**Readings in Contemporary Literary Theory: Ecocriticism**

**Class code**
ENGL-UA 9735 or ENVST-UA 9510

**Instructor Details**
Dr Jennifer Hamiton
jennifermaehamilton@nyu.edu

Office Hour: Thursday 12.30-1.30 OR Consultation by Appointment
Please allow at least 24 hours for your instructor to respond to your emails.

**Class Details**
Spring 2015

Readings in Contemporary Literary Theory: Ecocriticism

Thursday 9:00 – 12:00pm
February 5 to May 14
302
NYU Sydney Academic Centre

**Prerequisites**
None

**Class Description**
The environmental crisis troubles what it means to be human and asks us to rethink how we interact with the world. This raises questions not only for scientists and politicians, but also for philosophers, scholars, artists and students of literary theory. Ecocriticism is a critical method responding to both actual environmental degradation and a breakdown in intellectual categories of ‘the natural’ brought on by technology and politics. We ask how literature—one of the richest arenas for the practice of human imagination—does, has, or could shape environmental thought and action. How does the more than human world enter into human art-forms? What are the historical and structural obstacles to admitting different forms of consciousness into text? What literary genres and styles are called forth by the huge ecological challenges of our times?

In order to pursue answers to these questions, the course is broken into two parts “Ecocritical Theory” and “Ecocritical Reading”. In the first half of the course we will read and investigate a variety of exciting contemporary theories, including Jane Bennett’s “Vital Materialism”, Donna Haraway’s “Companion Species”, Val Plumwood’s “Shadow Places” and Rob Nixon’s notion of “Slow Violence”, among others; students will also be introduced to important conceptual terms such as “the Anthropocene” and learn strategies for deconstructing the idea of nature. The second part of the is comprised of two modules—City and Desert—where
we will read novels and watch films that represent these different environments. The first case study focuses on literature of Sydney, to think about cities not only as places full of bright lights, pretty people and tall buildings, but also as a lively environments shared with animals, afflicted by the weather and with a rich geological history. The second module, “Desert” explores literature of Australia’s arid and semi-arid interior and, in particular, the Mallee Bioregion, using fiction and poetry to investigate failed attempts to farm the semi-arid zone and the area’s rich indigenous history. Encouraging students to be critically engaged as both scholars and tourists in Sydney, the primary texts in the course are almost exclusively Australian, situating our creative and critical thinking in the lively real world environment.

Desired Outcomes

At the successful completion of this course, students will be able to demonstrate the following outcomes:

- An understanding of the complex and various representations of nature;
- The ability to deploy appropriate critical strategies to analyse the ideological dimensions of representations of nature and ecology;
- The skills to reflect upon and critique both the real world environmental crisis and representations of related issues by thinking with important contemporary theoretical concepts;
- A critical understanding of different generic and formal modes of construction—including strategies for representing ecological disaster and threat, apocalypse, different ideas of nature (e.g. as a historical category, as the site of technological mediation) and the more than human world of animals, plants and landscape;
- Enhanced reading, writing, research and group communication skills; and
- The capacity to engage with secondary critical reading material, assessing the scholarly arguments that might contribute to their intellectual projects.

Assessment Components

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Components</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Pages</th>
<th>Submission Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Photo Essay</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>(Week 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar Preparation Journal</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>0.5-1</td>
<td>Weekly from Wk 2 (Work in Progress Grading Wk 4, then Final submission Wk 13)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Essay Proposal</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>(Week 10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Essay Final</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>12-15</td>
<td>(Week 14)</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-Class Participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
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Note that due dates are NOT NEGOTIABLE. All written submissions (photo essays and research essays) are to be handed to your lecturer at the end of the class when they are due. Written assignments must be printed out, stapled, and the pages numbered. They are not to be emailed, or handed to other NYU staff members. It is essential that you keep electronic copies and backups of all your work.

*Failure to submit or fulfill any required course component will result in failure of the class.*
Assessment Expectations

**Grade A:** Excellent performance showing a thorough knowledge and understanding of the topics of the course; all work includes clear, logical explanations, insight, and original thought and reasoning. Written work is of a highly sophisticated standard.

