

Bioregionalism and Western American Literature
(ENG 425B.002: Topics in Literature)
Spring 2010
Michael Branch

Brief Course Description

While regionalism has long provided a rubric for understanding place and culture in various parts of the country, American environmental writers have experimented with a variety of new ways to conceptualize and localize identity. Among the most provocative of these “new regionalisms” are bioregional conceptions of place, which attempt to locate cultural and individual identity within a richer, more nuanced understanding of environment and home. In “Bioregionalism and Western American Literature” we will read the work of a variety of gifted nonfiction writers who explore and often attempt to redefine the relationship of self to place in the American West. What is the importance of local consciousness in our increasingly globalized world? What is the nature of the relationship between the West and national culture in the U.S.? How might bioregional conceptions of home differ from regional understandings of place? How do race, gender, and ethnicity impact cultural and environmental identity in the American West? Our survey of place-based western American nonfiction will take us from the deserts of the Mojave and Great Basin to the high peaks of the Sierra, from the Great Valley of California to the snowy forests of Montana, from the volcanic arc of the Cascades to the coastal rainforests, from wilderness to family farm. Along the way we will examine the work of such writers as Mary Austin, John Muir, Edward Abbey, Gary Snyder, Terry Tempest Williams, Linda Hogan, Barry Lopez, David Mas Masumoto, Rick Bass, and Robert Michael Pyle.

Required Books

(In order of appearance. Please be sure to get the editions of each text that you find listed here.)

Barry Lopez, *The Rediscovery of North America* (1992)
Knopf/Vintage, ISBN 0-679-74099-6

Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903)
Penguin, ISBN 0-14-024919-2

John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911)
Penguin, ISBN 0-14-025570-2

Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (1968)
Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, ISBN 0-671-69588-6

Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (1990)
Counterpoint/ Shoemaker and Hoard, ISBN 1-59376-016-7

Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1992)
Knopf/Vintage, ISBN 0-679-74024-4

Linda Hogan, *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* (1996)
Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, ISBN 0-684-83033-7

David Mas Masumoto, *Harvest Son: Planting Roots in American Soil* (1999)
Norton, ISBN 0-393-31974-1

Rick Bass, *Why I Came West: A Memoir* (2008)
Houghton Mifflin, ISBN 0-547-23771-5

Robert Michael Pyle, *Sky Time in Gray's River: Living for Keeps in a Forgotten Place* (2008)
Houghton Mifflin/Mariner, ISBN 0-618-91979-1

Electronic Reserves

To access electronic reserves for this course, go to the UNR Knowledge Center homepage at <http://www.knowledgecenter.unr.edu/>, then follow this path: Research > Course Reserves > Branch > English 425B > Electronic Reserves > Electronic Course Reserves.

Robert L. Thayer, Jr. "Introduction" and "Grounding." In *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice*. University of California Press, 2003.

Wendell Berry, "Conserving Communities." In *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*, edited by William Vitek and Wes Jackson. Yale University Press, 1996.

Wendell Berry, "Higher Education and Home Defense." In *Home Economics*. North Point Press, 1987.

Doug Aberley, "Interpreting Bioregionalism." In *Bioregionalism*, edited by Michael Vincent McGinnis. Routledge, 1999.

Mitchell Thomashow, "Toward a Cosmopolitan Bioregionalism." In *Bioregionalism*, edited by Michael Vincent McGinnis. Routledge, 1999.

Meeting Information

Class Time: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:00 a.m.-12:15 p.m.

Classroom: Frandsen Hall 231

Note: Please turn off and put away all portable electronic devices during all class meetings and examinations.

Instructor

Michael Branch

Office: Frandsen 223

Mailbox: Frandsen 127

Office phone: 682-6375

E-mail: mbranch@unr.edu (be sure to get the "m" on the front!)

Office hours: Tuesday and Thursday from 12:15-2:15 p.m., and by appointment

Course Requirements

Class Attendance and Participation

This is your class and its success will depend upon the contribution of your ideas. Most of each class meeting will be devoted to guided discussion, and your participation will be encouraged and, hopefully, inspired. Please attend class regularly, punctually, and actively, with your questions and ideas ready. Your participation is very important to the success of the course, and to your own success in the course (participation constitutes a substantial part of your final grade, and will also be reflected indirectly in how well you do on exams and essays).

Letter of Introduction

In order to help me get to know you better, I'm asking that you submit a letter of introduction for yourself. While you may want to use the letter to acquaint me with something of your academic and life experience or your reasons for taking this course, the content of the letter is entirely up to you. Feel free to share any particular concerns you may have about the class or your approach to it. Your letter may be informal, and needn't be any longer than you would like. *Please email your letter to me by midnight on Saturday, January 22.*

Examinations

Specifics: We will have two, equally-weighted examinations, which will be entirely closed-book. The midterm exam will include material covered since the start of the class; the final exam will cover only material covered since the midterm. See your schedule for dates and times of examinations, which will be held in our usual classroom. Please bring (large-sized) blue books to both examinations. *Note: you must submit all assigned exams and essays in order to pass the course.*

Objectives: The objective of the exams is to reward your diligence in keeping up with the substantial reading required in the course, to ensure that you are gaining an adequate understanding of assigned materials, to sharpen your skills as a critical thinker and reader, and to offer you an opportunity to demonstrate your understanding of the major themes, ideas, and techniques engaged by the writers whose work we will study.

