

**THOREAU AND THE POLITICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE**ENGLISH 9200B  
Winter 2022

Instructor: Prof. Kate Stanley  
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Class time: Tuesday, 12:30pm-3:30pm  
Class location: UC 3415

Office Hour Sign-up: <https://calendly.com/kate-stanley/15min>

Do cultural objects from the past provide meaningful guidance for facing the exigencies of the present or the uncertainties of the future? What resources can the humanities offer when confronting the long shadow of colonialism, systemic inequality, structural violence, and the climate crisis? This course will anchor these questions in the work of Henry David Thoreau, who devoted his life and writing to fostering transformative exchanges between individuals and collectivities, between the past and the present, between what is and isn't human, between practices of everyday life and political structures. In our reading of Thoreau's journals, *Walden*, and "Civil Disobedience," we will track his commitment to an "ecology of practices": to an ethic of material engagement, to thinking with the body, to animating the more-than-human-world, to "becoming indigenous to a place," and to nonviolent resistance. We will trace these ideas through the work of an eclectic array of contemporary artists, authors, activists, and scholars, including John Cage, Bill McKibben, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Jenny Odell, Tommy Pico, Jeff VanderMeer, and others. All of these writers and thinkers test Thoreau's methods, putting them to work while also offering crucial critiques of what has been described as Thoreau's "everyday life project": his attempts to reframe problems of political economy as ethical questions regarding our conduct of daily living.

**COURSE READINGS**

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Milkweed, 2015.  
Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. Melville House, 2019.  
Tommy Pico, *Nature Poem*. Tin House, 2017.  
Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*. Harper Collins, 2004.  
Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. Penguin, 2017.  
Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation*. HarperCollins, 2014.

\*PDFs of other readings will be distributed or posted on OWL

COURSEWORK

ASSIGNMENTS	WEIGHT	DUE DATE
Participation	15%	i.) Midterm check-in (February 15) ii.) End-of-term check-in (March 29)
Slow Reading Walden	5%	January 18 (350-500 words)
Teaching Exercise	10%	i.) Pedagogy Practice (7 mins per presenter) ii.) Pedagogy Report (note-form fine)+ Reflection (1000 words)
OWL Forum Posts	20%*	i.) 5 reading posts (300 words each) by the following days at noon(you can skip 3 of the 8 weeks): 1. Jan 24 2. Jan 31 3. Feb 7 4. Feb 14 5. Feb 28 6. Mar 7 7. Mar 14 8. Mar 21 ii. 5 responses to classmates' posts (100-150 words each) *Completion grade
Workshops	5%*	Participation in 3 drafting/revising workshops

**OPTION A: Everyday Life Project**

The literary critic Andrew Epstein describes an “everyday life project” as an experiment that’s “artificial” and “rule-bound,” which engages “in certain activities, usually for a set amount of time, with the goal of channeling attention to one or more aspects of everyday experience” (30). Epstein identifies *Walden*—Thoreau’s attempt to live as simple a life as possible in a small cabin in the woods—as a notable example of such a project. Propose and undertake an 8-week everyday life project of your choice (probably a more modest undertaking than Thoreau’s), which culminates in a report and presentation (format to be determined in consultation).

Project Proposal	5%	January 25 (1200 words)
Reflection #1	5%	Draft: February 15 (900 words) Submit: February 18 (1200 words)
Reflection #2	5%	Draft: March 8 (900 words) Submit: March 11 (1200 words)
Final Presentation + Report	30%	March 29 (1200 words)

**OPTION B: Article**

Pitch and draft a review-essay focussed on reading(s) from our syllabus for a public-facing literary journal like [publicbooks.org](http://publicbooks.org) or the [Los Angeles Review of Books](http://Los Angeles Review of Books).

Article Pitch	2%	January 25 (200 words)
Article Proposal + Outline	5%	Draft: February 15 (1000 words) Submit: February 18
Critical Conversation	8%	March 1 (1500 words)
Final Article	30%	March 29 (3500-4000 words)

### Course Ethos

Our class will honour the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion. We will use each other's preferred and chosen names and pronouns; we will engage in respectful and generous conversation with each other; we will avoid language that is hurtful, violent, or exclusive. We will also acknowledge that we may make mistakes, and that learning from each other and questioning ourselves is part of the EDI process.

