

LIT 6934: Blue Ecocriticism
Spring, 2018
Office hours: by appointment

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Overview

Earth is a planet of saltwater. Conventional accounts simplify: saltwater covers nearly 71% of the Earth's surface. Roughly, that translates to about 128 million square miles of ocean surface and 310 million miles cubed in ocean volume. Relatively speaking, that's a hell of a lot of saltwater (and just about anyone writing about marine environments is apt to relate that fact, as though the relative size stands as an argument in and of itself). The Ocean's average depth is about 12,080 feet, with the deepest point at Challenger Deep at the southern end of Mariana's Trench in the Pacific reaching 36,200 feet (just under 7 miles). Humans have seen less than 5-percent of this vastness—less than 1% below 1,000 feet down.

The ocean can be a strange place, an alien place, a wild place. Historically, we cast the ocean as the wildest nature, the untamable. But, in the same breath, we cast the ocean as a place of salvation. Contemporary environmental conversations and some oceanographic discussions describe the ocean as the place from where human salvation will likely emerge in the wake of environmental destruction; others point out that life on earth is dependent upon the health of the ocean: "as goes the ocean, so goes life" (Alana Mitchell, *Sea Sick*, 22). The ocean is strange and promising all in one breath.

The ocean. Singular. The bodies of saltwater that cover the planet are connected, or, more accurately, are a singular aquatic body divided only by human cartography for the sake of navigational communication, for the ability to conveniently identify location and for political claims to sovereign rights. But such convenience invades our thought, contributing to centuries of understanding the oceans as independent bodies. Instead, we must now think not of the world's oceans, but of the world's ocean—singular—or what author of *Shakespeare's Ocean* Dan Brayton points out is standard discourse in the marine sciences: "the global ocean." Or what J. H. Parry, the eminent maritime historian, described in his seminal book *The Discovery of the Sea* as "the one sea": "All the seas of the world are one." Unique in its oneness, the ocean is alone on this planet, and as far as we know at this moment, alone in the universe. The ocean, like Rocket Raccoon, declares, "Ain't no thing like me, except me." It is the rarest of jewels; there is no other of its kind. As such, its value is immeasurable. Its rarity surpasses the perception of its vastness. Size is relative.

The world's ocean, though, is also complicated with the turmoil of possession. The possessive *world's* indicates the ocean to be owned by the world; the world, of course, understood not to mean a global ecology, but the possession of the human inhabitants of the planet. The deeply-seeded cultural understanding of possession and its extension across the ocean confounds our ability to think of the ocean in ways other than territorially and reveals our desire to import land-based logic of ownership on the fluid space of the ocean. We have records of territorial disputes over ocean access and fisheries rights dating back to at least the early 1200s. Such cultural entrenchments will be difficult to overcome.

Enter ecocriticism and ecomposition.

Ecocriticism emerged in English programs just over a quarter century ago. Reductively, ecocriticism adopted the mission of examining literature from an environmental standpoint. In the same way that feminist criticism studies literature from a feminist perspective or Marxist

criticism studies literature from a Marxist perspective, ecocriticism claimed the study of literature from an environmental perspective. More speculatively, though, we might say that ecocriticism unfolded as humanists began to ask “what can we do?” alongside the sciences in the midst of growing environmental crisis.

Over the last 25+ years, ecocriticism has rapidly become not only a disciplinary legitimate critical form, but one of the most dynamic criticisms to emerge of recent. However, even in its institutional success, ecocriticism has failed in many ways, failures we might dismiss as resulting from its juvenescent standing. Key among these failures—at least for the purposes of this class—is ecocriticism’s terrestrial mindset, manifest in its historical attachment to Aldo Leopold’s “Thinking Like a Mountain.” That is, ecocriticism has thus far been a land-based criticism stranded on a liquid planet. Ecocritics have produced only limited work in marine-based ecocriticism

This class is designed to explore the possibility of a Blue Ecocriticism, of a critical approach to literary and writing studies informed by oceanic thinking, fluidity, and systems ecology. This course will consider a rich range of subjects all bound by the global ocean to the end of invigorating oceanic thinking. At minimum, the course will ask, how have we written about the oceans and what are the ramifications of those writings. More dynamically, though, this course will unearth ecocriticism, developing a vital theory of oceanic criticism. Subjects will include, but are not limited to:

- Atlantic/transatlantic & postcolonial studies
- Climate change and ocean rise
- Ecological literacy/digital literacy
- Marine animal studies
- Ocean as media
- Ocean/human/posthuman
- Oceanic studies
- The alien ocean
- The apparent ocean
- The appearance of blue as the last color humans have come to know
- The beach as transitional space
- The literary ocean
- The ocean as object and hyper object
- The oceanic sublime
- The paratextual ocean

Students will produce two projects for this class, including one multimodal project and a second research project.

Required Reading

Beebe, William. *Half Mile Down*

Brayton, Dan. *Shakespeare’s Ocean*

Carson, Rachel. *The Sea Around Us*

Clark, Timothy. *Ecocriticism on the Edge*

Coote, John. *The Norton Book of the Sea*

Earl, Sylvia. *The World is Blue*

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*

Glotfelty, Cheryl and Harold Fromm. *The Ecocriticism Reader*
Helmreich, Stefan. *Alien Ocean*
Kurlansky, Mark. *Cod*
PMLA Issue—Ocean Studies
Starsoleski, Nicole. *The Undersea Network (Sign, Storage, Transmission)*
Verne, Jules. *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*
Voo, Lee van der. *The Fish Market*

Assignments

1. Ocean Issue Presentation

Each student will deliver a 15 minute presentation to the class about an “ocean issue.” Issues may include, but are not limited to topics such as overfishing, microplastics, climate change, sea level rise, ocean pollution, and so on. The objective of the assignment is to make the class aware of an issue that currently affects the global ocean.

Presentations should include media.

Presentations will be delivered one per day on the following days of class meetings: 3/13, 3/20, 3/27, 4/3, 4/10, and 4/17.

2. Blue Ecocriticism Spark

Each student will produce a Spark page that forwards a Blue-Ecocritical argument. Spark will be addressed in the class, as will the details of what must be included in the Spark page. You should think of this assignment as the production of a publishable-quality, multimodal research project.

3. Research Paper

Each student will submit a written research paper directed at a conference or publication venue. The papers must directly forward the blue-ecocritical project. These papers may be tied to the Spark projects. Details will be addressed in class.

4. Seminar Discussion Leader

Each student will lead one day’s seminar discussion about the assigned reading. Choices of readings will be assigned on the second seminar meeting.

Grading

Final grades will be determined using the following values:

Ocean Issue Presentation	20%
Blue Ecocriticism Spark	30%
Conference Paper	30%
Seminar Discussion	20%

Calendar

1/9—Course introduction

1/16—Glotfelty and Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader*

1/23—Garrard, *EcoCriticism*

1/30—Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*

2/6—Verne, *20,000 Leagues Beneath the Sea*

2/13—Beebe, *Half Mile Down*

2/20—Carson, *The Sea Around Us*

2/27—Starsoleski, *The Undersea Network*

3/6—No class; Spring Break

3/13—Coote, *The Norton Book of the Sea*. PRESENTATION

3/20—Earl, *The World is Blue*. PRESENTATION

3/27—Kurlansky, *Cod*. PRESENTATION

4/3—Brayton, *Shakespeare's Ocean*. PRESENTATION (Note: Brayton Video)

4/10—PMLA Ocean Studies. PRESENTATION

4/17—Voo, *The Fish Market*. PRESENTATION

4/24—Helmreich, *Alien Ocean*. PRESENTATION