Essays

Specifics: You will write two essays: the first a critical examination of one or more of the texts we've studied, the second an attempt at a bioregional narrative of your own. In each case you will choose your own topic and approach, but I will give you guidelines and suggestions to help you along, and we will discuss the assignments and possible approaches to them well in advance. Late essays will be reduced by one full letter grade (B to C, etc.) for each weekday they are late. If you are late to class on the day your paper is due, your essay will be reduced by one-third of a letter grade (B to B-). *Note: you must submit all assigned exams and essays in order to pass the course.*

Critical Essay (Essay #1, due April 1): This essay should be 6-7 pages in length. The goal of the critical essay assignment is to allow you an opportunity to engage an author(s) or text(s) more fully than is possible in class discussion. I also hope this assignment will help you think more clearly about literary technique and style, allow you to grapple with important issues of region, bioregion, and place, increase your sensitivity to language and rhetoric, and improve the clarity and effectiveness of your writing. Your written work should enhance your own

understanding of literature while also extending your insights to the readers of your work. Think of your essay as a coherent and cohesive *argument* rather than a series of *observations*; that is, actively attempt to *persuade* your readers that your idea, understanding, or interpretation is valid and useful. It is essential that you make clear to your readers what you hope to accomplish, that you maintain the focus of your argument, and that you use references to and quotations from the text(s) as evidence in support of your argument. We will discuss the critical essay in greater detail before it is due.

You are not formally required to use secondary sources in writing your critical essay—your own ideas are more important. However, it can be very helpful to engage “outside” criticism to clarify or enrich the argument or interpretation of your essay. Be sure to properly document all sources used; if you are uncertain about how to properly document the words or ideas that you borrow and apply in your own writing, be sure to ask me, or a reference librarian, or consult the *MLA Handbook*. Your obligation to pay your intellectual debt by clearly documenting borrowings of course extends to all online sources. We will also discuss proper documentation in class, but when in doubt, please do ask.

You will be free to write on any aspect of the reading that interests you. As we discuss the texts we will work together to identify potential essay topics, but you will devise your own angle of approach. Start thinking of possible topics well before your essay is due, and always feel free to discuss your ideas with me at any stage of the writing process. I ask that you develop a topic of your own (rather than simply choosing a topic from an assignment sheet that reflects my own interests) because this approach tends to result in more rewarding and engaging essays that speak more directly to your own intellectual, ethical, literary, and environmental interests.

Bioregional Narrative (Essay #2, due May 4): This essay should be 8-9 pages in length. The texts we’ll study in this class take a variety of approaches to fundamental questions about how we choose to inhabit the place(s) where we live. After considering a number of literary approaches to questions of region, bioregion, place, and dwelling, the Bioregional Narrative assignment will give you an opportunity to create a work of informed, place-based writing that takes your own experiences, ideas, and values as its inspiration. This is your chance to employ some of the techniques you’ve studied—and perhaps to devise some of your own—in order to describe your own place and your carefully considered thoughts about how best to inhabit it. Whatever approach you ultimately take, your narrative should be “in conversation” with the authors, texts, and/or major themes of the course. We’ll discuss this assignment in detail well before the narrative is due.

Finish: By “finish” I refer to the overall clarity and effectiveness of your writing, and the care with which your work is prepared. Your essays should be carefully structured, clearly written, and meticulously proofread. A poor presentation is more than simply a matter of cosmetics; it damages your credibility with your audience by suggesting that you don’t care enough about your own ideas to work hard to convey them clearly and cleanly. Because the clarity and force of your prose is vital to the effectiveness of your argument, a poorly written essay is a poor essay, however brilliant conceptually.

Format: Essays should be typed, double-spaced, and have the pages numbered and stapled together. Please include your name, my name, the date, and a title. A cover page is not necessary. I prefer that your essays be either double-sided or printed on the reverse sides of previously used paper (at the very least, please use recycled paper).

Topics: As we discuss the texts we will work together to identify potential essay topics, but you will devise your own angle of approach. Start thinking of possible topics well ahead of

time, and always feel free to discuss your ideas with me at any stage of the composition process. Again, we'll discuss this further in class.

Grading

We will use a “plus and minus” grading system. The grades in the course will be distributed as follows:

Letter of Introduction	00%
Participation	10%
Midterm Exam	20%
Essay #1	25%
Essay #2	25%
Final Exam	20%

Disability Issues

I am committed to equal opportunity in education for all students, including those with disabilities. Any student with a disability who needs academic accommodations is requested to speak with me and with the Disability Resource Center as soon as possible to arrange for appropriate accommodations.

