Course Description

In this seminar we will study a sampling of texts from various fields that deal with the dialectic between wilderness and civilization and the identities it enables. We will consider how the concept of wilderness sometimes doubles for that of nature in forming a dynamic identity we call “civilized.” Our studies will draw on insights from biology, ecology, anthropology, political theory, and literature.

We will attempt to respond to such questions as: If wilderness is nature without humans, why are we so irresistibly drawn to it? What function does wilderness serve in our civilized lives? How has it become necessary to our imaginative, spiritual, and political lives? What does an investigation of “wilderness,” “nature,” and “civilization” allow us to express about the world we inhabit? What are the limits of these concepts—what possibilities do they disallow?

We will examine these concepts in terms of how they work to create identity for humans, what ways of life they offer, what they obscure. And we’ll look closely at related concepts that structure our sense of ourselves, sometimes without our being wholly conscious of it: What does it mean to be natural, or live a natural lifestyle? Should social organizations follow nature, be “organic,” or go in a different direction? How natural is sex? gender? class? How does what we consider “natural” and “unnatural” affect the lifestyle options available to us?

Our goal in this seminar is to think through these and related issues and to develop language that enables us to imagine viable alternative futures.

Course Objectives

1. To use close-reading and writing to evolve the ability to discuss and think critically about an array of texts;
2. To acquire a critical awareness of how identity categories are never simply given or natural but are subject to a specific set of social-cultural conditions that change through time;
3. To synthesize this awareness so that it can inform your own personal life experience and broaden your scope.

Writing Practices: Formal and Informal Writing and Workshops

You will write three formal essays for the seminar: two 3–4-page essays and one longer project, a 5–7-page literary-critical essay. I encourage you to develop the topics for your essays from your particular interests and from the readings. I can also help you develop topics suitable for these essays, if you wish. You will shepherd these formal essays through a process of drafting and peer-workshopping.

In addition to these three formal essays you will write a number of shorter essays, including thinking essays and exploratory essays toward the longer essays. You will also do several other writing assignments in the course of our seminar.
A word on our writing practices. We draft, and drafts of your essays in progress form an essential component of our workshops. For each formal essay bring several copies of your draft to the workshop, one for each member of your workshop group. I’ll give you more detailed information on workshops as we approach our first one.

Final versions of your essays must be formatted as follows: double-spaced, 12-point typeface, with one-inch margins on all sides. “Four pages” means four full pages of your own writing. Put your name, my name, the course name, and the title of your essay on a separate cover sheet. If you need to include documentation, style it in accordance with MLA style guidelines (see Hacker for details). You must carefully proofread and edit your final versions. Final versions of each essay are due on the dates indicated on the syllabus: hard copy is due in class on the due date; electronic versions are due by 4:00 p.m. on the due date.

Required Texts


In addition to the works above, I have also placed some required readings on the NYU Classes site for our course. These readings are indicated by an asterisk (*) in the schedule below.

Course Requirements and Grades

Our seminar relies on discussing and analyzing the readings together and on a regular series of writing workshops. This method will not succeed without your regular and timely attendance.

Your attendance is vitally important—to me and to your grade. Virtually all of what we do takes the form of group discussions. This includes your reading and critical appreciation of the texts. If you’re not present and alert in class, you aren’t able to participate in the group events. I expect, encourage, and greatly value your active and vocal participation. That is to say, I want to hear each of your voices at least once every class.

You must attend class on a regular basis and arrive on time. If you fall ill or experience an emergency, please contact me right away so that you can be prepared for the next class. Excessive absences (more than two) can jeopardize your course grade.

Grades are based on your ongoing class participation and on the quality of your written work. The development you make as you write improves the quality of your writing, so I will consider it when reckoning final grades. I am happy to read and evaluate any revisions of essays, provided they are submitted not later than one week after I have returned the graded essay to you.
Grading Policy

Roughly 75 percent of your final grade is based on your formal essays. The remaining 25 percent consists of written homework assignments and participation. Participation consists in regular attendance, punctuality, in-class work, and contributions to discussions. An approximate numerical breakdown follows:

- First essay: roughly 10%
- Second essay: roughly 15%
- Third essay (literary-critical essay): roughly 25%
- Thinking essays: roughly 25%
- Written homework assignments: roughly 5%
- Participation (including written homework): 20%

More than two absences will jeopardize your grade. **Do not miss a workshop day.** Workshops give us all key insights into revision possibilities. If you’re not there, you won’t benefit.

Doing Honest Work

I follow the Gallatin policies on academic integrity.

