

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

## **Environment and Empire**

### **HIST 615 / 635**

Spring Semester 2024

*Location:* Online

*Time:* Mondays 7:20pm-10pm

Professor Benjamin W. Goossen

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*Office Hours:* By appointment

### **Course Description**

European global expansion has left profound legacies of inequality across our world today, including for the modern United States. In an era of rapid climate change and other ecological crises, imperial pasts are now intruding into our present in new ways. This graduate seminar examines the relationship between imperialism and the environment since early modernity. Taking a global approach, we will reconsider core themes in imperial history—from maritime conquest, settler colonialism, and resource extraction—as part of the *longue durée* of human-caused environmental change across planet Earth. This course is designed to introduce topics and methods in environmental history for graduate students focusing on any world region.

***\*\*Syllabus subject to change, with notice\*\****

### **Course Objectives**

In this course, we will seek to:

1. Identify environmental contexts and consequences of core events in the history of European global expansion and colonization
2. Develop familiarity with crucial topics and methods of environmental history through readings in the history of empire, colonialism, and decolonization

3. Examine the genre forms of articles and books as building blocks of historical knowledge production, including their promise and limits for environmental history
4. Consider how the complex global entanglements of environment and empire might have bearing on students' own graduate research agendas beyond this course

### **Prerequisites and Eligibility**

Welcome! This is a graduate reading seminar that brings together imperial and environmental history. It is specifically intended to introduce students to environmental topics and methods. All students pursuing graduate training in history and related disciplines are welcome to enroll. No prior knowledge of environmental history is assumed. Advanced undergraduates should contact the professor to inquire about eligibility.

Some students may have preexisting interests in areas that we will cover in class, but others may be encountering major themes surrounding the intersections of imperialism and the environment for the first time. Whatever prior levels of knowledge students bring to the course content, I am committed to working with you to deepen your understanding of environmental history and to developing your familiarity with methodologies and tools of historical inquiry.

### **Inclusion and Accessibility**

This course should be a welcoming and inclusive space for all students. We should work together to foster an environment that gives all students the tools they need to succeed. Students may be approaching the course material from many different perspectives, including as related to their personal backgrounds, abilities / disabilities, educational experiences, and/or additional factors. Please bring an open mind, a sense of grace, and a willingness to help. Feel encouraged to speak with me to provide feedback if there are ways I can work to make our course more inclusive and accessible for your needs.

Accommodations for students with disabilities are provided in conjunction with Disability Services, which you can reach online: <https://ds.gmu.edu/> or by phone: (703) 993-2474. If you require accommodations, please let me know as soon as possible so I can best support you.

### **Further Resources**

Academic Advising for CHSS students: <https://academicaffairs.chss.gmu.edu/undergraduate-students>

Advising for History students: <https://historyarthistory.gmu.edu/advising-in-history-and-art-history>

Counseling and Psychological Services: 703-993-2380, <http://caps.gmu.edu>

Learning Services: <https://learningservices.gmu.edu/>

Student Support and Advocacy Center: 703-993-3686, <https://ssac.gmu.edu>

Writing Center: 703-993-1200, <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu>

## **Office Hours and Communication with Instructor**

The best way to communicate with me is by email: [bgoossen@gmu.edu](mailto:bgoossen@gmu.edu). You are welcome to send me emails anytime; I check my inbox during weekday business hours. Every week, I will be available to meet over Zoom for office hours during which we can discuss course materials, your progress, or other relevant questions. Please schedule office hours appointments via email.

## **Structure of the Course**

This is an entirely online class. We meet synchronously via Zoom on Monday evenings from 7:20pm to 10:00pm. You will need access to a computer and the internet to log into our weekly discussion sessions via Zoom. Plan to attend class regularly and come prepared to discuss our shared readings.

Beyond weekly Zoom meetings, asynchronous portions of our class will occur via Blackboard. It is important that you develop familiarity with our course website on Blackboard and that you check it regularly. You will use Blackboard to access readings, to complete assignments, and to receive announcements.

Our course will unfold over fourteen sessions. Our first week is an introductory week. During that first week, we will get to know each other, begin to engage with course content, and develop familiarity with the technological aspects of our course.

