

ECL 305: Literature and the Environment

Mermaids

Professor Jessica Pressman, Ph.D.

Spring 2024

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The official description and goal of this course: Environmental thought and consciousness as expressed in literature, emergence of modern and contemporary environmental thought, and impacts of literature on environmental awareness.

The specific class description you are taking to fulfill these goals:

The mermaid is a hybrid beast, half human and half animal, a border crosser of land and sea. She is one of our most ancient monsters from global literature, and she has reemerged in the twenty-first century to share messages about climate change. Everywhere you look—from literature to film, social media to fashion, digital art to commodity kitsch—mermaids are omnipresent. These contemporary tales reflect our culture’s most pressing anxieties and concerns— about climate change, racial and social justice, global capitalism, genetic science, algorithmic culture.

This class recognizes the contemporary mermaid craze as an important cultural phenomenon that can tell us something about the ongoing relationship between literature and the environment. We use the mermaid as a focal point, a metaphor and lens, for exploring cultural and historical views of the environment, through literature. In particular, we read diverse mermaid literature from across history and cultures in order to ask two central questions: 1) What does our contemporary mermaid renaissance say about our world and, especially, our understanding of the environment? 2) What does mermaid literature tell us about the role, power, and effects of literature and literary study? We explore these questions while learning about the scholarly fields of Environmental Humanities and Blue Humanities, as well as how to read, write and think in a critical and analytical manner.

Learning Outcomes

In this class, you will

- **Learn** specific aspects and theories of “Environmental thought and consciousness” as is central to the Environmental Humanities and, in particular, the emergent Blue Humanities subfield, which represent the “emergence of modern and contemporary environmental thought.”
- **Examine** specific examples of “impacts of literature on environmental awareness” by way of a focus on narratives that depict the mermaid as natural beast, environmental refuge, and symbol and signifier of environmental awareness.

- **Trace** a longer history of contemporary issues, including but not constrained to, environmental thought and consciousness, via engagement with the long history of mermaid narrative.
- **Hone** your skills as a critical thinker, listener, and writer by focusing on the development of a thesis statement and the ability to prove it through textual explication

Administrative Information

Email: jpressman@sdsu.edu *Do not expect a response within 24 hours	Course Website: https://spring2024-ecl305.jessicapressman.com/
Office: AL 261 Office hours: Thursdays 12-1:30 Additional times and dates by appointment; email me for an additional appointment (in-person or on Zoom) out of the regular office hours timeslot. Zoom meeting room: 943 624 7815 https://SDSU.zoom.us/my/jpressman	Course Meetings: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2-3:15pm Room: GMCS 308
English Subject Librarian: Markel Tumlin Special Collections Librarian: Anna Culbertson	mtumlin@rohan.sdsu.edu aculbertson@sdsu.edu

NOTE: This syllabus is subject to change... and probably will change!

ASSIGNMENTS

The assignments for this class are low-stakes but plentiful so that you have a chance to practice writing regularly and get feedback on your work. All assignments build upon each other, so there is no “busy work”; you can use your blogs posts for the midterm or final, for example.

Participation 20%

Weekly Blog 25%

2 Short Essays 15% each, 30% total (3 pages, double-spaced)

Final Essay proposal 1%

Final essay 24% (5-6 pages, double-spaced)

Extra credit: “Discovery” blog on a selection from the Penguin Anthology up to 1%

Participation 20%

This is your class, and your participation is vital to its success. You must attend all class meetings in order to receive full credit for participation. Come to class prepared to discuss the text in depth; this means having read the entire text before class. I expect you to speak and listen.

- Your participation grade includes engaging in dialogue in class. This means speaking and listening actively, attentively, and respectfully. (If you have fear of speaking in public, this seminar is a good place to learn to address that fear. Please come see me early in the term to discuss strategies for dealing with this fear).
- Your participation grade includes a meeting with the professor.

Weekly Blog 25%

You will write (approx. 350-500 words) blog responses to the reading (any text and any idea/section from that text) and each provide a comment on a peer's blog each week (due before the next week's class meeting, so before Thursday). The goal of the blog posts is to extend the conversation and coverage of the course by allowing you to 1) express, share, and comment upon interests, questions, and concerns related to the readings and also to 2) enable the professor to address and incorporate these topics in that week's meeting. It is also a place to draft ideas and text for use in your essays.

--Blog posts are due on Monday at 6pm weekly; late posts will not receive credit.

--You will be given an overall grade for blog posts, based on completion and content, not a grade for each post. Rubric for grading is available on our website and below.

