

Department of English & Writing Studies

English 3480G/Arthum 3393G
Reading (North) America Now: What is Literary Activism?
Winter 2024



Site of Thoreau's Hut, Concord, Mass. *The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection (CC0) <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-368c-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>*

Course Description

Do cultural objects from the past provide meaningful guidance for facing the exigencies of the present or the uncertainties of the future? What resources can the humanities offer when confronting the long shadow of colonialism, systemic inequality, structural violence, and the climate crisis? This course will anchor these questions in the work of Henry David Thoreau, who devoted his life and writing to fostering transformative exchanges between individuals and collectivities, between the past and the present, between what is and isn't human, between practices of everyday life and political structures. In our reading of Thoreau's *Walden* and "Civil Disobedience" we will track his commitment to an "ecology of practices": to an ethic of material engagement, to thinking with the body, to animating the more-than-human-world, and to nonviolent resistance. We will trace these ideas through the work of an eclectic array of contemporary authors, activists, and scholars, including Bill McKibben, Rebecca Solnit, Jenny Odell, Tommy Pico, Jeff VanderMeer, and Rebecca Campbell. Each of these writers test Thoreau's methods, putting them to work while also offering crucial critiques of what has been described as Thoreau's "everyday-life project": his attempts to reframe problems of political economy as ethical questions regarding our conduct of daily living.

Objectives:

In this class we will learn to develop four skills essential to work in the humanities:

1. *Close Reading*: Analyzing different aesthetic strategies that various contemporary artists, scholars, and activists have used to convey urgent social, political, and aesthetic experiences and aspirations; cultivating a critical awareness of the knowledge systems that position and shape a text's worldview, as well as our analysis of the text.
2. *Engaged Conversation*: Communicating with clarity, respect, and care in class discussions; asking thoughtful questions and making responsive contributions (even when your thoughts might still be in progress).
3. *Community Collaboration*: Working collaboratively on public-facing projects that engage our broader community in important discussion and actions regarding the lived experience and global impacts of climate change.
4. *Persuasive Writing*: Developing compelling ideas into lucid prose; making cogent written arguments situated within cultural and historical contexts and supported by persuasive textual evidence, scholarly criticism, and relevant theoretical frameworks.

Course Materials

The following required readings are available for purchase at the Western Bookstore. Please ensure that your version of *Walden* is edited by Kristen Case. We will be working with hard copies of all of these texts:

1. Tommy Pico, *Nature Poem*. Tin House, 2017.
2. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. Ed. Kristen Case. Penguin, 2017.
3. Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation*. HarperCollins, 2014.
4. Rebecca Campbell, *Arboreality*, Stelliform Press, 2022.
5. ENG 3480G Courseware

Methods of Evaluation

I. Engagement

Attentive reading and reflective discussion are at the heart of this course. Consistent attendance, thorough preparation, and active participation are essential to the success of our class. Being prepared means you have completed the reading, reflected on it, showed up on time with class readings and notebook in hand, ready to discuss your ideas and questions. Weekly attendance and being on time are mandatory and will be a part of your participation grade. Having said that, I will accommodate unavoidable absences and lateness whenever possible. You can miss one class this term without explanation or penalty. I just ask that you let me know as far in advance of class as you can when you will be late or absent. You will be asked to reflect on what constitutes meaningful class engagement at the beginning of the term and then will assess your own participation according to the criteria we have collectively established (at the midpoint and at the end of the semester).

Please be in communication as soon as you can if you anticipate or experience obstacles in meeting assignment deadlines. Note, however, that some assignments need to be completed on time to serve a useful pedagogical purpose for the class. If you miss those time-sensitive assignments and have received accommodation, we will devise a make-up assignment. More on Absence, Deadline and Accommodation policies below.

Assignments

| READING & ENGAGEMENT | WEIGHT | DUE |
|----------------------------|-------------------|---|
| Participation | 15% (10% + 5%) | 10 x check-in/check-out notecards (collected at the end of each class) - Midterm check-in: Wed, Feb 14 - End-of-term check-in: Wed, Mar 27 |
| Slow Reading <i>Walden</i> | 5% | Draft: Wed, Jan 17 (in class/OWL) Submit: Wed, Jan 31 (in class/OWL) |
| Commonplace Book | 10% | Complete: Week 2-13* (bring to class) Submit: Wed, Apr *you can miss one entry |

| EVERYDAY LIFE PROJECT | WEIGHT | DUE |
|--|--------|---|
| Proposal | 10% | Wed, Jan 24 (in class, OWL) |
| Reflection Letter #1 | 15% | Draft: Wed, Feb 14 (in class) Submit: Fri, Feb 16 (OWL) |
| Reflection Letter #2 | 15% | Draft: Wed, Mar 13 (in class) Submit: Fri, March 15 (OWL) |
| ELP Culmination + Final Reflection (incl. Action Workbook) | 30% | Share ELP: Wed, Mar 27 and Apr 3 Submit Reflection & Workbook: Wed, Apr 3 (OWL) |

Andrew Epstein describes an “everyday life project” as an experiment that’s “artificial” and “rule-bound,” which engages “in certain activities, usually for a set amount of time, with the goal of channeling attention to one or more aspects of everyday experience” (30). Epstein identifies *Walden*—Thoreau’s attempt to live as simple a life as possible in a small cabin in the woods—as a notable example of such a project. Propose and undertake an 8-week everyday life project of your choice (probably a more modest undertaking than Thoreau’s), which culminates in a report and presentation (format to be determined in consultation).