Honor

In this class your name is your pledge, and you will be held strictly accountable for the integrity of your work. In our global village, only 1 person out of 100 has the opportunity to receive a college education. Thus, it is my firm policy that plagiarism or cheating of any kind, of any scale, and on any assignment will result in a failing grade for the course and the filing of a formal accusation of academic dishonesty with Student Judicial Affairs. Plagiarism is defined as “submitting the language, ideas, thoughts or work of another as one’s own; or assisting in the act of plagiarism by allowing one’s work to be used in this fashion.” If you are unsure about how to properly document the ideas or words that you borrow and apply in your own writing, be sure to ask me, or a reference librarian, or consult the *MLA Handbook*. Your obligation to pay your intellectual debt by clearly documenting borrowings of course extends to all online sources. If you wish to submit an essay derived from work you are doing or have done in other classes, you are required to discuss this with me in advance.

Communication

To serve you most effectively, I need to know what questions and concerns you have about the class. Be sure to keep me informed about your progress in the course. When does the presentation of materials seem unclear? When might you benefit from a meeting with me? What questions do you have that can help you improve your work and/or your comfort level in the class? Please feel free to talk with me at any time or to request an appointment outside of class.

I'm here to help you in any way I can. The earlier you discuss a problem with me, the more likely it is that I will be in a position to help you solve it.

A Note on Ideology

This course is about thoughtful reading, writing, and discussion of literary, scientific, and environmental texts, ideas, and issues. It is not about indoctrination to any particular set of ideas. Regardless of your background, beliefs, and approaches to literature and life, I welcome and respect your opinions in this class. Because intelligent people have intelligent disagreements, you should not expect to concur with all the ideas, attitudes, or values expressed by the texts, the students, or the instructor in this course. You are required to critically examine and adequately understand the various texts and ideas introduced in the course, but you are certainly not required to accept them.

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SCHEDULE

(Subject to revision as necessary)

(Note: Boldface denotes weeks during which some assignment is due.)

- TU 1/19: Greetings, logistics, and review of syllabus and course requirements
TH 1/20: Introductions to each other and to the goals and emphases of the course
NOTE: Letter of introduction due to Mike (mbranch@unr.edu) by midnight Saturday
- TU 1/26: Barry Lopez, *The Rediscovery of North America* (1992)
TH 1/28: Laird Christensen, "Writing Home in a Global Age" (2008). Handout.
Leonard, et. al., "Where You At? A Bioregional Quiz" (1981). Handout.
"From the Editors," *Orion Magazine* (1995). Handout.
- TU 2/2: Robert L. Thayer, Jr. "Introduction" and "Grounding." In *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice* (2003). Electronic reserves.
TH 2/4: Wendell Berry, "Higher Education and Home Defense." In *Home Economics* (1987). Electronic reserves.
Wendell Berry, "Conserving Communities." In *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*, edited by William Vitek and Wes Jackson (1996).
Electronic reserves.
- TU 2/9: Doug Aberley, "Interpreting Bioregionalism." In *Bioregionalism*, edited by Michael Vincent McGinnis (1999). Electronic reserves.
Mitchell Thomashow, "Toward a Cosmopolitan Bioregionalism." In *Bioregionalism*, edited by Michael Vincent McGinnis (1999). Electronic Reserves.
- TH 2/11: CLASS CANCELLED
- TU 2/16: Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903)
TH 2/18: Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903)
- TU 2/23: John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911)
TH 2/25: John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911)
- TU 3/2: Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (1968)
TH 3/4: Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (1968)
- TU 3/9: Open day/ Midterm Exam Review
TH 3/11: Midterm Exam (bring large bluebooks)

SPRING BREAK

“If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant; if we did not sometimes taste of adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome.” –Anne Bradstreet

- TU 3/23: Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (1990)
TH 3/25: Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (1990)
- TU 3/30: Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1992)
TH 4/1: Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge* (1992)
ESSAY #1 DUE (at start of class)
- TU 4/6: Linda Hogan, *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* (1996)
TH 4/8: Linda Hogan, *Dwellings* (1996)
- TU 4/13: David Mas Masumoto, *Harvest Son: Planting Roots in American Soil* (1999)
TH 4/15: David Mas Masumoto, *Harvest Son* (1999)
- TU 4/20: Rick Bass, *Why I Came West: A Memoir* (2008)
TH 4/22: Rick Bass, *Why I Came West* (2008)
- TU 4/27: Robert Michael Pyle, *Sky Time in Gray’s River: Living for Keeps in a Forgotten Place* (2008)
TH 4/29: Robert Michael Pyle, *Sky Time in Gray’s River* (2008)
- TU 5/4: Open Day/ Final Exam Review
ESSAY #2 DUE
- TH 5/6: FINAL EXAM: 7:30-9:30 a.m. in the usual room (bring large bluebooks)