

**Culture and Environment: Animal, Vegetable, Mineral
(Environmental Studies 6146/Communication and Culture 6120)**

Calendar Description:

This course introduces students to the growing interdisciplinary field of Environmental Cultural Studies. In this course, students will critically examine how “culture” and cultural practices contribute to our understandings of nature, place, space, environmental issues, and our relation to the nonhuman. Particular attention will be given to how key concepts in cultural studies, such as power, identity, gender, race, language and representation, interact with environmental thought and contemporary environmental debates.

Objectives and Organization:

This intensive three-hour weekly seminar course is designed to allow students to explore, in some depth, the range of literatures currently grouped under the headings of “posthumanism,” “multispecies studies,” and/or “new materialism,” particularly as these literatures suggest a rethinking of the nature of ecocultural studies and environmental politics. Broadly speaking, these literatures do several, related things: a) they call into question the binary of human/nonhuman and the presumed uniqueness of human beings as speaking, thinking, planning, acting animals; b) they draw attention to the dense webs of co-constituting interactions that make up what Haraway has called “naturecultures,” including animals, plants, rocks, and even human-created things (i.e., they point to the everyday materialities of culture); c) they insist on the powerful and complex *agencies* of these more-than-human actors and objects in the cultural and political world that we share (albeit often unequally); and d) they demand that we reflect on what we might mean by/desire for “environmental” cultures and politics in light of both these changed understandings and the continuing power dynamics in which they are located.

The course will begin by chipping away at humanism and its mechanisms, with the agenda of opening the humanities to an increasingly broad understanding of culture, agency, and politics. We will begin with a critique of humanism via Agamben’s notion of the “anthropological machine,” and will move through inquiries concerning human mortality/animality (Phillips) and the need for species-specific renderings of the world (Uexküll) toward a fuller understanding of animal consciousness and storytelling, vegetal interaction and agency, mineral affect, and thing-power. We will consider in particular the ways different materialities demand different political and aesthetic renderings, and the specific contributions of science studies, critical animal studies, ecology, philosophy, art, literature, political theory and anthropology to developing an understanding of a multi-agential public realm that genuinely attends to both plural materialities and situating power dynamics.

The course will end with an exploration of three specific interagential constellations, each organized around a particular more-than-human actor: rats, glaciers, and salal. These individual studies will bring into focus different methodologies for posthumanist/materialist inquiry, and will ask us to consider the cultures and politics of more-than-human storytelling in the context of relations of class, race, colonialism, sex, and gender. Throughout the course and culminating in this section, each student will

conduct research on a particular species (or specific creature) that is part of the ecological community of the GTA but tends to be overlooked; following the models of the constellations we treat collectively, students will create an interdisciplinary, digital portfolio of this species for presentation and uploading to the collaborative international digital research platform "Life Overlooked."

Required Texts: The following required course texts are available from the York University Bookstore.

Agamben, Giorgio (2004). *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).

Bennett, Jane (2010). *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

Burt, Jonathan (2006). *Rat* (London: Reaktion Books).

Cruikshank, Julie (2005). *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press).

Haraway, Donna (2003). *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press).

McKay, Don (2006). *Strike/Slip* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart).

Phillips, Adam (2000). *Darwin's Worms: Life Stories and Death Stories* (New York: Basic Books).

Ricou, Laurie (2007). *Salal: Listening for the Northwest Understory* (Edmonton: NeWest Press).

Terpstra, John (2011). *Naked Trees* (Hamilton, ON: Wolsak and Wynn).

Uexküll, Jakob von (2010/1934). *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans with The Theory of Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press). ("Foray" only)

York, Alissa (2010). *Fauna* (Toronto: Vintage Canada).

Other Required and Recommended Texts:

We will be reading several chapters of the following texts in class, as noted below; students may find other sections of these texts useful as well, especially for presentations.

Braun, Bruce and Sarah Whatmore, eds. (2010). *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy and Public Life*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, ed. (2012). *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*. Washington, DC: Oliphaunt Books.

Latour, Bruno and Peter Weibel, eds. (2005). *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*. London: MIT Press.

Additional required and recommended materials are listed below in the course schedule below. Students will also be expected to forage widely in search of diverse materials on their "overlooked species," as below.

Evaluation:

1) Participation (15%)

This highly participatory seminar will only work if all members have prepared the required readings for the class in which they are being discussed. The reading load is quite heavy, and there may be weeks in which a student is not able to prepare 100 percent of all of the texts in perfect detail, but the expectation is that everyone will make every effort to do so, and will also come to class with questions,

comments, and a genuine interest in listening to what others have to say about the works that we have read in common.

2) Group seminar leadership (15%)

Students will be responsible, individually or in small groups (depending on class size), for “teaching” the readings for a given week, meaning offering a significant opening presentation that raises key themes and questions in the readings (not a summary), facilitating class discussion, and (as appropriate) developing an activity that might allow us to enter the readings in a different way. Students will sign up for a week in the second class. For the assigned week, the recommended readings are especially strongly recommended; students are welcome, but not required, to bring in extra materials.