**Grade B:** Good performance with general knowledge and understanding of the topics; all work includes general analysis and coherent explanations showing some independent reasoning, reading and research. Written work is of a superior standard.

**Grade C:** Satisfactory performance with some broad explanation and reasoning; the work will typically demonstrate an understanding of the course on a basic level. Written work is of an acceptable standard.

**Grade D:** Passable performance showing a general and superficial understanding of the course’s topics; work lacks satisfactory insight, analysis or reasoned explanations. Written work is of a basic standard.

**Grade F:** Unsatisfactory performance in all assessed criteria. Written work is weak, unfinished or unsubmitted.

Grade Conversions

NYU Sydney uses the following scale of numerical equivalents to letter grades:

- **A** = 94-100
- **A-** = 90-93
- **B+** = 87-89
- **B** = 84-86
- **B-** = 80-83
- **C+** = 77-79
- **C** = 74-76
- **C-** = 70-73
- **D+** = 67-69
- **D** = 65-66
- **F** = below 65

Late Submission of Work

Written work due in class must be submitted to your instructor during class time.

Late work should be submitted in person to the Academic Programs Coordinator during regular office hours (9:00am-5:00pm, Monday-Friday). In the absence of the Academic Programs Coordinator, another member of the administrative staff can accept the work in person. The NYUS staff will mark down the date and time of submission in the presence of the student. Students must also submit an electronic copy of late written work to Turn-It-In within 24 hours.

Work submitted after the submission time without an agreed extension receives a penalty of 2 points on the 100-point scale (for the assignment) for each day the work is late.

Written work submitted beyond five (5) weekdays after the submission date without an
agreed extension fails and is given a zero.

**Plagiarism Policy**
The academic standards of New York University apply to all coursework at NYU Sydney. NYU Sydney policies are in accordance with New York University’s plagiarism policy. The presentation of another person’s words, ideas, judgment, images or data as though they were your own, whether intentionally or unintentionally, constitutes an act of plagiarism.

Penalties for confirmed cases of plagiarism are severe and are dealt with by the Director, NYU Sydney, not your instructor. Your home school will be notified and you will be dealt with according to the standards of that school. The codes of conduct and academic standards for NYU’s various schools and colleges are outlined in the respective school’s academic resources.

**Attendance Policy**
Study abroad at Global Academic Centres is an academically intensive and immersive experience, in which students from a wide range of backgrounds exchange ideas in discussion-based seminars. Learning in such an environment depends on the active participation of all students. And since classes typically meet once or twice a week, even a single absence can cause a student to miss a significant portion of a course. To ensure the integrity of this academic experience, class attendance at the centres is mandatory, and unexcused absences will be penalised with a two percent deduction from the student’s final course grade for every week of classes missed.

The class roster will be marked in the first five minutes of class and anyone who arrives after this time will be considered absent. Students are responsible for making up any work missed due to absence. Repeated absences will result in harsher penalties, including failure.

**Classroom Expectations**
This is a seminar subject and requires the active participation of all students. It also requires engaged discussion, including listening to and respecting other points of view. Your behaviour in class should respect your classmates’ desire to learn. It is important for you to focus your full attention on the class, for the entire class period.

- Arrive to class on time.
- Once you are in class, you are expected to stay until class ends. Leaving to make or take phone calls, to meet with classmates, or to go to an interview, is not acceptable behaviour.
- Phones, digital music players, and any other communications or sound devices are not to be used during class. That means no phone calls, no texting, no social media, no email, and no internet browsing at any time during class.
- Laptop computers and tablets are not to be used during class except in rare instances for specific class-related activity expressly approved by your instructor.
- The only material you should be reading in class is material assigned for that class. Reading anything else, such as newspapers or magazines, or doing work from another class, is not acceptable.
- Class may not be recorded in any fashion – audio, video, or otherwise – without
permission in writing from the instructor.

Required Texts

Every week a number of mandatory and optional readings are set; both primary texts, and secondary readings from the field of eco-criticism. Mandatory readings must be completed by every student prior to the seminar. Optional readings are for those students who wish to deepen their understanding of a topic, or pursue a specific area of the course in their final research essays. Films will be screened prior to seminar discussions, in screenings arranged by NYU Sydney. Note that although readings are assigned to specific weeks, many are relevant to a wide range of sections in the course.

