

**English 782: Current Directions in Literary Study
“Ecomaterial Encounters”**

Fall Semester 2015

Instructor: Lowell Duckert

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Meeting Time: 7:00-9:50 PM W

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What the postcolonial/ecocritical alliance brings out, above all, is the need for a broadly materialist understanding of the changing relationship between people, animals and environment.

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin,
Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment

Everything...in the unpredictable...Everything at the crossroads. Encounters.

Michel Serres, *Biogea*

An *encounter*: a “meeting of adversaries, confrontation,” a word that comes from the Old French *encontre*, and that from the Latin *in-* (“in”) and *contra* (“against”), a conflict that postcolonial critic Mary Louise Pratt (1992) has famously defined as the “contact zone.” But if the “zone” has (arguably) come to determine the colonial encounter discursively, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2015) significantly urge postcolonial ecocriticism to interrogate the *material* interactions between human and nonhuman beings in these tense, transitional, and touching spaces of “contact.” This seminar explores the physical *tactility* of *contact*; it expands on the “touching with” that every encounter relates; it considers how to turn “the *against*,” as Michel Serres advocates, “into a *with*.” To early modern *encounters*, then: we will take up (and complicate) all these authors’ injunctions by exploring sixteenth- and seventeenth-century travel accounts across the globe: from the waterscapes of Guiana to the icefields of the Arctic, from the monsoonal weather-worlds of India to the liquescent actors of the London stage. Setting forth from this site of potentiality known as the “encounter” – here, at the crossroads – this seminar will also introduce you to current directions (to take) in ecostudies: what is known as the “new materialism.” We will ask several key questions: how does early modern travel literature challenge anthropocentric frameworks of being (supposed separations between body and environment) as well as knowing (such as autonomous authorship and discoverable, teleological “truth”)? How might these encounters, by intensifying issues of class and race and by amplifying voices silenced by the “greening” of imperialism, not only critique demarcations between global and local (thereby troubling the critical trend towards “bioregionalism” at present), but also reconceive our definitions of the *bio-* in order to materialize more expansive, expressive, and politico-ethical communities? Can “past” encounters translate in/organic collisions of strife at present into meetings of love in future?

Learning Objectives:

1. to consider the multi-sensorial ways that early modern travel-authors encountered ecomateriality; to ask how they understood (or did not understand) their experiences (drawing upon pseudo-scientific theories like geohumoralism); and to examine the “storied matter” (compositions) that resulted from these encounters.
2. to put early modern travel literature into conversation with participants in the so-called “material turn” at present – such as queer ecology, ecofeminism, vibrant materialism, and object-oriented-ontology – simultaneously interrogating their terms and expanding their horizons.
3. to think about how the early modern encounter speaks to, confronts, and perhaps redresses contemporary environmental issues: how its mediations might offer alternative futures besides unmitigated catastrophe.
4. to critique the anthropocentricity of our age in order to imagine a posthumanist ethics that accounts for love as well as strife with the unpredictability of everything.

Required Books: (available from the WVU Bookstore)

Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World*

Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*

Thomas Harriot, *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*

John Mandeville, *Book of Marvels and Travels*

Walter Raleigh, *The Discovery of Guiana*

William Shakespeare, *Pericles* and *The Tempest*

Requirements:

1. Expect plenty of *reading*, ranging from seventeenth-century eyewitness accounts of water tornados, to challenging secondary readings in ecological theory, to the travel narratives themselves. Be prepared to *participate*: I want us to grapple with the readings, pose more questions than answers, and engage in spirited discussions. (The challenge, I assure you, will be mutual.) Raleigh, who trudged through miles of water-land in modern-day Venezuela, once admitted of “being a very ill footman”; we will follow in his footsteps.
2. *Matter stories* are weekly responses (at least one page, double-spaced) in which you will meditate on the relationship between ecomateriality and imagination. I would like you to pick a place that you encounter in your average day-to-day experience – a broken birdbath, the hill by your home, that sewage smell by the trail – and note the weekly changes that you observe. How does the un/predictable nature of the material encounter make you think differently (or not) about how bodies (both stories and texts) are composed? Be creative; feel free to be personal. In general, your responses are meant to ask intelligent questions about that week’s reading, generate ideas for your papers, and, I hope, enlarge your own sense of the material turn.
3. *A short paper* (5 pp.) on topics of environmental justice and health; Raleigh’s *Discovery*; and the week’s readings (possibly in conjunction with the experiential learning component).

4. *A midterm paper* (10 pp.) that places primary material in conversation with one or more ecotheoretical modes and a current environmental issue of your choice.
5. *A final paper* (20-25 pp.) of article length that builds on your midterm research.

Grading:

Participation and attendance in class	20
Eco-journals (storied matter)	20
Short paper	10
Final paper (includes midterm)	50
Total	100

Experiential Learning Component:

Because one of the course objectives is thinking about how travel literature's ecotheorizations can influence current environmental policy, we will meet with an environmental organization during the semester. If you have any reservations about this conversation, or feel unable/unwilling to join for *any* reason, please do not hesitate to tell me. I will gladly assign you a different task.