Your Blog Grade is based on 2-parts: 1) a completion grade, and 2) a content grade

The completion component of the blog grade requires you to have the following number of posts:	The content component of the blog grade is based on the following grading rubric
A= 11-13 posts B= 8-10 posts C= 6-7 posts D= 4-5 posts F= 3 or less	A= Post contains a focused thesis or question and close reading of a passage, B= Post contains a close reading of content but no focused question or thesis C= Post contains no analysis of text (no close reading), just summary and undirected ideas D=Post contains little substantive thinking as content

2 Short Essays: 15% each (30%)-- You can revise each for a better grade. See the schedule for revisions deadline.

- 1) **Midterm close reading 15%** : This short essay (approx. 1500 words= 3-4 pages) is an opportunity to focus on one aspect or passage from a single text from our syllabus, to provide an in-depth analysis and to practice close reading/ explication. This essay also intended as a scaffolding assignment, meaning it is there to support you in developing the thinking and writing skills to produce the final essay, to provide a benchmark for your writing (and grade). You can revise one of your blog posts or write new content that demonstrates your ability to 1) develop a [thesis](#), and 2) use a text to support, through textual [explication/analysis/close reading](#), your argument. The short essay is an exercise in diving into the formal operations of a text to see HOW it operates and develop an argument about WHY that matters. You will
 - 1) select a single short text or passage of a text
 - 2) pursue a focused argument about that passage: what you see in it and why that matters (WHAT, HOW, SO WHAT)

2) **Discovery 15%**

This short creative-analytical assignment prompt you to practice thesis and close reading by engaging in “discovery” beyond our syllabus. There are 2 parts to this assignment:

- 1) make or find a text not on our syllabus (film, meme, poem, etc.) or a work of scholarship (scholarly article, book, etc.) that supports and expands our classroom learning. Post this item (or a link to it) into your blog and describe the object.
- 2) explain how this discovery matters and extends our learning about literature and the environment in a short (2 page, single-spaced) essay with a thesis that focuses on 1 aspect of the object and articulates the importance of your discovery. Analyze and close read the object or scholarly text to explain its relevance and relation to the class.

YOU CAN REVISE these short assignments for a better grade, and you are encouraged to do so. Revision is due before next discovery is due

Final essay proposal--thesis statement and description of the project 1%

This assignment helps ensure that you are on the right track for your final essay and enables me to give you feedback that can assist in your development. We will learn about Thesis Statements (and you can work with me (by email and office hours) to develop your argument.

Final Essay (5-6 pages): 24%

You will write a final essay that explores a topic or text from the course through a thesis-based argument and explication (close reading). You can write a creative-critical essay that takes the form of a work of a webart, video, hypertext, etc., BUT, whatever format your essay takes, it MUST contain the following:

- 1) a thesis statement
- 2) close-reading explication of the text

-You can use your blogs to form the basis of your final essay, but the requirements listed above must be met.

Extra Credit: “Discovery” Blog: up to 1%

This blog assignment can be written at any point during the semester is intended to inspire you to read beyond the texts assigned in class. For this blog, you will select a reading in the Penguin Anthology that is not on our syllabus and write a blog post about why it is important to your understanding of literature and the environment, and/or to our focus on mermaids. Your post should contain a thesis and textual explication/close reading to receive credit.

****NOTE: All assignments are docked 1/3 of a grade for each day they are late (for example, an A becomes an A- if turned in one day late)****

READINGS

**** I prefer students to have a physical copy of the book or the PDF in class, rather than a cell phone or computer.**

Required Reading (available at SDSU bookstore)

-Cristina Bacchilega and Marie Alohani Brown, eds. *The Penguin Book of Mermaids* (Penguin, 2019)

-Vaughn Scribner, *Merpeople: A Human History* (University of Chicago Press, 2020) (also available online through SDSU library)

-Rivers Solomon, *The Deep* (Saga, Gallery Press, 2019)

READING/WORK SCHEDULE

Week 1: Introductions

January 18: Introduction to the class

Week 2: CSU FACULTY STRIKE—no classes this week (please consider joining us on the picket line!)

