

**Environmental Studies 900**

**HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL METHODS IN ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH**

**(The “CHE Methods Seminar”)**

**INSTRUCTOR:** Bill Cronon, 443 Science Hall.

**Phone:** 265-6023; this has an answering machine, and I'll try to reply to messages as quickly as I can. **No calls to my home phone number, please.** Your best bet for a quick reply is almost always to email me rather than phone, at [wcronon@wisc.edu](mailto:wcronon@wisc.edu). But if by chance you don't get a response, please don't hesitate to send me a cage rattling email reminder. I typically receive 80-100 emails per day, and am always falling behind in replying. I'm therefore very happy when students whose messages have unintentionally slipped down my queue send me reminders, and I hope you'll try to be forgiving when this is necessary.

**Course Web Page:** [www.williamcronon.net/courses/chemethods.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/courses/chemethods.htm)

**Class Meetings:** We will meet Tuesday evenings from 5:30-8:00pm in 202-204 Bradley Memorial, 1225 Linden Drive. You should generally plan to eat beforehand. Class sessions will typically be divided into two blocks, with a break occurring sometime between 6:30-7:00pm, and with different faculty guests joining us for either or both of the two blocks.

**Office Hours:** I'm not keeping regular office hours during the spring semester, but will be happy to meet by appointment at any time that is convenient for both of us. To make an appointment, email me at [wcronon@wisc.edu](mailto:wcronon@wisc.edu).

**DESCRIPTION:**

Typically offered each spring, the CHE Methods seminar is one of the most important curricular offerings of the Nelson Institute's Center for Culture, History, and Environment. It has several goals:

- It introduces graduate students from a wide array of departments and programs to different disciplinary and interdisciplinary methods for studying past environmental change and the cultural human cultural contexts within which it occurs.
- It explores the disparate forms of evidence that can be used to reconstruct past environmental change and its human meanings.
- It strives to build a strong sense of community among graduate students and faculty members at UW-Madison who share an interest in past environmental change by creating a context within which grad students from different departments and programs can work together and become colleagues while getting to know faculty members associated with CHE.
- Written assignments for the seminar are designed in part to lay the groundwork for the CHE Place-Based Workshop, an annual field trip that occurs each May. Teams of students in the seminar will produce written documents, web resources, and/or oral reports to prepare participants in the workshop for the places they'll be visiting. This year's workshop will focus on vernacular architecture, built environment, and landscape interpretation in Madison and southwestern Wisconsin, so a key strand of the seminar will use these themes to practice the disciplinary and interdisciplinary skills and methods we're exploring in the rest of the course.

Because the seminar strives to reflect and incorporate the interests of the graduate students who are taking it, and also those of the many CHE faculty members who participate in panel discussions, this syllabus is being left relatively open at the start of the semester. The syllabus will evolve as the goals and interests of seminar members become clearer, and as CHE faculty members contribute readings for the sessions in which they participate, so that the final syllabus will not be complete until the end of the semester.

## READINGS

Since the large majority of readings in this syllabus have not yet been finalized, there will be many additions as visiting CHE faculty members identify texts they want to discuss and as seminar members decide topics we would like to explore together. Some readings will reflect the evolution of our conversations together, and some will be generated by the written assignments you'll be doing as background for the CHE Place-Based Workshop in May. Whenever possible, students will be informed of readings at least a week ahead of time, and in general the total number of pages assigned in a week will be under 200 pages except when an entire book is being assigned.

The one book that is currently assigned (and it may turn out to be the only full book you'll be reading) is the following classic guide to research methods. Please obtain a copy and read through it as early in the semester as you can.

Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research*, University of Chicago Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2008.

## WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

Written assignments will be defined after seminar members have brainstormed the content they would like to produce as background documents for the CHE Place-Based Workshop in May. Again, we will discuss this process at the first session of the seminar.

## QUESTIONS WE'LL ADDRESS

Although the design of the seminar is intended to be very flexible, it is not completely formless. The strategy I've adopted for trying to coordinate the interests of seminar members and those of CHE faculty participants is to frame a series of broad questions, at least two of which will be addressed in the two different parts of each seminar session. We'll review and discuss these questions at our first meeting, adding to, subtracting from, and revising them to reflect our interests, and then I'll start building a weekly outline by working to fit questions with CHE faculty members who will join us to discuss them.

I've arranged these questions into three sets. The first relates to broad understandings of academic disciplines: what they are; their strengths and weaknesses; how they affect our ability to address questions that cannot adequately be addressed by a single discipline; and how scholars and scientists with different disciplinary perspectives can best work together. The second set relates to the different analytical methods and forms of evidence that enable us to reconstruct past environmental change and its human meanings and cultural contexts. Finally, the third set—which we'll be brainstorming together—will give seminar members the opportunity to apply what they're learning about interdisciplinary research to the problem of using scientific and scholarly insights to interpret landscapes and built environments for public audiences by means of self-guided tours. Here are the questions I've pulled together thus far.

