

Seminar in Genre Studies of American Literature

ENGL 254

Fall 2025 Section 01 Hybrid 4 Unit(s) 08/20/2025 to 12/08/2025 Modified 08/19/2025

Contact Information

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| Instructor(s): | Daniel Lanza Rivers |
| Office Location: | Clark 441 |
| Email: | Daniel.rivers@sjsu.edu |
| Office Hours: | Tu 2:30-3:30 7 by appointment over zoom |
| Class Days/Time: | Tues 4-6:40 |
| Classroom: | Faculty Office Building 104 |
| Prerequisites: | Upper Division Standing |

Course Information

Course Description:

Environmental horror (or “ecohorror”) has a long history in literature, film, and popular culture. By placing this history in conversation with contemporary trends in the genre, this class asks you to think about how fear and horror have shaped popular thinking about nature and the “unnatural” within and beyond the US. Questions we’ll consider include: How have cultural anxieties shaped the stories we tell about animals, monsters, and the environment? And how might reckoning with ecohorror change the ways we’re capable

of imagining and responding to climate change, environmental injustice, and their underlying causes? Throughout the semester, we'll also discuss how queer, trans, BIPOC, and migrant authors have used tropes of monstrosity and fearful environments to create new modes of identification and creative exploration. And we'll ask how contemporary artists and writers are using the genre to respond to the political and environmental legacies of settler colonialism, industrial pollution, militarism, and racial capitalism.

Course Description and Requisites

Focuses on a genre of American Literature such as poetry, the novel, the short story, drama, autobiography, the personal and/or philosophical essay. With prior permission of graduate advisor may be repeatable once for credit.

Prerequisite: Classified standing or instructor consent.

Note: This course satisfies graduate-level GWAR in this master's program.

Letter Graded

* Classroom Protocols

A Note on Academic Integrity: Please note that no AI generated content will be accepted for credit. This includes work that has been "smoothed" using assistive technologies like Grammarly or the "smoothing" feature on digital translation platforms like Google Translate. Work produced using voice transcription programs that input and smooth language are not included, unless the student has made other arrangements with the professor or AEC.

Nor will writings based on other students' work, or copied/adapted from external texts (summaries, etc.) be accepted for credit, per SJSU's Academic Integrity Policy on plagiarism. As a member of our learning community, your success will be based on your own ability to read challenging texts, take focused notes, analyze specific passages, trends, and concepts, and articulate your own intellectual responses in writing.

If you find that you're struggling with an assignment or a text, please reach out to me (and the campus writing center) for help and support. Please, don't risk your grade, diminish your integrity and evade the opportunity for learning by passing someone (or something) else's work off as your own.

Assignments that contain AI-generated content (including work that is "smoothed" or revised using Google Translate or Grammarly) will receive 0 credit in this course. Submitters will be asked to meet with me before to discuss the assignment in question before being referred to SJSU's academic integrity process.

Late Work & Makeup Work:

Every student is allowed to use a two-day extension on a written assignments twice per term with prior notice. All late work (including late makeup work) will have its final grade reduced by .5 points for every 3 days it's late (rounding up). This penalty may be waived or adjusted if you reach out to Dr. Rivers and start a conversation about catching up with the course, and completing any uncompleted work. All late work is due to Canvas by 11:59PM (Midnight) on Monday 12/9.

Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs)

The following statement has been adopted by the Department of English for inclusion in all syllabi: In English Department Courses, instructors will comment on and grade the quality of student writing as well as the quality of ideas being conveyed. All student writing should be distinguished by correct grammar and punctuation, appropriate diction and syntax, and well-organized paragraphs. The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined in the SJSU Catalog ("The Grading System").

Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance:

- A = excellent;
- B = above average;
- C = average;
- D = below average;
- F = failure.

Within any of the letter grade ranges (e.g. B+/B/B-), the assignment of a +(plus) or -(minus) grade will reflect stronger (+) or weaker (-) completion of the goals of the assignment.