Through we will not meet as a class, I expect you to read and prepare for our first in-class meeting. Please read the following and write two blog posts: 1) an introduction to you, and 2) a reading response to one part/idea/question from the following reading assignment:

Vaughn Scribner, *Merpeople: A Human History* (University of Chicago Press, 2020):

-“Introduction” to *Merpeople: A Human History* (pgs. 7-27)

-Chapter 1, “Medieval Monsters” (pgs. 29-57)

-Chapter 2, “New Worlds, New Wonders” (pgs. 59-93)

Week 3: Mermaid as Metaphor and Paradigm for Understanding Culture, History, and the Environment

January 30: Discuss Vaughn Scribner, *Merpeople: A Human History*: Introduction, Ch. 1, Ch. 2

February 1: Cristina Bacchilega and Marie Alohani Brown, [“Introduction: The Stories We Tell about Mermaids and Other Water Spirits”](#) (Penguin, ix-xxii)

Week 4: Ancient Origin Myths

February 6: “Oannes” (Babylonian) (*Penguin*, pgs. 3-4),

“Kaliya, the Snake” (India) (*Penguin*, pgs. 5-8)

“The Tuna (Eel) of Lake Vaihiria” (Pacific Islands) (*Penguin*, pgs. 13-18)

“Sedna” (Inuit): <https://www.palomar.edu/users/scrouthamel/ais100/sedna.htm>

Cristina Bacchilega and Marie Alohalani Brown, “Water Beings of Indigenous North America” (*Penguin*, pgs. 281)

February 8: “Odysseus and the Sirens” (ancient Greece) (*Penguin*, pgs. 9-12)

Week 5: Medieval Melusine (14th Century, France)

February 13: “The Legend of Melusina” (*Penguin*, pgs. 85-88)

from *The Romance of the Faery Melusine* (Gareth Knight, translated by Andre Lebey, 19th C).

Ch. 1: “The Great Old Hunter” (PDF, pgs.11-15)

Ch. 3: “The Faery at the Fountain” (PDF, pgs. 23-29)

February 15: from *The Romance of the Faery Melusine* (Gareth Knight, translated by Andre Lebey, 19th C)

Ch.14: “Betrayal” (PDF, pgs. 119-125)

Ch. 22: “Departure” (PDF, pgs. 138-144)

Week 6: The Modern Era: 19th C Industrialism & Capitalism

February 20: from *Undine* (1811) (*Penguin*, pgs. 101-106)

February 22: “The Feejee Mermaid Hoax” (*Penguin*, pgs. 239-244)

-excerpt from Vaughn Scribner’s *Merpeople: A Human History*: from Chapter 4, “Freakshows and Fantasies” (125-129) ([online access through SDSU Library](#))

Week 7: The Victorian Standard

February 27: Hans Christian Andersen, *The Little Mermaid* (1837) (*Penguin*, p. 107-130)

February 29: Hans Christian Andersen, *The Little Mermaid* (1837) (*Penguin*, p. 107-130)

****First Short Essay Assignment Due—either Discovery OR Close Reading-- posted to the website—Sunday, at midnight****

Week 8: Defining “The Environment” and “The Wilderness”

March 5: William Cronon, “[The Trouble with Wildness](#)” (1996)

March 7: William Cronon, “[The Trouble with Wildness](#)” (1996)

Week 9: Introduction to the Environmental Humanities & the Blue Humanities

March 12: “The Emergence of Environmental Humanities” in *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction*, eds. Robert S. Emmett and David E. Nye (MIT Press, 2017) (pgs. 1-21)

March 14: John Gillis, “The Blue Humanities” (*Humanities: The Journal of the National Endowment for the Humanities*. Web. 2013)

<https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2013/mayjune/feature/the-blue-humanities>.

Week 10: Introduction to Oceanic Thinking

March 19: Eric Paul Roorda, *The Ocean Reader: Theory, Culture, Politics* (Duke UP, 2020).
'Introduction" (pgs. 1-4) PDF

-Helen M. Rodzadowski, *Vast Expanses: A History of the Oceans* (Reaktion Books, 2018),
"Introduction: People and Oceans" (pgs. 7-12) PDF

March 21: Steve Mentz, *Ocean* (Bloomsbury, 2020): "Deterritorializing Preface" (pgs. xv-xviii)
PDF

Week 11: Cinematic Monsters and/as Environmental Crisis

March 26: Emilija Skarnulyte's short film, [Sironemelia](#) (2017)

-Peer review of thesis statements

March 28: Emilija Skarnulyte's short film, [Sironemelia](#) (2017)

****Second Short Essay Assignment Due—either Discovery OR Close Reading-- posted to the website—Sunday, at midnight**** Revisions of Essay #1 also due

****SPRING BREAK****

Week 12: The Ocean as Archive

April 9: Gabrielle Tesfaye, [The Water will carry us home](#) (stop motion animation, 2018)

April 11: Derek Walcott, "[The Sea is History](#)" (1978), poem

Week 13: Mami Wati and African Mermaids

April 16: Cristina Bacchilega and Marie Alohalani Brown, "African Mermaids and Other Water Spirits" (*Penguin*, pgs. 165-7)

"Aganju and Yemaja" (*Penguin*, p. 168-9)

"African Water Spirits in the Caribbean" (*Penguin*, p. 273-274)

