

English 5020-1: Studies in Non-Fiction: Toxic Landscapes**Fall 2003**

T/Th 9:10-10:30 a.m. Bu C 211

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Office Hours: T/Th: 10:45-11:45 a.m.; 1:45-2:45 p.m. and by appointment

Course Description: This course will study a variety of non-fiction texts, as well as the photography of Richard Misrach and the film Safe by the director Todd Haynes, which portray toxic human and natural landscapes in the American West and Southwest. So defined, the course is a study in contemporary writing about the environment as well as a genre course. Along with reading and discussing the themes of the assigned readings, we will be studying the formal or rhetorical features of toxic discourse. In general, the objectives of environmental writing are not only to inform and to be faithful to the world out there being portrayed (and one's experience of it), but also to promote some kind of activism—what some critics call an “ethics of care.” Writing and studying about toxic landscapes constitutes a kind of limit case for such objectives, for the challenge is to learn how to “care” about degraded environments. Since so many toxic landscapes are and have been located in/near working-class and minority populations, studying toxic landscapes frequently coincides with the environmental justice movement. As the course develops, then, we will likely be discussing such issues as environmental racism, the linkage between violence against landscapes and against women, and the specific features of a toxic anti-aesthetic where the distance between reader/viewer and subject gets abolished. The fact is, studying toxic landscapes can be, well, “toxic.”

Texts:Urrea, By the Lake of Sleeping Children: The Secret Life of the Mexican BorderWard, Canaries on the Rim: Living Downwind in the WestBowden, Blood Orchid: An Unnatural History of AmericaMeloy, The Last Cheater's Waltz: Beauty and Violence in the Desert SouthwestSolnit, Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American WestMisrach, Violent Legacies: Three CantosSafe, a film by Todd Haynes

Selected Reserve Readings

Requirements:--Attendance: More than three unexcused absences will affect your final grade adversely.

This is not a correspondence course.

--Reading and Discussion: Those who contribute to the success of class discussion will receive extra credit when the final grade is figured.--Writing:

- a) 5-7 page paper of your own creative non-fiction about a trip to a local toxic landscape (you define “local”—if you're going to Moab this fall, e.g., you could discuss the Atlas tailings site, etc. May involve research. May involve photography if you so desire.
- b) 5-7 page interpretive paper on one of the assigned books.
- c) 8-10 page FINAL PAPER (topic worked up in consultation)
- d) quizzes over reading assignments (announced or unannounced)

Reading/Discussion Schedule: (Note: * denotes Reserve Reading)

- August 21: Introduction to the Course
- August 26: **Buell**, “Toxic Discourse,” from Writing for an Endangered World*
- August 28: T.V. **Reed**, “Toward an Environmental Justice Ecocriticism”*
(from Adamson, The Environmental Justice Reader)
- September 2: **Solnitt**, from Savage Dreams:
“The Rainbow”; “Spectators”; “Framing the View”
- September 4: **Solnitt**, “Fire in the Garden”; “The Name of the Snake”; “Full Circle”
- September 9: **Davis**, “Ecocide in Marlboro Country,” from Dead Cities*
- September 11: **Ward**, Canaries on the Rim, pp. 1-62
- September 16: **Ward**, pp. 62-118
- September 18: **Ward**, pp. 119-88
- September 23: **Ward**, pp. 189-to end
- September 25: **Misrach**, “Project w-47 (the secret)” and “Interview”
From Violent Legacies: Three Legacies
Campbell, from The Cultures of the American New West*
- September 30: **First Paper Due**: Turn in either writing project A or B described above.
- October 2: Fall Mini-Break/ NO CLASS
- October 7: **Solnitt**, from Savage Dreams: “From Hell to Breakfast”
“Like Moths to a Candle”
- October 9: No class (I’ll be out of town for a conference)
- October 14: **Solnitt**, “April Fool’s Day”; “Trees”; “Lise Meitner’s Walking Shoes”
- October 16: **Solnitt**, “Golden Hours and Iron County” through end of Part One
- October 21: **Misrach**, “The Pit”; Sontag, “The View from the Ark”
From Violent Legacies
- October 23: **Misrach**, “The Playboys”

- October 28: Discussion of Safe (film by Todd **Haynes**)
- October 30: No class (I'll be out of town attending a conference)
Second Paper DUE in my mailbox by Friday, Oct. 31st
 (If you did project A for the first paper, turn in project B
 If you did project B for the first paper, turn in project A)
- November 4: **Meloy**, The Last Cheater's Waltz, first three chapter
- November 6: **Meloy**, "Tse Valley II: Fossil River"; "Learning to Find Home";
 "Spitting Photons"
- November 11: **Meloy**, "The Last Cheater's Waltz," "Epilogue"
- November 13: **Bowden**, Blood Orchid, "How it Came to Pass," plus first two chapters
- November 18: **Bowden**, chapters 3 and 4
- November 20: **Bowden**, chapters 5 and 6
- November 25: **Bowden**, chapter 7 through end
- November 27: **Thanksgiving/NO CLASS**
- December 2: **Urrea**, By the Lake of Sleeping Children: "Introductory Matters";
 "A Lake of Sleeping Children"; "Dompe Days"
- December 4: **Urrea**, "Borderland Blues"; "In the Wet"; "The Bald Monkey"
 "The Stupidity of Evil"

FINAL PAPER DUE before 9:00 a.m. on December 12.