

## HISTORY 471: HISTORY OF NATURE

Fall 2013

Professor Sara Ritchey

[ritchey@louisiana.edu](mailto:ritchey@louisiana.edu)

Mondays 2:30-5:00

**Course description:** Nature is a construct. The overarching goal of this seminar is to examine the role that this vital and dynamic construct has played in shaping the intellectual history of medieval western Europe. We begin with philosophical and scriptural foundations. Through the first half of the semester we move to discover how later individuals and communities would build on these authorities to communicate their perception of the material world and more, their understanding of how the material world interacts with, guides, and threatens humanity and simultaneously obscures and reveals God. After examining the specter of “nature” through various medieval lenses, we will turn in the second half of the semester to our contemporary uses of this term. Here, our goal is to amass a bounty of tools through which to interrogate what we mean when we refer-- in marketing, politics, and daily practice—to nature, the natural, and the organic. As part of our investigations, along the way we will have ample opportunity to discuss numerous issues tangled up in our perceptions of nature-- the body, materiality, God, language, the environment, sex, food, toxins, and animal welfare. Because this course is premised upon a commitment to using history to evaluate our present world, and to examine the historical baggage of our current understanding and use of “nature,” we will take special care to implement our understanding of the development of “nature” into our observations of the neighborhoods and resources of Acadiana.

**Our classroom:** This upper-division course is designed as a seminar that includes graduate and undergraduate students. The whole operation only works if each and every student comes to class prepared to discuss the assigned readings. Therefore, you must not only read the assignments, you must engage them and be prepared to talk about them in a meaningful way. The vast majority of your grade will be based on this very simple notion of active preparedness. Read with a pen or pencil. Underline the phrases that strike you as interesting, strange, or even boring. If they are boring to you, ask yourself why they were not boring, why they truly mattered, to their authors. If they are strange, try to assert yourself into a world where that logic was perfectly obvious. To ensure that you are keeping up with the readings, there will be a brief and quite simple reading test at the beginning of every single seminar.

One rule of this course is that you must speak and behave with absolute respect to your peers and your professor. We will explore some contentious topics in this course. We will discuss them openly, freely, and only in an informed manner. We certainly will not agree all of the time. For me to express my interpretations, and for each and every students to express hers or his, we must live by a code of absolute respect. We can only respect one another if we know that one another is coming to these readings, these ideas, in an informed manner. So again, do your reading. If I ever sense that one of you is acting with disrespect or making another student feel that his or her interpretation is not valued, I will immediately seek disciplinary action. Our goal is to

understand one another, to understand the past that we have inherited, and to understand our world.

**Assignments:**

- Weekly reading tests, 25%
- Journals, 35%
- Final essay and presentation, 40% Due: Tuesday, December 10 at 6:00 pm

**Journals:** Throughout the course of the semester I ask you to keep a journal recording your thoughts, as they develop, about the assigned readings, the problems we discuss in this course, and local resources for environmental history and environmental understanding. Journals should be roughly five pages, double-spaced, 12-point font. They should incorporate our assigned readings for the week and answer in entirety the questions posed by the weekly journal assignment (see below for specifics, the questions for each journal assignment are posted under weekly reading assignments).

**Accessibility:** I wish to accommodate, with reason, students' special needs in order to optimize success in this course. Please consult the accessibility options offered by the Office of Disability Services: <http://disability.louisiana.edu> Let me know how I can be of assistance.

**In addition to the readings available for downloading on Moodle, I have ordered the following books for purchase at the University Bookstore:**

- Plato, *Timeaus and Critias* trans. Thomas Johansen and Desmond Lee (New York Penguin, 2008).
- Bernard Silvestris, *Cosmographia* trans. Winthrop Wetherbee (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).
- Alan of Lille, *The Plaint of Nature* Trans. James Sheridan (Toronto: PIMS, 1980)
- Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of Francis of Assisi* (Newtonville, MA: Triangle, 2000).
- Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- *Nature All Around Us: A Guide to Urban Ecology*, ed. Beatrix Beisner, et. al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
- Steven Lerner, *Diamond: A Struggle for Environmental Justice in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor* (Boston: The MIT Press, 2007).
- Annie Dillard, *The Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper, 1971).