"Ti Jeanne" (275-77)

April 18: Rivers Solomon, *The Deep* (novel, 2019): Chapters 1-4

Week 14: The Deep

April 23: Rivers Solomon, *The Deep* (2019): Chapters 5-7

April 25: : Rivers Solomon, *The Deep* (2019): Chapters 8-9, all of the book

Additional: Check out the recent exhibition, "From the Deep, in the Wake of Drexciya" at the National Museum of African Art (May 2023): <https://africa.si.edu/exhibitions/current-exhibitions/from-the-deep-in-the-wake-of-drexciya-with-ayana-v-jackson/>

****Final essay proposal due, Sunday, at midnight**** Revisions of Discovery # 2 also due

Week 15: Conclusions

April 30: Stephanie Burt, "[We are Mermaids](#)" (2022) [PDF], poem

Peer Review-- bring to class a printed-out draft of your thesis statement for the final essay*

May 2: Conclusion

Final Essay due, Thursday, May 9, at midnight, posted to the blog*

OTHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Communication

Students are provided with an SDSU Gmail account, and this [SDSU email address](#) will be used for all communications. University Senate policy notes that students are responsible for checking their official university email once per day during the academic term. For more information, please see [Student Official Email Address Use Policy here](#).

Medical-related absences

University policy instructs students to contact their professor/instructor/coach in the event they need to miss class due to an illness, injury, or emergency. Please inform me as soon as possible if you are missing class due to an illness or a Covid-related situation.

Finding Help on Campus

Need help finding an advisor, tutor, counselor, or require emergency economic assistance? The [SDSU Student Success Help Desk](#) is here for you. Student assistants are available via Zoom Monday through Friday, 9:00 AM to 4:30 PM to help you find the office or service that can best assist with your particular questions or concerns.

Other important resources:

- CAL Student Success Center: <https://cal.sdsu.edu/student-resources/student-success>
- College of Education Student Success Center: <https://education.sdsu.edu/oss>
- Center for Student Success in Engineering: <https://csse.sdsu.edu/>
- CoS Student Success Center: <https://cossuccess.sdsu.edu/>
- FSB Student Success Center: <https://business.sdsu.edu/undergrad/advising>
- HHS Advisors: <https://chhs.sdsu.edu/student-resources/advising/>
- IVC Student Success and Retention: https://ivcampus.sdsu.edu/student_affairs/retention
- PSFA Advisors: https://psfa.sdsu.edu/resources/student_advisors

Accommodations

SDSU via the [Student Ability Success Center \(SASC\)](#) provides accommodations for students with documented disabilities or medical conditions covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In keeping with current public health guidance, I cannot provide arrangements to students without an ADA-qualified disability or medical condition.

If you are a student with a disability and are in need of accommodations for this class, please contact the Student Ability Success Center at sascinfo@sdsu.edu (or go to sdsu.edu/sasc) as soon as possible. Please know accommodations are not retroactive, and I cannot provide accommodations based upon disability until I have received an accommodation letter from the Student Ability Success Center. SASC registration and accommodation approvals may take up to 10-14 business days, so please plan accordingly.

SDSU as “safe space”

The CSU has affirmed its commitment to ‘protecting access, affordability, intellectual freedom, inclusivity, and diversity for all students . . . including supporting DACA students.’ Discrimination, harassment, or retaliation against students, faculty, and staff on the basis of race, religion, gender, sexuality, disability, nationality, immigration status and other categories of identity is prohibited. If you have concerns about your status at the university, please visit <http://studentaffairs.sdsu.edu/EOP/> for information or contact the Dean of Students or the Assistant Dean for Student Affairs in your College.”

Mandated Reporting

Please note that as an instructor, I am a mandated reporter and required to share information involving sex discrimination and sexual violence on campus with the SDSU Title IX coordinator, Gail Mendez. If you or someone you know has experienced sex discrimination and/or sexual violence, there are various Title IX officers, offices, and contacts on campus that you can reach out to. For more information about campus contacts and resources, please visit: <https://titleix.sdsu.edu/>.

Academic Honesty (especially in the age of Chat GBT)

I take teaching seriously, and I expect you to take seriously your work as a student. That means that academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Academic dishonest includes, but is not limited to: (a) using assignments that you wrote for another class, (b) representing work done by someone else as your own (i.e., plagiarism), and (c) copying someone else’s work on an assignment, basic cheating. Plagiarism and Cheating of any kind will result at least in an "F" for that assignment (and may, depending on the severity of the case, lead to an "F" for the entire course) and may be referred to the Center for Student Rights and Responsibilities for further action. If you have questions at all, you should consult me immediately.