The rest of the course (Weeks 2-14) will follow a common pattern. During each of those weeks, we will read one academic monograph and one additional article-length or chapter-length piece. Each of these sessions is devoted to a crucial topic in the history of imperialism and the environment. These topics move forward in time chronologically and they also range across many geographic locations so that by the end of the course, we will have both completed a survey of the history of empire and the environment from the early modern era to the present as well as developed familiarity with specific manifestations of this history around the world.

## Accessing Materials

You are responsible for acquiring copies of the fourteen monographs that we will read cover-to-cover for this seminar. Orders of these books have been placed with the GMU bookstore, and you can buy them there or via your preferred online bookseller. Alternatively, you can check them out from the GMU library system. Books marked with two asterisks (\*\*) are available in electronic format via the GMU libraries. Act fast to acquire these books; we will begin using them for our seminar discussions on the first day of class. The fourteen books you need are:

- Beckert, Sven, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).
- \*\*Brown, Kate, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- \*\*Coen, Deborah, *Climate in Motion: Science, Empire, and the Problem of Scale* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).
- Cronon, William, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985).
- \*\*Crosby, Alfred, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge, 2004).
- \*\*Davis, Mike, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (New York: Verso, 2001).
- Degroot, Dagomar, *The Frigid Golden Age: Climate Change, the Little Ice Age, and the Dutch Republic, 1560-1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
- Demuth, Bathsheba, *Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020).
- \*\*Frank, Alison, *Oil Empire: Visions of Prosperity in Austrian Galicia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).
- Ghosh, Amitav, *The Nutmeg's Curse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).
- Grandin, Greg, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City* (New York: Metropolitan, 2009).
- Kolbert, Elizabeth, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014).
- \*\*Lekan, Thomas, *Our Gigantic Zoo: A German Quest to Save the Serengeti* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- \*\*McNeill, John, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Beyond these fourteen books, we will also read thirteen total article-length or chapter-length pieces. All of these shorter readings are available in PDF format via our Blackboard course site. When you are logged into our Blackboard site, look at the main menu on the left-hand side. Click on the tab labeled “Course Readings.” Then, find the folder for the appropriate week (folders are labeled “Week 1,” “Week 2,” etc.). PDFs of the shorter readings are in these folders.

If you have any trouble accessing course materials, email the instructor.

## **Course Requirements:**

### **1) Participation**

Active and consistent participation in our weekly Zoom meetings is the single most important component of this course, and that is reflected in the grade breakdown for this class. Participation constitutes 30% of your total grade. In this seminar, we are working together to develop understanding of the relationship between empire and environment. This is by nature a collaborative process, and our success as a class depends on everyone coming to class prepared to fully engage. You are expected to attend every class session.

To earn full participation marks, you must have read the weekly readings thoroughly and completely. You should be ready to talk about any parts of the readings, and you should be able to draw comparisons between and connections across different sections of the texts. Quality of participation is vital: your comments and questions during our Monday class sessions should bring the conversation forward and stimulate a deepening of discussion.

### **2) Introduction Post**

Before our first meeting on January 22, write a 500-word post on Blackboard introducing yourself to the class. Your post can include basic information about yourself and your interest in this course. You might share about your academic interests, hobbies, or anything else you’d like me and your classmates to know about you. Feel free to write about why you signed up for this course and what you hope to learn from it. What you share is up to you.

If you would like, you can also include some responses to the reading for our first meeting, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Nutmeg’s Curse*. In future weeks, you will respond to course readings in Discussion Posts, so this might be a good chance to get practice for those upcoming posts.

Your Introduction Post is **due by noon on Monday, January 22.**

### 3) Discussion Posts

Starting after our first meeting, you will write a weekly Discussion Post on Blackboard, due by noon each Monday prior to our evening discussion sessions. Your weekly post should discuss one or more aspects of the week's themes and materials as encountered in the required readings for the week. Your Discussion Post should engage the material rigorously: it should not merely be a summary of the material, but rather you should seek to analyze and draw connections. Your post should be at least 500 words long.

Over the course of the semester, you are required to complete twelve total Discussion Posts. This represents one Discussion Post per week from Meeting 2 through Meeting 14, with one free "skip" allowed. Discussion Posts are extremely important: they will get your thoughts flowing before our weekly meetings so that we can have even deeper discussions than otherwise possible. In aggregate, they will also form a base layer for starting our in-class conversations. You should plan to read your fellow students' Discussion Posts in advance of our weekly evening meetings.

