This seminar will investigate the field of contemporary ecopoetry/ecopoetics, focusing mainly on the work of American poets from the second half of the twentieth century. We will consider both the overlap and the differences between ecopoetry and ecopoetics as the terms are currently used in ecocritical discourse. “Ecopoetry” sometimes refers specifically to poetry informed by the post-World War II ecology movement, but is also used more loosely to refer to any poetry that deals with environmental themes; in contrast, “ecopoetics” refers to an ecological theory of poetry, and often indicates an interest in how poetry may be “ecological” in its formal strategies rather than simply in its thematic content. Put simply, ecopoetry tends to be more accessible and/or activist in its orientation, whereas ecopoetics tends to designate a more formally experimental kind of work influenced by avant-garde modernists like Pound, Williams, and Stein and by Marxist and poststructuralist critiques of the concept of nature. Our readings will include poetry and criticism from both camps, as well as some poetry that is not self-consciously “eco-” at all but still merits ecocritical attention. We will also consider whether or not ecopoetry and ecopoetics represent a critical departure from (Romantic) nature poetry, which some have criticized as perpetuating a reductive binary opposition between nature and culture or reinforcing anthropocentric humanist conceptions of selfhood.

As we explore various versions of ecopoetry and ecopoetics that have emerged since the 1950s, our goal will be not simply to locate and celebrate poems that express ecological values, but to develop a more precise understanding of what conceptions of nature, ecology, or environment are operating in each text (as well as in our own critical discourse); to consider what social-material discourses inform those conceptions; and to consider how different poetic strategies might reflect, contribute to, complicate, unsettle, or enrich our understanding of the more-than-human world and the place of humans within it.

We will situate our inquiry theoretically by comparing several different definitions of ecopoetry and ecopoetics that have been offered by critics like Jonathan Bate, Leonard Scigaj, David Gilcrest, Jed Rasula, Angus Fletcher, Kate Rigby, and Timothy Morton, and by contemporary ecopoets like Jonathan Skinner and Juliana Spahr. We will also seek to develop a historical understanding of both the poetry and the criticism by situating them in relation to relevant events such as the development of ecology as both a science and a popular political movement; the emergence of what Daniel Belgrad calls a “culture of spontaneity” in the 1960s; the poststructuralist turn in literary and cultural studies; the emergence of the environmental justice movement in the 1980s; and the “science wars” of the 1990s.

Grading:
Seminar work, 50%; seminar paper, 50%. Seminar work will include two presentations, one on a primary text and one on a critical article.

Texts:
TBA, but the primary texts will include poems by a range of poets representing different moments, movements, and positions in post-World War II American poetry, such as Elizabeth Bishop, Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, Gary Snyder, Adrienne Rich, A.R. Ammons, Ron Silliman, Susan Howe, Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, Derek Walcott, Patricia Smith, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, Arthur Sze, and Juliana Spahr. Secondary texts will include theoretical and historical materials on ecology, ecocriticism, and ecopoetry/ecopoetics, as well as critical readings of particular poems.