Environmental Studies 900  
HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL METHODS IN ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH  
(The “CHE Methods Seminar”)  
Tuesday, 5:30-8:00 pm, 202 Bradley Memorial

INSTRUCTOR: Gregg Mitman, 1415 Medical Sciences Center.

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 or after. 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: Tuesdays, 10-12, or by appointment. To make an appointment, email me at gmitman@med.wisc.edu or reach me by phone: 262-9140.

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 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 place within which grad students from different departments and programs can work together and become colleagues while getting to know faculty members associated with CHE.

• Assignments for the seminar are designed to cultivate research skills and methods. This year, the Mississippi watershed and river histories offer a touchstone around which we will address disciplinary and interdisciplinary skills and methods. This theme also serves as the basis for this year’s CHE Place-Based Workshop, an annual field trip that occurs each May. The dates of this year’s workshop are May 15-20.

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, this syllabus is being left somewhat open at the start of the semester. The syllabus may 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.
READINGS
Although the majority of readings in this syllabus have been finalized, there may be 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 added readings could reflect the evolution of our conversations together, and some may be generated by the assignments you’ll be doing as background for your final projects. 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.

SEMINAR REQUIREMENTS:
Participation: (40%) This course is based on a seminar-discussion format. Each one in class needs to assume the responsibility of an active participant and learner. Success in the class depends largely upon the time, energy, and commitment you invest. You will be required to arrive at class having read the material assigned for the day and prepared to engage in a thoughtful and constructive conversation that is respectful of others in the classroom and takes seriously the issues and themes presented in the readings.

Found Object Assignment: (20%) You will be required to write a 1,000-word interpretive essay that takes a found object from the archive—a document, a sound, a photograph, a film clip, a sediment core, e.g.-- to tell a story about the Mississippi and its history in relationship to time, place, or culture.

Edge Effects Submission (40%):
You will be required to pitch and submit an essay or exhibit to CHE’s digital magazine, Edge Effects [http://edgeeffects.net](http://edgeeffects.net). These are pieces up to 2,000 words in length with images. The topic can be related to your research, and need not be connected to the Mississippi, but it must be conceived in a way that integrates a theme or topic we have raised in the seminar connected to river histories or watery landscapes.

GUIDING QUESTIONS
The following questions are meant as a guide to help navigate us through the various topics, readings, and discussion sessions with CHE faculty participants over the course of the semester. Each session is oriented around a subset of the questions in this list, which should be taken as preliminary and evolving as we identify areas of interest and issues we would like to explore as a group.

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 what constitutes forms of evidence in different disciplinary domains?

What are the differences between quantitative and qualitative information, and how are they used differently across scholarly domains?

How can interviews with people be incorporated into scholarly research in ways that are respectful of cultures, traditions, and the rights of human subjects?

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 19**

Introduction to the CHE Methods Seminar

Getting to know each other: extended introductions

Brainstorming goals and protocols for the seminar

**January 26 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?

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:**


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.

**TIME**

**February 2  Capital, Commodities, and Narratives of History**  
**Guest:** Bill Cronon, History, Geography, and Environmental Studies  
Part II: What constitutes an interesting and important research question--and what shapes our judgment in deciding whether or not a question is "significant"?

**READINGS:**


Booth et. al., *The Craft of Research*, pp. 31-68.

Review “How to Frame a Researchable Question” of *Learning to Do Historical Research* website: [www.williamcronon.net/researching/index.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/index.htm)

**ASSIGNMENT:** Bring to class a single well-formed research question that you feel confident most members of your discipline would regard as valuable and/or significant connected to a watershed and its history.

**February 9  Sedimentary Archives and Geological Time**  
**Guest:** Eric Carson  
Part II: Finding documentary sources for river histories  
Guest: Lisa Saywell, Wisconsin Historical Society
READES:

BACKGROUND

MAIN READINGS

Review “What are the Documents” of *Learning to Do Historical Research* website: 
www.williamcronon.net/researching/index.htm

February 16 Discerning Ecological Pasts
Guest: Sara Hotchkiss, Botany and Environmental Studies
Part II: Finding the sedimentary remains of a river’s history: reports from the scavenger hunt

READINGS:

Review “Arguments and Narrative” of *Learning to Do Historical Research* website: 
www.williamcronon.net/researching/index.htm

ASSIGNMENT:
Bring to class two primary documents—text, image, map, or sound--that you found related to the Upper Mississippi watershed and questions of time. Be prepared to discuss.

PLACE
February 23 From Miasmas to Toxics: Landscapes of Health and Illness
Gregg Mitman
Part II: Pitching to *Edge Effects*
Guest: Nathan Jandl, English, Editor of *Edge Effects*

**READINGS:**
Gregg Mitman, “In Search of Health: Landscapes and Disease in American Environmental History,” *Environmental History*

**March 1 Flyways: Questions of Animal Agency**
Guest: Elizabeth Hennessey, History and Environmental Studies
Part II: Pitching object for interpretive essay

**READINGS:**

**ASSIGNMENT:** Come to class with a pitch for your found object from the archive to write your 1,000 word interpretive essay.

**March 8: Watery Landscapes**
Guest: Adam Mandelman, Geography


**Optional Reading**
**Gallery: Visualizing Rivers**


Daniel Huffman, “Mississippi River System,” 2011


**ASSIGNMENT: Exploring Watersheds**
Take a half hour or so to try and follow the below guide to for exploring major US watersheds using Google Earth. They’re not the clearest instructions and the datasets can be large and awkward to navigate, so don’t get too hung up on this if you get stuck. If you manage to make it work, however, spend some time thinking “hydro-geographically,” that is, how water connects places in ways we don’t typically think about. Pro tip: be sure to play with disabling and enabling the dataset’s various layers (Land Cover, Population, Elevation, etc.) in Google Earth.

[http://serc.carleton.edu/eslabs/drought/2b.html](http://serc.carleton.edu/eslabs/drought/2b.html)

**March 15: Ancestral Places**
**Guest: Larry Nesper**
Part II: Discussion of found object essays

**READINGS:**


**ASSIGNMENT:** Circulate drafts of found object essay. Be prepared to discuss and critique.

**March 22 (NO CLASS: SPRING RECESS)**

**March 29 Soundscapes**
**Guest: Craig Eley**
Part II: Screening of *The River*
READINGS:

Suggested:

ASSIGNMENT:  Final drafts of Found Object essay due

CULTURE
April 5  Material Cultures
Guest: Anna Andrzejewski
Part II: Come to class prepared to pitch your idea for your *Edge Effects* essay

READINGS:


ASSIGNMENT: Come to class prepared to pitch your idea for your *Edge Effects* essay

April 12  Exploring River Life: Perspectives from Public Folklore
Guests: Janet Gilmore and James Leary
Part II: Share images or sounds that will be part of your *Edge Effects* submission

READINGS: TBA

ASSIGNMENT:  Come to class with a selection of images and sounds to accompany your *Edge Effects* submission.
April 19  *A River Runs through It*: The Methods of Ecocriticism  
Guest: Lynn Keller, English  
Part II: First draft of *Edge Effects* essay due.

**READINGS:**  

Literary text:  

Sample of ecocriticism on that novella:  

Another brief and quite different ecocritical take on the same text:  

**ASSIGNMENT:** Circulate first draft of *Edge Effects* essay and be prepared to discuss

April 26  *Water Politics*  
Guest: Samer Alatout, Community and Environmental Sociology/Environmental Studies  
Part II:  

**READINGS:** TBA

May 3  *Wrap Up*  
**ASSIGNMENT:** Final draft of *Edge Effects* essays due.