HIST 277 - Environmental Issues of the Nineteenth Century

Instructor: Edward Melillo
Office Hours (Rice 307):
Wednesday: 3:00 – 5:00 p.m.

Spring 2008
Office Phone: (440)775-8528
Edward.Melillo@oberlin.edu

(A farmworker adding nitrate fertilizer to sugar cane irrigation water, Island of Kauai, Hawaii – 1890s. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Course Description: This course considers the ways that people in various parts of the world thought about and acted upon nature during the nineteenth century. We look historically at issues that continue to have relevance today, including: invasive species, deforestation, soil-nitrogen availability, water use, desertification, and air pollution. Themes include: the relationship of nineteenth-century colonialism and environmental degradation, gender and environmental change, the racial dimensions of ecological issues, and the spatial aspects of human interactions with nature. We will make at least one visit to the Allen Memorial Art Museum to discuss visual representations of nature during the 1800s. In addition, we will watch three films that approach nineteenth-century environmental issues from different vantage points.

Format: Our class will meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 3:00 to 4:15 p.m. in Room 237 of the King Building. Class attendance is mandatory; class participation comprises 20% of your final grade.
Assignments:

- **Two-page short papers**: Prior each Thursday session, you will write a two-page paper. It is your responsibility to bring a printed copy of your short paper to our Thursday class. The topic for the February 14th short paper appears in the syllabus. I will assign topics for the remaining weeks as the semester progresses. Late papers will lose a grade point per day (e.g. A → A-).

- **Final Paper**: The final paper will be no more than ten pages long and will involve minimal research on your part. It will require you to synthesize approaches and critique arguments from the course. I will distribute the assignment for the final paper halfway through the semester.

- **Final Exam**: The final exam will cover the material from my lectures, our readings, and our class discussions. The exam will include: fifteen short identifications, two short essay questions, and two long essay questions.

- **Class Discussions**: This course will only be as good as you are willing to make it. All of us will come to class ready to discuss the material from the assigned readings. Generally, we will spend at least part of our Thursday classes discussing the week’s readings.

**Grading**: Your grade for the semester will depend upon the following components:

- Written work (short papers and final paper): 50%
- Final exam: 30%
- Class participation: 20%

**Honor Code**: The Oberlin community takes its honor code very seriously. You should be familiar with the honor code, which is available for download at: http://www.oberlin.edu/students/life/rules-reg.html

It is crucial that you write and sign the honor code on all work you hand in for this class. The Honor Code reads: “I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code on this assignment.”

**Readings and Required Texts**: There are three required texts for this class:


Unless I hand them out in class, all other readings will be available on Blackboard as scanned texts or as links to online articles. Readings for each week rarely exceed 200 pages.
Class Schedule:

Tuesday, February 5: Course Introduction

Thursday, February 7: *No class – I will be at a conference in Salt Lake City.*

Tuesday, February 12: *Background.* The following readings will help provide historical and methodological background for the course. Prepare to discuss them on February 14.

- Douglas R. Weiner. “A death-defying attempt to articulate a coherent Definition of Environmental History” *Environmental History* 10 (July 2005): [link](http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ch/10.3/weiner.html)

Thursday, February 14:

- Assignment due at the end of class: In no more than two pages tell me about a place that you have lived or visited. Describe that location as it might have been two hundred years ago. In concise prose, tell me what this place could have looked, smelled, sounded, and/or felt like in the year 1800. You might choose a site as small as a backyard garden or as large as a city block. Feel free to tell me about humans, non-human organisms, or any elements of the landscape that you find relevant. This assignment does not require any research or outside sources. Use your imagination!

Tuesday, February 19: *Into the Woods.* Prepare to discuss these readings on February 21.

- Per Eliasson and Sven G. Nilsson, “‘You should hate young oaks and young noblemen’: The environmental history of oaks in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Sweden,” *Environmental History* (October 2002) [link](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3854/is_200210/ai_n9100017/pg_1)
Thursday, February 21: Assignment due at the end of class: TBA.

Tuesday, February 26: Migrant Ecologies. Prepare to discuss the following book excerpts on February 28.

Thursday, February 28: Assignment due at the end of class: TBA

Tuesday, March 4: Gendering Nature. Prepare to discuss the following articles on March 6.

Thursday, March 8: Assignment due at the end of class: TBA.

Tuesday, March 11: Imperial Designs. Prepare to discuss the following reading on March 13.

Thursday, March 13:
- Assignment due at the end of class: TBA.

Tuesday, March 18: Imperial Designs, contd. Prepare to discuss the following reading on March 20.

Thursday, March 20: Assignment due at the end of class: TBA.

Tuesday and Thursday, March 25 & 27: *No class – Spring Break.*
Tuesday, April 1: Water-worlds. Prepare to discuss the following readings on April 3.

Thursday, April 3:
- Assignment due at the end of class: TBA.
- In-class video – Yosemite: The Fate of Heaven, dir. John Else (Sundance Institute and Yosemite Association, 1989)

Tuesday, April 8: Darkening Skies. Prepare to discuss the following articles on April 10.

Thursday, April 10: Assignment due at the end of class: TBA.

Tuesday, April 15: The Wealth of the Soil. Prepare to discuss the following articles on April 17.

Thursday, April 17:
- Assignment due at the end of class: TBA.

Tuesday, April 22: The Nature of Western Bodies. Prepare to discuss the following articles on April 24.

**Thursday, April 24:** Assignment due at the end of class: TBA.

**Tuesday, April 29:** *Ending with a Marsh.*

• George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature; or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (1864), excerpt and edition TBA.

**May 1:** No assignment due.

**May 6:** *Exam review.*

**May 8:** *Final paper due at end of class.*