English 7384 F: Theorizing Environment

In the past decade or so, critics working in the emerging fields of ecocriticism and environmental cultural studies have developed a range of approaches to the question of how to understand nature, or “the environment,” and its relationship to human social and cultural practice. While first-wave ecocritics tended to focus on valorizing the critically neglected genre of nature writing, ecocritics now examine representations of environment in a wide range of texts and genres, and propose that we think of “environmentality” as a category of analysis analogous to, and at least as important as, the more familiar critical categories of gender, race, class, and sexuality. This new category requires its own set of critical tools. Rather than simply analyzing images of nature in literary texts, ecocritics are now drawing on a variety of theoretical resources to historicize the concepts of nature and environment, to complicate reductive distinctions between nature and culture, to rethink the relationship between scientific and literary conceptions of ecology, and to develop more complex ways of understanding the relationships among human beings, individually and collectively, and the other agents and forces that co-constitute the more-than-human world.

This seminar will provide an opportunity to explore some key issues in environmental cultural studies, and to grapple with some key texts that we can categorize under the loose heading of “environmental theory.” Put another way, it will also provide an introduction to some important areas in contemporary critical theory as viewed from an environmental perspective. We will focus primarily on coming to grips with the theoretical issues themselves, rather than trying to “apply” them to literary texts. However, we will also consider how these theoretical resources might be used in literary-critical projects, as well as how they relate to more popular and activist environmental discourses. Each week we will read a primary theoretical text (or substantial sections of it) from the list below, plus a critical article that examines the primary text from the perspective of environmental cultural studies.

Course texts:
Available at the Agora Bookstore, 145 Besserer St. at Waller, http://www.sfuca.ca/businesses/agora; texts will also be on reserve at Morisset Library.

• Karl Marx, Selected Writings (Hackett)
• Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception (Routledge)
• Martin Heidegger, Basic Writings (HarperCollins)
• Bruno Latour, Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies (Harvard UP)
• Donna Haraway, The Haraway Reader (Routledge)
• Donna Haraway, The Companion Species Manifesto (Prickly Paradigm)
• Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus (U of Minnesota P)
• Cary Wolfe, ed., Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal (U of Minnesota P)
• Fritjof Capra, The Web of Life (Knopf)
• Deborah Barndt, Tangled Routes: Women, Work, & Globalization on the Tomato Trail (Rowman & Littlefield)
• Gary Snyder, The Practice of the Wild (Shoemaker & Hoard)
• Photocopied course packet (also available at the Agora)
Course Work:

Preparation and participation (10%):
Your active participation is essential to the success of the seminar. You aren’t expected to be an expert in theory, but you are expected to think carefully about the readings and come prepared to share ideas and questions, debate issues, play devil’s advocate, and approach challenging texts and ideas with curiosity and an open mind.

Three reading responses/presentations (10% each = 30%):
Three times this term, each of you will be responsible for helping to generate class discussion by preparing, circulating via email, and presenting in class an informal reading response that ends with some questions for discussion. Normally there will be two people presenting at each class. Both presenters will be jointly responsible for getting and keeping the discussion rolling. (I’ll help too.) Your presentation grades will be based partly on the written response and partly on your contributions in class.

Your responses need not be structured like formal essays; they can be quite informal and exploratory. No one will expect you to have understood the readings perfectly, so don’t feel you have to explain every aspect of the theorist’s or critic’s argument. Instead, do your best to summarize key ideas and raise productive questions for discussion—questions about how to interpret the text(s), about how the writers’ ideas compare with those of other writers we’ve read, or about how their ideas might be useful or problematic. In most cases, you will be signed up for a particular secondary article in addition to the primary text.

* Since not everyone will have time to read every article carefully each week, it will be helpful if you could begin your response by briefly summarizing the argument of the secondary article you’re signed up for and commenting on what you think is useful, problematic, or confusing about it. Then you can make a few comments/questions about the primary theorist—questions arising either from the article or from your own thoughts about the theorist’s ideas.

To summarize, here’s what you’re expected to do to for each class on which you’re signed up to present::

1) Write a short, informal response to the text and/or article (1-2 pages, single-spaced) that includes:
   a) A brief summary of what you see as some of the most important claims made or ideas explored (in the article and/or primary text),
   b) some observations about which part(s) of the article and/or primary text you find most useful or intriguing, and why;
   c) some comments about which part(s) of the article and/or primary text you find puzzling, problematic, or not fully persuasive, and why;
   d) a couple of questions arising from the week’s readings that you think would be useful to discuss in class. (In general, your questions will be most useful if they point us to a specific passage in the text(s).)
   e) If you wish, you may also comment on how the readings compare with other texts we’ve read so far: Which previous thinkers do you think this writer would agree or disagree with the most? How do his/her ideas reaffirm, supplement, complicate, or challenge those of other writers we’ve read?