3) Polished critical reflection (30%): 10-12 pages (November 6)

Over the course of the first part of the class (September 11 – November 6), students will keep, as part of their seminar preparation process, a running log/journal of their responses to the readings, especially paying attention to how the different readings speak to one another (these questions will be amply supported by class discussion). For this assignment, due November 6, students are asked to revise, select, and polish a portion of that log for submission as a situated reflection on a particular set of themes and arguments developed over the term. This reflection can be focused on a particular conversation (e.g., how Uexküll’s *umwelt* meets Haraway’s companion species meets York’s coyotes); it can also trace a central set of questions as they appear in the readings and debates over multiple weeks (e.g., how we can understand the material world as a realm of communication, and how – and with what consequences – does the idea of “communication” shift as we move from animal to vegetable to mineral). In either case, students should demonstrate a thorough and critical understanding of a range of course materials (i.e., more than one week’s readings); inclusion of outside materials is not expected.

4) Life Overlooked (40%): in-class presentation plus digital portfolio (December 4 and 11)

This portion of the class is set up to become part of an international, Mellon-funded research project called “Life Overlooked” (we are part of a pilot teaching module along with the University of Oregon and Arizona State University). For the Life Overlooked assignment, students will create a digital portfolio that can be uploaded to the interactive web platform associated with the project: each student’s project will be “pinned” on a map associated with the website (actual uploading will be voluntary), and also presented in the final class on December 4. Each student will conduct interdisciplinary “foraging” research (including components from natural and social sciences, humanities, arts, education, etc.); read and write fiction, poetry and non-fiction; take pictures; make drawings or other artwork; and/or create short performances or films to make a portfolio of one “species overlooked” in the GTA, meaning any being that tends for the most part to fly (or swim or creep or crawl or tendril or flit or ooze or flagellate or sit apparently unmoving) under the radar of everyday human attention (the dynamics of attention and inattention will, of course, be a topic of class conversation, as well as what constitutes a “life”). The goal will be to create a public presence for this being that represents, expounds, narrates, illustrates, questions, and problematizes its ecological, cultural, phenomenological, economic, political, and personal significance, while simultaneously reflecting on the ways in which being “overlooked” is a highly complex phenomenon that does not simply reflect neoliberal, North American, human figurations of life even as it is inextricably part of these relations.

Further details, including instructions for uploading and in-class presentation, will be discussed in class.

Weekly course outline:

Additional readings may be added. Please see me if you have difficulty obtaining any materials.

Part I: Disrupting the Anthropological Machine

September 11 Course Introductions and Expectations

Video: Truffaut, *The Wild Child* (in class)

September 18 The Anthropological Machine

Required reading: Agamben, *The Open*
Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*)

Recommended: Wolfe, "Section II" (in *Before the Law*).

September 25 Mortality

Required reading: Phillips, *Darwin's Worms*
Rose, "In the Shadow of All This Death" (in Johnston and Probyn-Rapsey ed., *Animal Death*)

Recommended: Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930)
Darwin, *Formation of Vegetable Mould Through the Action of Worms* (1881)

October 2 Umwelten: Views of the Other

Required reading: Uexküll, "A Foray into the World of Animals and Humans"
Smith, "Ecological Community, the Sense of the World, and Senseless Extinction" (*Environmental Humanities*, 2013)

Recommended: Evernden, "A Biology of Subjects" (in *The Natural Alien*)
Raffles, "Vision" (in *Insectopedia*)

October 9 Speaking (to/of/as) Animals...

Required reading: York, *Fauna*
Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*
Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am" (*Critical Inquiry*, 2002)
Fraiman, "Pussy Panic" (*Critical Inquiry*, 2012)

October 16 ...Vegetables?

Required reading: Terpstra, *Naked Trees*
Marder, "Resist Like a Plant" (*Peace Studies Journal*, 2012)

Cloke and Jones, "Turning in the Graveyard" (*Cultural Geographies*, 2004)
Phillips, "The Distinctive Capacities of Plants" (handout)
Sandilands, "Floral Sensations: Plant Biopolitics" (handout)

October 23 ... Minerals?

Required reading: McKay, *Strike/Slip*
Robertson, "Exemplary Rocks" (in Cohen)
Allen, "Mineral Virtue" (in Cohen)
Barry, "Materialist Politics: Metallurgy" (in Braun and Whatmore)
Raffles, "Twenty-five Years is a Long Time" (*Cultural Anthropology*, 2012).

October 30 No class

November 6 Things and Politics (critical reflections due)

Required reading: Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*
Hawkins, "Plastic Materialities" (in Braun and Whatmore)

Recommended: Marres, "Front-staging Nonhumans" (in Braun and Whatmore)
Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik" (in Latour and Weibel)
Stengers, "The Cosmopolitical Proposal" (in Latour and Weibel)
Brown, "Thing Theory" (in *Things*)

Part II: Intergenerational Constellations

Students are encouraged to bring to class extra materials on rats, glaciers, and salal as part of their foraging experiments.

November 13 Rats

Required reading: Burt, *Rat*

November 20 Glaciers

Required reading: Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen?* (selections)

November 27 Salal

Required reading: Ricou, *Salal*

December 4 "Life Overlooked"

Required reading: as per student presentations

December 11 Digital portfolios due