*See **OWL > Assignments** for assignment guidelines

Policies & Resources

Course Ethos

Our class will honour the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion. We will use each other’s preferred and chosen names and pronouns; we will engage in respectful and generous conversation with each other; we will avoid language that is hurtful, violent, or exclusive. We will also acknowledge that we may make mistakes, and that learning from each other and questioning ourselves is part of the EDI process.

Electronic Devices

We will be using hard copies of our assigned readings and completing classwork in notebooks that will be provided for you. Please keep your computers, phones, tablets, and other electronic devices stowed away during class time.

ChatGPT

In this course, I do not recommend students use generative AI tools. AI tools such as ChatGPT provide confident responses based on the specific prompts provided to them, but they do not

discern between fact or fiction when collating data and responding. Additionally, ChatGPT will confidently fabricate information and does not cite its work. The use of this software to conduct research or produce academic writing not only borders on plagiarism, but it also robs students of certain learning experiences which are core to the university experience and necessary for success. It is essential that students critically evaluate all information they obtain from any source, exercise independent thinking, and engage in original research to synthesize and develop their own ideas, arguments, and perspectives. Assignments should reflect the students' own thoughts and independent written work. By adhering to these guidelines, students contribute to a responsible and ethical learning environment that promotes critical thinking, independent inquiry, and allows them to produce original written contributions.

Plagiarism

Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea or passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. All instances of plagiarism will be reported to the Chair of Undergraduate Studies. Proven cases of plagiarism will result in a grade of zero for the assignment. Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence here:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf.

Student Absences & Deadlines

If you are unable to meet a course requirement due to illness or other serious circumstances, please follow the procedures below.

Assessments worth less than 10% of the overall course grade:

Please contact me as far in advance of the assignment deadline as possible if you need to request an extension.

Assessments worth 10% or more of the overall course grade:

For work totaling 10% or more of the final course grade, you must provide valid medical or supporting documentation to the Academic Counselling Office of your Faculty of Registration as soon as possible. For further information, please consult the University's medical illness policy here:

https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/accommodation_medical.pdf.

The Student Medical Certificate is available here:

https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/medicalform.pdf.

Religious Accommodation

When a course requirement conflicts with a religious holiday that requires an absence from the University or prohibits certain activities, students should request accommodation for their absence in writing at least two weeks prior to the holiday to the course instructor and/or the Academic Counselling office of their Faculty of Registration. Please consult University's list of recognized religious holidays here:

<https://multiculturalcalendar.com/ecal/index.php?s=c-univwo>.

Accommodation Policies

Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact Accessible Education, which provides recommendations for accommodation based on medical documentation or psychological and cognitive testing. The policy on Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities can

be found here: https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/Academic_Accommodation_disabilities.pdf.

Support Services

Registrarial Services <http://www.registrar.uwo.ca>

Student Support Services <https://student.uwo.ca/psp/heprdweb/?cmd=login>

Services provided by the USC <http://westernusc.ca/services/>

Student Development Centre <http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/>

Mental Health Support

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western (<https://uwo.ca/health/>) for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

Academic Counselling

Your Home Faculty's Academic Counselling or Academic Advising Office will support or refer whenever you have an issue that is affecting your studies, including information on adding/dropping courses, academic considerations for absences, appeals, exam conflicts, and many other academic related matters. Do not hesitate to reach out to them if you are struggling and unsure where to go for help. Contact info for all Faculties is here:

https://registrar.uwo.ca/faculty_academic_counselling.html

Gender-based and Sexual Violence

Western University [is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence](#) and providing compassionate support to anyone who has gone through these traumatic events. If you have experienced gender-based or sexual violence (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts, [here](#). To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact support@uwo.ca.

Accessible Education

Please contact the course instructor if you require lecture or printed material in an alternate format or if any other arrangements can make this course more accessible to you. If you have any questions regarding accommodations contact Accessible Education here:

http://academicssupport.uwo.ca/accessible_education/index.html

Learning Development and Success

Counsellors at the Learning Development and Success Centre (<https://learning.uwo.ca>) are ready to help you improve your learning skills. They offer presentations on strategies for improving time management, multiple-choice exam preparation/writing, textbook reading, and more. Individual support is offered throughout the Fall/Winter terms in the drop-in Learning Help Centre, and year-round through individual counselling.

Digital Student Experience

Western University is committed to a thriving campus as we deliver our courses in the mixed model of both virtual and face-to-face formats. We encourage you to check out the Digital Student Experience website to manage your academics and well-being:

<https://www.uwo.ca/se/digital/>.

USC

Additional student-run support services are offered by the USC, <https://westernusc.ca/services/>.

