choice or *chance*, select three to five words to discuss in class. **Share in class your words and discuss *Grasmere Journals*.** **Prose #2 assigned.**

January 27

Discuss Dorothy Wordsworth, *Grasmere Journals*. William Wordsworth's poem on the Leech-Gatherer she spots on one of her walks [ see 4 May 1802]

“Resolution & Independence” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45545/resolution-and-independence>

“I wandered lonely as a cloud” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45521/i-wandered-lonely-as-a-cloud>

### Workshop #2:

A Prose entry from a walk, written in the hasty and detailed style of Dorothy Wordsworth.

Experiment with using some of her punctuational haste, and her rhythm to rewrite one of your walk entries as such

### Week Four

February 1 **Discuss** the online excerpt from Whitman's *Song of Myself* [on PoetryFoundation] **Select a section to analyze deeply.** **Prose #3 assigned.**

February 3 **Workshop #3 Prose** on a passage from Whitman; then try to capture his form of long lines and other poetic devices, but use your own content (turn to the journal!)

## **Week Five**

February 8 **Discuss** Diaz, *Postcolonial Love Poem*

February 10 Continue Diaz

Interview <https://tinhouse.com/transcript/between-the-covers-natalie-diaz-interview>

## **Week Six**

February 15 **Prose #4 due** discussing one or more poems in the book

**Assign poem #2**

February 16 4 p.m. in 420 Doheny

**Diaz reads (Mandatory attendance except in case of schedule conflict)**

February 17 **Workshop Poem #2**

## **Week 7**

February 22 **Discuss** Tracy K. Smith. *Wade in the Water*

Watch <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/amanpour-and-company/video/tracy-k-smith-on-her-new-book-wade-in-the-water/> **Assign Poem #3** (combining two registers of language, like Smith's quoting those who experienced near death, and her cataloging the storm and exploring eco-injustice)

February 24 **Workshop Poem #3**

## **Week 8**

March 1 **Workshop #3 continued**

March 2 **Discuss** Perez *Threshold*

<https://thegeorgiareview.com/posts/on-habitat-threshold-by-craig-santos-perez/>

<https://forthewild.world/listen/craig-santos-perez-on-habitat-threshold-183>

**Assign Poem#4** (find a real eco-event ongoing that you feel strongly about, and then try to express its significance by adopting one of Perez's styles)

## **Week 9**

March 8 **Workshop Poem #4**

March 10 **Workshop #4 continued**

## **Week 10 SPRING BREAK**

## **Week 11**

March 22 **Discuss** *The Mother Tree*

March 25 *Mother Tree* continued

## **Week 12**

March 29 *Mother Tree* **Present a particularly moving or important passage (a paragraph or set of phrases) that speaks to your sense of how this memoir addresses human-tree relations, tree-tree relations, and how they mirror your human family or ancestral past. Prose #5)**

March 31 **Presentations continued**

### **Week 13**

April 5 **Discuss first two sections of *Hillman's Extra Hidden Life***  
(I will provide a lecture, or review for this as well)

April 7 Hillman continued, the last sections, with personal elegy

### **Week 14**

April 12 More on Formal Experiment and Punctuation in Hillman **Assign Poem #5**

April 14 **Workshop #5**

### **Week 15**

April 19 Journal Reading (select a section in yours you want to expand upon—or spot a seed for other writing)

April 21 Journal continued

### **Week 16**

April 26 Creative Interventions (**Presentation**)

April 28 **Presentations continued**

**Key: Remember to READ all submissions for workshop and have some prepared comments in your journal before the class meeting.**

**FINAL PORTFOLIO** (5 workshopped and revised prose pieces; 5 workshopped and revised poems; 1 presentation, and your journal with your comments on the work of your peers, notes you took to be ready for workshop.)

**DUE May 10 5 p.m.**

### Last Notes:

Note: Walking in urban nature and hiking trails:

\*\* Places for walks and observation are many in Southern California:

You can take your ecopoetics practices beyond the page through "fieldwork" in local ecologies, such as the Santa Monica Mountains, Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook, Will Rogers State Park, the L.A. River, desert, Exposition Park, beach, Huntington Gardens, and various other botanical gardens. AND FINALLY, there are many micro-places at USC that could serve for your observation; as with all the walks, chart them. Draw a map to and from the "tree" or plant you have discovered; then annotate with other observations along the way.

For extra credit, engage with contemporary environmental issues by attending a real life program/event/uprising in community with fellow Earth dwellers.

## Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

### Academic Conduct:

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” [policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b](http://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b). Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

### Support Systems:

Student Counseling Services (SCS) – (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.  
[engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling)

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1 (800) 273-8255 Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.  
[www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) – (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. [engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp)

### Sexual Assault Resource Center

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: [sarc.usc.edu](http://sarc.usc.edu)

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086 Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. [equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu)

### Bias Assessment Response and Support

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. [studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support)

The Office of Disability Services and Programs Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. [dsp.usc.edu](http://dsp.usc.edu)

Student Support and Advocacy – (213) 821-4710

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. [studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa)

## Diversity at USC

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. [diversity.usc.edu](http://diversity.usc.edu)

## USC Emergency Information

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible. [emergency.usc.edu](http://emergency.usc.edu)