

The Nature of Modernity: Landscape, Environment, Planet

We are now living in the geological epoch that scientists call the Anthropocene, which is marked as that period in which the effects of humans on the planet have attained the force and scale of planetary events, including but not limited to anthropogenic climate change. This course will look at the historical development of environmental literature leading up to the present moment, focusing mainly on American writers. The course will be divided into three parts, focusing on the concepts of landscape, environment, and anthropocene, respectively.

We will begin with English romantic poetry and American Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau, whose writings took a stand for nature against the increasing industrialization and fast pace of urban life in modernity. For these early 19th-century authors, nature was often understood in opposition to the human. We will then shift our focus to the development of preservationism, conservationism, and environmentalism from the late 19th to the mid-20th centuries, including works by John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson. We will conclude by looking at contemporary treatments of the anthropocene, reading both scientific/governmental reports and late 20th/early 21st century cli-fi (climate science fiction).