Discussion Posts are graded on a complete / incomplete basis. If you write meaningful and compelling posts, you will get full credit. Posts shorter than 500 words or that merely summarize aspects of the readings without going deeper will receive an "incomplete."

Discussion Posts are **due by noon each Monday** that we meet **from January 29 to April 29**.

### 4) Book Review 1

Pick one of the books that we have read for Meetings 1-4 and write an **academic-style** book review (1,000 to 1,500 words). Monographs constitute one of the core building blocks of academic history, and this assignment is designed to get you thinking about what makes a history book—and how environmental history, specifically, can fit into that form.

Your book review should conform to the conventions of academic book reviews that are published in major scholarly journals. As you begin planning your review, you should identify and read other book reviews published in major journals that review books about environmental history, such as *American Historical Review*, *Environmental History*, and *Environment and History*. Pick apart some of the reviews you find: how do the authors structure their reviews? What kind of information do they include? What is a normal balance of exposition, praise, and critique?

Make sure you communicate the crucial details: what is the aim of the book? Who is it for? What are its key arguments? How does the author / how do the authors make their case? What are the book's greatest strengths? Does it have any weaknesses, or do you have any suggestions for improvement?

You will have to decide whether to write your review before or after you read academic reviews that have already been published about the book you have chosen. This is always a decision that a reviewer has to make (unless the book under review is absolutely brand new). Sometimes you want to know what others have said before you start drafting your review; at other times, you might want to develop your own take before reading others'.

You may choose to review any of the four books we have read up to this point: Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*; Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*; Degroot, *The Frigid Golden Age*; or McNeill, *Mosquito Empires*.

Book Review 1 is due via email by midnight on Friday, **February 16**.

## 5) Book Review 2

Pick one of the books that we have read for Meetings 5-8 and write a **popular-style** book review (1,500 to 2,500 words). This review should differ significantly in style from Book Review 1. History books often have multiple audiences, and this assignment should give you a chance to think about how non-academic publics encounter and benefit from monographs about the history of the environment.

Your review should be written as though it could be published in a magazine for general, but informed, audiences. As you prepare to write your review, plan to peruse serious and substantial book reviews published in places like the *London Review of Books*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, or *New Yorker*. You should assume that your readers are not experts (i.e. they have not been taking our class!) but that they want to learn more about empire and the environment, and they might be interested in reading the book you have reviewed.

As with Book Review 1, make sure you communicate the crucial details: what is the aim of the book? Who is it for? What are its key arguments? How does the author / how do the authors make their case? What are the book's greatest strengths? Does it have any weaknesses, or do you have any suggestions for improvement?

However, the way you communicate this information will be different than Book Review 1, since in this review, you are writing for a popular, non-academic audience. Again, you'll want to think carefully about whether you want to study other authors' reviews of the book you have chosen before you begin drafting your own review.

You may choose to review any of the books that we read for Meetings 5-8: Cronon, *Changes in the Land*; Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*; Frank, *Oil Empire*; or Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*.

Book Review 2 is due via email by midnight on Friday, **March 22**.

## 6) Final Paper

The assignments in this course build toward a 5,000-7,000-word Final Paper in which you will select and analyze five major books in a key area of the history of environment and empire. This assignment is a specific kind of a “historiography paper.” It does not constitute original primary source research. Rather, you will be examining monographs written by other scholars, and you will be looking for conversations that unfold between them.

Your paper should center on one of the topical themes around which our weekly Monday meetings are organized (e.g. “Climate,” “Fossil Fuels,” or “Decolonization.”). You may pick any topical theme from Meeting 2-14. One of the five books that you analyze in your paper should be the common book that we read in class that week. This may be a book on which you wrote one of your two book reviews, or it might not. The other four books you select to analyze in your final paper must not be on our syllabus. It is your responsibility to identify five total books (one from our syllabus and four other books) to analyze in your paper.

