**Fall 2022 Syllabus – Elective Reporting Topics: Covering the Earth (UA 204.004)**

Wednesdays, 10-1, Room 652, 20 Cooper Square

Instructor: Dan Fagin, Professor of Journalism and Director of the Science, Health and Environmental Reporting Program, New York University

Office Hours: Room 712, 20 Cooper Square: Wednesdays 1-1:30, 2:30-3:30.

**Overview**

Environmental narratives have never been more impactful than today. As we ride this wave of popularity as environmental journalists, there’s a lot we can learn from those who preceded us. How have some of our greatest writers and thinkers responded to the natural world and the deep footprints we humans have left upon it? How can their work help us make our own contributions to this rich journalistic tradition? Would Thoreau have sub-tweeted Donald Trump? How might Rachel Carson have told *Silent Spring* online? Should we forgive John Muir? Must I crawl around in sewers to write well about them? (John McPhee would say yes!) These questions and many others are the fodder for this seminar in which we will read great work and produce our own. With the help of classic and contemporary readings, we will confront thorny questions of advocacy, inclusion, issue framing, risk balancing and the scientific process as we report our own stories and essays on the most epic beat of all.

**Attendance**

We will meet Wednesday mornings from 10:00 to 1:00 in Room 652 of 20 Cooper Square. Some days, we’ll end earlier.

Because discussion is such an important part of the course, and because we are going to move quickly through a lot of material, **I expect you to show up for class each week**, and to be prepared and ready to contribute. If there’s some reason you can’t, you need to let me know beforehand via e-mail or telephone.

**Deadlines**

**Unless otherwise specified, all assignments are due by the start of class, 10 a.m., on the due date.** Coping with deadlines is one of the most valuable skills you are learning at NYU. If you can’t meet a deadline for a written assignment in this class, you’re expected to have a very good reason. Even the best reason will not be good enough to avoid being marked down for lateness.

**Discussion**

This is a seminar. Its success depends on robust discussion. The best journalists are skeptics who question everything; you should emulate them. No dubious assertion (especially by the professor) should go unchallenged. Take nothing for granted; take everything with a grain of salt. Come prepared to contribute, to question, to argue – and to be called upon if you’re too quiet.

**Readings**
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The assigned readings are not “extras” and they are not optional; they are essential to what we will accomplish together in this class. I expect you to do the readings as assigned and on time, and to be prepared to talk about them.

**You need to buy a book for this class:** *American Earth*, edited by Bill McKibben. Amazon is usually cheapest source ([new](https://www.amazon.com) or [used](https://www.amazon.com)), but of course it’s widely available elsewhere, too. *American Earth* is available only in hardcover, but we are going to use it extensively and it’s packed with great environmental writing and thinking, so I hope it’s a book you’ll keep forever.

If you want, you can also buy *Toms River* and avoid the annoyance of reading several chapters as online pdfs. But please don’t feel any pressure at all to buy it; I won’t mind at all if you don’t! (Back in the day, I used to get annoyed when professors made me buy books they wrote.)

All class readings that are not in the McKibben book will be available online, either as links in this syllabus (see the weekly schedule) or as pdf files in the class folder in Google Drive. In the folder, which is called Covering the Earth 2022, you’ll also see the latest version of this syllabus, including links. Remember that the weekly readings and assignments may change somewhat as the semester progresses, so **always rely on the online, Google Drive version of the syllabus**, which will always be up to date.

**Writing Assignments**

This is a hybrid reading/writing class. We will read and discuss great environmental writing almost every week, and you will also write a critique, a descriptive essay (with an accompanying image), an opinion column and a feature story. The writing assignments are not lengthy, which is why they are difficult! You will need to think carefully about every word. (Story length limits will be enforced to within 100 words, which means that the 600-word critique, for example, must be between 500 and 700 words.)

All assignments should be Microsoft Word files (.doc or .docx), so I can edit them and return them to you with comments. If you need to use another word-processing program, it’s your responsibility to make sure I can read it. Unless I tell you otherwise, you should email all of your assignments as attached Word files to dan.fagin@nyu.edu.