Course Schedule

This schedule is subject to change as our discussions develop. Please check OWL for announcements about updates or revisions to the schedule.

| CLASS | DISCUSSION | READINGS | DUE |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| Week 1: Jan 10 | Introductions | Syllabus | |
| Week 2: Jan 17 | Thoreau's Everyday Life Project | <p>Kristen Case, "Introduction," Henry David Thoreau, <i>Walden and Civil Disobedience</i>. New York: Penguin, 2017, p. vii-xviii.*</p> <p>Andrew Epstein, "'Everyday-Life Projects' in Poetry and Beyond," from <i>Attention Equals Life</i> (2016), p. 29-35.*</p> <p>Min Hyung Song, "Introduction: The Practice of Sustaining Attention to Climate Change," p. 1-3, 15; "Chapter 4: How Should I Live? Inattention and Everyday-Life Projects," p. 80-97, from Climate Lyricism (2022).*</p> <p>Henry David Thoreau, from "Economy" (p. 3-12), "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," "Reading," "Sounds," "Visitors," "Solitude" p. (65-103), from <i>Walden</i>.</p> <p>SLOW READING WORKSHOP</p> | <p>Draft: Slow Reading</p> <p>Commonplace Passage 1: <i>Walden</i></p> |
| Week 3: Jan 24 | <i>Walden</i> Warming | <p>Jenny Odell, "Introduction: Surviving Usefulness," from <i>How to Do Nothing</i> (2019).*</p> <p>Thoreau, "Solitude" (p.104-12), "The Village" (p. 135-39), "Higher Laws (p. 169-79), "Spring," "Conclusion" (p. 240-68), from <i>Walden</i>.</p> <p>Bill McKibben, "What Would Thoreau Think of Climate Change?" <i>New Republic</i> (July 12 2017).*</p> <p>GUEST: Jason Dyck, Research and Learning Librarian (4:00pm)</p> | <p>Submit: ELP Proposal</p> <p>CP2: <i>Walden</i></p> |
| Week 4: Jan 31 | Thoreauvian Resistance | <p>Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," p. 271-92.</p> <p>Odell, "Chapter 3: Anatomy of a Refusal," from <i>How to Do Nothing</i>.*</p> | <p>Submit: Slow Reading</p> |

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| | | <p>Rebecca Solnit, "The Thoreau Problem," <i>Orion</i> (May 2007)*</p> <p>Beth Miller, "Literary Activism," <i>American Book Review</i> 41.4 (May/June 2020), p. 3.** (Also explore the full issue)</p> <p>Elizabeth Ammons, "Preface," from <i>Brave New Words</i> (2010), pp. 1-7.*</p> | CP3: "Civil Disobedience" |
| Week 5: Feb 7 | Decolonizing Nature Writing | Tommy Pico, <i>Nature Poem</i> (2017) | CP4: <i>Nature Poem</i> |
| Week 6: Feb 14 | Birdsong | Pico, <i>Nature Poem</i> ELP WORKSHOP #1 | <p>Draft Workshop: ELP Letter #1</p> <p>Submit: ELP Letter #1 (Fri, Feb 16)</p> <p>Participation Reflection</p> <p>CP5: <i>Nature Poem</i></p> |
| Week 7: Feb 21 | READING WEEK | NO CLASS | Read <i>Annihilation</i> |
| Week 8: Feb 28 | Weirding Thoreau | Jeff VanderMeer, <i>Annihilation</i> (2014). Joshua Rothman, "The Weird Thoreau," <i>New Yorker</i> (January 14, 2015.) | CP6: <i>Annihilation</i> |
| Week 9: Mar 6 | Rewilding Thoreau | VanderMeer, <i>Annihilation</i> Caroline Levine, "Preface," "Three Weeks to Political Action: A Workbook: WEEK 1," <i>The Activist Humanist</i> , p. ix-xv, 149-53.* | CP7: <i>Annihilation</i> |
| Week 10: Mar 13 | Speculative Thoreau | Rebecca Campbell, <i>Arboreality</i> Levine, "Three Weeks to Political Action: A Workbook: WEEK 2," <i>The Activist Humanist</i> , p. 153-56.* ELP WORKSHOP #2 | <p>Draft: ELP Letter #2</p> <p>Submit: ELP Letter #2 (Fri, Mar 15)</p> <p>CP8: <i>Arboreality</i></p> |
| Week 11: Mar 20 | Thoreauvian Futures? | Campbell, <i>Arboreality</i> GUEST #1: Rebecca Campbell | CP9: Guest #1 Q (Tues, Mar 19) |

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| | | Levine, "Three Weeks to Political Action: A Workbook: WEEK 3," <i>The Activist Humanist</i> , p. 156-58.* | |
| Week 12: Mar 27 | From Attention to Action | GUEST #2: Caroline Levine | CP10: Guest # 2 Q (Tues, Mar 26) Participation Reflection |
| Week 13: Apr 3 | Wrap-up | Share ELPs | Submit: - Final Reflection + Workbook - CP Book incl. CP11: Epigraph |

* Reading included in Courseware

** Reading to be distributed in class