In preparation for this Final Paper, we will do a number of in-class activities that help you learn how to identify important books within a given academic area. This is a core skill that will help you throughout your graduate training and beyond, so we will spend a lot of time on this. Making sure that you have selected five books for your Final Paper that are serious, important in the field, and thematically in conversation with each other is a major point of the assignment. In fact, to identify the five right books to analyze, you will actually have to learn about many more; excluding other books will be vital to choosing the five right ones.

Your paper should showcase an original argument about the five books you have selected and about their contribution to the topical area of environmental history that unites them. Your paper should not be five separate book reviews. Rather, you should weave your analysis of these books together to make a larger argument. Do include basic information that alerts the reader to what is in each book; your reader (in this case, me) should come away fully understanding what each book is about as well as the argument that each author makes. But your paper must also do more than this. It should explain how considering these five books together fundamentally enriches our understanding of a core topic in the history of empire and the environment.

Make sure to find and read good examples of historiography essays in environmental history as you are preparing to embark on this Final Paper. We will encounter one such essay, Johnson’s “Europe Without Borders,” early in the semester. Be thinking about how your paper will make similar moves—and how it will differ—from this and other examples.

The Final Paper is due via email by midnight on Friday, **May 3**.



## Grading

The grade breakdown is as follows:

Participation	30%
Introduction Post	2%
Discussion Posts (twelve)	24%
Book Review 1	10%
Book Review 2	10%
Final Paper	24%

In this course, an “A” represents outstanding work. A “B” represents above average work. A “C” represents average work. A “D” represents below average work. And an “F” is a failing grade; it represents work that demonstrates a lack of caring or comprehension. Letter grades correspond to these percentages:

A+ 97-100	B+ 87-89	C+ 77-79	D 60-69
A 94-96	B 84-86	C 74-76	F <60
A- 90-93	B- 80-83	C- 70-73	

You are responsible for tracking your own cumulative in-progress grade in this class during the course of the semester based on your grades for individual assignments. Your overall grade is not reflected in the Blackboard grade center since I will be keeping grades in a separate register.

## Absences and Late Assignments

Participation in every Monday session of this course is expected. Absences will be excused for extraordinary circumstances only. You must be in touch with me regarding any absence.

If you require an extension for one of your assignments, please be in touch with me at least 48 hours in advance of the deadline. Extensions may be granted on a case-by-case basis.

## Academic Integrity

All students are expected to abide by the George Mason [Honor Code](#). Although you are encouraged to discuss the assignments with colleagues, all products should be your own work. You should appropriately cite information acquired from print or digital publications, or from conversations. Parenthetical citations or footnotes are both acceptable.

*The most common violation of academic integrity is plagiarism.* Plagiarism refers to taking someone else's work and passing it off as your own. Do not directly copy and paste material directly from the internet or other sources into any of your assignments. It is fine to quote from materials such as our course readings, but any quotations must be clearly marked (i.e. with quotation marks), and direct citations must be given. I should never have to wonder where your ideas are coming from. Either they must clearly be your own thoughts, or if you are quoting or paraphrasing someone else, you should indicate where you found that material and provide a citation so I can trace your steps back to the original source.

A recent development in conversations about academic integrity involves generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) sites like ChatGPT. *You should be careful any time you use AI*, because it can very easily lead to plagiarism. Never directly copy and paste from sites like ChatGPT into your assignments. First, you should know that generative AI can often be wrong about basic facts—so if you use information from these sites, it may be factually incorrect and thus hurt your grade in class. Second, it's important to remember that information from these sites represents an aggregate of knowledge from the AI's underlying training data. That means that even paraphrasing from ChatGPT can be a form of plagiarism, since you are not able to directly cite the underlying work on which AI information is based.

*To avoid plagiarism, follow these tips:*

- 1) As a rule of thumb, always write your own text.
- 2) If you use any text written by someone else, always mark it in quotation marks.
- 3) Always cite sources that you consult, even if you do not quote from them directly.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### Meeting 1: Introduction

(January 22)

Welcome to the class!

Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

**Assignment:** Introduction Post – due Monday, January 22, by noon (Blackboard)

## Meeting 2: Europe and the World

(January 29)

Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge, 2004).

Alison Frank Johnson, "Europe without Borders: Environmental and Global History in a World after Continents," *Contemporary European History* 31, no. 1 (2022), 129–141.