Attendance Policy:

Attendance is mandatory. Late work will not be accepted. If you foresee a scheduling conflict, please notify me as soon as possible. Incompletes will be considered only if you apply to me before the end of the term; once I agree, we will negotiate the conditions under which the grade of "I" will be changed to a letter grade and sign a contract. Incomplete work will be submitted before the last day of class of the following semester (at the latest).

Academic Integrity:

The integrity of the classes offered by any academic institution solidifies the foundation of its mission and cannot be sacrificed to expediency, ignorance, or blatant fraud. Therefore, I will enforce rigorous standards of academic integrity in all aspects and assignments of this course. For the detailed policy of West Virginia University regarding the definitions of acts considered to fall under academic dishonesty and possible ensuing sanctions, please see the West Virginia University Academic Catalog at <http://catalog.wvu.edu/undergraduate/coursecredittermsclassification/#academicintegrity> text. Should you have any questions about possibly improper research citations or references, or any other activity that may be interpreted as an attempt at academic dishonesty, please see me before the assignment is due to discuss the matter.

Inclusivity:

The West Virginia University community is committed to creating and fostering a positive learning and working environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and inclusion. Any attempt to disrupt the nondiscriminatory environment of this class will not be tolerated. If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Accessibility Services (293-6700). For more

information on West Virginia University's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, please see <http://diversity.wvu.edu>.

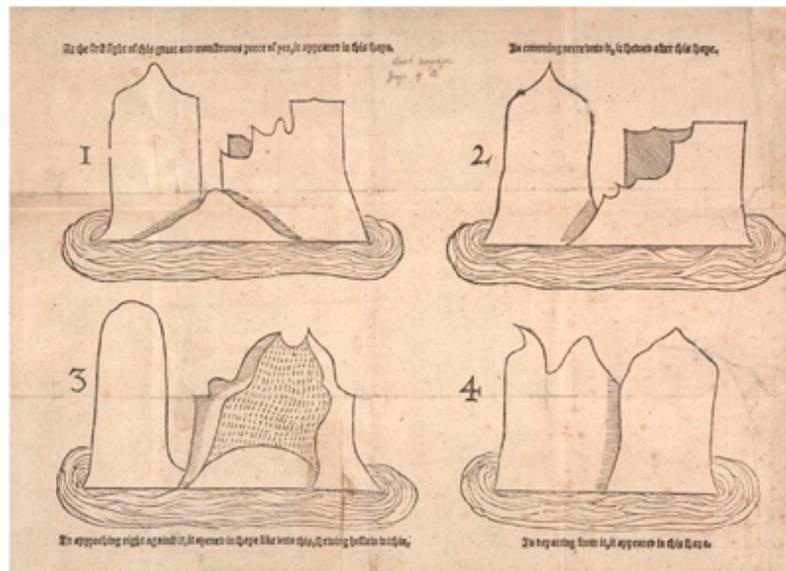
Contact:

I encourage you to take advantage of my office hours (information above), and feel free to email/call me at any time. Never hesitate to ask a question, express a doubt, or request clarification. Make sure that your MIX email address is operational; I will frequently notify you about what to read for a given day, and I will occasionally post documents online.

Schedule of Readings (liable to turn, like all travelers):

- 8/19: Introductions
- 8/26: **Story**
- Richard Grove, “Introduction,” and Chapter 1, “Edens, islands, and early empires,” from *Green Imperialism*, (online)
 - Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, “Introduction,” from *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (online)
 - Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, “Introduction: Stories Come to Matter,” from *Material Ecocriticism* (online)
 - Michel Serres, “Encounters, Loves,” from *Biogea* (online)
- 9/2: No class
- 9/9: **Movement**
Mandeville, *Marvels*
- 9/16: **River**
Raleigh, *Discovery*
- 9/23: **Print**
Harriot, *Virginia*; **short paper due**
- 9/30: **Ice**
George Best, *A True Discourse* (online)
John Davis, *The World's Hydrographical Description* (online)
- 10/7: **Monsoon**
John Ovington, *A Voyage to Suratt* (online)
John Fryer, *New Account of East-India and Persia* (online)
- 10/14: **Atom**
Cavendish, *Blazing*

- 10/21: **Elephant**
Thomas Coryate, *Traveler for the English Wits* (online); **midterm paper due**
- 10/28: **Stage**
Shakespeare, *Pericles, The Tempest*
- 11/4: TBD
- 11/11: **Winter**
Thomas James, *Strange and Dangerous Voyage* (online)
Edward Pelham, *God's Power and Providence* (online)
- 11/18: **Flood**
Ghosh, *Tide*
- 11/25: No class: Fall Recess
- 12/2: Individual conferences
- 12/10: **Final paper due**



“A mounteine of yce appearing in sundrie figures.”
Thomas Ellis, *A True Report of the Third and Last Voyage into Meta Incognita* (1578)