

ENS 350 *Environmental Visions*

Elon University, Spring 2012

W 3:35-6:55, Powell House (Environmental Studies) 101 (& on the road)

Professor Anthony Weston

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Office hours: TWTh 1:15-2:15 and by appointment

Catalog description

This course explores alternative “green” visions of the future far beyond the familiar, reactive responses to the ecological emergency of our times. We consider possible long-term transformations of technologies, materials, food, cities, human relations and our relations with other animals, Earth as a whole, and with the rest of the cosmos. Students end by developing environmental visions of their own.

Course Objectives

This course offers you the chance to:

1. Gain a longer-term and more varied perspective on environmental problems and possibilities than we are usually offered in public discussion or even, often, within environmentalism itself. Visionary perspectives can give us the conceptual and imaginative space to plan for, and choose between, radical green futures. Disaster is not the only possibility – though arguably our times remain perilous.
2. Discover that a wide range of contemporary thinkers and communities are already engaging the question of long-term green alternatives, and are offering dramatic and also dramatically different visions of the future; and furthermore that many experiments toward some of those futures are already underway.
3. Become conversant with some of the chief types of environmental visions currently taking shape and being debated, such as radical visions of sustainability (well beyond and even against the current definitions and practice of sustainability), visions focused on transforming our relations with other creatures, “bright green” techno-optimism (“dematerializing culture”; “geo-engineering”...), and “re-wilding” (“bringing back the Pleistocene”) alongside extraterrestrial environmentalism.
4. Develop some essential critical tools to compare and evaluate these visions for yourself, and correspondingly a familiarity with the critical reception that they have so far received. Students develop their own critical evaluations of the alternatives as a first step toward working out their own environmental visions.
5. Develop the skills to imaginatively and critically articulate an environmental vision of your own, to be shared in a public forum for the Elon Community.

Books for the course

We'll be using books from a variety of sources. Four are in the bookstore:

- Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia* (Heyday, 2004)
- David Holmgren, *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability* (Holmgren Design Services, 2002)
- Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making Life on a Tough New Planet* (St Martin's, 2011)
- Anthony Weston, *Mobilizing the Green Imagination* (New Society, 2012)

One other (Lovelock) you can get from me; the rest will be online or handed out on photocopy.

Class Meetings

We have three and a half hour sessions once a week. It's a long time, but we will use it for a variety of activities, and take a variety of breaks, including for food. The long seminar-style meeting time also enables us to travel off-campus for meetings at local sites related to our themes and readings – which we will do frequently! Though these trips will also make the meeting schedule somewhat varied, our “home” schedule may look something like this:

- 1) Check-in
- 2) The week's visionary (student introduction of the week's author(s))
- 3) Review of key categories and concepts
- 4) Key ideas – at least outlined
- 5) Break (+ snack)
- 6) Workshop/ Application activity
- 7) Imaginative extension (if not part of #6), with food
- 8) Check-out

Again, though, we'll be on the road at least half the time, and the plan will vary accordingly.

Expectations and grades

1. Attendance and in-class contributions (25% of your grade)

Be here, and be active! Attendance is always expected unless you are too sick to contribute to or benefit from the class. Timeliness is expected too – especially on trip days. Your timeliness and participation allow *me* to be more efficient and effective as well, as well as making the class as productive as possible for your classmates. In general, attendance and participation cannot be made up, since they depend on interaction and each session's activities are carefully planned, and many sessions will be off campus in places you can't otherwise go. Five percent of your grade is based specifically on your Visionary introduction (of one of our authors) and other (slightly) more formal in-class presentations or symposia.

2. Weekly reading responses: 5% each (total 50% of your grade)

There will be eleven meetings with assigned readings. For each of these meetings, you are asked to write a reading response of about 2 pages double-spaced typed. You'll need to be accurate, concise, and on your critical toes; a little additional research may be necessary (or wise) sometimes. Your response should summarize the reading's main ideas and themes, including a few

citations when appropriate but largely in your own words, and then offer an appreciative but also critical perspective, which can draw on what you may find out about the critical reception of the book but should also be in part your own. Reading responses should be emailed to me (attached Word documents please) by *8 am Wednesday* before class meeting (this is so that I can read them before class and have some idea of what you are thinking). They will be lightly graded (+/OK/-scale) and for this portion of your grade I will count your best ten (so you can miss/drop one).