“As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html] for a full description of the academic integrity policy.”

I will go over proper documentation style in the course of the semester in conjunction with Hacker’s *A Pocket Style Manual*. 

Office Hours and Connectivity

My office is room 506 in 1 Washington Place (the Gallatin building).

My regular office hours for the spring term are:

Wednesday 12:30–1:30 p.m., and
Friday afternoons by appointment.

E-mail is the best way to contact me: al260@nyu.edu. The telephone extension for room 506 is 87340.

I may need to adjust this syllabus and course schedule to accommodate pedagogical needs as they arise. If I do, I will.

Course Schedule

You should read each assigned text by the dates indicated below. For instance, you have to finish reading all of Eisenberg’s “Earth Jazz” before coming to class on Sept. 9.

4 Sept.
- Introduction.
- Writing assignment: Keep a surround journal for one week.
9 Sept.
  o Reading for discussion: Eisenberg, from “Earth Jazz.”*
  o Writing assignment: Write a two-page essay on one metaphor from Eisenberg’s “Earth Jazz.”

11 Sept.
  o Surround journals due; two-page essay on one metaphor from Eisenberg’s “Earth Jazz” due.

16 Sept.
  o Reading for discussion: Hearne, *Adam’s Task*.
  o Writing assignment: Write a thinking essay on Hearne (2 pages).

18 Sept.
  o Reading for discussion: Hearne, *Adam’s Task*.

23 Sept.
  o Thinking essay on Hearne due (2 pages).
  o Reading for discussion: Snyder, “The Etiquette of Freedom” and “The Woman Who Married a Bear.”*
  o Assignment: View *Grizzly Man* (film).

25 Sept.
  o Discussion of *Grizzly Man* (film).
  o Discuss topics for the first formal essay (analytical, 3–4-pages).
  o Writing assignment: Draft a 3–4-page analytical essay.

30 Sept.
  o Workshop for the first formal essay (analytical essay, 3–4-pages).

2 Oct.
  o Workshop for the first formal essay (analytical essay, 3–4-pages).

7 Oct.
  o First formal essay due.
  o Reading for discussion: *Ishmael*.

W 9 Oct.
  o Reading for discussion: *Ishmael*.
  o Writing assignment: Write a thinking essay on Quinn (2 pages).

M 14 Oct.  No classes.

16 Oct.
  o Thinking essay on Quinn due (2 pages).
  o Reading for discussion: Berger, “Why Look at Animals?”
  o Discussion of close reading as a practice.

21 Oct.
  o Reading for discussion: Shepard, *Nature and Madness*.

23 Oct.
  o Reading for discussion: Shepard, *Nature and Madness*.
  o Writing assignment: Write a thinking essay on Shepard (2 pages).
28 Oct.
- Discuss topics for the second formal essay (close reading, 3–4 pages).

30 Oct.
- Thinking essay on Shepard due (2 pages).
- Close-reading practice using McCarthy.
- Writing assignment: Draft a 3–4-page close-reading essay.

4 Nov.
- Workshop for the second formal essay (close-reading essay, 3–4 pages).

6 Nov.
- Workshop for the second formal essay (close-reading essay, 3–4 pages).

11 Nov.
- Second formal essay due.
- Reading for discussion: Coetzee, *The Life and Times of Michael K.*
- Discuss topics for the third formal essay (literary critical, 5–7 pages).
- Writing assignment: Draft a 5–7-page literary-critical essay.

13 Nov.
- Reading for discussion: Coetzee, *The Life and Times of Michael K.*

18 Nov.
- Workshop for the third formal essay (literary-critical, 5–7 pages).

20 Nov.
- Workshop for the third formal essay (literary-critical, 5–7 pages).
- Assignment: View Lee’s *When the Levees Broke,* acts 2 and 3 (film).

25 Nov.
- Discussion of Lee, *When the Levees Broke.*

28 Nov.–1 Dec  
**THANKSGIVING RECESS.**

2 Dec.
- Third formal essay due.
- Reading for discussion: Garrett.*
- Discuss kinds of writing (academic, personal, journalism) and the relation to audience they imply or invent.
- Writing assignment: Write a thinking essay on Garrett and Lee (2 pages).

4 Dec.
- Reading for discussion: Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums.*

9 Dec.
- Thinking essay on Garrett and Lee due (2 pages).
- Reading for discussion: Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums.*
- Write a personal reflection essay on Kerouac (2 pages).

11 Dec.
- Personal reflection essay on Kerouac (2 pages) due.
- Conclusion.