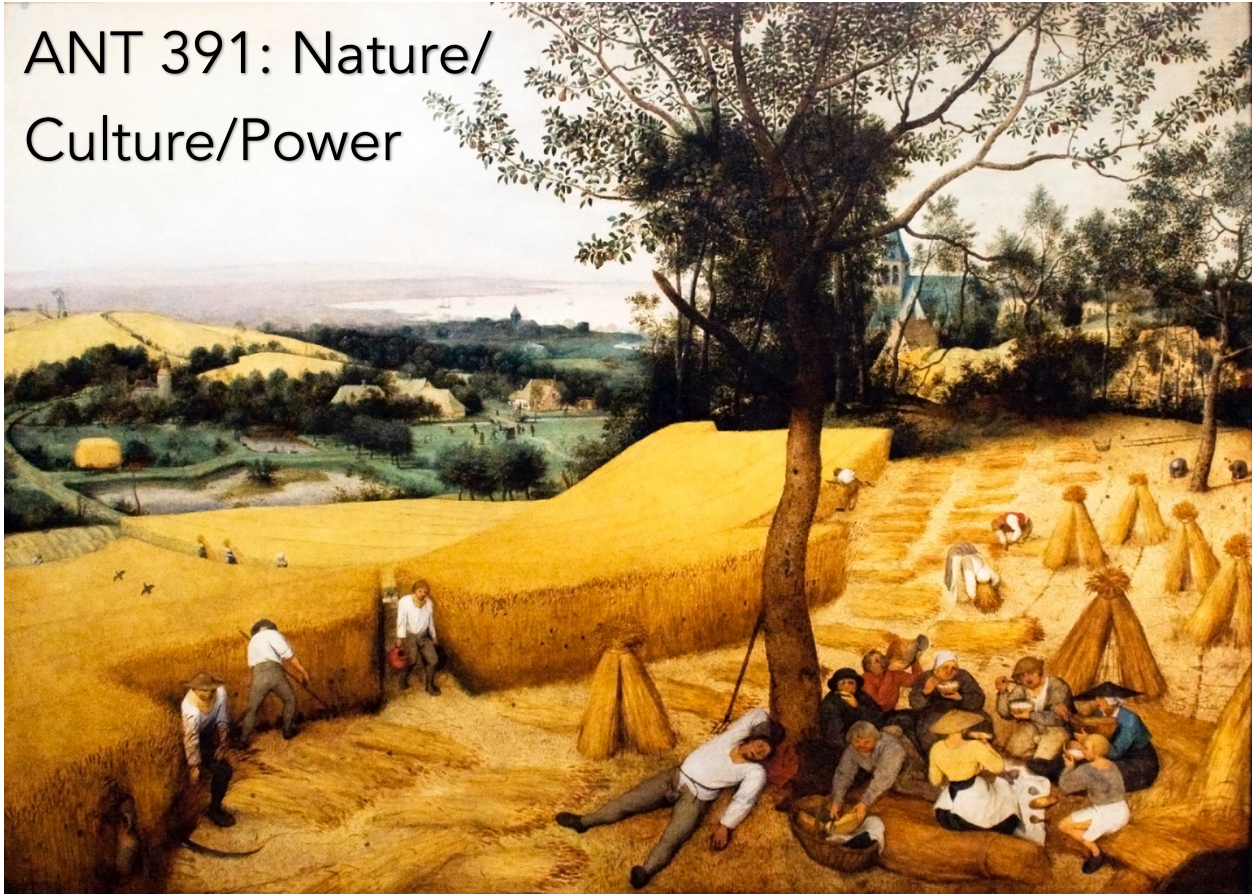


ANT 391: Nature/ Culture/Power



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, "The Corn Harvest," 1565

WCP4.120 , Tuesdays 9:00am-12:00pm

Instructor: Jason Cons

jasoncons@utexas.edu

Office: SAC 5.138

Office Hours: Thursdays: 2:00-4:00pm (or by appointment)

"Natural's not in it. Your relations are of power."