Program Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of the MA English program, students will be able to:

1. Demonstrate an appropriate level of expertise in literary history, literary theory, and rhetoric.
2. Demonstrate high-level proficiency in literary research and in the synthesis of research
3. Demonstrate critical and analytical skills in the interpretation and evaluation of literary texts.
4. Demonstrate a command of written academic English, including the abilities to
 - a. organize and present material in a cogent fashion,
 - b. formulate and defend original arguments,
 - c. employ effectively the language of their discipline and
 - d. write under time constraints.
5. Demonstrate a reading knowledge of at least one foreign language.

Upon successful completion of the MFA in Creative Writing, students will be able to:

1. Demonstrate a high level of ability to propose and complete a publishable, full-length work of literature in a primary genre concentration (fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, or scriptwriting).
2. Demonstrate high level of proficiency to write works of literature in a secondary genre concentration (fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, or scriptwriting).
3. Demonstrate an appropriate level of knowledge of literary history, literary theory, and craft and theory of creative writing.
4. Demonstrate critical and analytical skills in the evaluation and interpretation of literary texts.

5. Demonstrate a command of written academic English, including the abilities to:
- a) organize and present material in a cogent fashion;
 - b) formulate and defend original arguments;
 - c) employ effectively the language of their discipline;
 - d) write under time constraints.
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Department Information:

Department Name: English and Comparative Literature

Department Office: FO 102

Department Website: www.sjsu.edu/english (<https://www.sjsu.edu/english>)

Department email: english@sjsu.edu (<mailto:english@sjsu.edu>)

Department phone number: 408-924-4425

Course Materials

Algernon Blackwood, *The Willows* (Lanternfish Press edition preferred), ISBN: 9781941360835

Jeff Vandermeer, *Annihilation*, ISBN: [9780374104092](https://www.isbn.org/9780374104092)

H.G. Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (Penguin Edition preferred), ISBN: 978-0141441023

Silvia Moreno-Garcia, *Mexican Gothic*, ISBN: 9780525620808

Mattie Lubchansky, *Boy's Weekend*, ISBN: 9780593316719

Samanta Schweblin, *Fever Dream*, ISBN: 9780399184604

Carmen Maria Machado, *The Low Low Woods*, ISBN: 9781779513120

Stephen Graham Jones, *The Only Good Indians*, ISBN: 9781982136468

Course Requirements and Assignments

Course Assignments:

Classroom Participation and Preparation (20%):

Students in this course are expected to arrive on time with the day's assigned text and their notes, and participate in all discussion and break-out activities. Participation activities cannot be made up in the case of absence. All students are expected to participate in classroom discussions in a curious and respectful manner that evidences preparation for the day's reading and writing assignments. Expectations for professional participation in a university-level class include: focused attention, appropriate use of

technology, respectful communication, completion of reading assignments (including taking notes to support discussion on the day a reading is due), and treating our texts and topics with the seriousness they require.

Canvas Reading Responses (30%):

Each week, you will be asked to submit a brief reflection and analysis paper that discusses key elements, themes, and/or insights from the week's readings. Your finished Canvas post should be 1.5-3 double-spaced pages in length, and should demonstrate the following: a) that you completed the assigned reading in its entirety, b) that you have taken notes that allow you to locate and discuss key lines, passages, and elements of craft within some depth and specificity and c) that you can reflect on connections between this reading and your developing understanding of ecohorror, including its literary and cultural contexts and engagements. More weekly guidance is available on Canvas. ***Twice per semester, you are allowed to submit a set of reading notes instead of a full written response. These notes will be graded on two categories: 1) Level of focus and engagement and 2) Coverage of assigned text/s.*** When you are using this allowance, please make note of it in your submission.

Classroom Facilitation (15%):

Each student will sign up to lead class discussion for one day of the term. Students will select their date at the beginning of the term, and they will be in charge of consulting at least 1 research-based external source as they develop a brief presentation on the text (and/or its contexts) for the given class day.

Along with identifying key passages and/or questions about the text, the student can bring in media, current events, author biography, discussion activities or cultural contexts that enrich will enrich our discussions of this text. The presentation material should be around 10-13 minutes (including media), and students should submit a short overview of their presentation at least 24 hours before the class they are scheduled to facilitate. The media component of the presentation should not exceed 3 minutes, without written permission from the professor. Use of longer media excerpts will not count toward the minimum presentation time (beyond 3 mins).

