

# Advanced Poetry: Environmental Writing and Ecopoetry

Dr. Janelle Adsit

Course Information  
Contact Information

Office Hours: XX:XX – XX:XX  
Office Location: XXX

## Course Description

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This course questions how we write the landscape. Both reading and writing intensive, the course considers depictions of land and environment in American poetry from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. We will take a body of literature called “ecopoetry” as an occasion to consider how art is world-making and how art can shape human action. Activist ecopoets challenge several aesthetic theories that affirm the autonomy and non-instrumentality of literary art, as these ecopoets insist instead that art cannot be separated from the ethical realm. As writers, we will take up this debate: Can the arts forward an ecological ethic, and can poetry be a mode of activism and persuasion, without compromising aesthetic integrity? We will contextualize this question in an aesthetic tradition that has contested the Horatian claim that poetry should “delight and instruct.”

In addition to these aesthetic theoretical concerns, we will turn to issues of craft: By what techniques can languages and art-forms put us in contact with the physical world, or do texts (whether visual or linguistic) only refer us to their own textuality and representation? Taking these as orienting questions, we will analyze literary texts and artifacts to elucidate assumptions about the relationship between human and world. Our critical readings will show that the “message in the means” – that the craft and form of writing cannot be separated from its content. With this idea in mind, we will take a practitioner’s approach to the study of literature: As a means of analysis, you will be asked to imitate, compare and contrast, and revise the poetry that we read and discuss. Thinking about form and content, we will also examine poetic texts in relation to other genres and media, including fiction, nonfiction, travel writing, map-making, painting, photography, and film.

## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this course, you will be able...

- To analyze, with a range of vocabularies and theoretical tools, human relationships to environments and landscapes; to think critically about linguistic and conceptual constructions of “nature.”
- To consider language as a “naturally” occurring phenomenon and as a means of reconciling humans’ estrangement from their landscapes.
- To articulate the artistic value of cross-disciplinary ways of thinking about human relationships to environments and landscapes.
- To speak and write about landscapes from a range of economic, pedagogic, and political frames; to make cogent arguments about relationships between land and histories of inequality.
- To identify the complex relationship between form and content.
- To consider your own craft in the context of changing definitions of art and the contingencies of literary evaluation.
- To recognize the ways that verse can participate in activism.

## Required Textbooks

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1. Fisher-Wirth, Ann, and Laura-Gray Street. *The Ecopoetry Anthology*. Trinity UP, 2013. [ISBN: 978-159534146-4]
2. Mullen, Harryette. *Urban Tumbleweed: Notes from a Tanka Diary*. Graywolf Press, 2013. [ISBN: 978-1-55597-656-9]
3. Sprague, Jane. *The Port of Los Angeles*. Chax Press, 2009. [ISBN: 978-0-925904-77-5]
4. Course packet (pdfs will be posted on Blackboard/Canvas/Moodle)

### Course Policies and Expectations (Attendance, Plagiarism, Community Expectations, etc.)

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See separate sheet.

### Grading

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Your grade will be determined by the cumulative points earned on the following assignments.

| Unit  | Major Assignment / Project  | % of Total Grade |
|-------|---|------------------|
| 1     | Imitative Poem and Analysis   | 20%              |
| 2     | Walking Poem and Postscript   | 10%              |
| 3     | Creative Research Project and Presentation on Identity, Inequality, and Landscape | 20%              |
| 4     | Argument Paper or Poem  | 20%              |
| Daily | In-Class Writing Assignments and Exercises  | 30%              |

### Course Overview

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The following provides an overview of the organization of the course. A day-by-day schedule with assignment due-dates will be provided at the beginning of each unit. All assignments will include a detailed explanation, checklist, and rubric. Each major assignment/project will be due at the end of the unit.

**Note that daily in-class writing assignments and exercises will make up 30% of your final grade.** These assignments put into practice your knowledge of the assigned readings and ensure that you are a fully participative member of the course's community.

### UNIT 1: PRE-MODERNISM, MODERNISM, AND ECOLOGY

#### *Class Time: Exercises*

- Profile Assignment: Who Are You as a Writer?
- Reflection: What Are Your Writing Goals? What Are Your Goals for This Course?
- Agreements: What Kind of Writing Community Do You Want?
- Identifying Preconceptions: What Is Nature Writing? What Is Eco-poetry? Why Are Representations of the Landscape Important?
- Visually Mapping Aesthetic Debates about Art's "Use"
- Taking a Provisional Position: What Is Your Perspective on Art's "Use"? (Questionnaire, Think-Pair-Share Exercise)
- Unit 1 Project Poetry Workshop

#### *Readings To Be Completed for Homework*

- "Debates about Art's 'Use' Aesthetic Theory Packet" (20 page handout), which includes short selections from Aristotle's *Poetics*, Horace, Kant, J.S. Mill, Oscar Wilde, John Dewey, Chris Green, and Rachel Blau DuPlessis.
- Walt Whitman section of *Eco-poetry Anthology*.
- Emily Dickinson section of *Eco-poetry Anthology*.
- William Carols Williams section of *Eco-poetry Anthology*.
- H.D. section of *Eco-poetry Anthology*.
- Ezra Pound section of *Eco-poetry Anthology*.
- Robert Hass, "Ezra Pound's Proposition" (p. 304).

