

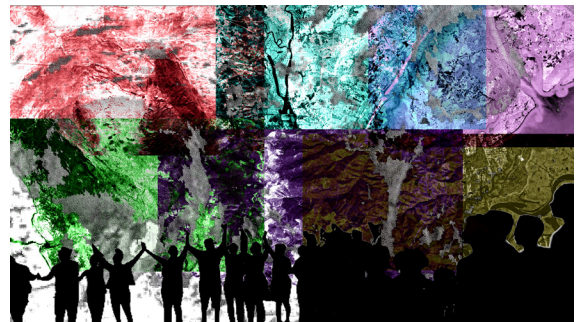
Architecture Climate Change & Society

Buell Center
2021 Course Development Prize

LIVING BY WATER: ENGLISH LITERATURE AND COMMUNITY DESIGN ISSUES JOINT MICRO SEMINARS ON PLACE AND COMMUNITY

Amee Carmines & Carmina Sánchez-del-Valle
Hampton University

The joint micro-seminars in “Living by Water” focus on the interaction between place and community, particularly at times of crisis. Architecture students from a course on community design collaborate with students in a course on the novel to visualize literary works to create an environment that promotes a critical dialogue crossing invisible and implied disciplinary boundaries. In the texts, the landscape of communities built and destroyed around constructions of racial hierarchy links to the construction of narrative. The collaborative inquiry reveals the structures, physical and social limitations, and strategies needed to shelter human beings in ways that enrich cultural expression; and how knowledgeable and skilled local communities are about their built environment.



**Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture and ACSA
2021 Course Development Prize in Architecture, Climate Change, and Society Submission**

Authors:

Dr. Ameer Carmines, Associate Professor,
Department of English and Foreign Languages, School of Liberal Arts and Education
Dr. Carmina Sánchez-del-Valle, Professor,
Department of Architecture, School of Engineering and Technology
Hampton University, Virginia

Title

Living by Water: English Literature and Community Design Issues Joint Micro Seminars on Place and Community

Course Description

Each joint “micro-seminar” focuses on the interaction between place and community, particularly at times of crisis. It brings together English literature and architecture students. It is not a full course that occupies its own space and time, but one that is carved out of two required courses: one offered by the Department of English and Foreign Languages, and the other by the Department of Architecture. The idea is to augment the content of both. The required course for English Literature students is “ENG 409-410: The Novel”. The one required of architecture students is “ARC 618: Community Design Issues Seminar”. Since Spring 2019 the faculty involved in this effort have tested the approach and the literary works that create an environment encouraging students to engage in a critical dialogue that crosses invisible and implied disciplinary boundaries. The micro-seminars can be organized to meet for one to three sessions for each novel.

These are the micro-seminars we have completed:

Micro seminar I (Spring 2019): In the Eye of the Hurricane: Building for Shelter from the Storm (Naylor’s Gullah Islands and Ward’s De Lisle and the St. Louis Bay - looking at the exploitation of the natural environment and the devastation of the storm)

Micro seminar II (Spring 2020): Rivers to the Sea: Building for History (Conrad’s Congo and Chesnut’s Wilmington – looking at the physical landscapes of exploitation and racial divide)

English 410 has been revised to focus on novels which narrate the survival of African-American communities devastated by hurricanes. In Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, a traditional community of Sea Islanders weathers the natural storm that levels houses and the social storm caused by wealthy investors seeking to create a resort paradise. Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* anchors the dilemma of community and building in the American experience of Hurricane Katrina through a young African-American girl whose tenuous physical and social environment on the gulf coast of Mississippi results in both the loss of her home and the loss of her childhood innocence. And yet, in the face of these unbearable losses, each of these communities finds the strength to rebuild, and in some cases, to renew their culture through that rebuilding. English 409 addresses the African diaspora through Conrad’s canonical work on the exploitation of the Congo and Chesnut’s fictionalized version of the coup that overthrew the elected racially diverse government of Wilmington, North Carolina. Percival Everett’s novel *Watershed* explicitly addresses the issue of authority over water sources on a fictional native American reservation in the American west, highlighting the building of a coalition between an African-American hydrologist and local native activists. Everett’s most recent novel, *Telephone*, inhabits the space of the desert and the border with Mexico, placing the issues of economic and environmental exploitation within the arid zone.

The seminar “ARC 618 Community Design Issues” adds to the knowledge architecture students have gained about designing places for people in the required urban design theory course, and in the international urban design studio. The seminar starts by locating community design in relation to practice in architecture, urban design and planning. It introduces community participation approaches such as those proposed by Henry Sanoff, New Urbanism, Tactical Urbanism and Spatial Agency. Also discussed are fundamental concepts tied to community such as culture, family and household; and current debates on the right to housing, and the right to the city. These are considered in relation to historical and contemporary communities of place, and on how they are affected by revitalization efforts, gentrification, erasure and creative destruction. The seminar focuses on underserved communities in transitional areas, for example, the rise of Wynwood and the struggles of Overtown in Miami, Florida.

The works of fiction that create the common ground for the discussion together expand the landscape of the architecture seminar. The novel *Salvage the Bones* opens the door to the communities of the disappearing wetlands of Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, while *Mama Day* provides a historical view of a community in the Gullah Islands, today threatened by sea level rise. *The Marrow of Tradition* places the discussion in a growing Wilmington, North Carolina at the time of Reconstruction where African Americans are important contributors to the economy and governance of the city. It allows us to connect to the Wilmington of today, where African American communities have organized to recover from the destruction of storms and flooding in the historical districts. Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* describes the land along the shores of the Congo River and the colonial extraction settlements extending to Brazzaville and Kinshasa in the late 19th century. As supplement to the works of literature, architecture students analyze tourist guides, news media archives, architecture scholarly articles, and map and compare socio-economic indicators using census data. Everett's novels *Telephone* and *Watershed* contest stereotypical ideas about the nuclear family, the relationship between town and country, and the control of community resources and action.

