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M/W 9-10 & 10-11
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Expository Writing 20: Wastelands

Unit Overviews

Unit 1: Close Reading Literary Wastelands

Representations of wastelands in literature typically revolve around ideas of emptiness, desolation, and depravity. But this kind of writing also raises a number of questions about the relationship between emptiness and wasteland. Is any land ever really empty? Think of colonization. Entire continents have been declared vacant by invading nations. As we read these stories, we should be asking questions like, Who and what are excluded from literary representations of wastelands? And to what purpose? And how do writers accomplish these erasures? What writing strategies do they use: metaphor, stereotype, hyperbole?

The goal of Unit I is to explain something that is not obvious about literary wastelands. In what ways does literature reinforce or complicate our assumptions about wastelands? And, conversely, in what ways does it provide the tools we need to combat those assumptions? To convince your readers that your interpretation makes the most sense, you will need to draw on evidence from the story itself and explain how that evidence ought to be understood.

Unit 2: Test a Theory Wastelands through the Lens

Few ideas entertain us more than the spectacle of dystopian and post-apocalyptic wastelands. In the first unit, we ask ourselves what the implications of these spectacles are on a society that already thinks of wastelands in such hopeless terms.

In Unit 2, we move beyond spectacle to the factual.

The goal of Unit 2 is to test a theory about wastelands. We will read Vinay Gidwani's paper, "Six Theses on Waste, Value, and Commons." Each thesis is an argument that Gidwani makes about the nature of real wastelands. Then we will watch two documentaries. The first is Vik Muniz's *Waste Land*, a film about the garbage pickers of

Rio de Janeiro. The second is *Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai* about the creation of the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya.

You will listen to what films have to say about their respective wastelands. In your essay, you will compare your own observations against those made by Gidwani. Do his theses hold up against your own observations? And what new observations would you add in order to clarify and develop the nature of wastelands in the real world?

Unit 3: Research Essentials Wastelands Today

For Unit 3, you will research a contemporary wasteland of your choosing. I will provide a list of possible research topics, but you are free to create a topic of your own.

As you look back through the pre-writings of your earlier papers, you will want to ask yourself what characteristic(s) of wasteland, or issues surrounding wastelands, excited, disturbed, or confused you? This will be a good way to brainstorm for your paper, and it may help you choose a wasteland worth exploring in a different context.

Context is key. Even though you may be researching a *type* of wasteland already covered in this course, the very fact that you are making a claim about a twenty-first century wasteland and not a nineteenth century wasteland makes a difference. To establish context is to consider all the factors that surround and inform your claim. Time is important, but context may also imply place, people, things, and actions.

This is where the research comes in. You might, for instance, be interested in the mega slums of Mumbai. But in order to make a claim about the slums, you need to know something about them. You need to know what makes the slums of Mumbai unique from, say, those of Rio de Janeiro. You might need to know what politics are at play or how the economy functions. Who has power, who does not, and why? The more you know, and the more research you use to support your argument, the more convincing your claim will be.