—Gang of Four, "Natural's Not in It"

Course Description

To say that "nature" is a pivotal category of the contemporary moment is to profoundly understate the case. Ecology, environmental degradation, and climate change have become the watchwords of contemporary politics. The always tenuous and constructed boundaries between "nature" and "culture" now appear profoundly eroded. How do, and how have, thinkers in environmental social sciences engaged with these issues? And what do ethnographies at the intersections of nature, culture, and power contribute to our understanding of both epochal and everyday environmental change? This graduate seminar explores these questions and the rich theoretical and methodological debates opened in environmental anthropology and related disciplines. It traces debates over nature, culture, and power back through cultural ecology, political ecology, agrarian studies, and science and technology studies. It traces them forward through ethnographies of the socio-natures of sustainability, water, race and ethnicity, resistance, material politics, and infrastructure.

Land Acknowledgement

We would like to acknowledge that we are meeting on Indigenous land. Moreover, We would like to acknowledge and pay our respects to the Carrizo & Comecrudo, Coahuiltecan, Caddo, Tonkawa, Comanche, Lipan Apache, Alabama-Coushatta, Kickapoo, Tigua Pueblo, and all the American Indian and Indigenous Peoples and communities who have been or have become a part of these lands and territories in Texas, here on Turtle Island.

Course Aims and Learning Outcomes:

For a multitude of more and less obvious reasons, questions related to environmental change, the relationship between nature and culture, and the power and politics that both undergird and flow from these relationships have emerged as central concerns in anthropology and, more broadly, environmental social sciences and humanities in recent years. There is much new, cutting edge theoretical and empirical research emerging from this trend which has and will continue to shape critical debates in coming years. Much of this work highlights the emergent (ecologies, worlds, lives, etc.). Yet this new work also implicitly and explicitly builds on work, agendas, and questions that have framed disciplinary and interdisciplinary debates for decades. This course does not promise to survey all of the current or historical debates around nature/culture/power (indeed, to do this would require a full and extended curriculum, not a single course). What it *does* aim to do is introduce students to the broad contours of these debates, old and new.

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Trace the lineages of fields such as cultural ecology, political ecology, agrarian studies, environmental history, etc. in contemporary work on environmental change.
- Understand the ways that new environmental ethnographies both build on and diverge from these more classic agendas.
- Engage with a series of critical issues in contemporary work on nature/culture/power
- Outline and deploy different methodological and theoretical approaches to environmental change in their own work.
- Gain confidence in discussing and writing about the intersections between ecology, theory, and ethnographic and other approaches to the environmental humanities and social sciences.

Course Format, Expectations, and Procedures:

- This is a seminar course. The bulk of the class will be devoted to class discussion, not lectures. I expect everyone to be an active, regular, and respectful participant in course discussions.
- This is a reading-intensive course. I expect students to arrive in class having done the readings and prepared to engage in active class discussion.
- I reserve the right to treat this syllabus as provisional. That is: if I or course participants identify other readings that will be helpful, I reserve the right to swap them in for readings listed here as needed. The amount of reading listed in this syllabus will remain approximately the same.
- I ask everyone to complete eight reading responses over the course of the semester. I will provide more information about how to complete these in class, but I find that these are enormously helpful in pushing class discussion forward. For everyone to have an opportunity to read these in advance, I ask that the reading responses be posted by midnight the night before class.
- Everyone will have an opportunity to lead class discussion twice. We will discuss the format for this more in class.
- Your final project should be productive for you. While this project should draw on themes and readings from the course, the format is open-ended. It could be a standard research paper, an article,

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a dissertation research or grant proposal, a portfolio, etc. It should be the equivalent of an approximately 20-page paper.

Framing Socio-Nature

Class 1: January 14—Course Introduction

- *In-Class Film:* Les Blank. 1982. *Burden of Dreams*.

IF YOU HAVE NOT READ THIS BEFORE, please read:

- William Cronon. 1995. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." In *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human place in Nature*. WW Norton.

Suggested:

- Werner Herzog. 1982. *Fitzcarraldo*. Film.

Class 2: January 21—Locating the Anthropocene

- Dipesh Chakrabarty. 2009. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry*. 35.
- Heather Davis and Zoe Todd. 2017. "On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene." *Acme*. 16(4).
- Kathryn Yusoff. 2020. "The Inhumanities." *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*. 111, 3.
- Jason Moore. 2017. "The Capitalocene, Part 1: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis." *Journal of Peasant Studies*. 44, 3.

