

AMERICANS and NATURE



A Panorama of Niagara from the Canada Side, 1903
Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs

University of Southern California
Dornsife College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences
Fall Term, 2014

Thematic Option
CORE 104: Change and the Future
Americans and Nature
Mondays and Wednesdays
12:00 to 1:50
WPH 102

Discussion Sections: Fridays (required)
Lab Sessions as Needed (Thursdays 5:00 – 8:00)

Professor William Deverell
deverell@usc.edu
Office Hours: Mondays 10:00 to 11:00
History Department
Main Office Suite
SOS Bldg.
I prefer that you see me during OH, but I am available for appointments as well.

Teaching Assistant: Kristina Shull, Ph.D.
Office Hours: TBA

Course Objectives and Themes

American history is tied peculiarly and particularly to conceptions of nature, and these ideas and expectations have often been mixed with or built upon ideas and convictions of nationalism. From the era of Old World/New World contact unto today, the trajectory of American history has touched deeply upon meaning and meanings drawn from nature.

This course will explore American Nature through history and literature. Our aim will be to discover shifts in perceptions over time, both as the national trajectory changes and as “nature under review” changes. Students will explore fiction, poetry, history, and historical scholarship. We will be especially focused on the regional and temporal differences germane to colonial history, the early Republic, the Civil War era, and the first and second halves of the 20th century. Although we will move through historical periods hewing to conventional ways in which eras are described, we will also be open to new ways to divide American history by reference to nature and ideas about how nature and American relationships to it change. Could we think of other ways to describe American eras and epochs if we make nature our chief analytical prism? Our work together will also examine the visual record of American views of nature, especially as expressed through painting and photography.

Our time together this term will move rapidly. We will honor and hew closely to the three stated educational and intellectual goals of Thematic Option, namely that:

1. Students learn to think across disciplines, to not be constrained by the methods and concepts of any one approach.
2. Students develop a love of language, an appreciation for the power of the written and spoken word. Through Thematic Option’s writing seminars students learn to express themselves cogently and concisely as excellent writers. Through the CORE curriculum courses, students get a sense of the great tradition of Western thought, along with the ability to discuss it critically and open it up to inquiry.
3. Students learn to deal with ambiguity. Thematic Option courses are not about providing answers, but asking questions. What is truth? What is justice? Who am I? What responsibilities do I have to society? These are but a few of the grand questions with which Thematic Option students struggle as they become comfortable with the realm of uncertainty, an open space full of opportunities for exploration.

Course Meetings and Assignments

We expect you in class. We expect that you come prepared. We expect that you participate. Unexcused absences are frowned upon and may imperil your grade. Excused absences ought to be few. You are welcome – encouraged – to take notes in this class, as you will do better if you do. Please feel free to take notes however you wish. However, please do not utilize your laptop, phone, tablet, etc. for anything other than note taking unless the opportunity presents itself for us to look something up via your device. You are expected to do your own work; violations of academic integrity, cheating, plagiarism, and the like are taken very seriously by

the university, the College, the history department, and everyone in the academic community.

Course Readings

We read a lot of books in this class. They are all required. Please have the relevant books or parts of books read by the time we begin class each week. In no particular order, the books for the term are these:

Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*. Brilliant, very difficult, but you will learn so much from it.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*. Required reading of educated young people in America. But go slow: it can bog down, it can be dense, and it is more complicated and perhaps less clear than we would wish for it to be.

Donald Worster, *A Passion for Nature*. Big biography of John Muir. You read this one for several reasons, chief among them that you need to know more about Muir and you need to know about Worster.

William deBuys, *A Great Aridness*. An influential environmental thinker, deBuys brings us westward and forward in time.

Gary Snyder, *No Nature*. Arguably the greatest American poet of the 20th century.

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*. Arguably the greatest poet in American history.

Jared Farmer, *Trees in Paradise*. Brilliant historian: his thoughts about trees and about California, twisted together.

Annie Proulx, *Bird Cloud*. An environmental and personal reckoning by the author of the story that became Brokeback Mountain.

Paul Johnson, *Sam Patch*. A weirdly wonderful examination of nature and industrialism mixed and fermented through the life an American daredevil in the early 19th century.