### Major Assignments

- **Imitative Poem and Analysis (20% of the final grade):** Write an imitation of a Unit 1 poet of your choice. Your imitative poem should be attentive to at least one element in your local landscape. Your imitative poem will be accompanied by an essay that reads closely and compares your poem to the Unit 1 poet you are studying. Your analysis should clearly explain the poetics of your chosen Unit 1 poet and should demonstrate how you put the poet’s aesthetic theories and methods into practice in your poem.

## UNIT 2: WALKING, THINKING, PAYING ATTENTION

### Class Time: Exercises

- Class Walk-then-Talks
- Writing While Walking
- Mapping Theories and Histories of Walking: What Has Walking Been Thought to Do?
- Analyzing Visual Depictions of Walking in Film and Art
- Unit 2 Poetry Workshop

### Readings

- Henry David Thoreau, selection from *Wild Fruits* (course packet).
- David Abram, selection from *Spell of the Sensuous* (course packet).
- Walker Percy, “Loss of the Creature” (course packet).
- A.R. Ammons, “A Poem Is a Walk” (course packet).
- A.R. Ammons section of *Eco-poetry Anthology* (pp. 133-141).
- Matthew Cooperman, “A Poem Is a Horizon” (course packet).
- Nikki Giovanni, “Walking Down Park” (course packet).
- Brenda Hillman, “Walking the Dunes” (course packet).
- Rebecca Solnit, selection from *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (course packet).
- Rebecca Solnit, selection from *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art* (course packet).
- Harryette Mullen, *Urban Tumbleweed*.

### Major Assignments

- **Walking Poem and Postscript (10% of the final grade):** Write a walking poem, using the methods of observation that we practice in class. Follow your poem with a postscript that connects you poem to the Unit 2 readings. Explain the value of methodologies of walking for eco-poetry.

## UNIT 3: IDENTITY, INEQUALITY, AND THE LANDSCAPE

### Class Time: Exercises

- Analyzing Photos and Painting of Humans in their Landscapes
- Critical Reading of Scenes from Disney’s *Pocahontas*
- Critical Reading of *Last of the Mohicans*
- Verbal Workshop of Research Project Proposals
- Library Research
- Rewriting Whitman Partner Exercise
- Research Presentations

### Readings

- Kwame Dawes, “Genocide, Again” in *Ecopoetry Anthology* (p. 225).
- Yusef Komunyakaa section of *Ecopoetry Anthology* (pp. 363-368).
- Camille T. Dungy section of *Ecopoetry Anthology* (pp. 232-235).
- Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge section in *Ecopoetry Anthology* (pp. 179-183).
- Lorna Dee Cervantes section in *Ecopoetry Anthology* (pp. 206-208).
- Jimmy Santiago Baca, “As Children Know” in *Ecopoetry Anthology* (pp. 154-155).
- Jennifer Chang, “Genealogy” in *Ecopoetry Anthology* (p. 208).
- Linda Hogan section of *Ecopoetry Anthology* (pp. 336-339).
- Joy Harjo section of *Ecopoetry Anthology* (pp. 296-299).
- Leslie Marmon Silko, ““Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination” (in course packet).

### Major Assignments

- **Creative Research Project and Presentation on Identity, Inequality, and Landscape (20% of the final grade):** Examine a contemporary or historical instance of inequality or political strife in relation to a landscape. Choose a specific locality and a single issue that has arisen in that locality. You should offer a “thick description” of your chosen topic, analyzing the issue from multiple angles as we have practiced in Unit 3 class discussions. Think about questions of socioeconomic disparity, segregation, marginalization, and disenfranchisement. Research the history of your topic: From what forces and realities did the situation emerge? Examine several different types of maps to understand your topic’s “locatedness” in different ways.

## UNIT 4: PARADISE AND WASTE: ENCLOSURE, OWNERSHIP, AND THE COMMONS

### Class Time: Exercises

- Critical Reading of Scenes from *Avatar*
- Examining a History of Maps to Think about Territoriality, Ownership
- Verbal Workshop of Argument Proposals
- Argument Presentations and Discussions

### Readings

- John Clare, “Song,” and “from Helpstone” (course packet).
- John Ashbery, “For John Clare” (pp. 152-3) in *Ecopoetry Anthology*.
- Ellen Meiksins Wood, “The Agrarian Origins of Capitalism” (course packet).
- Peter Linebaugh, “The City and the Commons: A Story for Our Times” (course packet).
- Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons” (course packet).
- Jane Sprague, *The Port of Los Angeles*
- Student Arguments (Read for homework in preparation for the presentations and discussions in the final weeks of class.)

### Major Assignments

- **Argument Paper or Poem (20% of the final grade):** Take a stance on an issue related to the land that is important to you. Your argument can be related to questions of enclosure and the commons, discussed in Unit 4, and it can be related to questions that arose in any other unit or outside of class. While you must meet the required minimum word count, you may write your argument in the form of an academic essay, a personal or creative essay, or a long poem. We’ll spend the final weeks of class reading and engaging with your drafted arguments. These discussions will allow you to more fully develop your writing before submitting it for a final grade.