Class 3: January 28— Cultural and Political Ecologies

- Roy Rappaport. 2007. "Ritual Regulation of Environmental Relations Among a New Guinea People." In *Environmental Anthropology: A Historical Reader*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Michael Watts. 1983. "On the Poverty of Theory: Natural Hazards Research in Context." In *Interpretations of Calamity from the Viewpoint of Human Ecology*. Allen and Unwin.
- Donna Haraway. 1984. "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936." *Social Text*. 11.
- Michael Watts. 2015. "Now and Then: The Origins of Political Ecology and the Rebirth of Adaptation as a Form of Thought." In *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*. Routledge.

Class 4: February 4— Land, Enclosure, Frontier

- Karl Marx. 1977. "So-Called Primitive Accumulation (Chapters 26-28)." *Capital, Volume 1*. Vintage.
- David Harvey. 2003. "Accumulation by Dispossession." In *The New Imperialism*. Oxford U. Press.
- Tania Li. 2014. "What is Land? Assembling a Resource for Global Investment." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. 39.
- Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. 2003. "Natural Resources and Capitalist Frontiers." *Economic and Political Weekly*. 38(48).
- Hi'lei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart. 2023. "Surfacing." *The Avery Review*. <https://averyreview.com/issues/64/surfacing>

Class 5: February 11—Unpacking Causality

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- Michel Callon. 1986. "Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St. Brieuc Bay." In *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge?* Routledge
- Jane Bennett. 2005. "The Agency of Assemblages & the North American Blackout." *Public Culture*. 17(3).
- Nabil Ahmed. 2014. "The Toxic House." In *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Michelle Murphy. 2017. "Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations." *Cultural Anthropology*. 32(4).

Class 6: February 18—Decentering Humans

- Radhika Govindrajani. 2015. "The Goat that Died for the Family: Animal Sacrifice and Interspecies Kinship in India's Central Himalayas." *American Ethnologist*. 42, 3.
- Nayanika Mathur. 2021. "Beastly Identification in India: The Government of Big Cats in the Anthropocene." *American Ethnologist*. 48, 2.
- Zoe Todd. 2014. "Fish Pluralities: Human-Animal Relations and Sites of Engagement in Paulatuuq, Arctic Canada." *Études Inuit Studies*. 31, 1-2.
- Timothy Mitchell. 2002. "Can the Mosquito Speak?" In *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*. University of California Press.

Class 7: February 25— Beyond "Land"scape

- Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge. 2009. "Wet Theory." In Anuradha Mathur and Dilip Da Cunha. *Soak: Mumbai in an Estuary*. Rupa and Co.
- Jatin Dua. 2023. "Anthropology at Sea: Displacement as Ethnographic Praxis." *American Ethnologist*. 51.
- Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters. "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. 33.
- Nikhil Anand. 2023. "Anthroposea: Planning Future Ecologies in Mumbai's Wetscapes." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. 41, 4.
- Andrea Ballester. 2019. "The Underground as Infrastructure? Water, Figure/Ground Reversals, and Dissolution in Sardinal." In *Infrastructure, Environment, and Life in the Anthropocene*. Gregg Hetherington (Ed). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Dilip da Cunha. 2018. "River Literacy." In *The Invention of Rivers: Alexander's Eye and Ganga's Descent*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Into the Littoral

Class 8: March 4— Powerships

- Gökçe Günel. Forthcoming. *All of the Above: A Global Future of Energy*
- Dr. Günel will be joining us for a session where we read and comment on her forthcoming book manuscript.

Class 9: March 11— Settler Landscapes

- Rafico Ruiz. 2021. *Slow Disturbance: Infrastructural Meditation on the Settler Colonial Resource Frontier*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Class 10: March 25—No Class

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Class 11: April 1— Reframing Floods

- James Scott. 2025. *In Praise of Floods: The Untamed River and the Life it Brings*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Class 12: April 8— The Amphibious Urban

- Stephanie Wakefield. 2025. *Miami in the Anthropocene: Rising Seas and Urban Resilience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Class 13: April 15—Beyond Mitigation

- Ashley Carse. forthcoming. *Age of Mitigation: Global Shipping and a River on Life Support*.
- Dr. Carse will be joining us for a session where we read and comment on his forthcoming book manuscript.

