

Working Landscapes: The Literature of Resource Extraction

Professor Ethan Mannon

Course Description:

Much that nurtured and now sustains human culture comes from rural and wild places. The whaling industry that Herman Melville wrote about in his famous *Moby-Dick* developed as a way to supply America (and the world) with whale oil for lamps. Today we depend on gasoline for our cars, and much of the electricity we use is generated in coal-fired power plants situated in areas with low human population densities. Finally, even the paper this syllabus is printed on, though made from post-consumer fiber, ultimately derives from some forest somewhere.

That we may not know the source of the electricity and paper we use is one of the many ideas that appears in the literature we'll be reading this semester. The authors of what we'll broadly define as the literature of resource extraction also explore the impact of the metropolis on the cultures and economies of the hinterlands. And we'll also track the ways that gender (think about the hyper-masculine culture of the lumberjack) as well as race and class (environmental justice advocates note that racism and class prejudice influence the placement of polluting industries) crop up in our reading.

The course is organized around the groups of resources that often originate in rural and wild landscapes: Fiber, Fish, and Fur; Fuel (coal, oil, and natural gas); Food; and The Folk. To varying degrees, all these things—even the human inhabitants of rural places—are *mined*. Putting that last sentence in the active voice (naming the agent doing the mining) represents one thread that will tie together much of our reading.

Required Texts:

James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers* ISBN: 0140390073

Jack London, *The Sea-Wolf* ISBN: 0486411087

Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* ISBN: 0143039865

*Rick Bass, "Fiber" (PDF)

Upton Sinclair, *Oil!* ISBN: 0143112260

Denise Giardina, *Storming Heaven* ISBN: 080410297X

**"Promised Land" (DVD)

Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres* ISBN: 1400033837

Colson Whitehead, *John Henry Days* ISBN: 0385498209

*No need to purchase texts marked with an asterisk: I'll make them available as PDFs.

**Don't buy this DVD either—I'll show it in class.