The readings will be made available through NYU Classes or the NYU library. With reference to the novels, you may work from editions other than those that are listed here. Books will be available to purchase from the Co-op Bookstore.

PRIMARY TEXTS FOR ECO-CRITICISM, SPRING 2015.

Novels (to purchase):

Films (DVDs available at NYU Sydney):

Short-Story (available on NYU Classes):

Poetry (available on NYU Classes and to be provided in class):

Theory & Criticism (available on NYU Classes):

**Supplemental Texts**


There are also “Optional” readings for each seminar, listed in the week-by-week guide part of the syllabus. The instructor can also provide further supplementary reading; interested students should book a consultation time to discuss.

**Internet Research Guidelines**

A citation guide will be provided, detailing the proper form of referencing online, multimedia and textual sources. Students are encouraged to read beyond the set-list for the course at their own discretion. In researching their photo essays and research essays, students should maintain a sceptical mindset with regards to the reliability and authenticity of online resources.

**Additional Required Equipment**

None (other than sensible walking shoes for the field trips).

**PART 1: ECOCRITICAL THEORY (WEEKS 1-6)**
Session 1  Part I: What is Ecocriticism & Ecocritical Theory?

Thursday, February 5

The course is structured in two parts. In Part I we carefully read cultural theories relevant to ecocritical studies and in Part II we apply these theories to the reading of four great texts. The first half of the seminar will provide a comprehensive overview of the course outline, covering everything from the structure and content to assessments and expectations. We will then open the course by discussing some big conceptual questions. What and where is nature? As newly arrived students and tourists, what images, ideas and expectations do you have about nature in Australia? How do you plan to integrate your tourism and your learning? And, what ideas about nature have you carried with you in your ‘cultural backpack’ from home?

The second half of the seminar will be a mini-lecture and discussion focused entirely on the questions: “What is ecocriticism?” and “What is ecocritical theory?” You will come to this seminar having read Greg Garrard’s introductory chapter on ecocriticism, Ursula K. Heise’s “Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism” and an excerpt from Rachel Carson’s ground breaking book *Silent Spring*.

Required Reading:


Recommended Reading:


In this seminar students will receive details of the assignment “Seminar Preparation Journal”

Session 2  Nature & the Anthropocene

Thursday, February 12

This seminar will begin our exploration of conceptual and theoretical strategies for undertaking ecocritical analysis. Here we deconstruct the term “Nature” and introduce you to the “Anthropocene”. You will have watched Jan Zalasiewicz’s striking description of the new geological time-scale known as the “Anthropocene” – a concept that further complicates the relationship between humans and this thing we call “nature”. In this context, we will begin by deconstructing the term nature and exploring the idea of the Anthropocene not only as a stratigraphic layer, but as a useful cultural concept.
Required Reading:

Required Viewing:

Recommended Reading:

In this seminar students will receive details of the assignment “Photo Essay”.

Session 3  Apocalypse & Representation (On the Beach)
Thursday, February 19

This week we will explore the ecological apocalypse and strategies for representing the end of the world. A mini-lecture on the history of representations of the apocalypse will precede an exploration of the first major literary text of the course: Neville Shute’s On the Beach (1957). This novel and Joseph Masco’s article “Bad Weather” not only open up our thinking to apocalypticism inherent in ecocriticism, but also animate the historical roots of this global crisis. We will also spend some time thinking specifically about representation and genre: What literary forms are best suited to capturing environmental catastrophe? What does Shute’s novel say about our ability to represent a ‘whole world’ catastrophe?

Required Reading:

Recommended Reading:

Session 4  The “More than Human” World: Vibrant Matter & Companion Species
Thursday, February 26
A lively understanding of the world of things—from Animals, Plants, Fungi, Soil and Rocks, to Computers, Cyborgs, Bicycles, Cars, Roads, Coal, Atoms, Plankton, Drones and Pharmaceuticals—is essential for ecocritical thinking. This week we get down and dirty with a variety of more-than-human creatures, plants, objects and particles that share and, indeed, mutually constitute the world around us. This week we also sample two extraordinary works animating the world beyond the human. While the writing of Haraway and Bennett is difficult at times, we will spend good time in the seminars exploring the rich theoretical proposals offered by two giants of contemporary theory.

