

Commoning
(Studies in Global Literature)
ENGL 81000-21 + EES 79903-06
Friday 11:45am – 1:45pm

Course Description:

From Chiapas to Occupy, from the Gezi Park uprising to disaster communism during the pandemic, acts of commoning have been central to new political imaginaries and formations over the last decades. Capitalism was born, Marx famously argued, when peasants were forcibly torn from their means of subsistence and hurled onto urban labor markets as free and “unattached” proletarians. As Marx evocatively put it, “the history of this expropriation is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.” Recent theorists of capitalism have asserted that the process of violent dispossession not only has continued unabated for the last five centuries but has been intensifying during the neoliberal age. Indeed, for many, today’s enclosures are the leading edge of contemporary capitalism. We live in a period of violent land grabbing and resource extraction that is pushing planetary systems towards terminal breakdown.

This seminar will explore contemporary processes of – and resistance to - capitalist and neocolonialist enclosure. Our conversations will be oriented around three key theoretical and political interventions. The first is the assertion that enclosure and extraction pertain not just to material things like land and minerals but also to relatively immaterial social resources such as information, culture, and even affect. The commons is thus a social form that is constantly created and recreated. The corollary of this, and the second key theoretical hypothesis of the seminar, is the idea that the commons is not solely a thing but a social practice. The commons, in other words, is the space of social relation created in and through acts of mutual aid and solidarity. Lastly, we will explore the extent to which commoning presents political possibilities beyond the stale opposition between the vampiric free market and top-down state power.

The seminar will excavate experiences of commoning, and of capitalist extraction and decomposition, across five key sectors: land, cities, social media, social reproduction, and energy. We will track how these contested processes manifest in the letters of blood and fire through which today’s acts of dispossession are recorded. How does commoning affect literary fabulation, and, conversely, how does representation affect struggles over the commons? Does commoning require or catalyze new genres of expression? Is there such a thing as a common or commoning voice or mode of narration?

Course Learning Goals:

Students in the course can expect to acquire familiarity with a wide array of theoretical and literary texts that focus on issues of the commons and commoning. In the seminar we will collectively explore how people have engaged in mutual aid in the past, and how people’s desire for connection can be turned into meaningful cooperation for the greater good in the precarious present and future. Through participation in the course, students will gain proficiency in verbal presentations, collaborative research, and the production of publishable research papers.

Course Requirements:

Presentations (20%): You will each be responsible for kicking off our discussion *once* during the semester by synthesizing and responding to the course materials for the day. In your presentations you should highlight key arguments, pivotal problematics, and interesting questions from the materials, and then develop these ideas using your own thoughts and observations. The goal here is to initiate and guide discussion of the day's conversations. These informal presentations should be approximately 10-15 minutes in length.

Collective Syllabus (40%): Hashtag syllabi have emerged in recent years as important vehicles for the building of intellectual community. These projects can help educate the broader public about an issue and the historical dynamics that define it. They have also served as calls to action. Examples of such projects include #StandingRockSyllabus, #ImmigrationSyllabus, #CharlestonSyllabus.

The class will break up into three working groups, each of which will develop a syllabus around an issue germane to the seminar. You might pick a general topic like #commoning or a more specific one like #Enbridge3.

The idea of here is to challenge the isolation that dominant research and publication models in the humanities emphasize by working collaboratively, and to project the results of this labor into the public sphere through an online presence. Your syllabi can of course include multi-media components, and should ideally be posted online (consider using one of the free website creation and hosting services like [Wix](#)).

For theorization of the context and purpose of #syllabi, check out Lisa A. Monroe's "[Making the American Syllabus](#)."

Final Class Project (40%): You will be turning in a final project that reflects and synthesizes the thinking you've been doing across the semester. I am willing to accept either a traditional, article-length essay or a more experimental mixed-media research project (film, digital media, podcast, etc.). If you elect to write the former, your paper should be approximately 7,000 – 8,500 words. Please email your papers to me in Word (not PDF) format so that I can send them back to you with comments. Your paper should focus on the texts – primary or secondary - under discussion for the semester, or on your own independent research project. If you choose the latter angle, you should apply themes and texts from the class to your project. Whichever type of project you decide to engage in, it should be turned in no later than 5/15.

2 vs. 4 credits: Students taking the class for 4 credits are expected to complete all the above requirements. Those taking the class for 2 credits are not expected to write a final paper, but I would like you to do an in-class presentation and participate in the collective syllabus.

Course Schedule

Week 1 (1/29): Introduction: How Do We Get Outta this Place?

- Sandro Mezzadra & Brett Neilson, “On the Multiple Frontiers of Extraction”
- The Red Nation, *Red Deal, Part III: Heal Our Planet*
- Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During this Crisis* *

Theorizing the Commons

Week 2 (2/5): Common Wealth?

- Garret Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons”
- Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons* *
- Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *Common* *

February 12: Graduate Center is Closed

Week 3 (2/19): A Common Voice?

- Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* *
- WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development* *
- Sarah Brouillette, “[On the African Literary Hustle](#)”

Land

Week 4 (2/26)

- Raja Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks*
- Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land* *

Week 5 (3/5)

- Arundhati Roy, *Walking with the Comrades*
- Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property* *

Cities

Week 6 (3/12)

- Chris Abani, *Graceland*
- Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* *

Week 7 (3/19)

- Latife Tekin, *Berji Kristin*
- Justin McGuirk, *Radical Cities* *

* = Excerpt of text, available online @ course Blackboard site

Class Schedule (continued)

Social Media

Week 8 (3/26)

- Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0*
- Paolo Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets* *
- Collective Syllabi due

March 27 – April 4: Spring Break

Week 9 (4/9) – class visit by Professor Matt Gold

- Andrew Marantz, *Antisocial*
- Shoshona Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* *

Social Reproduction

Week 10 (4/16) – class visit by Professor Jayna Brown

- Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*
- Jayna Brown, *Black Utopias* *

Week 11 (4/23) – class visit by Professor Matt Brim

- José Esteban Muñoz, “The Brown Queer Commons”
- Matt Brim, *Poor Queer Studies* *

Energy

Week 12 (4/30):

- Fiston Mwanza Mujila, *Tram 83*
- Martín Arboleda, *Planetary Mine* *

Week 13 (5/7)

- Jennifer Haigh, *Heat and Light*
- Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* *

Week 14 (5/14)

- #syllabus jam

Final papers due by Monday, 5/24

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