

CDIPS Final Project

Burnt by the Sun- Land Stewardship and Ecocide in Russophone culture

This undergraduate reading and composition course will introduce students to literature and art that engages or represents human impacts on non-human landscapes, drawing on material from the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. As the world's largest country, the Russian Federation faces at once a great existential threat from climate collapse, and at the same time has the potential to effect irreversible damage to tundra, marine and forest ecosystems that could bring about suffering on a global scale. Over the last 200 years, Russia's violent colonizations of neighboring polities has been accompanied by interventions into those communities' indigenous systems of land stewardship and intensive efforts to extract their natural resources. In this course, students will learn to unpack these topics using the critical vocabulary of the ecological humanities. As a first year writing course, they will also learn how to make persuasive arguments, use salient examples to illustrate their points, and draw pertinent conclusions to their essays.

Bibliography

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Analysis

As Ghosh elegantly demonstrates in his non-fiction work *The Great Derangement*, literary practitioners and the humanities departments that study them in the global North have failed to address and respond to the crises engendered by the Anthropocene, often excluding narratives of environmental destruction, habitat endangerment and its concomitant human precarity from the corpus of 'high culture' and the 'canon.' At the same time, online media platforms and social channels have made younger generations more aware of the dangers that the planet is facing, and expect their educators to address these topics within the classroom. This course, designed primarily for freshman students at UC Berkeley, will seek to offer a revisionist history of Russophone literary culture and to show that the topics of agriculture, ecosystem collapse and resource extraction in fact permeate many of its best known novels. At the same time, we will seek to learn more about the egregious acts of environmental harm committed in the service of large-scale imperial and political projects, extending into the contemporary moment of the

invasion of Ukraine, which has led the Russian Federation to burn off unprecedented amounts of natural gas as a belligerent warning sign to its European neighbors.

The anticipated learners in this class will number around 20, and they will predominantly be freshmen or students that have found college writing to be a challenge in the past, and are therefore required by the UC to take a foundational course in composition. Around 30 percent of the students will be first-gen students, and just under a quarter will be ‘underrepresented’ according to UC criteria. A little under ten percent are likely to be transfer students from the community college system. Living in California, a state severely impacted by drought and wildfires, many students are likely to have direct experience with climate hazards. They may already be aware of the discourses of veganism, land stewardship and waste management from biology or natural sciences classes in high school, and many may intend to major in environmental or biological engineering.

During the course, we will read extracts from Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* and his essay on the human impacts of the meat industry. We will trace the evolution of some of these ideas from Vedic philosophy in order to situate Tolstoy into broader environmental traditions. We will read Peterson’s nonfiction book on the Aral Sea and Russian Imperial projects in the Transoxiana region to trace how pre-revolutionary Russian culture contained both great insights into how to look after nature, as well as examples of primitive accumulation by colonial powers and the impact of this dispossession on indigenous communities and their environments. Writings from the Soviet period will engage with Modernist attempts at linking man and machine, including how the first Five Year Plan led to intense demands for resources to be yielded for processing in factories in urban centers, and how resources were diverted towards these centers during the war. We will then also turn to socialist realist accounts of “conquering nature” and consider Platonov’s *Dzhan* in terms of its ecological critique. We will read Rythkheu’s novel about whales in order to think through how national narratives can conflict with grassroots and local customs and epistemologies.

Learning about nuclear power, we will watch the HBO series *Chernobyl* and read Ismailov’s novel about Semipalatinsk, *The Dead Lake*. Finally, we will look at contemporary artifacts, such as Monetochka’s song *Gori Gori*, in order to think about strategies of ecological resistance under dictatorship. The goal of the course will be for students to think critically about how humans and their environments are symbiotic, as well as how political structures and modes of production influence whether or not land and resources are destroyed or preserved. In their writing, students will hopefully demonstrate nuanced knowledge of the specificities of the Soviet situation, understanding Russian as a language present in many bilingual communities within and outside of the Russian Federation. As such, they will challenge the hegemonic conflation of Russophone, RF-citizen and ethnic Russian that is often operative when we use the word “Russian” without specifying our contexts.