Wrapping Things Up

Class 14: April 22— Course Conclusion

FINAL PAPERS DUE MAY 2

Course Policies and Procedures

Required Material:

All course materials, except for books, are available on the course's Canvas site. This includes framing pieces and suggested readings (again, except for books). The following books are required reading for the course and may be purchased at a location of your choosing.

- Rafico Ruiz. 2021. *Slow Disturbance: Infrastructural Meditation on the Settler Colonial Resource Frontier*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- James Scott. 2025. *In Praise of Floods: The Untamed River and the Life it Brings*. New Haven: Yale University Press. (Due to be published on February 25, 2025)
- Stephanie Wakefield. 2025. *Miami in the Anthropocene: Rising Seas and Urban Resilience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Due to be published January 21, 2025).

Grading

- Course participation: 20% (based on regular and active participation in class)
- Reading Responses: 30% (based on completion of all 8 required responses)
- Course leadership: 20% (based on your two opportunities to lead a course)
- Final Research Paper: 30%

Classroom Policies

Policy on late work: Unexcused late papers will receive 1/3 of a letter grade deduction if less than 12 hours, a full letter grade deduction if between 12 and 24 hours late, two full letter grade deductions between 24 and 48 hours late, and will not be accepted if more than 48 hours late. Reading responses must be posted the night before class.

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Policy on absences: I expect you to attend each class. I also recognize that things happen. Please contact me in advance if you will be missing class. Missing more than two classes will be grounds for failing the course.

Course readings and syllabus

I believe that a course and its instructor should be adaptable. This means that readings and course activities may change to suit course developments, forward fruitful discussions, or address student interests. For this reason, the readings in this syllabus should be regarded as provisional. For any given week, the readings will be available on Canvas.

While readings may, from time-to-time change, the course policies and procedures listed in this syllabus will not. It is your responsibility to know them.

Statement on Learning Success

Your success in this class is important to me. We will all need accommodations because we all learn differently. If there are aspects of this course that prevent you from learning or exclude you, please let me know as soon as possible. We will develop strategies to meet both your needs and the requirements of the course. I also encourage you to reach out to the student resources available through UT. Many are listed on this syllabus, but I am happy to connect you with a person or Center if you would like.

Student Rights & Responsibilities

- You have a right to a learning environment that supports mental and physical wellness.
- You have a right to respect.
- You have a right to be assessed and graded fairly.
- You have a right to freedom of opinion and expression.
- You have a right to privacy and confidentiality.
- You have a right to meaningful and equal participation, to self-organize groups to improve your learning environment.
- You have a right to learn in an environment that is welcoming to all people. No student shall be isolated, excluded or diminished in any way.

With these rights come responsibilities:

- You are responsible for taking care of yourself, managing your time, and communicating with the teaching team and with others if things start to feel out of control or overwhelming.
- You are responsible for acting in a way that is worthy of respect and always respectful of others.
- Your experience with this course is directly related to the quality of the energy that you bring to it, and your energy shapes the quality of your peers' experiences.
- You are responsible for creating an inclusive environment and for speaking up when someone is excluded.
- You are responsible for holding yourself accountable to these standards, holding each other to these standards, and holding the teaching team accountable as well.

Personal Pronoun Preference

Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with differences of race, culture, religion, politics, sexual orientation, gender, gender variance, and nationalities. Class rosters are provided to the instructor with the student's legal name. I will gladly honor your request to address you by a name different than what appears on the roster, and by the gender pronouns you use. Please advise me of this preference early in the semester so that I may make appropriate changes to my records.

I use the pronouns he, him, and his.

UNIVERSITY POLICIES & RESOURCES

SB 17 Statement

[Texas Senate Bill 17](#), the recent law that prohibits certain diversity, equity, and inclusion programs at public colleges and universities in Texas, does not affect academic course instruction, including the content, teaching, or discussion in a course at public colleges and universities in Texas. SB 17 does not alter existing expectations and academic freedom for teaching and related classroom discussion, including regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion topics.

COVID-19, Campus, and Personal Safety

To help keep everyone at UT and in our community safe, it is critical that students report COVID-19 symptoms and testing, regardless of test results, to [University Health Services](#), and faculty and staff report to the [HealthPoint Occupational Health Program](#) (OHP) as soon as possible. Please see this [link](#) to understand what needs to be reported. In addition, to help understand what to do if a fellow student in the class (or the instructor or TA) tests positive for COVID, see this [University Health Services link](#).