**Required Reading:**

**Recommended Viewing:**
- Haraway, Donna “SF: String Figures, Multispecies Muddles and Staying with the Trouble” Lecture from 2014 at University of Alberta. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1uTVnhiHS8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1uTVnhiHS8)

**Assessment due: Weeks 2-4 of Seminar Preparation Journal for a Work in Progress Grade**

### Session 5  Country & Gender

**Thursday, March 5**

*You are standing on a vast and undetectable artwork.* Indigenous epistemologies in Australia offer unique access to nature, and take form through cultural, legal and social discourse. Appeals to Indigenous understandings of the environment are refer to a specific kind of nature that exceeds the ‘natural’ in any western sense of the word. This seminar will explore how the idea of “Country” relates to ecocritical thinking. We will critically examine the idea, and unpack some key suppositions about Aboriginality, custodianship and ecology. We will have a guest speaker to guide our in the journey into the idea of Country. And, at the end of the seminar, we will make time to reflect on how the idea of Country is both similar to and different from the post-humanist theories we encountered in the previous week.

We will also look at the questions gender with regards to the notion of nature. Gender is a significant within ecocriticism because nature is usually gendered female, thus we need to be able to reflect upon how the gendering of nature shapes our attitudes towards environmental issues. The late ecofeminist philosopher, Val Plumwood, will guide us as we explore this complex terrain.

**Required Reading:**
In the final seminar of Part I, we venture out to a suburb just south of Sydney for a special field trip to Earlwood Farm. Using majestic views of the city as a backdrop and the back yard of a suburban home as a lecture hall, our subject for this seminar is “place”, “justice” and the “politics of dwelling”. The work ecology comes from the Greek oikos, meaning home; it is important not to forget our own homes as connected to the wider environment. Indeed, where and how we live is tied to a complex set of ecological relations that themselves can be the subject of ecocritical scrutiny. So as well as exploring some new theoretical ideas that will become useful as we progress into Part II of the course, we will also consider how ecocriticism relates to our real and embodied experience in the world, how it can shape our personal political thought and action.

Required Reading:
- Earlwood farm website—www.earlwoodfarm.com

Recommended Reading:

Field trip/excursion: Earlwood Farm

**SPRING BREAK 16 – 20 March**

**PART 2: ECOCRITICAL READING (WEEKS 7-14)**

Now we have acquired some theoretical tools how can we apply them to an ecocritical reading? How does the theory inform our reading of literature? How will it help us to draw out particular meanings from the primary texts? This seminar we will all read Rick Bass’s short story “Fiber” and Terry Gifford’s reading of the story. We will discuss Gifford’s argument with regards to Bass’s story and construct our own ecocritical reflection on Bass’s story as a class.
After providing a way into this section of the course way of a practical example of ecocritical reading, a mini-lecture will introduce the two modules of Part II “City” and “Desert”. The four texts of this half of the course, *Australia Daze, Indelible Ink, Tracks* and *Everyman’s Rules For Scientific Living* variously represent these different environmental regions of Australia. The lecture will also outline how the theory learned in Part I will be useful to us in Part II.

For the second half of the seminar, will embark on an ecocritical walking tour of Circular Quay and the Botanic Gardens thinking not only about the human history of the site—the arrival of boat loads of people and the shocking displacement of others—but also about the animals, plants and rocks that constitute this landmass.

**Required Reading:**


**Field trip/excursion: Excavating Deep Time – a Perambulatory Seminar**

The walking tour of The Rocks, Circular Quay and around to the Botanic Gardens will explore the deep time geological and environmental history of the site in relation to its present day appearance and foreshadow session 8.

In this seminar students will receive details of the assignment “Essay Proposal & Final Essay”.