Design

Students will engage thoughtfully with the materials offered and be active in listening to their peers’ responses. Students will explore a topic of contemporary relevance that opens out into broad questions of how to create a more equitable world through resource distribution and the challenging of an exploitative capitalist mode of production. Students will learn about postcolonial theory through accessible introductory academic articles and will consider these theoretical interventions alongside real-world examples from within our field of study.

Students will prepare short weekly reading journals that demonstrate that they have read and thought about the texts thoughtfully. They will offer open-ended questions that they will pose in group discussions during class-time. Students will engage with one another surrounding the topics that we cover by recording a podcast episode pertinent to the course materials as a midterm assignment.

Students will write three extended papers over the semester, one of which will be a revision of the first and will respond to constructive feedback given by the instructor and offered by peers during a peer writing workshop. The third paper will be an 8-10 page research paper that speaks to one of the texts and topics that we have covered in our course.

Students will be encouraged to be proud of all of the identities that they bring to the classroom, including those that may not be shared by other class members. We will begin our class with an introductions exercise based on Katherine McKittrick’s “Where do you know from?” paradigm, as elaborated in [this](#) article by Zuroski.

Students will be informed from the beginning of class of the resources available to them in times of crisis, and of the expectations for the class to be a safe and inclusive environment.

Learning objectives

Objective	In-class activity	Written work	Readings
Learn about the intersections of land and politics in Russophone cultures	We will look at a map of the Russian Empire, Soviet Union, and present-day RF and talk about cartography and the geographical imaginaries of empire that have been operative in recent history. We will relate this to the current invasion of Ukraine, understanding concurrently the need to speak on the war and the need to be sensitive to those more directly impacted by the war that may be in our class.	Students will write essays that engage the non-fiction material on the syllabus and demonstrate that they have understood the concept of discursive geography and the ties between colonial violence and resource extraction.	Plokhy, Peterson, Ghosh, Lowe

<p>Learn about specific narratives of ecological stewardship and ecological transformation that emerge in literary texts</p>	<p>Class discussion of weekly readings</p>	<p>Students will write their weekly reading journals as well as offer three papers that engage at least two of the fictional texts on the syllabus, providing close readings of form, imagery, tone, setting and ideological content.</p>	<p>Ismailov, Tolstoy, Platonov, Rytkeu</p>
<p>Increase confidence in college-level writing</p>	<p>Peer workshops on writing essays, including 1-1 paired essay feedback groups</p>	<p>Students will receive feedback throughout the semester on written work and will revise and expand one longer paper/</p>	<p>Various extracts of college-level reading guides to be distributed, sample essays offered</p>
<p>Enable a class atmosphere that is collaborative, respectful and inclusive</p>	<p>Students will not use electronic devices in class and class will be instructor-guided rather than led; students will be encouraged when they offer opinions and the lived experience they bring to class celebrated. Students that are less inclined to speak in class will be encouraged, although not impelled, to do so by incorporating game-like group activities that feel low-stakes and enjoyable.</p>	<p>Students will complete evaluations of class throughout the semester, brief online surveys that “check-in” on how they feel they have been able to contribute. Students will be asked to attend office hours regularly.</p>	<p>The instructor will spend time outside of class revising materials from CDIPS around antiracist pedagogy and inclusiveness. The instructor will make notes on their classes weekly and have biweekly “self-check-ins” to reflect on what went well or did not go well during recent classes. The instructor will work with other students in a pedagogy seminar to discuss how the class is proceeding.</p>

Grading

The class will be graded as follows:

Participation: 30%

Papers: 50%

Weekly journal + podcast: 20%

Participation metrics will include attendance, active contributions, active listening to other students, preparedness for class discussion, proactive involvement in in-class activities and adherence to class policies for conduct. Papers will be graded according to their coherence, structure, accuracy of grammar and spelling and judicious use of source materials. They will also be assessed for content: how they raise and elaborate themes from the readings, open into other avenues of intellectual inquiry and/or how they make productive comparisons between contexts whilst being attendant to the nuances of each source. Students that find writing particularly challenging will be rewarded if their final paper demonstrates significant improvement on their first paper, even if the final paper does not necessarily yet meet the standards for college-level writing.