Religious Holy Days

By UT Austin policy, you must notify me of your pending absence at least fourteen days prior to the date of observance of a religious holy day. If you must miss a class, an examination, a work assignment, or a project in order to observe a religious holy day, I will give you an opportunity to complete the missed work within a reasonable time after the absence.

Q Drop Policy

If you want to drop a class after the 12th class day, you'll need to execute a Q drop before the Q-drop deadline, which typically occurs near the middle of the semester. Under Texas law, you are only allowed six Q drops while you are in college at any public Texas institution. For more information, see:

<http://www.utexas.edu/ugs/csacc/academic/adddrop/qdrop>

Student Accommodations

Students with a documented disability may request appropriate academic accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities, 512-471-6259 (voice) or 1-866-329-3986 (video phone). <http://ddce.utexas.edu/disability/about/>

- Please request a meeting as soon as possible to discuss any accommodations
- Please notify me as soon as possible if the material being presented in class is not accessible
- Please notify me if any of the physical space is difficult for you

Academic Integrity

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Each student in the course is expected to abide by the University of Texas Honor Code:

“As a student of The University of Texas at Austin, I shall abide by the core values of the University and uphold academic integrity.”

This means that work you produce on assignments, tests and exams is all your own work, unless it is assigned as group work. I will make it clear for each test, exam or assignment whether collaboration is encouraged or not.

Always cite your sources. If you use words or ideas that are not your own (or that you have used in previous class), you must make that clear otherwise you will be guilty of plagiarism and subject to academic disciplinary action, including failure of the course.

You are responsible for understanding UT’s Academic Honesty Policy which can be found at the following web address: http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acint_student.php

University Resources for Students

The university has numerous resources for students to provide assistance and support for your learning, use these to help you succeed in your classes

The Sanger Learning Center

Did you know that more than one-third of UT undergraduate students use the Sanger Learning Center each year to improve their academic performance? All students are welcome to take advantage of Sanger Center’s classes and workshops, private learning specialist appointments, peer academic coaching, and tutoring for more than 70 courses in 15 different subject areas. For more information, please visit <http://www.utexas.edu/ugs/slc> or call 512-471-3614 (JES A332).

The University Writing Center

The University Writing Center offers free, individualized, expert help with writing for any UT student, by appointment or on a drop-in basis. Consultants help students develop strategies to improve their writing. The assistance we provide is intended to foster students’ resourcefulness and self-reliance. <http://uwc.utexas.edu/>

Counseling and Mental Health Center

The Counseling and Mental Health Center (CMHC) provides counseling, psychiatric, consultation, and prevention services that facilitate students' academic and life goals and enhance their personal growth and well-being. <http://cmhc.utexas.edu/>

Student Emergency Services

<http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/emergency/>

ITS

Need help with technology? <http://www.utexas.edu/its/>

Libraries

Need help searching for information? <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/>

Canvas

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Canvas help is available 24/7 at <https://utexas.instructure.com/courses/633028/pages/student-tutorials>

Important Safety Information

BCAL

If you have concerns about the safety or behavior of fellow students, TAs or Professors, call BCAL (the Behavior Concerns Advice Line): 512-232-5050. Your call can be anonymous. If something doesn't feel right – it probably isn't. Trust your instincts and share your concerns.

Evacuation Information

The following recommendations regarding emergency evacuation from the Office of Campus Safety and Security, 512-471-5767, <http://www.utexas.edu/safety/>

Occupants of buildings on The University of Texas at Austin campus are required to evacuate buildings when an alarm or alert is activated. Alarm activation or announcement requires exiting and assembling outside, unless told otherwise by an official representative.

Familiarize yourself with all exit doors of each classroom and building you may occupy.

Remember that the nearest exit door may not be the one you used when entering the building.

Students requiring assistance in evacuation shall inform their instructor in writing during the first week of class.

In the event of an evacuation, follow the instruction of faculty or class instructors. Do not re-enter a building unless given instructions by the following: Austin Fire Department, The University of Texas at Austin Police Department, or Fire Prevention Services office.

Link to information regarding emergency evacuation routes and emergency procedures can be found at: www.utexas.edu/emergency