**Assessment Due: Photo Essays (25%)**

**Session 8 (Part II, Module I) City not Country (Australia Daze) & Essay Planning Workshop**

**Thursday, April 2**

The late Australian poet Dorothy Porter once described Sydney as a “glittering tart”, and cultural theorist Ross Gibson added “Aqueous. Shiny. Shifty. Stupid. Braggart. Gorgeous beyond measure. Cruel. Exorbitant. A geist that puts hooks in you when you do your hardest wanting”. While these are evocative descriptions of Sydney today, there is more to Australia’s largest city than its brash and beautiful current incarnation. Indeed, the city is built on land stolen from its indigenous custodians, in a historical act of violence that has never been properly reconciled. To introduce our ecocritical study of the City will watch the documentary *Australia Daze*, made as a response to the “celebration” of the Bicentenary of the British Colonisation of Australia in 1988. Dramatised re-enactments of first contact clash with one of the biggest Indigenous protest marches in the Nation’s history, in a filmic pastiche that highlights the contested nature of the land beneath our feet. Building on our knowledge of Country, and the environmental history of the region animated in Seminar 7’s field trip, this seminar looks at representations of Sydney that engage with its deep time geological and indigenous history, and also some representations of the arrival of the first white people.

**Required Reading:**


**Recommended Reading:**

• Lorange, Astrid (ed.). *Cordite Poetry Review* #38.0: Sydney 2012.  


The final part of this seminar is an essay planning workshop.

**Session 9  Urban Ecologies: Class, Gender & a living City (*Indelible Ink*)**  
Thursday, April 9

From Seaforth to Surry Hills and from Gordon’s Bay to Villawood, Sydney is a living character in Fiona McGregor’s majestic novel *Indelible Ink*. In the photo-essay assignment you will have already explored some of the suburbs of Sydney featured in the novel and undertaken preliminary theoretical reflections on how the environment actively shapes life in the city. Here we have a chance to apply that thinking to a literary example.

While the novel as a literary form is known for its ability to represent the human experience—from gender and class wars, to the dynamics of desire and sexuality—an ecocritical reading of McGregor’s novel reveals a narrative carefully stitched into a lively setting. The novel’s setting binds the human to the more than human, the cultural to the natural, and the local to the global. This week we harness some of the tools developed in Part I—in particular Val Plumwood’s work on the Politics of Dwelling and Gender—and construct an ecocritical reading of Sydney’s role in the novel.

**Required Reading:**


**Recommended Reading:**

*We will also draw on Val Plumwood’s work as the theory for this seminar, so please re-read her work for this seminar.*


• Googling “Fiona McGregor” & “Indelible Ink” in a single search will reveal the author’s website, a range of her own responses to the novel, reviews and video blogs about the work. Familiarising yourself not only with the novel, but its reception both here and abroad, is recommended.

**Session 10  More Than Human Sydney (*Indelible Ink*)**  
Thursday, April 16
Guest lecturer: Dr Thom van Dooren (Senior Lecturer, Environmental Humanities, UNSW)

In this seminar we explore the details of more-than-human Sydney and their role in Marie’s story, from Gardens and Vomit to Lemon Trees, Bars, Cafes, Cats, Cancer, Tattoo Parlours, the Harbour, the Zoo, Weeds and Petrol Stations. This seminar will methodically move through the novel and, using the theory of Jane Bennett and Donna Haraway, explore the variety of ways the author weaves the more-than-human world into her narrative.

During the novel, the heroine Marie is slowly tattooed with images of “more than human” phenomena, from flames and moths to passionfruit and angophora. Her body becomes a canvas for the representation of aspects of Sydney’s ecology most relevant to her experience and memory. She also becomes very sick, as if poisoned by the lifestyle she led in the city. We will also think about the role of the individual human within the ecosystem. Harold Fromm writes eloquently about his bodily experiences of being polluted, by substances he cannot name, in his life on a farm. What if the toxic waste dump isn’t the waterway or the forest, but the self?

We will also conclude our module on the City with a talk from Thom van Dooren who has spent a lot of time thinking with the city’s penguins and their lives on the edges of our ever-changing harbour.