We will use Google Docs for this class; I’ll share some readings and assignments with you via email. It’s important that you **check email daily** to make sure you are aware of changes to assignments and deadlines.

**Critiques**

Just as important as the assigned readings will be the environmental news articles you find and read on your own. “Mainstream” environmental reporting (whatever that means, exactly) is in flux as reporters seek new, more effective story forms while audiences increasingly seek information elsewhere. Critiquing contemporary coverage will thus be an important part of this class. I will set aside time in class to dissect recently published environmental stories and will assign specific students to lead the discussion (see the syllabus). If you’re not happy with the date I’ve assigned to you, it’s fine to switch with a classmate as long as you let me know.

When it’s your assigned week, you’ll write a 600-word critique of a recently published story you will select. Before class, you’ll e-mail me your written critique (include the URL of the story you’re critiquing). Please also **come to class with enough paper copies of the article for everyone to have one**. At the start of class, you’ll pass out the copies of the story you chose and we’ll all take a few minutes to read it, after which you’ll lead the group in a brief discussion.
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Please don’t read your written critique out loud; instead come prepared to tell the rest of us about a few points that you think are particularly important and interesting.

If you prefer to critique a radio or television piece that’s fine, too, but you must let me know ahead of time, so we can all watch and/or listen in class.

The article you choose for your critique should be: a) on an environmental topic, b) written for a broad, non-specialized audience by a professional journalist (not someone whose main job is something outside of journalism), c) between 500 and 2,000 words long (or three to ten minutes long for video or audio), and d) less than perfect (because how do you critique a perfect story?) but not so awful that your criticisms are obvious.

The point of the critiquing exercise is to ask and answer questions such as: Was the writing effective? Was the sourcing complete? How could the piece have been organized better? How would your reporting strategy have been different? Your job is not only to show what went wrong in a piece of journalism, but more importantly to tell us what you would do differently to improve the piece. Be as detailed as you can be within the 600-word limit about the specific changes you would make. The more detailed you are about your proposed fixes, the more you will get out of this assignment.

There are, of course, many places you can find mass-market environmental stories to critique. If you’re stumped, here are a few ideas, some obvious and some less so: newspapers such as The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune, USA Today; magazines such as Time, Harper’s, Esquire, Mother Jones, Smithsonian, The Nation, Outside, Audubon, and Chemical and Engineering News; web sites such as Vox, Quartz, Vice, LiveScience, Scientific American and many others. Every weekday, the Society of Environmental Journalists also posts a daily selection of new and notable environmental stories from around the country. To find it, go to sej.org and look at the “EJToday: Headlines” section. (You don’t have to join SEJ to get access to EJ Today, but if you’re interested in environmental reporting I strongly recommend joining.) Another good compilation site is environmentalhealthnews.org.

Grades

Your final grade is this class will be a combination of your written work and class discussion. Here’s the formula:

- Story critique: 600-word analysis plus five-minute presentation – 10 percent
- Observational essay: 500 words – 15 percent
- Opinion column: 600 words – 15 percent
- Feature story: 1,500 words – 25 percent (half of your feature grade will be for the initial version, and the other half for the rewrite version)
- Class participation, including attendance – 35 percent

Revisions

For the observational essay and the opinion column, you have the option of doing a rewrite version due Dec. 14. If you choose to do a rewrite, your grade on the assignment will be an average of the first version and the revision.

For the feature story, you must do two versions.

For the story critique, there is no revision option.
Ethical Conduct

While you are at NYU (and afterward, we hope!), we expect you to always follow the letter and spirit of the NYU Honor Code. If you don’t hold yourself to those standards, the university and I will. Please choose the former route because that will be a lot more enjoyable for both of us. Following the letter and spirit of the honor code means fully acknowledging all of your source materials (whether documents or people) in your assignments. We’ll discuss in class what that entails, and please also review NYU Journalism’s ethics handbook, which is full of essential advice. If you plagiarize, you’re risking sanctions that can go all the way up to expulsion from the university.

Vigorous classroom discussion, including disagreement, enhances learning for us all. No one has a monopoly on good ideas, including me. But I do insist that we treat each other with respect and attention, no exceptions.