**Assignment:** Discussion Post – due Monday, January 29, by noon (Blackboard)

## Meeting 3: Climate

(February 5)

Dagomar Degroot, *The Frigid Golden Age: Climate Change, the Little Ice Age, and the Dutch Republic, 1560-1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Geoffrey Parker, "Crisis and Catastrophe: The Global Crisis of the Seventeenth Century Reconsidered," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 4 (2008): 1053-1079.

**Assignment:** Discussion Post – due Monday, February 5, by noon (Blackboard)

## Meeting 4: Maritime Conquest

(February 12)

Joyce Chaplin, "Planetary Power? The United States and the History of Around-the-World Travel," *Journal of American Studies* 47, no. 1 (2013): 1-21.

John McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

**Assignments:** Discussion Post – due Monday, February 12, by noon (Blackboard)  
Book Review 1 – due Friday, February 16, by midnight (turn in by email)

## Meeting 5: Settler Colonialism

**(February 19)**

William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985).

Pekka Hämmäläinen, "The Politics of Grass: European Expansion, Ecological Change, and Indigenous Power in the Southwest Borderlands," *William and Mary Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2010): 173-208.

**Assignment:** Discussion Post – due Monday, February 19, by noon (Blackboard)

**Meeting 6: The Nature of Capitalism**

**(February 26)**

Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).

Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3-28.

**Assignment:** Discussion Post – due Monday, February 26, by noon (Blackboard)

**Spring Break**

**(March 3-9)**

**Meeting 7: Fossil Fuels**

**(March 11)**

Alison Frank, *Oil Empire: Visions of Prosperity in Austrian Galicia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Victor Seow, *Carbon Technocracy: Energy Regimes in Modern East Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 1-26.

**Assignment:** Discussion Post – due Monday, March 11, by noon (Blackboard)

## Meeting 8: Food and Famine

(March 18)

Belinda Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 24-47.

Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (New York: Verso, 2001).

**Assignments:**      Discussion Post – due Monday, March 18, by noon (Blackboard)  
Book Review 2 – due Friday, March 22, by midnight (turn in by email)

## Meeting 9: Science and Technology

(March 25)

Deborah R. Coen, *Climate in Motion: Science, Empire, and the Problem of Scale* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

Meredith McKittrick, "Making Rain, Making Maps: Competing Geographies of Weather and Power in Southwestern Africa," *Journal of African History* 58, no. 2 (2017): 187-212.

**Assignment:**      Discussion Post – due Monday, March 25, by noon (Blackboard)

## Meeting 10: Animals

(April 1)

Bathsheba Demuth, *Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020).

Ian J. Miller, *The Nature of the Beasts: Empire and Exhibition at the Tokyo Imperial Zoo* (Berkeley, 2013), 120-164.

**Assignment:**      Discussion Post – due Monday, April 1, by noon (Blackboard)

## Meeting 11: American Empire

**(April 8)**

Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City* (New York: Metropolitan, 2009).

Ruth Oldenziel, "Islands: U.S. as Networked Empire," in *Entangled Geographies. Empire and Technopolitics in the Global Cold War*, ed. Gabrielle Hecht (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 13-42.

**Assignment:** Discussion Post – due Monday, April 8, by noon (Blackboard)

**Meeting 12: Decolonization**

**(April 15)**

Elizabeth Chatterjee, "The Asian Anthropocene: Electricity and Fossil Developmentalism," *Journal of Asian Studies* 79, no. 1 (2020): 3-24.

Thomas M. Lekan, *Our Gigantic Zoo: A German Quest to Save the Serengeti* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

**Assignment:** Discussion Post – due Monday, April 15, by noon (Blackboard)

**Meeting 13: Cold War**

**(April 22)**

Stephen Brain, "The Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature," *Environmental History* vol. 15, no. 4 (2010): 670-700.

Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

**Assignment:** Discussion Post – due Monday, April 22, by noon (Blackboard)

**Meeting 14: New Frontiers**

**(April 29)**

Megan Black, "Prospecting the World: Landsat and the Search for Minerals in Space Age Globalization," *Journal of American History* 106, no. 1 (2019): 97–120.

Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014).

**Assignments:** Discussion Post – due Monday, April 29, by noon (Blackboard)

**Exam Period: May 1-8**

*Final Exam* – due Friday, May 3, by midnight (turn in by email)