Development

Readings will either be posted on the online platform used by Berkeley or the students will be expected to purchase paper copies of the texts or acquire at the library. Films and music will be available on the online Kanopy platform with licensing from the UC. For the podcast episode, students will be encouraged to use the language laboratory at Berkeley or to use personal sound equipment if they have it.

The references listed for the course will inform the majority of the instructional content, and the presentation of this content will be either through lecture or through lecture and powerpoint presentation. The instructor, if absent, will record a lecture and upload in advance to bCourses. My pedagogy supervisor at Berkeley is incredibly supportive and enthusiastic regarding creating inclusive, counter-canonical and antiracist syllabi. There are also mentors of mine within the Geography department that have been instrumental in my thinking around inclusive pedagogies and I feel confident that they, alongside fellow graduate students, will offer candid and helpful feedback as I iterate the course.

I do not believe that members of the campus community would find the course controversial, however I am aware that in crafting counter-hegemonic syllabi in the time of war may possibly attract the attention of government agencies in the RF, and that, should students travel there, this is something to be aware of. However, I think that it is important especially at this time to teach students about the importance of taking climate action and resisting against dictatorship.

Implementation

I found the CDIPS program incredibly informative and generative as a young instructor. I will try to avoid presenting to students any forms of knowledge or knowledge-making as “right” and instead hopefully explain the rationale in learning “standard” academic language and written forms whilst simultaneously deconstructing them as the only means of engaging in particular topics. To this end, I hope that the students come to see the fictional and musical sources in the

course not only as materials to write about, but also as themselves manifestos/essays/ expressions of ideological critique that can do the same kinds of work as academic writing. I will be mindful of my identity entering the classroom as a woman for whom English is her native language, and who speaks a form of English that has the reputation for being “standard.” As such, in class I will not correct students on their phrasing or vocabulary unless it is severely impacting intelligibility. In written work, if students make grammatical errors or use inappropriate vocabulary, I will try to redirect them in a gentle way and to support my intervention with specific grammar textbook excerpts that help them to learn why what they wrote might not be correct. In terms of the content, I will let students know that they are never obliged to disclose details of their personal stories with me or the class, but that should they share a link in their own biography to some of the materials we discuss, that is welcomed and listened to. I will let the students know that I am a mandated reporter and that they can speak to me in confidence about any issues that impact their student careers.

Evaluation

As mentioned in the table, I will seek feedback from students at three intervals in the semester through anonymous survey: after week 4, week 7 and before writing the final paper in week 12. I will ask how they feel the course is proceeding for them, what they find interesting and challenging and whether they feel supported in their academic trajectory. I will also ask in the anonymous survey how their other courses are going. Students with severe stress from their major requirement courses may not feel comfortable discussing this in person, perhaps out of fear that instructors will not be understanding. However, knowing that students are balancing multiple competing priorities in the American liberal arts system means that it is important for me to be aware of when they have reached capacity and need fewer assignments in this class. I will require students to come to office hours every three weeks so that the channels of dialogue are open and low-stakes.

In terms of self-reflection, I will continue to read around the course topic and stay aware of current events in Russia and the former Soviet Union in order to bring pertinent examples to class, although mindful of not over-saturating the class with contemporary materials. I will reflect biweekly on my performance as an instructor and on how I am managing and engaging with students. When something goes different than planned, I will note it down and try to process it on my own as well as in my pedagogy supervision group. At the end of the semester, the combination of final papers, student spoken contributions and student evaluations will help me to understand whether the course delivered on its objectives.