When you are facilitating, I will ask you to extend your Canvas Post by 1 page and respond to the following prompt:

What external source/s did you consult for your facilitation? Please identify the argument, contexts, and significant insights that arose across your supplemental readings for this week. Please also select 2-3 quotes that capture this insight and its nuances. Then spend a long paragraph analyzing your quote and discussing how the author develops and nuances their thinking, and how, in turn, their work has influenced your own thinking. Are there particular histories, theories, quotes from other scholars, or pieces evidence they use to support and expand their discussion? How does this text help us better understand the day's reading and its literary, cultural, and/or environmental contexts?

These posts will be due by 3:00PM (before class) on the day that the corresponding reading is scheduled for discussion

Connections Paper (15%)

At the end of the first unit, you will be asked to complete a connections project that either a) explores one of our texts in greater depth or b) analyzes a theme or connection across multiple texts. Regardless of which option you choose, you'll be asked to analyze and engage at least one secondary/nonfiction text from the course. More details on this assignment will become available as we approach the end of unit one.

Final Project: Entering the Eco-Nightmare (20%)

This final project asks you to undertake a critical, creative, or archival engagement with ecohorror and the unnatural. You will identify your own topic and develop your project across the final unit of the course. As you do so, I'll ask you to submit a proposal and research summary. Your final project can take the form of a) traditional interpretive analysis paper or b) a creative project.

If you pursue an analysis paper, your work should significantly incorporate at least 2 texts from the course (including at least 1 creative and 1 contextual texts), as well as 2 external or supplementary texts (articles, etc.). These external/supplementary texts can range in type, but should include at least 1 research-based source from a peer-reviewed journal or a book published by a University Press. You should also consider consulting our librarian, Peggy Cabrera for support.

The second option is a creative project. This project can take the form of a piece of creative writing, or it could be a public humanities project, a comic book, a lesson plan, or some other mode of creative engagement. All projects will need to be proposed beforehand to gain instructor feedback and approval. (Please note: paper collages will not be approved unless the student can demonstrate a substantial engagement with the genre and its contexts.). Finished creative projects will also need a 700-800 word artist's statement that illustrates craft choices, connections among the project and its research material, as well as some process-reflections on the work of developing and revising/refining the creative project. Though the creative production will comprise the majority of this project, the artist's statement should incorporate at least 3 class text and at least 2 pieces of contextual research the shape your engagement with queer literary cultures

Students pursuing either option will be required to submit a research summary and project outline on Week 14. More details on this project will be distributed during the semester

✓ Grading Information

Grading Breakdown:

| Category | Percentage of Total Grade |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Classroom Participation | 20% |
| Canvas Reading Responses | 30% |
| Classroom Facilitation | 15% |
| Connections Project | 15% |
| Final Project | 20% |

Class Department Grading Standards:

- Seminar instructors will comment on and grade the quality of student writing as well as the quality of ideas being conveyed. All student writing should be distinguished by correct grammar and punctuation, appropriate diction and syntax, and well-organized paragraphs.
- The differential grading scale defined in the SJSU Catalog ("The Grading System") is as follows: Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A = excellent; B = above average; C = average; D = below average; F = failure.
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In written assignments, this scale is based on the following criteria:

A plus = 97 to 100 percent

A = 93 to 96 percent

A minus = 90 to 92 percent

B plus = 87 to 89 percent

B = 83 to 86 percent

B minus = 80 to 82 percent

C plus = 77 to 79 percent

C = 73 to 76 percent

C minus = 70 to 72 percent

D plus = 67 to 69 percent

D = 63 to 66 percent

D minus = 60 to 62 percent

- A = Excellent: The "A" essay is articulate and well developed with fluid transitions and a clear and persuasive use of evidence, which is drawn from the literary text itself, lecture materials (when appropriate), and research materials. An "A" essay contains a fresh insight that teaches the reader something new about the subject matter.
- B = Above average: The "B" essay demonstrates a good understanding of its subject, a clear and persuasive use of evidence, a certain level of ease of expression, and solid organization. However, it usually lacks the level of originality and creativity that characterizes the insight found in an "A" essay.
- C = Average: The "C" essay makes a good attempt at all the assignment's requirements. It has a reasonable understanding of its subject matter but its ideas are frequently simplistic or over-generalized. The writing style is also more bland and repetitive than the style shown by "A" and "B" essays and it often contains flaws in grammar, punctuation, spelling and/or word choice. It may also use textual evidence out of context.
- D = Below average: The "D" essay is poorly organized and generally unclear. It has inappropriate or inadequate examples, is noticeably superficial or simplistic, and/or contains some serious mechanical and grammatical problems. A "D" essay may also reveal some misunderstanding of the assignment requirements.
- F = Failure: An "F" essay has not addressed the requirements of the assignment and is unacceptable work in terms of both form and content.

University Policies

Per [University Policy S16-9 \(PDF\)](http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S16-9.pdf) (<http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S16-9.pdf>), relevant university policy concerning all courses, such as student responsibilities, academic integrity, accommodations, dropping and adding, consent for recording of class, etc. and available student services (e.g. learning assistance, counseling, and other resources) are listed on the [Syllabus Information](https://www.sjsu.edu/curriculum/courses/syllabus-info.php) (<https://www.sjsu.edu/curriculum/courses/syllabus-info.php>) web page. Make sure to visit this page to review and be aware of these university policies and resources.

Course Schedule

ENGL 254: Ecohorror (Genres of American Literature), Fall 2025, Course Schedule

The agenda below constitutes our current semester schedule. Reading and assignment dates are subject to change with fair notice (as emailed from the instructor and announced in class at least one week ahead).

Course Schedule:

| Week/Lesson/Module | Date | Topics, Readings, Assignments, Deadlines <i>(If appropriate, add extra column(s) to meet your needs.)</i> |
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| | | UNIT 1: Foundations of Ecohorror |
| 1 | Tues 8/26 | First Day of Class In-Class Activity: Discuss <i>Jaws</i> (1975), read Shaun Tan, "The Shark," and watch excerpt from <i>Sharksploitation</i> (2023) |
| 2 | Tues 9/2 | Reading Due: Algernon Blackwood, <i>The Willows</i> (1907) (finish) & Sara Crosby, "Beyond Ecophilia: Edgar Allen Poe and the Tradition of American Ecohorror" (2014) Assignment Due: Reading Response 1: Roots of Ecohorror, Due by 3:00PM Facilitator: _____ |

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| 3 | Tues 9/9 | <p>Reading Due: Jeff Vandermeer, <i>Annihilation</i> (2014) (finish)</p> <p>Assignment Due: Reading Response 2: Ecohorror in the Anthropocene, Due by 3:00PM</p> <p>In-Class Activity: Discuss Connections Project</p> <p>Facilitator: _____</p> |
| 4 | Tues 9/16 | <p>Reading Due: H.G. Wells, <i>The Island of Dr. Moreau</i> (1896) (finish) & Excerpts from "Animals, Nature, and the Races of Man," from Claire Jean Kim, <i>Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, & Nature in a Multicultural Age</i></p> <p>Assignment Due: Reading Response 3: Race, Animality, and Eugenics , Due by 3:00PM</p> <p>In-Class Activity: Check in about connections projects (due next week)</p> <p>Facilitator: _____</p> |

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| 5 | Tues 9/23 | <p>Reading Due: No Reading Due</p> <p>Assignment Due: Connections Project due by 3:00PM</p> <p>In-Class Activity: Watch <i>The Creature from the Black Lagoon</i> (1954)</p> <p>Facilitator: _____</p> |
| | | UNIT 2: Monstrosity and the Colonial Anthropocene |
| 6 | Tues 9/30 | <p>Reading Due: Sylvia Moreno-Garcia, <i>Mexican Gothic</i> to p. __ (2020) & Bridgitte Barclay, "Leaving a Record of Their Coming: Extinction and Evolution in The Creature from the Black Lagoon" (2021)</p> <p>In-Class Activity: Discuss Creature, Barclay, and Mexican Gothic</p> <p>Assignment Due: Reading Response 4: Colonialism and Horrific Nature in Moreno-Garcia and Barclay, Due by 3:00PM</p> <p>Facilitator: _____</p> |