2) Email your response to the class by Sunday evening before the class on which you’re signed up to present. This will ensure that everyone has time to think about your comments and questions before we meet.

3) The day before the class meeting, read the other presenter’s response and prepare a tentative answer to at least one of his/her questions. Your answer doesn’t have to be definitive or perfectly worked out; just come prepared to throw out some ideas, and/or direct the class to a passage you think might be relevant.

4) In class, you will share your comments and questions orally so we’ll all have them fresh in our minds. You will then be responsible for helping to facilitate our discussion of the text.

Three position papers (20% each = 60%):
The week after your presentation (or no more than 2 weeks later; I’m prepared to be somewhat flexible), you will submit a brief position paper (about 4 pages, single-spaced) that elaborates on ideas and questions raised in class. You can think of this as a revised and expanded version of your presentation, or you can start fresh and approach the readings from a different direction.
Each position paper should explore a particular question or problem arising out of the week’s readings. Ideally you will develop and support a particular argument that states your own position on the issue, but you should also feel free to be more tentative and exploratory than you would in a formal essay. It’s perfectly fine—and in fact probably most productive—to begin with a question and explore several different possible answers, for example, or to argue a certain position and then end with questions that you don’t know how to answer yet. The point of the position papers is not to produce publishable theoretical arguments; rather, it’s to deepen your understanding of the texts by formulating a written response to the discussion we had of them, and to come to some kind of conclusion about what the important issues are for you, where you stand on those issues at this point in your thinking, and why you think those issues are important to think about. In a way, the series of papers will serve as a kind of journal documenting the evolution of your thinking throughout the course.

Since these are position papers rather than full-fledged critical essays, you are not required to do research beyond the assigned readings—I want you to focus on grappling with the assigned texts, not surveying everything that other critics have written about them, so I’ll be perfectly happy if your position papers cite only the assigned texts. However, you are welcome to use other sources if you really want to. These might include readers’ guides to the philosophers, critical essays other than the ones in the coursepack, or anything else you find useful. If you wish, you can put the week’s readings in dialogue with other texts we’ve read earlier in the term. Another option would be to begin exploring the question of how to “apply” the theory to literary texts by putting the week’s readings in dialogue with a literary text of your choice. But again, it’s perfectly fine to just focus on the theorist and/or secondary article(s) you presented on. Do whatever you think would be interesting and useful for you.
**Reading Schedule:**

Tues, Sept 14: Introductory questions
   Biro, Denaturalizing Ecological Politics, chapters 1-3 (available at the Agora bookstore and also online through U of O library); Williams, “Ideas of Nature” and Cronon, Introduction to Uncommon Ground (coursepack)

1: Foundations: Darwin and Marx


Tues, Sept 28: Marx, from Selected Writings: excerpts from 1844 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (54-97), The German Ideology, Part 1 (102-56), The Communist Manifesto (157-86), and Capital Vol. 1 (214-300); Vogel, “Marx and Alienation from Nature”; Foster, “Introduction” from Marx’s Ecology (you may also want to read Chapter 5, “The Materialist Conception of History”)


2: Phenomenology

Tues, Oct 12: Merleau-Ponty, selections from Phenomenology of Perception plus “The Intertwining—The Chiasm” (coursepack); Abram, “Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth”; Toadvine, “Radical Reflection and the Resistance of Things”

Tues, Oct 19: Latour, Pandora’s Hope; “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”

* READING WEEK Oct 25-29 *

3: Science studies and systems theory

Tues, Nov 2: Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” “The Promises of Monsters,” “Modest_Witness@ Second_Millennium” (Haraway Reader) and The Companion Species Manifesto

Tues, Nov 9: Capra, The Web of Life; Zylinska, “A Different History of Bioethics”

4: Posthumanism

Tues, Nov 16: Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, especially chapters 1 (rhizome), 2 (wolves), 10 (becoming-animal), and 11 (refrain); chapters 3 (geology of morals) and 6 (body without organs) are also relevant; Economides, “Romantic Individualism, Animal Rights and the Challenge of Multiplicity”; Mugerauer, “Deleuze and Guattari’s Return to Science”

Tues, Nov 23: Wolfe, Zoontologies, “In the Shadow of Wittgenstein’s Lion” and other chapters TBA

5: Globalization and ecopolitical practice

Tues, Nov 30: Barndt, Tangled Routes; Heise, “From the Blue Planet to Google Earth: Environmentalism, Ecocriticism, and the Imagination of the Global”

Tues, Dec 7: Snyder, The Practice of the Wild