Nicole Seymour  
Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society  
Sample Syllabus (upper-division and/or graduate course)

“Dis/ability and Environment”

Course Description and Objectives

This course will ask you to engage with, and undertake, interdisciplinary academic work at an advanced level. You will explore a specific issue (dis/ability and environment) as it appears in scholarship and art, and have the opportunity to apply your general skills in argumentation, research, and collaboration.

We will begin with disability studies’ most influential claim: that “disabled” is neither an innate quality of individuals nor a neutral medical diagnosis, but rather a constructed category produced by environmental factors such as physical barriers to access. We will push this focus on “environment” forward in two ways. First, we will put it into conversation with environmental humanities studies, considering how dis/ability informs relationships with natural and other kinds of environments, and literary/filmic depictions thereof. Second, we will consider why some disabilities are considered “natural” and some “unnatural,” and what that means for the social status of certain physical conditions – as well as for our definitions of “nature.” Finally, we will also consider recent developments in environmental humanities scholarship, such as the so-called “material turn”; we will ask, broadly, What is the connection between one’s material embodiment and one’s material experience of environment?

Course Requirements

Leading one class discussion for at least half of the scheduled time: 15%

Contributing to the course blog 1-2 times per week: 20%

Midterm project: 25% (details TBA)

Final project: 40% (details TBA)

Course Schedule

Introduction (Weeks 1-2)

• Fiona Kumari Campbell, selections from The Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Ableness (scholarship)

• Special issue of Local Environment journal, “The Environment and Disability: Making the Connections” (scholarship)
  o Read Imrie and Thomas’s “The Interrelationships between Environment and Disability”

Hospital/Desert: Dissolve from Todd Haynes’s Safe
Presenter for this class meeting selects an additional article from the issue for all to read

- Sarah Jaquette Ray, “‘Maimed Away from Mother Earth’: The Disabled Body in Environmental Thought and Literature,” from *The Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture* (scholarship)

**Guest lecturer(s) from Sociology, Environmental Studies, and/or the local community**

**Part I: Trauma, the Body, and the Outdoors (Weeks 3-5)**

*(Here, we will ask how dis/ability informs experiences and depictions of the outdoors, focusing on extreme natural landscapes. We will consider what Sarah Jaquette Ray has called “the able-bodied wilderness ideal” and how it intersects with the “supercrip” archetype: the individual who “overcomes” a disability by performing extraordinary physical feats.)*

- Edward Abbey, selections from *Desert Solitaire* (memoir)
- Danny Boyle, *127 Hours* (film; screening TBA)
- The Floyd Collins, Aron Ralston, and Erik Weihenmeyer archives

**Guest lecturer(s) from Kinesiology, Theatre and Dance, and/or the local community**

**MIDTERM PROJECT DUE**

**Part II: Queerness, Dis/ability, and “Nature” (Weeks 6-8)**

*(In this section, we will explore the relationship among the categories of queerness, disability, and “nature. We will consider how queerness has historically been positioned in Western culture as “unnatural” and as a sickness, and how queer and dis/abled identities are shaped by specific regional and cultural environments.)*

- Eli Clare, selections from *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (memoir)
- Daphne Scholinski, *The Last Time I Wore a Dress* (memoir)
- Tod Browning, *Freaks* (film; screening TBA)
- Shelley Jackson, *Half Life* (novel)
Guest lecturer(s) from Women and Gender Studies, Liberal Studies, and/or the local community

Part III: Environmental Illness, Environmental Health (Weeks 9-11)

(Here, we will explore the connections between dis/ability and “sickness,” and between the mind and the body. We will think about the implications of activist and policy efforts to categorize intangible and immunological illnesses such as depression and HIV/AIDS as disabilities, and discuss what the environmental health movement tells us about how we define safety, health, and wellness.)

• Phil Brown, selections from Toxic Exposures: Contested Illnesses and the Environmental Movement (scholarship)
  o Read “Preface: Toxic Exposures and the Challenge of Environmental Health” and “Conclusion: The Growing Environmental Health Movement”
  o Presenter for this class meeting selects one additional chapter to read

• Todd Haynes, Safe (film; screening TBA)

• Albert Donnay, “On the Recognition of Multiple Chemical Sensitivity in Medical Literature and Government Policy,” from the International Journal of Toxicology (scholarship)

• Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge and Kiki Smith, Endocrinology (poetry/illustration)

Guest lecturers from Health Science, Environmental Studies, Psychology, and/or the local community

Conclusion (Weeks 12-15)

Development of final projects

FINAL PROJECT DUE