For English majors, constructing and deconstructing narratives becomes second nature; however, this work often occurs with no reference to the actual built communities so deeply rooted in the narratives. Working with advanced architecture students reveals the structures, physical and social limitations, and strategies needed to shelter human beings in productive ways that enrich cultural expression. Architecture students can learn from these powerful narratives how knowledgeable and skilled local communities are about their needs in terms of the built environment.

Joint-Micro Seminar Learning Objectives

Concepts: Systems, interconnectedness, life cycles, community, place, fiction, reality, fact.

1. Develop a shared vocabulary for dialogical exchange across disciplines to tackle complex issues and act on them.
2. Design maps and narratives that demonstrate the direct connections between the characteristics of physical environment and the capacity of communities to survive and live.
3. Articulate and visually convey the risks and magnitude of damage from natural (severe weather) and human forces on people and the environment. Describe the strengths and weaknesses of buildings in relation to natural forces.
4. Create strategies through narrative and building that intersect the ability of marginal and invisible communities to recover after natural disasters' impact on cultural, social and physical landscapes.

Micro Seminar Student Outcomes

1. Students will map in words and designs the methods through which communities build resilience in precarious social and physical spaces.
2. Students will collaborate with others in building common ground for the analysis of place, people and environment.

Work Plan for Course Development

Maintaining the micro-seminar's flexibility and portability has been important, as the collaboration depends as much on the academic calendar and course schedule, as on the faculty involved. A main challenge is to capitalize on the time we spend together using approaches that enhance interaction to build new understandings. The pedagogical vehicles have been assigned reading and writing, impromptu writing, sharing of questions, and discussion. Teamwork focusing on team chosen themes and designing for community in the places of the narratives will be part of the next micro-seminar cycle.

Currently we are planning the next micro-seminar:

Micro seminar III (Spring 2021): *Water of Life: Building for the Future* (Percival Everett's *Telephone*, and *Watershed* – looking at the exploitation of natural environment and of people, water scarcity and the impact on native communities)

The literary works that bring us together are chosen by Dr. Ameer Carmine, the faculty teaching the English Literature course with the understanding that the narratives must provide space for discussing place and community. Both groups of students prepare for the encounter. We meet once for each novel. We are planning to expand contact time to three sessions per novel. The process we have followed is for English major students, or for the faculty involved, to identify the passages that architecture students must read to grasp the narrative's main points, and to place the characters within it. English Literature students select areas of interest to discuss with the architecture students. Architecture students analyze the built environment in the places where the novels take place in terms of geography and climate, history and architecture, and map socio-economic indicators focusing on diversity of population, income, and housing. We use a discussion board in a virtual learning environment to share questions and brief statements. The English Literature students start the threads. Work will also be shared as podcasts.

List of Selected Readings and References

Sources specific to the events and sites that inspired and are portrayed in the novels are not included as they are researched by the students in the micro seminar.

Novels

Charles Waddell Chesnut. *The Marrow of Tradition*. 1901

Joseph Conrad. *Heart of Darkness*. 1902

Percival Everett. *Telephone*. Minnesota: Graywolf Press. 2020. [There are three versions of this novel]

_____. *Watershed*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press. 2003.

Gloria Naylor. *Mama Day*. New York: Vintage Books. 1998.

Jesmyn Ward. *Salvage the Bones*. New York: Bloomsbury. 2011.

References

Bossér, Ulrika, and Mats Lindahl. Students' Positioning in the Classroom: A Study of teacher-student Interactions in a Socioscientific Issue Context. *Research in Science Education* 49 (April 2019): 371-390.

Buell, Lawrence, Ursula K. Heise, and Karen Thornber. "Literature and Environment". *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 36, no. 1 (November 2011): 417-40.

Dimock, Wai Chee. "Literature for the Planet". Special Topic: Globalizing Literary Studies. *PMLA*. 116, no. 1 (January 2001): 173-188.

_____. "Climate Humanists", Editor's Column. *PMLA* 133, no.1 (January 2018): 9-18.

_____. "Humanists as Builders", Editor's Column. *PMLA* 133, no.3 (May 2018) : 473-481.

Johns Putra, Adeline. "Climate Change in Literature and Literary Studies". *WIREs Climate Change* 7, no. 2 (March 2016): 266-282.

Love, Glen A. "Ecocriticism and Science: Toward Consilience?" *New Literary History* 30, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 561-576.

Mehnert, Antonia. *Climate Change Fictions: Representations of Global Warming in American Literature*. 2016.

McGreavy, Bridie, Linda Silka, and Laura Lindenfeld. "Interdisciplinary and Actionable Science: Exploring the Generative Potential in Difference." *Journal of Community Practice* 22, no.1-2 (2014):189-209.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2014.901264>.

Peterson, J. Fiona, Andrea Chester, Suzie Attiwill, and Debra Bateman. "Learning and Teaching Scholarship: Discovery Across Disciplines." *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences: Annual Review* 10 (2015): 33-50.

Siperstein, Stephen. "Teaching Climate Change." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21, no.1 (Winter 2014): 20-21. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isu011>.