**August 26: Introduction**

Meet at the Acadiana Park Nature Station:

1205 East Alexander Street

Lafayette

*Bring writing implement and paper for your journal!!!!*

**Journal Assignment:** You are at the Nature Station. Apparently, nature is here. What do you see? How do you feel? Record the smells and sounds. How does this station serve as a frame

for “nature”? What assumptions about nature is it premised upon? Think about where it is located. Observe the signage. Enter the Station itself—what do you learn about inside?

## **PART ONE: THE PREMODERN TEMPLATE**

### **Sept. 9: Foundational Concepts in the West**

#### **Required reading:**

- *The Bible, Genesis 1-9 and Romans 1* (<http://www.drbo.org/>)
- Plato, *The Timeaus*
- Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, “Nature” **ON MOODLE**

- **Journal Assignment:** attend one of our local farmer’s markets this week. There are at least three every week:

SATURDAY, 8-12 at the Horse Farm

SATURDAY, 8-12 at the Oil Center, across from Champagnes

WEDNESDAY, 2-6 421 Convent Street

Describe the culture of the market—why do people shop there? What are the advantages and disadvantages of shopping there? Interview a farmer: ask her or him why they do this work, how they became involved in it, and what they would like to see in terms of the development of local farmer’s markets. What moral assertions come through in the farmer’s market experience? What lifestyle values?

### **Sept. 16: The Medieval Landscape**

#### **Required reading:**

- “Nature” in *The Axe and the Oath: Ordinary Life in the Middle Ages*. **ON MOODLE**
- David J. Herlihy. “Attitudes Toward the Environment in Medieval Society,” in *Historical Ecology; essays in environment and social change*. ed. Lester J. Bilsky. Port Washington, NY: National University Publications, 1980: 100-116. **ON MOODLE**
- MD Chenu, “The Twelfth-Century Discovery of Nature” *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 19968). **ON MOODLE**
- Michael Williams, “Medieval Europe” in *Deforesting the Earth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). **ON MOODLE**

### **Sept 23: Nature as Allegory**

#### **Required reading:**

- Bernard Silvestris, *Cosmographia* trans. Winthrop Wetherbee (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).
- Hildegard of Bingen, selections from *Symphonia* **ON MOODLE**
- **Journal Assignment:** Attend a *different* Farmer’s Market from the one you attended on the week of the 9<sup>th</sup>. Answer the same set of questions, and the following: what are the

differences in market culture between the two different markets? What guidelines seem to inform the kinds of items available for purchase at each market?

### **Sept. 30: Nature as Morality Tale**

#### **Required reading:**

- Alan of Lille, *The Plaint of Nature* Trans. James Sheridan (Toronto: PIMS, 1980)
- John Boswell, “Intellectual Change: Men, Beasts, and ‘Nature’” in *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) **ON MOODLE**
- <http://www.legis.state.la.us/lss/lss.asp?doc=78695>
- **Journal Assignment:** What does it mean to describe a set of acts or behaviors as “unnatural” or “against nature”? Clearly, one suggests here that there is a moral component to nature, that nature holds some moral authority to which humans should be held accountable. Does it? If so, what morals does nature teach? If not, why is “unnatural” such a damning term?

### **Oct. 7: Nature as Work of Art**

#### **Required Reading:**

- Martha Newman, “A Garden Enclosed: The Cultivation of the Soul,” in *The Boundaries of Charity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996) **ON MOODLE**
- Bruno, Letter to Raoul Le Verd **ON MOODLE**
- Abbot Adam Suger, “On What Was Done Under His Administration” **ON MOODLE**
- Albertus Magnus. “Of the Virtues of Stones,” from *The Book of Secrets of Albertus Magnus*. Boston, MA: Weiser Books, 1973 25-49. **ON MOODLE**
- Bernard of Clairvaux, “Apologia to Abbot William” **ON MOODLE**