Required Reading:


Recommended Reading:

*We will also draw on Bennett and Haraway as the theory for this seminar, so please re-read their work for this seminar.*


Assessment due: Essay proposal (20%)

Session 11  (Part II, Module II) Desert and Place (Tracks) & Essay Writing Workshop

Thursday, April 23

Seminar 11 moves us from the city to the desert. How do we imagine the vast and dry expanses of this great southern land? Recently, the politician Bob Katter said “If you drop a series of hydrogen bombs from the back of Cairns ... all the way across to Broome, you won’t kill anybody. There’s nobody living there. There’s only 670,000 people living on 95 percent of the surface area of this country.” But of course such an act would cause incredible loss of life. Australia may be big and sparsely populated, but the land is not empty and the flow on effect of such bombing would devastate the island ecology. Moreover, indigenous Australians...
traditionally inhabited the whole continent and the land is dotted with sacred sites. The colonial and anthropocentric attitude that Australia is empty is complicated by Robyn Davidson’s journey across the centre in *Tracks*, this essay will use the 2013 film of Davidson’s journey as a way to frame our understanding of the interior.

**Required Reading:**

**Required Viewing:**

**Recommended Reading:**

**Return of Essay Proposal**

The final part of this seminar will be an essay writing workshop.

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**Session 12  Sex in the Desert (*Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living*)**

**Thursday, April 30**

**Guest Speaker: Carrie Tiffany  (Author of *Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living*)**

Carrie’s novel is brimming of descriptions of sexual encounters in the both human and the more than human world, some are wild and sexy and others mechanical and scientific. We will seize upon these moments within the novel as a point of departure to ask how the novel’s representation of sex–reproductive, pleasurable, scientific and illicit–accesses broader ecocritical themes. In this seminar we call back to the gendering of nature, the body and environment theorized by Val Plumwood and also the “slow violence” of pollution, theorized by Rob Dixon. In particular, we ask how does the idea of the desert as barren landscape complicate the novel’s representation of sexual fertility and reproduction?

**Required Reading:**

**Recommended Reading:**
Session 13  Rural Apocalypse / Desert Ecology (Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living)

Thursday, May 7

This seminar takes us back to week 3 of the course and ideas of the apocalypse and the challenges of representation. In *Indelible Ink*, the protagonist is given a book the cover of which showed a “parched Australian landscape. Prize stickers like UFOs floated across the red sky. A skeletal tree stood in the foreground”. This exchange reveals one of the paradoxes of the Australian cultural life: although we are one of the most urbanized populations on earth and all our major cities are on the coast, our imaginations are fixated in the interior. Indeed, award winning novels and films of our country tell stories of what Ken Gelder calls the “Rural Apocalypse”, including such tales as Carrie Tiffany’s novel *Everyman’s Rules For Scientific Living*. This seminar will explore the desire to shape the environment of the semi-arid and arid regions of Australia, and reflect on the role of the environment itself in the failure of that dream as represented in Tiffany’s novel.

**Required Reading:**

**Recommended Reading:**

**Assignment due: Seminar Preparation Journal (15%)**

Session 14  A Game & A Movie

Thursday, May 14

Aaaand, we’re done! At the beginning of Seminar 14 you will hand in your final assessment piece. In this seminar we will revise the course together, its themes and key learnings over the semester. We will consider ‘where to from here’ options for when you return from Sydney to the United States, and we will ask for your feedback to help strengthen the course into the future. There is only one reading for this seminar—‘Global Futures: The Game’. We will spend some time speculating on future possibilities stemming from your learning in the course, before watching a film to end the experience

**Required Reading:**

**Assignment due: Long Essay (30%)**
Jennifer Hamilton holds a PhD in English Literature and is currently a Visiting Fellow with the Environmental Humanities research group at the University of New South Wales. Her book project, *Shakespeare’s Pitiless Storm*, is a cultural history of human-weather relations, using the storm scenes in *King Lear* as a touchstone. As an ecocritic, Jennifer activates links between traditional theoretical research and a creative life praxis. Her artistic collaborations—*Walking in the Rain* (2011), *Sea Shanties for Dead Sailors* (2012), *Tilting at Windmills* (2013) and *The Yurt Empire* (2013-14)—explore themes of environmental degradation, colonial history and urban renewal. She shares the ambition of being an urban farmer with her partner and blogs about their progress at www.earlwoodfarm.com.