

English 5650: Advanced Seminar in Literary Study: U.S. Desert Writers

Spring 2017 T/H 2-3:20 p.m. LNCO 3870

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About this Course: This course focuses primarily on prose fiction and nonfiction 20thC. U.S. writing about the desert Southwest (a broad term encompassing the Mojave, Sonoran, and Great Basin deserts, along with the Colorado Plateau). Most of our reading will center on writing published after 1960. The course will also focus the readings and discussions by means of selected secondary readings about the genre of environmental writing, ecocriticism, and also theoretical issues having to do with language and representation, regional and/or national identity, and borderland subjectivity. In addition to broadening your understanding of environmental writing in the U.S., another course objective is to introduce key issues/themes/topics (and associated vocabularies) associated with writing about the human relationship to the nonhuman or more-than-human world. Our objective in short is not only to survey the tradition, so to speak, of writing about desert spaces in the U.S. West and Southwest that has emerged over the course of the 20th century, but also to consider the key questions raised by the two major forms of this genre: the first-person narrative of seeking awareness through place (sometimes called the “wilderness narrative”); the literary exploration of the entanglement of natural world ecology with human ecology and environmental and social (in)justice. As a capstone course for the English major, this seminar will require not only shorter critical writing on the assigned texts, but also a longer research paper involving secondary scholarly writing on the student’s texts and topic.

Some Questions: The desert is typically considered a void—barren, empty. Perhaps valuable as a place for toxic waste and military testing and extractive mining. For tourism. What is that “something that isn’t even visible” that emerges as important in their writing(s)? In short, **why** the desert? **How**, through language, persona, and literary form, to make the desert matter? What do our writers “notice” about the desert that they and their culture weren’t noticing before? How, through language, to make the unfamiliar “familiar” or the “familiar” unfamiliar/novel/surprising? In turn, as our time together proceeds, and as you work your way through the readings and discussions, what do you “notice” you weren’t seeing before? What if one considered the desert as an “ecology of surprise” rather than a place for used razor blades, military ordnance, toxic waste? As a potentially sacred space? And what if the desert is precisely the place where one sees a natural history bound up with the neoliberal history of destruction, its “slow violence” entwined with environmental injustice?

Probable Primary Texts:

Abbey, Edward. Desert Solitaire (1968)

Meloy, Ellen. Eating Stone (2005)

Julie Otsuka, When the Emperor was Divine (2002)

Luci Tapahonso, A Radiant Curve (2008)

Luis Urrea, The Devil's Highway (2004)

Ann Zwinger, The Mysterious Lands (1996)

Paolo Bacigalupi, Pump 6 and Other Stories (2010)