3. Final project: (25% of grade)

One of the aims of this course is for students to take on green visionary thinking for yourselves as well as (and in the context of) encountering the green visions of others. Accordingly, from the very start, I advise keeping notes on your own ideas as they arise while doing the readings and in discussion and on trips for this class. As the course proceeds, let a few ideas take more detailed shape as possible directions to pursue for a final project. After Break, you will begin to work on some of your own ideas in class workshops. For your final paper/project, your challenge is to work out one of them as an environmental vision of your own. Ideally it will be not just a projection of possibility but a concrete future that we could begin to plan for and realize *now*: that is, an actual imaginative *proposal*. To give these proposal a concrete focus, it should be an idea that applies specifically to Elon: that is, some proposal, even if quite wild, that can be concretely realized *here*. Students might work in pairs or alone. We will arrange a public presentation and celebration of your proposals, possibly along with a website, at the end of the term.

Tentative schedule

Week 1, Feb 1: **Introduction**

Read: Weston, *Mobilizing the Green Imagination*, Chapters 1 and 2.

Week 2, Feb 8: **The Gaia Hypothesis and a Total Disaster Scenario**

Read: Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia*, Chapters 1-4.

Week 3, Feb 15: **Partial disaster – “Making Life on a Tough New Planet”**

Read: McKibben, *Eaarth*, pp 1-2 and 90-212 (Chapters 3-4 and a bit more: skim the rest).

→ Trip: Windy Knoll Farm, Gibsonville

Week 4, Feb 22: **Total Sustainability: A Classic Vision**

Read: Callenbach, *Ecotopia* (selections: there will be a reading guide).

→ Trip: Arcadia Co-Housing Community, Carrboro (return about 7:45)

Week 5, Feb 29: **Beyond Sustainability: Visions Mash-Up**

This week the class will divide up different readings and bring them together in a mash-up of different visions that frame themselves as “beyond sustainability”. Readings will include selections from Holmgren’s *Permaculture*, materials from on-line resources such as Worldchanging (<http://www.worldchanging.com/>) and the Buckminster Fuller Institute (<http://www.bfi.org/>), and *Mobilizing the Green Imagination*, Chapters 3 & 4.

Week 6, March 7: **“Bright Green” Visions and Geo-engineering**

Read: TBA. We may end up doing more of the above, plus “geo-engineering” (from web resources: for a starting overview, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoengineering>). We’ll also explore the Viridian Design Movement at <http://www.viridiandesign.org/manifesto.html>.

Week 7, March 14: **Design for Climate Change**

Read: *Mobilizing the Green Imagination*, Chapters 5 & 8, plus web and other complementary sources (see reading guide).

The week of March 21 is SPRING BREAK!!

Week 8, March 28: **From Ecological to Social Paradigms**

Read: Selections from Sally Goerner, *After the Clockwork Universe* (photocopied handout)
→ Trip to Vimala's Curryblossom Restaurant (great Indian food while we talk), Chapel Hill.
Guest: Sally Goerner. We'll meet with her for discussion and food -- plan on dinner.

Week 9, April 4: **Visions of "Re-Wilding"**

Read: selections from Paul Martin, *Twilight of the Mammoths: Ice Age Extinctions and the Rewilding of America* (University of California, 2007) and Anne Matthews, *Where the Buffalo Roam: Restoring America's Great Plains* (University of Chicago, 2002) and others (photocopied handouts).

→ Trip to NC Conservators' Center, Mebane. We'll start with a tour of the Conservators' Center -- meet the big cats and wolves -- and Center staff will join us for a discussion of the readings.

Week 10, April 11: **Cross-Species Connections**

Read: Tess Williams, *Sea as Mirror* (selections; there will be a reading guide)

→ Trip: class will meet at Timberlake Farm in Whitsett (Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World): staff will join our discussion. We'll have time for outside exploration as well. The author, Tess Williams, will join us via Skype. Timberlake staff will also join the discussion.

Week 11, April 18: **No Class** (prep for field trip this coming weekend)

Read: Eco-village web resources (TBA).

→ Friday April 20th – Sunday 22nd: **Field trip, Earthhaven Ecovillage**

For our Earth Day observance, we'll camp and tour Earthhaven Ecovillage and maybe get in a hike and visit to Asheville as well. We can get camping equipment through Elon if you need it.

Week 12, April 25: **Beyond Earth: Extraterrestrial Visions Mash-Up**

This week we'll again divide up different readings and then bring them together symposium-style to consider the prospects for a cosmic or extraterrestrial environmentalism. Readings will include *Mobilizing the Green Imagination*, Chapter 9; Lovelock's *The Greening of Mars*; selections from Robert Zubrin's *The Case for Mars* (Touchstone, 1996); and Oliver Morton's "Gaia's Neighbor", from his *Mapping Mars: Science, Imagination, and the Birth of a World* (Picador, 2003).

Week 13, April 2: **Workshop and Presentation of Student Visionary Projects**

Final meeting, Saturday, May 12 (11:30-2:30): **Presentation of Student Visionary Projects**