

English 469 (CRN 27546)
Winter 2014; MWF 3:00-3:50
CONDON 106

Prof. L. Westling
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Ecocollapse: Representing Human/Environmental Disasters

This course focuses on literary and visual representations of interrelationships between human communities and regional biosystems during the Great Depression of the 1930s, the present, and possible futures. The collapse of the U.S. financial system coincided with devastating natural disasters such as the Dust Bowl and catastrophic floods of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. Streams of refugees poured north and west from the drought-stricken Plains states and Southern landscapes gouged by erosion and impoverished by monocropping. Readings cluster around particular disaster areas and ecological problems--the Dust Bowl, the Mississippi River drainage, the Appalachian Mountains of Kentucky and West Virginia, and the Pacific Coast of California. These interrelated works of poetry, prose, and photography anticipate environmental justice writing and criticism of recent decades. Readings in environmental justice, ecofeminism, and environmental ethics will be supplemented by student research into historical contexts and contemporary debates. Films include Pare Lorentz's *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *The River*, as well as John Sayles's *Matewan* and various You Tube videos. Questions to be explored include how socio-economic and environmental destabilization intersect with aesthetic purposes in writing and visual media, how literary representation of "nature" functions in works with urgent polemical motivations, and the ways in which "human" and "natural" are delineated in these texts.

Requirements: Regular attendance and participation including presentation of oral reports and incisive analytical comments on readings, timely submission of several short papers, and a final paper of 12-15 pages in standard scholarly format due Wednesday, March 19.

Texts (all books available at UO Bookstore; some perhaps at Smith Family)

Butler, Octavia. *Parable of the Sower* [**Optional:** *Apocalyptic Planet*, Craig Childs]
Egan, Timothy. *The Worst Hard Time*.
Giardina, Denise. *Storming Heaven*.
Selections from Ortiz, Simon. *Woven Stone*. (BLACKBOARD)
Rukeyser, Muriel. *Out of Silence*.
Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Various shorter readings presented as handouts or pdf's.

Course Schedule (*minor adjustments possible*)

Week 1 -Jan. 6--Introductions: Ecocriticism, the Deep Past, Extinctions, and Ancient
Catastrophes

Jan 8-- Questions of human/environment relationships. Sign up for Depression reports. **Have read**, "The
Lost World," by Elizabeth Kolbert and Preface to Jared Diamond, *Collapse* and pp. 277-308 (pdfs
on Blackboard). Bring examples of good news/signs of hope.

Jan. 10--The Great Depression-- **Have read:** *The Worst Hard Time*, Intro. & Chs. 1-3.

Week 2 Jan. 13--**Have read** Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, Chapters 4-8; Brief student reports on various
environmental aspects of the Great Depression.

Jan. 15--Egan, Chapters 9-115.

Jan. 17 --Egan, Chapters 16-19; **Short paper on Egan's rhetorical strategies (2 pp.)**

Week 3--Jan. 20-- **Martin Luther King Holiday**

Jan. 22--View Pare Lorentz, *The Plow that Broke the Plains*. **Finish** Timothy Egan's *The Worst Hard Time*

Jan. 24--Begin John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

Week 4--Jan. 27-- *Grapes of Wrath*

Jan. 29--*Grapes of Wrath*

Jan. 31--*Grapes of Wrath*

Week 5 --Feb. 3--Finish *Grapes of Wrath*. **Short paper on Steinbeck; view** Per Lorentz's *The River*.

Feb. 5-- Southern agriculture, geographic history of the Mississippi drainage, the Tennessee Valley Authority (cf. huge 2008 December coal waste spill); government programs in landscape restoration. **Begin Giardina, *Storming Heaven*.**

Feb. 7--*Storming Heaven* and The Mining Wars of the Twenties and Thirties; reports on mining history, environmental problems of the Appalachians, mountain top removal.

Week 6 --Feb. 10-- Giardina's *Storming Heaven*; view *Matewan*

Feb. 12 --*Storming Heaven*; environmental justice and human/landscape health. Readings in environmental justice scholarship (TBA).

Feb. 14--Finish *Storming Heaven*.

Week 7 --Feb. 17--. Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead*.

Feb. 19--*Book of the Dead*; **student presentations** on individual poems, with special attention to human/environment relations.

Feb. 21--*Book of the Dead*; **student presentations. Short paper due on a Rukeyser poem: poetic devices for EJ purposes**, based on class presentations.

Week 8 --Feb. 24--Native American Reservations and "Resource Extraction"-- Simon Ortiz,

"Our Homeland, a National Sacrifice Area" and poems from *Woven Stone* (pdf.)

Feb. 26--Ortiz, poems

Feb. 28--Ortiz, poems; **Draft proposals for final papers due. (Draft proposal should include brief description of project, explanation of its significance, working thesis, working bibliography of at least 5 items, exclusive of internet materials. Length 2-4 pp., normal margins, proper scholarly documentation.)**

Week 9 --Mar. 3--Octavia Butler and Climate Change--*Parable of the Sower*.

Mar. 5--*Parable of the Sower*

Mar. 7--*Parable of the Sower*; **climate change reports.**

Week 10 Mar. 10--*Parable of the Sower*; Jared Diamond, "The World as a Polder: What Does it All Mean to Us Today?" (pdf); **climate change reports.**

Mar. 12--Provisional conclusions: Relation of literary culture to economic history, environmental change. The Climate Change Debate. **Work-in-progress reports on seminar papers.**

Mar. 14--**Work-in-progress reports on seminar papers.**

Final Paper Due: Wednesday, March 19.