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| 7 | Tues 10/7 | <p>Reading Due: Moreno-Garcia, <i>Mexican Gothic</i> (finish)</p> <p>E.C. Opportunity: Attend Library Event "Making Queer and Trans Speculative Worlds" for Banned Books Week from 12-2, featuring me, Dr. Maite Urcaregui, and SJSU alum Mara Olivas</p> <p>Assignment Due: Reading Response 5: Post-colonial Ecohorror in Moreno-Garcia's <i>Mexican Gothic</i>, Due by 3:00PM</p> <p>Facilitator: _____</p> |
| 8 | Tues 10/14 | <p>Reading due: Mattie Lubchansky, <i>Boy's Weekend</i> (2023) (finish) & Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix" (1993) (excerpts)</p> <p>Assignment Due: Reading Response 6: Queer and Trans Horror & Tech Dystopianism in <i>Boy's Weekend</i> due by 3:00 PM</p> <p>Facilitator: _____</p> |

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| 9 | <p>Tues</p> <p>10/21</p> | <p>Reading due: Samanta Schweblin, <i>Fever Dream</i> (2014) (finish)</p> <p>In-Class Activity: Begin Watching <i>The Bay</i> (2012)</p> <p>Assignment Due: Reading Response 7: Exposure as Ecohorror in Schweblin's <i>Fever Dream</i> due by 3:00 PM</p> <p>Facilitator: _____</p> |
| 10 | <p>Tues</p> <p>10/28</p> | <p>Reading Due: Carmen Maria Machado & Steve Wands, <i>The Low Low Woods</i> (2020) (Finish)</p> <p>Assignment Due: Reading Response 8: Ecohorror and Environmental Justice in <i>The Low Low Woods</i> due by 3:00 PM</p> <p>Facilitator: _____</p> |

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| 11 | Tues 11/4 | <p>Reading Due: Simon Estok, "Ecomedia and Ecophobia" & Kim Hester Williams, "Introduction: Speaking of the EcoGothic--Decolonised"</p> <p>In-Class Activity: Watch a movie (probably <i>The Girl With All the Gifts</i>, 2016)</p> <p>Assignment Due: Submit Handwritten Reading Notes on Estok, "Ecomedia and Ecophobia" and Kim Hester Williams, "Decolonising the EcoGothic" by 3:00 PM</p> <p>Facilitator: _____</p> |
| 12 | Tues 11/11 | <p>No Class Meeting: Veteran's Day</p> <p>Assignment Due: Submit Handwritten Reading Notes for Stephen Graham Jones, <i>The Only Good Indians</i> to page __ on Thursday 11/13 by 11:59PM</p> |
| 13 | Tues 11/18 | <p>Reading Due: Finish Stephen Graham Jones, <i>The Only Good Indians</i> (2020)</p> <p>Assignment Due: Reading Response 8: Horror and Relations with the Living World in <i>The Only Good Indians</i> Due by 3:00 PM</p> <p>Facilitator: _____</p> |

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| 14 | Tues 11/25 | <p>Reading Due: Octavia Butler, "Bloodchild" (1995)</p> <p>In-Class Activity: Discuss Final Project; Semester overview discussion</p> <p>Assignment Due: Submit Handwritten reading notes on Butler, "Bloodchild" by 3:00PM</p> <p>Facilitator: _____</p> |
| 15 | Wed 11/26 | NO CLASS: THANKSGIVING BREAK |
| 16 | Tues 12/2 | <p>No Reading Due: Work on final project</p> <p>In-Class Activity: Watch <i>The Host</i> (2006)</p> |
| Final Exam | Tues 12/16 3:15-5:15 | Assignment Due: Final Projects Due by 2:30PM; Attend in-class final project sharing session |