Course Exercises and Assignments

This course has three substantive exercises and assignments. They are due on their respective due dates (or earlier, but not later). You are also graded upon your participation and contributions to discussion sections. Your grade breakdown will be: short essays, 15% each; midterm 20%; final essay 30%; section work 20%.

Two Short essays. 1000 words or less. The first one is due September 12th at the start of section, the second one is due October 17th at the start of section, in hard

copy please (proofread and spellchecked). For these, choose two of the following three prompts (there is no order).

Discuss the theme/idea/meaning of nature in one of the following documents: the US Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the inaugural address of any President before Lincoln, the Seneca Falls Declaration Sentiments and Resolutions (1848), or William Seward's "Higher Law" speech.

Please analyze the various understandings of nature in any treaty made by the United States and one or more Native American nations. It would help if you reproduced the treaty with your essay, but some are very long. Relevant sections reproduced would be fine.

Built upon a search of a relevant text for the word "nature," please describe the meaning(s), use, and power of the word and concept in any work by James Fenimore Cooper, Margaret Fuller, Herman Melville, David Foreman, Jack London, Willa Cather, or Annie Dillard. Choose one author (but you may write about several works). You may propose a different author, but it has to be approved by Professor Deverell or TA Shull in advance of your working on the assignment.

Assignment Three. Midterm examination. October 22nd. In class. Closed book.

Assignment Four

Longer Essay. In 4000-5000 words, and covering at least a century of United States history (though try not to extend too far; 100 years is plenty in most cases) please analyze and interpret changing perceptions of nature by reference to one of the following genres of expression or knowledge: photography; geology; animal rights; sermons/theology; painting; poetry; national policymaking; folk or other music; political speeches. Please limit your analysis to one of these. You are free to suggest another medium if you wish, though we must approve of it ahead of time. How can you be sure that your examples reveal change beyond coincidental or circumstantial reasons? Please be certain to elucidate and illuminate change in your essay. Please footnote/endnote/otherwise cite as needed. Please include a bibliography of sources. Please do not utilize the internet as your sole resource. Please do not replicate work done in the shorter essay assignment. Due in hard copy at by 4:00 pm on December 10th, History Department.

Questions and Feedback

We encourage it. You are entering into the life of the university, and this transition will undoubtedly bring with it many, many questions. There are no dumb questions in college. If you feel comfortable asking a question in class, raise your hand and fire away. If you would prefer to ask in quieter circumstances, please feel free to come to office hours or make an appointment.

Course Schedule

Week One: Encounters

August 25 and 27

Introduction to course, readings, and assignments.

Please begin Miller (a couple of chapters)

Week Two: Theologies of Nature

September 1 and 3

Please read Miller through chapter seven

No Class September 1

Week Three: Natives and Nature

September 8 and 10

Please read Nathaniel Hawthorne's *May-Pole of Merry Mount*, *Ambitious Guest*, and *Young Goodman Brown* short stories.

Essay one due this week.

Film Screening pm September 11th.

Week Four: The New Nation: A New Nature?

September 15 and 17

Please read all of the Sam Patch book

Week Five: Transcending Nature

September 22 and 24

Please read all of Thoreau's *Walden*

Please read the last three chapters of Miller

Week Six: Natural Emotions

September 29 and October 1

Please read all of Whitman

Field Trip: Huntington Library October 3rd.

Week Seven: The Early West

October 6 and 8

No reading this week. Please catch up or work on essay(s).

Week Eight: Prophets and the Far West

October 13 and 15

Please read Worster, chapters 1-5

Short essay due Friday October 17th in section.

Week Nine: Preserving Nature before or after the Fall

October 20 and 22

Please read Worster, chapters 6 through Epilogue
Midterm Examination: in class, October 22nd. Closed book.

Week Ten: Convalescent Nature?
October 27 and 29
Please read Farmer, Parts I and II

Week Eleven: Regimes and Change
November 3 and 5
Please read Farmer Parts III and IV

Week Twelve
November 10 and 12
Please begin deBuys.

Week Thirteen: Aridity and Beauty
November 17 and 19
Please finish deBuys

Week Fourteen: Words and Experience
November 24 and 26
No Class November 26
Please read Snyder in entirety and begin Proulx

Week Fifteen: Imagination and Wide Open Space
December 1 and 3
Please finish Annie Proulx
Please read the last chapter of Miller again
Longer Essay due 4 pm December 10th, History Department