

NATURE: ART, MYTH, AND FOLKLORE

As members of ERS, we are attuned to the concept that we are part of the complex socio-ecological system that is planet Earth. We thus should understand that “nature” is more than just the material world—the biophysical environment—in which we find ourselves. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, provides 14 senses for the word “nature” in four broad categories: (i) “relating to physical or bodily power, strength, or substance”; (ii) “relating to mental or physical impulses and requirements”; (iii) “relating to innate character”; and, (iv) “relating to the material world”. Such insight has, indeed, been part of western thought for a very long time, at least since the classic Greek philosophers.

The quest to understand nature—the essential characteristics of both self and the world, and the place of self in the world—has occupied people for as long as they have been capable of abstract thought. Secular thought of modernity has favoured the absolute distinction between human nature and Nature. For example, the geographer Robert Kates identified “the central question of the human environment tradition [in Geography as:] *what is and ought to be our relationship to the natural world?*” [my emphasis] For us moderns, the approaches used to comprehend nature often come out of the scientific tradition, yet the quest is older and broader than modern science. All cultures have used myth, folklore, and art—sometimes codified into religious belief and expressed through religious ritual—to express their exploration, categorization, and understanding of the “central question”. The imperative implied by the “ought” in Kates’ central question, until modernity, came from a profound sense of continuity between self, society, and the material world.

ERS 360 aims to examine “nature”, but not through the rational, scientific approach common to university courses. Rather, we will attempt to experience the symbolic and metaphoric understanding typical of pre-modern societies. Their art, myth, and folklore expressed a worldview that accounted for human nature, for Nature, and for the place of humans in and of Nature. I do not argue that the symbolic approach is better than the scientific, only that life is richer when we are alive to the perspectives both provide. The course asks you to express your understanding of nature in creative ways, to attempt to think, and therefore experience, like a pre-modern person. You will thereby experience a way of knowing the self in the world that, though once common, is too often absent in our scientific modernity.

Meetings: Monday June 16 –Friday June 27, daily 08:30–11:50 a.m.; room EV2-1001

Instructor: Paul Kay, Associate Professor Emeritus ERS

Contacting me: Consultations Monday–Thursday afternoons, EV2–2039.

e-mail: pkay@uwaterloo.ca

My assigned office space does not have a telephone. E-mail is my preferred communication tool, which I monitor it throughout the day. You can usually expect a response within a day’s time.

Text: A book of course readings, available from the bookstore, is required. It contains details about each week's topic, instructions for the various course requirements, a select bibliography and various materials meant to “prime the pump” of your imagination for the assignments.

Thematic Approach: There are many possible ways to approach an examination of Nature. Courses in folklore often use culture or region or time as the organizing principle(s). I have chosen a thematic approach, in which we will be sampling freely across culture and time.

How the Course Works: Unlike many of your university courses, ERS 360 asks a high degree of continuous participation, and the course will be what you make of it. You are expected to work consistently and to offer input regularly. At all times, your questions and discussions are encouraged.

Further, ERS 360 asks you to work outside the usual box of rational analysis. Creativity, exploration, and insight are desired. “Artistic skill” is not a prerequisite (my last art class was in grade 7, **many** decades ago), but a willingness to explore the vocabularies of art, myth, and folklore is.

As the schedule on the next page indicates, our meetings will consist of some lecture, discussion, and presentation of your creative work. We will view two films that lead us to question the value of traditional lifeways in the face of modernity; these films bookend the course. In between, our meetings will typically begin with presentation and discussion of your daily work on the theme (shown in **bold**) introduced in the middle part of the previous day, and end with discussion about and time for approaches to the assignment for the next day.

Evaluation: Your grade will be based on:

- participation throughout the term (attendance, active contribution to class sections, and daily assignments)—50%;
- a “mid-term” creation, due at the beginning of week 2—25%; and,
- a final summation, due at the end of week 2’s last class—25%.

Details of the assignments and requirements are provided in the course reader.

Late Penalties: Late submissions will be penalized (at 5 points per day).

| Day | 8:30–9:30 | 9:45–10:45 | 11:00–11:50 |
|--------|---|----------------------------------|--|
| Mon 16 | Introduction to course. What is art; myth; folklore? | Movie: <i>Rabbit-proof Fence</i> | |
| Tue 17 | Discuss <i>Rabbit-proof Fence</i> | Symbol & Metaphor | A metaphor that expresses my operating image of nature. |
| Wed 18 | My metaphor for “nature” | Attributes of Place | What makes “my place” my place? |
| Thu 19 | A story about my place | Creation | Write a creation myth to explain how some aspect of nature came to be. |
| Fri 20 | A creation story | Time | Describe a ritual that would mark a significant time in your university life. |
| Mon 23 | A ritual for my time | Animal | Write a myth or folktale that illustrates the quality of your animal totem. |
| Tue 24 | My totem animal | Tree & Forest | Write a myth or folktale that teaches the proper position of the “people” to the forest. |
| Wed 25 | A forest story | Garden | Water |
| Thu 26 | A garden that expresses your hope for the future. | | Journey |
| Fri 27 | Movie: <i>Die Salzmänner von Tibet</i> | | Summation , using <i>Saltmen</i> |

Mandatory Statements Regarding Your Rights

Academic Integrity: To create and promote a culture of academic integrity, the behaviour of all members of the University of Waterloo is based on honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility.

Grievance: A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of his/her university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. Read Policy 70 - Student Petitions and Grievances, Section 4, <http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/policies/policy70.html>

Discipline: A student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offences, and to take responsibility for his/her actions. A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about “rules” for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course professor, academic advisor, or the Undergraduate Associate Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under Policy 71 – Student Discipline. For information on categories of offences and types of penalties, students should refer to Policy 71 - Student Discipline, <http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.html>

Appeals: A student may appeal the finding and/or penalty in a decision made under Policy 70 - Student Petitions and Grievances (other than regarding a petition) or Policy 71 - Student Discipline if a ground for an appeal can be established. Read Policy 72 - Student Appeals, <http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy72.html>

Consequences of Academic Offences: As a student you are expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offenses, and to take responsibility for your actions. If you are unsure whether an action constitutes an offense, or if you need help in learning how to avoid offenses (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about “rules” for group work/collaboration, you should seek guidance from the course professor, academic advisor, or the Undergraduate Associate Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under Policy 71 – Student Discipline. For information on categories of offenses and types of penalties, you should refer to Policy 71 - Student Discipline, <http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm>

Within ENV, students committing academic offences (e.g. cheating, plagiarism) will be placed on disciplinary probation and will be subject to penalties which may include a grade of 0 on affected course elements, 0 on the course, suspension, and expulsion. Students who believe that they have been wrongfully or unjustly penalized have the right to grieve; refer to Policy #70, Student Grievance, <http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy70.htm>