### Questions about Disciplines and Interdisciplinary Scholarship:

What is a discipline, and how does one find one's bearings both within and between disciplinary spaces? How do our different disciplines conceive of time, space/place, and culture?

What are the key ways we seek to know nature, both within and between academic disciplines, and in the rest of human life?

What are the most interesting questions about past environmental change that tend to fall between the cracks when a single discipline tackles them on its own? (The answer to this question will likely vary from discipline to discipline, but are there also questions that tend to fall between the cracks for all disciplines?)

What strategies are most effective when people with different disciplinary training try to work together on a common problem or project?

In studying the environmental past and thinking about its relationship with the environmental present, how

can we best resolve the creative tensions between scholarship and activism?

How can we best communicate our scholarly and scientific insights beyond the boundaries of our discipline, both to our colleagues in other fields and to the larger public?

**Questions about Methods and Evidence:**

What constitutes an interesting and important research question--and what shapes our judgment in deciding whether or not a question is "significant"?

What different skills do we need for reading different kinds of scholarly communications? How does a scientific article, for instance, differ from an article in a humanities discipline like history or literature?

What is evidence, and how do different disciplinary domains constitute, deploy, and privilege evidence differently?

What are documents, and how can we find the ones we need?

What and how can we learn from pictures?

What and how can we learn from film?

How can we make and use maps, and what are the best new digital tools for doing so?

What are the differences between quantitative and qualitative information, and what do we need to know when we start asking questions that require us to count?

How should we interview people to find out what they can tell us about their lives and their worlds?

How do we tell stories, and what are the opportunities and hazards of narrative as a rhetorical form?

How do we synthesize different analytical insights and different forms of knowledge to produce a unified argument?

## SYLLABUS, READINGS, AND HOMEWORK

### January 24: Introductory

Introduction to the CHE Methods Seminar

Getting to know each other: extended introductions

Brainstorming goals and protocols for the seminar

Brainstorming our final projects and questions we should be exploring to move forward with them.

**READING:** None.

### January 27: CHE Director's Potluck (come if at all possible)

6:00-9:00pm, Lynn Keller's House, 2005 Jefferson St.; bring side dish, salad, or dessert to pass.

This annual gathering at the start of the second semester is a great way to get to know or reconnect with members of the CHE community.

### January 31: From Interdisciplinary Dissertation to Prize-Winning Book

Part I: Special Session with Thomas Andrews of the University of Colorado-Boulder on "What I've Learned about Interdisciplinary Environmental-Historical Research, and What I'm Still Trying to Figure Out." (Andrews will be giving a CHE public lecture right before our seminar at 4:00pm on Tuesday, January 31, in 125 Bradley Memorial, and if you can possibly attend, you should; he'll also be launching the CHE Colloquium discussion on Wednesday, February 1, from 12-1pm in 202 Bradley Memorial, and that should be worth attending if you can as well.)

Part II: Initial brainstorming session about kinds of self-guided tours we'd like to produce to share our disciplinary and interdisciplinary insights about key places in the Madison and Dane County area.

#### **READINGS:**

Thomas Andrews, "Made by Toile"? Tourism, Labor, and the Construction of the Colorado Landscape, 1858-1917," *Journal of American History*, 92:3 (Dec 2005), 837-63.

Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), Chapter 1.

### February 6: Navigating the Crossroads of Disciplines

Part I: What is a discipline? How do you know when you are in one? How does one find one's bearings both within and between disciplinary spaces? (Guest: Gregg Mitman)

Part II: What are the basic stages of the academic research process, and what skills does one need to acquire to become an effective researcher?

#### **READINGS:**

Carl Sauer, "The Agency of Man on the Earth," in *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth*, edited by William L. Thomas, Jr., pp. 49-69 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), pp. 42-68, 301-303.

Gregg Mitman, "Where Ecology, Nature, and Politics Meet: Reclaiming *The Death of Nature*," *Isis* 97 (2006): 496-504.

Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research* (University of Chicago Press, 3rd edition, 2008), pp. 3-27.

Definitions of the word "discipline" (and "interdisciplinary" and "transdisciplinary," *American Heritage Dictionary* and *Oxford English Dictionary*. (Available online)

Review research process portions and "How We Built This Website" page of *Learning to Do Historical Research* website: [www.williamcronon.net/researching/index.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/index.htm)

**ASSIGNMENT:** Find reviews of *The Death of Nature* in at least two different disciplinary journals and bring them to class prepared to discuss.