### Support Services

Registrarial Services <http://www.registrar.uwo.ca>

Student Support Services <https://student.uwo.ca/psp/heprdweb/?cmd=login>

Services provided by the USC <http://westernusc.ca/services/>

Student Development Centre <http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/>

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to MentalHealth@Western for a complete list of options about how to obtain help: <http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/>

### Graduate Course Health and Wellness

As part of a successful graduate student experience at Western, we encourage students to make their health and wellness a priority. Western provides several on campus health-related services to help you achieve optimum health and engage in healthy living while pursuing your graduate degree. For example, to support physical activity, all students, as part of their registration, receive membership in Western's Campus Recreation Centre. Numerous cultural events are offered throughout the year. For example, please check out the Faculty of Music web page <http://www.music.uwo.ca/>, and our own McIntosh Gallery <http://www.mcintoshgallery.ca/>. Information regarding health- and wellness-related services available to students may be found at <http://www.health.uwo.ca/>. Students seeking help regarding mental health concerns are advised to speak to someone they feel comfortable confiding in, such as their faculty supervisor, their program director (graduate chair), or other relevant administrators in their unit. Campus mental health resources may be found at: <https://uwo.ca/health/psych/>.

### Accommodation Policies

Students with disabilities work with Accessible Education (formerly SSD) which provides recommendations for accommodation based on medical documentation or psychological and cognitive testing. The accommodation policy can be found [here](#).

### Plagiarism

Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea or passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. All instances of plagiarism will be reported to the Chair of Graduate Studies. Proven cases of plagiarism will result in a grade of zero for the assignment.

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following: [http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/scholastic\\_discipline\\_grad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf)

### Covid on Campus

Students will be expected to wear triple layer non-medical masks at all times in the classroom as per Western policy and public health directives. Students are expected not to eat or drink while in class to ensure masks stay in place. Students will be able to eat and drink outside of the classroom during scheduled breaks.

COURSE SCHEDULE

CLASS	DISCUSSION		DUE
Week 1: Jan 11	Introduction: Thoreau's Everyday Life Project	<p>Kristen Case, "Introduction," Henry David Thoreau, <i>Walden and Civil Disobedience</i>. New York: Penguin, 2017, p. vii-xviii.</p> <p>Andrew Epstein, "'Everyday-Life Projects' in Poetry and Beyond," from <i>Attention Equals Life</i> (2016), p. 29-35</p> <p>Jenny Odell, "Introduction: Surviving Usefulness," from <i>How to Do Nothing</i> (2019), p. ix-xxii.</p> <p>Min Hyong Song, "Introduction: The Practice of Sustaining Attention to Climate Change," "Chapter 4: How Should I Live? Inattention and Everyday-Life Projects," from <a href="#">Climate Lyricism</a></p> <p>Henry David Thoreau, from "Economy" and "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," from <i>Walden</i> (1854), p. 3-10, 65-79.</p> <p>Recommended: Thoreau, <i>Walden</i>, "Economy," p. 10-64 and read as far into <i>Walden</i> as you can manage</p> <p>Epstein, "The Crisis of Attention, Everyday-Life Theory, and Contemporary Poetry," from <i>Attention Equals Life</i> (2016), p. 41-69.</p>	
Week 2: Jan 18	Reading Walden Now	<p>Thoreau, <i>Walden</i> (1854)</p> <p>Recommended: <a href="#">William Howarth, "Reading Thoreau at 200," <i>The American Scholar</i>. (June 5, 2017).</a>*</p> <p><a href="#">Ron Fein, "Who's Laughing Now Assholes," <i>McSweeney's</i> (April 29, 2020).</a></p>	Slow Reading Walden
Week 3: Jan 25	Resistance & Refusal	<p>Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience"</p> <p><a href="#">Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Civil Disobedience," <i>New Yorker</i> (1970)</a></p> <p><a href="#">Bill McKibben, "What Would Thoreau Think of Climate Change?" <i>New Republic</i> (July 12 2017).</a>*</p>	OPT A: Everyday Life Project Proposal  Forum Post 1 – By Jan 24 @ noon