Taking good notes on the assigned readings and in class is always a good idea. It’s a habit you should develop now, if you haven’t already. The very act of taking notes, or even just highlighting important passages in a book, can be a wonderful aid to learning. Taking notes on a laptop, though, is a different story. There is solid research supporting the hypothesis that laptops can be a huge distraction from learning, thanks to the allure of the screen (email, social media, adorable pet videos, etc.). Some teachers forbid students from bringing laptops to class. I’m not going to go that far, but I think you’re better off keeping them closed, and keeping your cellphone in your pocket. Whether or not you bring a laptop, your full attention needs to always be on whoever is speaking.

Contacting Me, Contacting You

You’re welcome to contact me any time at dan.fagin@nyu.edu. Email is usually easiest, but if you prefer old-fashioned interpersonal communication (and who doesn’t?) you can call me on my cellphone (516-660-6383). Better still, you can find me in person at my office (Room 712 of 20 Cooper Square) Wednesday afternoons from 1:00-1:30 and 2:30-3:30. (I am also often available on Tuesday afternoons around 4:00 p.m.) It’s very important that you give me your current email address in case I need to reach you, and that you check your e-mail regularly.

Staying Healthy

University life is stressful, and COVID-19 has only added to the stress. If you feel overwhelmed, please come talk to me or any of your professors and we’ll do our best to help. And don’t hesitate to take full advantage of the health resources NYU provides – after all, you’re paying for them! The Student Health Center is at 726 Broadway (Third Floor), the phone number is 212-443-1000 and they do accept walk-ins. There’s also a 24-hour hotline: 212-443-9999. Their services are confidential and are covered by your insurance and tuition.

Accommodations

Students with disabilities that necessitate accommodations should contact and register with NYU’s Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) at 212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu. Information about the Moses Center can be found at www.nyu.edu/csd. The Moses Center is located at 726 Broadway on the 2nd floor.
Diversity and Inclusion

The Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute is committed to creating an anti-racist learning environment that embraces diversity, complexity, and honesty. We are an intellectual community enriched by diversity along a number of dimensions, including race, sex, gender identity, class, ethnicity, sexualities, abilities, religion, and culture. Our student body is excitingly international. We welcome a multiplicity of perspectives. We acknowledge that listening to other perspectives on some of these issues may be personally challenging, and we accept that challenge. We further acknowledge that our profession, journalism, and our home, New York University, have participated in the systemic racism that underpins U.S. history. We are committed to teaching and practicing fair, rigorous, and engaged journalism that helps all our communities move toward justice and equality.

Tentative Course Sequence and Assignments

We will take some detours as the term progresses, so always check the Google Drive class folder every week for an updated schedule. Here’s the tentative plan:

Assignment due Sept. 7: Read “Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks” by Edward Abbey, in American Earth, pages 413-433 or “Abbey” in the class Google Drive folder. (I will also email you the essay.)

Sept. 7 – Introduction, syllabus, Edward Abbey.

Assignments due Sept. 14: 1) Begin looking for three great feature ideas to present to class; 2) Read the following:

- Henry David Thoreau, bio page and excerpts from Walden, pages 1 and 9-25 in American Earth.
- Dina Gilio-Whitaker, “The Problem With Wilderness,” UUWorld, March 1, 2020 (or see “Gilio-Whitaker” in the class folder).

Sept. 14 – Progenitors: articulating the environmental idea. Also, elements of an effective feature stories, critiquing, and story pitching.

Assignments due Sept. 21: 1) Turn in three environmental feature pitches of no more than 150 words each; 2) Read the following:
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- Aldo Leopold, bio page and excerpts from *A Sand County Almanac*, pages 265-276 in *American Earth*.
- Michael Pollan, bio page and excerpt from *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, pages 948-960 in *American Earth*.
- Dan Fagin, Prologue: Marking Time, *Toms River* (see “Toms River Introduction” in Google Drive class folder).

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**Sept. 21 – Observing and Describing**. We will also discuss the observational essay assignment and effective oral pitching, too. **MARIA** critiques.

Assignments due Sept. 28: 1) Prepare 90-second oral pitches for two approved environmental feature ideas to present to the class; 2) Start working on your observational essay.

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**Sept. 28 – Pitch Slam. Also, researching and reporting an environmental feature. **ABI critiques.

