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# Oil and Water Don't Mix

ENG 5400: Literature and Social Engagement



Jeffrey Insko

MW 6-9:20 • 544 O'Dowd. • Summer 2023 • 4 credits

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Oakland University • College of Arts and Sciences • English

## Course Catalogue Description

Examines the relationship between literature and social change, with focus on a specific issue, location, and/or time period to be specified by the instructor. As a part of the course, students may study and/or implement relevant practices of socially engaged scholarship.

## Required Texts

Bonnie Jo Campbell, *Once Upon a River*

Janet Lewis, *The Invasion*

Simon Orpana, *Gasoline Dreams*

Sarah Jaquette Ray, *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Cool on a Warming Planet*

\*\* Additional readings listed on the syllabus will be distributed via hard copy or Moodle.



## About this Course

Climate change, climate justice, environmental destruction, and environmental justice: these may be the defining issues of our time. Yet for many of us they can also seem too distant and too abstract. In this course, therefore, we will confront them by focusing on sites of struggle closer to home—literally, right here in Michigan. More specifically, we will take as our test case and launching point the movement to shut down the Line 5 oil pipeline that traverses the Straits of Mackinac, a movement whose slogan has become “Oil and Water Don’t Mix.” In order to situate and examine this environmental movement within some broader historical, cultural, and theoretical contexts, we’ll read literary texts (fiction, nonfiction, photography, and film) with an eye to the larger social forces they reflect and embody, and read works of non-fiction—from academic history and social theory to journalism and opinion writing—with a literary critic’s attention to form, genre, and rhetoric. Rather than writing a traditional research paper, students will have opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge through collaborative research, class presentations, and public-facing writing.

## **Course Requirements**

### **Participation**

Please keep in mind that summer sessions move fast, so you'll need to budget your time carefully. I expect that everyone will appear weekly as good class citizens, ready to participate in demanding discussions. The success of our conversations will depend upon your to engage in thoughtful, serious, informed discussion with your peers as well as with me of the texts and topics at hand. I expect each of you to contribute regularly to class discussions.

### **Keeping Cool presentation**

Rather than all of reading the entire book, each week, one of you will give a short presentation on a chapter from Sarah Jaquette Ray's *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety*, providing a summary of the chapter along with some reflections about how it relates to the course material and/or your own thinking about social engagement.

### **Blog Post**

For the first of two forms of public writing, each of you will produce a blog post (of roughly 1500 words) for the Line 6B Citizens' Blog. Each post will tell a story about Line 5 that offers a reframing of the problem/issue/movement (indeed, choosing the right noun might well be an important part of your framing!). Ideally, your post will offer a slightly unique or fresh vantage on Line 5, placing it in a revealing social, political, historical, or theoretical context.

### **Climate Summit report**

We are fortunate that our course just happens to coincide with the Michigan Climate Action Network's Climate Summit, which will be hosted by Oakland University on June 2. I'd like each of you to attend the summit and produce a short reflection or meditation on what you experienced and learned.

### **Final Public-Facing Essay**

Your final assignment for the semester will be to produce a polished piece of persuasive writing about some aspect of Line 5. You may choose to write an op-ed or letter to the editor for a publication of your choosing, a letter or short position paper addressed to an elected leader or other stakeholder advocating for a particular course of action, or c) an engaging short essay of cultural criticism for online publication (we can talk about potential venues for such writing). A potential goal here could be a piece of writing that finds a public audience via some form of publication.

### **Attendance Policy**

Don't miss class.

## **How to Reach Me**

I am always happy to chat, help with assignments, answer questions, recommend further readings, or swap fun stories about American writers with you outside of class.

My office: 544F O'Dowd

Office hours: by appt.

Office phone: 248.370.2253

Email: [insko@oakland.edu](mailto:insko@oakland.edu)

## Schedule of Readings (items are subject to change)

### Week 1 (May 8): Climate Disaster, Pipeline Disasters

Bonnie Jo Campbell, *Once Upon a River*

Inside Climate News, [The Dilbit Disaster](#)

David Wallace-Wells, [“The Uninhabitable Earth,”](#) and [“Beyond Catastrophe: A New Climate Reality is Coming into View”](#)

Rob Nixon, [“Slow Violence”](#)

Min Hyoung Song, [“The Practice of Sustaining Attention to Climate Change,”](#) *Climate Lyricism*.

Caroline Levine, “Preface” and “Toward an Affirmative Instrumentality,” *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis*

Sarah Jaquette Ray, “Introduction,” *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Cool on a Warming Planet*.