		<p>Extinction Rebellion Manifesto*</p> <p><a href="#">Rebecca Solnit, "The Thoreau Problem," <i>Orion</i> (May 2007)</a></p> <p>Odell, "Chapter 1: The Case for Nothing," "Chapter 3: Anatomy of a Refusal," from <i>How to Do Nothing</i></p> <p>Recommended: Odell, "Chapter 2: The Impossibility of Retreat," from <i>How to Do Nothing</i></p>	
<p>Week 4: Feb 1</p>	<p>Attention Training</p>	<p>Thoreau, "Walking"*</p> <p>Odell, "Chapter 4: Exercises in Attention," from <i>How to Do Nothing</i></p> <p><a href="#">Cage, <i>Lecture on the Weather</i> (1975)</a></p> <p><a href="https://www.streamingmuseum.org/post/john-cage-lecture-on-the-weather">https://www.streamingmuseum.org/post/john-cage-lecture-on-the-weather</a></p> <p>Cage, "Introduction to Lecture on the Weather," <i>Empty Words: Writings '73-'78</i>. Wesleyan UP, 1979, p. 3-5.*</p> <p><a href="#">Cage, "4'33" (1952)</a></p> <p>Branka Arsic, from "What Music Shall We Have? Thoreau on the Aesthetics and Politics of Listening," from <i>American Impersonal: Essays with Sharon Cameron</i>, ed. Branka Arsic, Bloomsbury, 2014.* *Concentrate on p. 187-190</p> <p>Recommended: <a href="#">Caleb Smith, "That Terrible Thoreau," <i>Political Theology</i> (202)</a></p>	<p>Forum Post 2 – By Jan 31 @ noon</p>
<p>Week 5: Feb 8</p>	<p>Becoming Indigenous to a Place?</p>	<p>Odell, "Chapter 5: Ecology of Strangers," "Chapter 6: Restoring the Grounds for Thought," from <i>How to Do Nothing</i></p> <p>Robin Wall Kimmerer, from <i>Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants</i> (2014)</p>	<p>OPT B: Article Pitch</p> <p>Forum Post 3 – By Feb 7 @ noon</p>

<p>Week 6: Feb 15</p>	<p>Journal Practices</p>	<p><b>ZOOM CLASS</b>                  Guest Speaker: Kristen Case, University of Maine - on <a href="#">Thoreau's Kalendar Project</a>                  [Read "About the Kalendar"]                   Thoreau, Journals (TBA)*                   Kristen Case, "The Art of Losing: Reading Thoreau's Journal Practices." <i>The Thoreau Society Bulletin</i>, No. 287 (Fall 2014), p. 5-6.*                   John Kucich, "Thoreau and the Indian Problem"                   From <i>Now Comes Good Sailing: Writers Reflect on Henry David Thoreau</i>, ed. Andrew Blauner (Princeton 2021)                   WORKSHOP #1</p>	<p>OPT A:                  ELP Reflection 1                  Draft – Feb 15                  Submit – Feb 18                   OPT B:                  Article Proposal                  + Outline                  Draft – Feb 15                  Submit – Feb 18                   Forum Post 4 –                  By Feb 14                  @ noon</p>
<p>Week 7: Feb 22</p>	<p>READING WEEK</p>	<p><b>NO CLASS</b></p>	
<p>Week 8: Mar 1</p>	<p>Decolonizing Nature</p>	<p>Tommy Pico, <i>Nature Poem</i> (2017)                   Brian Teare, "The Earth is Full of Men," <i>21 19 : Contemporary Poets in the Nineteenth-Century Archive</i> Eds. Kristen Case and Alexandra Manglis (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2019), 142-60.*                  *concentrate on pgs. 142-44, 149-52, 157-60.</p>	<p>OPT B:                  Critical Conversation                   Forum Post 5 –                  By Feb 28                  @ noon</p>
<p>Week 9: Mar 8</p>	<p>Reading for Atmosphere</p>	<p><b>ZOOM CLASS</b>                   Marilynne Robinson, <i>Housekeeping</i> (1980)                   WORKSHOP #2</p>	<p>OPT A:                  ELP Reflection 2                  Draft – Mar 8                  Submit – Mar 11                   OPT B:                  Article Half Draft                   Forum Post 6                  By Mar 7                  @ noon</p>
<p>Week 10: Mar 15</p>	<p>Weirding Thoreau</p>	<p>Jeff VanderMeer, <i>Annihilation</i> (2014)   <a href="#">Joshua Rothman, "The Weird Thoreau," <i>New Yorker</i> (January 14, 2015.)</a>*</p>	<p>Forum Post 7 –                  By Mar 14                  @ noon</p>

<p>Week 11: Mar 22</p>	<p>Wilding Thoreau</p>	<p>VanderMeer, <i>Annihilation</i> cont.  WORKSHOP #3</p>	<p>OPT A: ELP Report Draft  OPT B: Article Full Draft  Forum Post 8 – By Mar 21 @ noon</p>
<p>Week 12: Mar 29</p>		<p>Reading TBD  Presenting Projects &amp; Articles</p>	<p>OPT A: ELP Final Reflection/Report  OPT B: Final Article</p>