

**English 320/Program in the Environment 377: Literature and Environment**  
**Course Theme: Country and City**  
**Winter 2021**

**Course Description:**

“Coastal elites” vs. “Trump supporters.” “Urban progress” vs. “rural decline.” Skyscrapers vs. farms. Mainstream media and pop culture usually depict rural and urban America—especially around national elections—as diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive. Rural America, in these visions, is uniformly white and conservative, while urban America is diverse and progressive. Examining literary production, however, reveals a far more complicated reality—visions of both country and city that are diverse in terms of race, sexuality, ideology, and more, as well as a troubling of clear “divides” between the rural and urban. What does it really mean to be “urban” or “rural?” Who actually lives in the country or the city? How does place shape identity, and vice versa? And how does the environment shift our perception and experiences of what is urban or rural?

In this course, we will examine fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry from across the United States, exploring the environment in literature, and environmental approaches to literature, through the lenses of urbanity and rurality. We will ask how writers depict urban and rural environments and the issues facing them. Authors may include Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Tommy Orange, Ana Castillo, Jane Smiley, Juan Felipe Herrera, and bell hooks; topics may include environmental justice, agriculture and food, gentrification, immigration, and climate change. We will pay special attention to the intersections between race and environment in both urban and rural spaces.

We will work primarily with literary methods, but students from all majors are more than welcome, and there will be opportunities to do interdisciplinary work within the frame of the course.

**Required Texts:**

Jean Toomer, *Cane* (1923)

Randall Kenan, *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989)

Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres* (1991)

Ana Castillo, *So Far From God* (1993)

Helena Maria Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995)

Tommy Orange, *There There* (2018)

Any edition of the books is acceptable, so long as you are able to annotate your physical or electronic copy. All other course readings will be available as PDFs on Canvas. If you have trouble purchasing—or accessing through the library—the books, please let me know and I can assist you.

## **Course Requirements and Final Grade Weights:**

### **Daily engagement—20%**

- Attendance
- Participation in class discussions and small group activities
- Discussion leadership (see separate handout)

### **First close-reading essay—15%**

- 3-4 page essay close-reading a passage from one of the texts we've read for class
- Prompts and further guidance will be available in advance of the due date.

### **Second close-reading essay or concept map—20%**

- Choose one:
  - 4-5 page essay close-reading a passage from one of the texts we've read for class
    - Please do not repeat the topic, or text, of the first essay.
  - Concept map assignment (see separate handout)

### **Final project—25%**

- Final project synthesizing course themes and engaging with course texts in a form of your choosing. You will develop your project idea through a proposal and discussions with me, and may write a critical essay, develop a teaching presentation, undertake a creative project, or select another way to demonstrate mastery over our course readings and themes.

### **Ecopoem or flash personal essay—5%**

- Taking inspiration from our course materials, write a one-page poem or personal essay that engages with issues of rurality, urbanity, and environment.
- You can turn this assignment in at any point during the semester.

### **Discussion posts and object studies—15%**

- Over the course of the semester, you will submit four short (250-300-word) discussion posts to Canvas.
- Two of these should be responses to course readings, submitted before class on the day the reading is assigned.
- Two of these should be “object studies” analyzing objects—an article, a road sign, a conversation, anything at all—that you encounter in the world in relation to course themes and discussions.
- The timing of these responses is entirely up to you.

### **Extra credit book review—up to one-third of a letter grade bonus on the final grade**

- For extra credit, read one of the books listed as “Further Reading” and write a 5-page book review of it that synthesizes course themes.
- This assignment can be completed at any point before the last week of the semester.

## DAILY COURSE SCHEDULE

### **Wednesday, January 20**

#### *In class*

Introductions, classroom community, syllabus and expectations  
Rural/urban jamboards

### **Monday, January 25**

#### *Reading*

Aimee Nezhukumatathil, "Catalpa Tree," "Cactus Wren," "Narwhal"

#### *Assignments due*

Submit to classroom norms form

### **Wednesday, January 27**

#### *Reading*

Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, Chapters 1, 15, 16, 22, 25

### **Monday, February 1**

#### *Reading*

Jean Toomer, *Cane*, Parts 1 and 2

### **Wednesday, February 3**

#### *Reading*

Toomer, *Cane*, "Kabnis"

Donald M. Shaffer, Jr., "When the Sun Goes Down": The Ghetto Pastoral Mode in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

### **Monday, February 8**

#### *Readings*

Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Parts 1-2

Optional: "We Carry Our Environments within Ourselves": An Interview with Helena María Viramontes"

### **Wednesday, February 10**

#### *Readings*

Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (finish)

Priscilla Solis Ybarra, "Active Subjectivity in Migrant Farmworker Fiction: Rejecting Alienation from the Land"

Tish Hinojosa, "Something in the Rain" (song)

### **Monday, February 15**

#### *Readings*

Tommy Orange, *There There*, Prologue and Part I: Remain

Recommended: Listen to A Tribe Called Red, *We Are the Halluci Nation* (especially "We Are the Halluci Nation," "R.E.D.," "The Virus," "Before," and "Soon")

**Wednesday, February 17**

*Readings*

Orange, *There There*, through p. 170 (stop at Octavio's chapter)

**Monday, February 22**

*Readings*

Orange, *There There* (finish)

**Wednesday, February 24—Break**

**Monday, March 1**

*Readings*

Poems from Juan Felipe Herrera and Javier Zamora

Cecilia M. Tsu, "Immigration in a Rural Context"

*Assignments due*

First essay

**Wednesday, March 3**

*Readings*

Hisaye Yamamoto, "Seventeen Syllables," "Wilshire Bus," "Yoneko's Earthquake"

**Monday, March 8—Catch-up/optional day**

**Wednesday, March 10**

*Readings*

Castillo, *So Far From God*, Chapters 1-4

**Monday, March 15**

*Readings*

Castillo, *So Far From God*, Chapters 5-10

**Wednesday, March 17**

*Readings*

Castillo, *So Far From God* (finish)

**Monday, March 22**

*Readings*

Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres*, Books 1-2

**Wednesday, March 24**

*Readings*

Smiley, *A Thousand Acres*, Book 3

**Monday, March 29**

*Readings*

Smiley, *A Thousand Acres* (finish)

**Wednesday, March 31**

*Readings*

David Baker, “Scavenger Loop”

**Friday, April 2: Second essay/concept map due**

**Monday, April 5**

*Readings*

bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (excerpts)

**Wednesday, April 7**

*Readings*

Randall Kenan, *A Visitation of Spirits*, “White Sorcery” and “Black Necromancy”

*Assignments due*

Final project proposal

**Monday, April 12**

*Readings*

Kenan, *A Visitation of Spirits*, “Holy Science” and “Old Demonology”

**Wednesday, April 14**

*Readings*

Kenan, *A Visitation of Spirits* (finish)

**Monday, April 19**

*In class*

Final project presentations, concluding thoughts

**Wednesday, April 21**

*In class*

Final project presentations, concluding thoughts

**Friday, April 23—Final Project Due**

### **Further Reading**

James Baldwin, *Another Country* (1962)

Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart* (1946)

Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (1918)

Susan Choi, *The Foreign Student* (1998)

William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis* (1991)

Percival Everett, *Watershed* (1996)

David Mas Masumoto, *Epitaph for a Peach* (1996)

Marie Mutsuki Mockett, *American Harvest: God, Country, and Farming in the Heartland* (2020)

Achy Obejas, *Memory Mambo* (1996)

Ruth Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* (1998)

Sarah Smarsh, *Heartland* (2018)

Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019)

Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (2011)

Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, (1997)