

ENLT 521.1 The Elemental West  
Tu 7:10-10 PM, LA 233  
Professor Nancy Cook  
Office: LA 124  
Tel: 243-2963  
Office hours TU 4-5  
**AND BY APPOINTMENT**  
[Nancy.cook@mso.umt.edu](mailto:Nancy.cook@mso.umt.edu)

### The Elemental West

In this course we will examine western American literature from the ground up, so to speak. What do western texts look like when viewed from the perspective of the elements—water, air, fire, and earth? How do the elements determine or inflect narrative, character, and ethical substance of the text? What can this perspective tell us about the way we inhabit Western spaces? About our animal selves? Literary texts will be drawn from among works by the following 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>–century authors: Stegner, McNickle, Austin, LeGuin, Barr, Butler, Kesey, Williams, Meloy, Owens, Welch, Silko, Dillard, Walker, Cather, Hammett, Didion, Boyle, Galvin, McPhee, Reiser, Kittredge, Blew, Earling, Lewis and Clark, Maclean, Abbey. For theoretical and methodological frameworks, we'll draw from ecocriticism and cultural geography.

#### The Fine Print

**Attendance:** Expected. If you have a compelling reason to be away (presenting your work at a conference in Rome or you are in the hospital), please see me ahead of time.

**Disabilities accommodation:** Please see p 334 of catalog for university policies. I will make appropriate accommodations for documented disabilities. Please see me privately.

**Incompletes:** Please refer to university catalog, p 21 for policy.

**Student Conduct Code:** You are expected to adhere to the code.

**Grades:** Your grade will be based on written work, on presentations, and on participation in the work of the course. Your final written project will comprise 60% of your course grade.

**Outcomes:** In this course we will examine western American literature from the ground up, so to speak. What do western texts look like when viewed from the perspective of the elements—water, air, fire, and earth? How do the elements determine or inflect narrative, character, and ethical substance of the text? What can this perspective tell us about the way we inhabit Western spaces? About our animal selves?

We will look at North American texts from the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries that posit, defend, critique and challenge ideas about the status of the four elements their relations to cultural (socio-political) practices. As we move through the semester we will look at these issues through different modes of discourse, with particular attention to the contributions made by literary texts. In addition, we will carefully consider the ways in which readers of literature appropriate the theories and methodologies of other

disciplines. By the end of the course your work will show a sophisticated use of theoretical and methodological discourses and attentiveness to the ways in which elemental nature has been represented in literary texts.

**Assessments:** During the semester, you will produce **one presentation** on a critical text, six short provocative pieces on the primary readings, and **one final essay or textual project**, of substantial length (18-30 pp.) \*

\*I am willing to negotiate with each of you to establish a project that both meets the objectives of the course and your academic needs.

**Books:** The University bookstore should have copies of all the books. I have placed copies of many on reserve in the library (sometimes multiple copies). Some of you may wish to buy used books on-line. I will place some required readings on reserve. Critical books are available on-line, or library, or ILL, or rarely, on loan from me. For living writers, if you can afford it, buy NEW. Royalties feed writers. If you buy used, get the best deal you can. Book Exchange can have good prices, or you can shop on-line. I might recall a book to place on reserve, so keep that in mind. For the literature, public libraries are a good bet. Borrow—many of these are old chestnuts around Missoula, so you might be able to borrow from friends.

**Required:**

Sarah Andrews. *Fault Line*  
Craig Childs. *The Secret Knowledge of Water*  
Mike Davis. *The Ecology of Fear*  
Joan Didion. *Run River*  
Daniel Duane. *Caught Inside*  
Timothy Egan. *The Worst Hard Time*  
Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston. *Farewell to Manzanar*  
Ken Kesey. *Sometimes a Great Notion*  
Darcy McNickle. *Wind from an Enemy Sky*  
Stephen Pyne. *The Year of the Fires*  
Diane Smith. *Pictures from an Expedition*  
Wallace Stegner. *Angle of Repose*  
Terry Tempest Williams. *Desert Quartet*

**Recommended:**

You will need to read and present on ONE critical/ theoretical book, which may be from this list, or pre-approved. I encourage you to find a theory or methodology that interests you and explore that one.

Abrams, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous*  
Basso, Keith. *Wisdom Sits in Places*  
Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism*  
*Writing for an Endangered World*  
Evernden, Neil. *The Social Creation of Nature*  
Jackson, J.B.  
Jackson, Wes. *Becoming Native to this Place*

Jahner, Elaine. *Spaces of the Mind*  
Knobloch, Frieda. *The Culture of Wilderness*  
McNeill, J.R. *Something New Under the Sun*  
Nabhan, Gary. *Cultures of Habitat*  
Nicholas, et al. eds. *Imagining the Big Open*  
Oates, David. *Paradise Wild*  
Phillips, Dana. *The Truth of Ecology*  
Steinberg, Ted. *Acts of God.*  
*Down to Earth*  
Suchantke, Andrea *Eco-Geography*  
Worster, Donald. *An Unsettled Country*  
Worster, Donald. *Nature's Economy*  
Wrobel, David and Michael Steiner, eds. *Many Wests*