### Week 2 (May 15): Petroculture

Simon Orpana, *Gasoline Dreams: Waking Up from Petroculture*

Warren Cariou (Métis), [“An Athabasca Story”](#)

Brett Bloom, *Petrosubjectivity: De-Industrializing Our Sense of Self*

Petrocultures Research Group, *After Oil*

Sheena Wilson, [“Energy Imaginaries: Feminist and Decolonial Futures”](#)

Mark Simpson and Imre Szeman, “Impasse Time”

Edward Burtynsky, *Oil* (photographs)

### Week 3 (May 22): Across the Border

Daniel Macfarlane, “Fossil Fuels in the Cold War,” *Natural Allies: Canada-US Environmental and Energy Relations, 1867-Present*

Imre Szeman, “Pipelines and Territories: On Energy and Environmental Futures in Canada”

Theodore Dreiser, [“A Certain Oil Refinery”](#) (1919)

Daved Huebert, “Chemical Valley”

Jeffrey Insko, [“The Line 5 Disaster is Now”](#)

Sarah Marie Wiebe, “Atmosphere” and “Skeletons in the Closet: Citizen Wounding and the Biopolitics of Injustice,” *Everyday Exposure: Indigenous Mobilization and Environmental Justice in Canada's Chemical Valley*

Rebecca Altman, [“How the Benzene Tree Polluted the World”](#)

### Week 4 (May 29): Infrastructure

China Mieville, [“Covehithe”](#)

Brian Larkin, [“The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure”](#)

Deborah Cowen and Winona LaDuke (Ojibwe), [“Beyond Wiindigo Infrastructure”](#)

Bruce Braun and Mary E. Thomas, “Beyond Settler Infrastructures,” *Settling the Boom: The Sites and Subjects of Bakken Oil*

Jennifer Wenzel, “Forms of Life: Thinking Fossil Infrastructure and Its Narrative Grammar”

Lynne Heasley with Daniel Macfarlane, “Water, Oil, and Fish,” *The Accidental Reef and Other Odysseys in the Great Lakes*.

### **Week 5 (June 5): Indigenous Sovereignty**

Janet Lewis, *The Invasion*

Simon Pokagon, [The Red Man's Rebuke](#) (1893).

Joanne Barker (Lenape), ["For Whom Sovereignty Matters"](#) in *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination*

Elena Bruess, ["Treaty rights acknowledged for first time in oil pipeline's controversial history,"](#) Michigan Radio, March 12, 2021.

Mathew L. M. Fletcher (Ottawa), "The Story of the 1836 Treaty of Washington," *The Eagle Returns: The Legal History of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians*

Kyle Powys Whyte (Potawatomi), ["Is It Colonial Deja Vu? Indigenous Peoples and Climate Injustice"](#) and ["Too late for indigenous climate justice: Ecological and relational tipping points"](#)

### **Week 6 (June 12): Environmental Justice**

Jeffrey Insko, ["Line 5's Environmental Calamities Started When it was Built,"](#)

Allyson Green, ["Questions of Environmental Health and Justice Growing with the Petroco Piles in Detroit,"](#) Scientific American, 2013

Virginia Gordon, ["Residents sue Marathon refinery over poll,"](#) Michigan Radio, 2016

Keith Matheny, ["Marathon wants to keep storing pet coke uncovered near Detroit River,"](#)

Derek Seidman, ["We consider ourselves a sacrifice zone, because many of the people that live here are Black low-income folk."](#)

Terressa A. Benz, ["Toxic Cities: Neoliberalism and Environmental Racism in Flint and Detroit Michigan,"](#) Critical Sociology, (2017): 1-14.

Martinez, Michelle. "Environmental Justice and Detroit's Long Shadow"

### **Week 7 (June 19): Resistance**

Walter Dignolo, "Introduction," *The Darker Side of Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*.

Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*

Thea Riofrancos, ["A Burning Planet: Should the climate movement embrace sabotage?"](#)

Kyle Powys Whyte, ["Indigenous Environmental Movements and the Function of Governance Institutions"](#)

Kai Bosworth, "Introduction," *Pipeline Populism: Grassroots Environmentalism in the Twenty-First Century*

Elizabeth LaPensée, [Thunderbird Strike](#) (game)

### **Week 8: (June 26)**

Caroline Levine, "Three Weeks to Political Action: A Workbook," *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis*

Final Exam TBA