Assignment due Oct. 5: 1) Turn in observational essay; 2) Read the following:

- Robert Draper, “Madagascar’s Pierced Heart,” September, 2010 (or see “Draper” in the class folder, you may need to download it to your laptop because it’s a large file).
- John McPhee, bio page and excerpts from *Encounters with the Archdruid*, pages 493–499 in *American Earth*.

**Oct. 5 – Structuring and writing an environmental feature.** Guest speaker at 11:30: Zoë Schlanger, freelance environmental writer and author (and former student in this class). **SARAH** critiques

Assignments for Oct. 12: 1) Make progress on your feature; 2) Read the following:

- Dan Fagin, Chapters 1 and 2, *Toms River* (see “Toms River Chaps 1 and 2” in Google Drive class folder).
- Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science*, December 13, 1968 (see “Hardin” in class folder). (Note: please read the version in the class folder, not the McKibben book.)
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Assignments for Oct. 19: 1) By 10 a.m., send a short (200 words or so) summary of your progress on your feature to me, and be ready to give us an update on your progress during class. 2) Read the following:

- Rachel Carson, bio page and excerpt from Silent Spring, pages 365-376 in American Earth.
- E. O. Wilson, bio page and excerpt from Biophilia, pages 671-689 in American Earth.

Oct. 19 – Persuading. We’ll discuss the opinion piece assignment and also discuss feature progress. RACHEL critiques.

Assignments for Oct. 26: 1) Write persuasive opinion column; 2) Read the following:

- Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins & L. Hunter Lovins, Natural Capitalism, Chapter 1 (in Google Drive class folder as “HawkenChapter1”).

Oct. 26 – Environmental rules: Where do we go from here? Also, peer editing basics and assignments. ASHA critiques.

Assignments for Nov. 2: 1) Turn in feature to your editor, with a cc to me; 2) Read the following:

- Dan Fagin, Chapter 14 of Toms River (see “Toms River Chapter 14” in Google Drive class folder).
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- Somini Sengupta, “This is Inequity at the Boiling Point,” New York Times, Aug. 7, 2020 (or see “Sengupta” in class folder – though reading online is much better in this case).

**Nov. 2 – Pollution, Health, and Environmental Justice. KRISTINA critiques**

Assignments: 1) By Nov. 4 at noon, editors return your stories to your writer with a cc to me; 2) By Nov. 6 at noon, writers turn in your feature stories to me; 3) By Nov. 9, read the following:

- Emma Marris, “Nature is Everywhere – We Just Need to Learn to See It”, TED Talk.
- David Quammen, bio page and excerpts from *Planet of Weeds*, pages 874-897 in *American Earth*.
- Dan Fagin, unpublished introduction to next book. See “Monarch Intro Draft” in class folder. (NOTE: This document must be kept confidential).
- Elizabeth Kolbert, “The Sixth Extinction?” The New Yorker, May 25, 2009 (see “KolbertExtinction” in Google Drive class folder).

**Nov. 9 – Biodiversity and The Anthropocene.**

**Nov. 16 – Individual meetings on your feature in Room 712. I will post a sign-up sheet for time slots.**

**Nov. 23 – No class, happy Thanksgiving!**

Assignment for Nov. 30: 1) Watch this 5-minute video and then use the En-ROADS simulator to devise the best feasible scenario you can come up to reduce the aggregate temperature increase by 2100 from 3.6˚ C to 2.0˚ C. Then use the “share your scenario” button to email your scenario to me and to yourself. Be prepared to defend your choices in class. The readings will help you make your choices. 2) Read the following:

Nov. 30 – Energy/Climate: The Super Wicked Problem

Assignment for Dec. 7: Read the following:

- Anthony Leiserowitz, et al., *Climate Change in the American Mind*, Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, November 2019. **Executive summary only**, unless you want to read more (or see “Leiserowitz 2020” in class folder).

Dec. 7 – Framing and the Limits of Empiricism.

Assignment for Dec. 14: 1) Turn in feature revision; 2) If you decide to do them, turn in optional revisions of your observational essay and opinion piece.

Dec. 14 – No class, enjoy your break!