

English 338: Environmental Criticism
T/Th 2:30-3:45
Professor Stephanie Foote

This class explores environmental criticism by focusing on the category of waste. “Waste” is a charged word: individuals are castigated for wasting time, talent, money, or opportunity; bodies can waste away; people can get wasted; ruined landscapes become lonely wastes. Waste is also, of course, a key term to indicate what counts as trash or garbage. Waste suggests excess and abandon as well as scarcity and neglect.



This class looks at twentieth-century U.S. narratives about waste in its material, moral, and symbolic incarnations, exploring how the idea of waste itself has generated new kinds of relations between individuals and the culture that surrounds them. In particular, we will look at new kinds of narratives that have emerged around the idea of waste, including creative non-fiction, memoirs, and blogs about lifestyle practices and environmental concerns; and we will pay special attention to what it means that the form of imaginative narratives themselves -- television, certain kinds of novels, and blogs, among others -- have long been considered “wastes of time.” The class will include units on hoarding, environmental anxiety, dumpster diving, thrifting, curating and collecting, and ewaste. This class has two aims: to look first at how modern U.S. narrative has defined its cultural work through various meditations on the generative power of waste and wastefulness; and to look at the rise of the explanatory power of environmental criticism for an endangered world. Course requirements include 4 essays, one final exam, and a collaborative project.