### **Oct. 14: Creatures and Creation**

#### **Required Reading:**

- Francis of Assisi, “Canticle of Creation” **ON MOODLE**
- Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*
- Lisa J. Kiser. “The Garden of St. Francis: Plants, Landscape, and Economy in Thirteenth-Century Italy,” *Environmental History* 8:2 (Apr., 2003): 229-245. **ON MOODLE**

**Note the Forum THIS WEEK:** panelists from *Women Pioneers of the Louisiana Environmental Movement*, ed. Peggy Franklin (University Press of Mississippi, 2013) October 17 at Dupré Library at 4:00 pm

## **PART TWO: TOOLS/THEORIES/METHODS**

### **Oct. 21: Getting Back to the Middle Ages Today**

- Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*
- Excerpts from Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* **ON MOODLE**

### **Oct. 28: Urban Ecology and Environmental History**

- *Nature All Around Us: A Guide to Urban Ecology*, ed. Beatrix Beisner, et. al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013)
- William Cronon, “The Uses of Environmental History” **ON MOODLE**
- William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness” **ON MOODLE**
- Introduction to Final Essay and Presentation

### **Nov. 4: Food Production, Food Consumption**

#### **Required Reading:**

- Excerpts from *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability* (Boston: MIT Press, 2011). **ON MOODLE**
- LISTEN: Peter Singer on Speciesism  
PART ONE: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_nch3NQ-wN8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nch3NQ-wN8)  
PART TWO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sV-w6rwDiws>
- **Journal assignment:** after completing the reading choose one day to document all the food and beverages you consume in one meal, then trace the supply chain—where did these foods come from? To complete this project you will need to read labels, speak with grocers, do some on-line research, and interview restaurant managers if you are dining out. So plan ahead. Make sure you account for all the components—if you eat cereal, don’t forget about the milk, but you may also need to call Nabisco or Post to inquire into where they source their wheat. Many products now have apps that allow consumers to trace where their food comes from.

### **Nov. 11: Ecofeminism**

#### **Required Reading:**

- Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, excerpts **ON MOODLE**
- Wangari Maathai, *The Greenbelt Movement* (Lantern Books, 2003) excerpts **ON MOODLE**
- Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: the Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Beacon Press, 1990) excerpts **ON MOODLE**
- Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* excerpts **ON MOODLE**
- Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, excerpts **ON MOODLE**

### **Nov. 18: Environmental Justice:**

**CLASS VISIT FROM WILMA SUBRA, HELEN VINTON, AND LORNA BOURG!!!!!!!!!!**

### **Required Reading:**

- *Diamond: A Struggle for Environmental Justice in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor*
- "Wilma Subra," "Sister Helen Vinton," and "Lorna Bourg" in *Women Pioneers of the Louisiana Environmental Movement*, ed. Peggy Franklin (University Press of Mississippi, 2013). *Women Pioneers of the Louisiana Environmental Movement*, ed. Peggy Franklin (University Press of Mississippi, 2013) **ON MOODLE**

**Journal Assignment:** Observe a neighborhood, any neighborhood. What are its environmental conditions? Are there energy efficient ways of going in and out? Is it accessible only by car? Are the houses in good shape, well cared for lawns? Are there sidewalks? What is the nearest food source? What is the condition of the local public school? Do the people who live there have safe homes that will protect them during floods and hurricanes? What is the condition of the roads? The drainage systems? What is the noise level?

### **Nov. 25: Revisiting Nature**

#### **Required Reading:**

- Intro to *Queer Ecologies*, **ON MOODLE**
- Sally McFague, "The World As God's Body" **ON MOODLE**
- Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974)

**Journal Assignment:** What are the implications of McFague's vision of the material world? What is God's relationship to the world, according to McFague? Is it possible to articulate a holistic environmental ethics without God? How does Morton's work frame such a possibility?

### **Dec. 2: PRESENTATIONS. PAPERS DUE!**

As the professor I reserve the right to make changes to this syllabus as I see fit throughout the semester.