

## **Rutgers Geography Graduate Program Curricular Statement**

The curriculum of the Rutgers Geography Graduate Program is designed to fulfill a number of pedagogical goals aimed at training advanced research students to develop empirically rigorous and conceptually and practically transformative projects oriented toward producing a more sustainable and just future. Part of this involves learning the history of the discipline and the methods and theories it has used to examine the earth's landscape, human and natural transformations of that landscape, and the social and human–environment relations thereupon. Part of this involves deep training in methods of spatial analysis. And part of this involves systematic introduction to theories of explanation used to understand social and biophysical causes and consequences of geographical change, as well as the meanings derived from them.

An additional core focus of the Geography Graduate curriculum is the evaluation, review, and critique of past and present epistemologies and conventions of geographical inquiry: why has a particular theory, method, or perspective persisted or dominated, and what blind spots, biases, or forms of violence, exclusion, or erasure did and does it enable? How have geographical theories, methods, or perspectives emerged through past and present forms of coloniality in all its forms? What counts as valuable knowledge or ways of knowing in the discipline? Who makes those decisions, and whose voices are left out? What innovative, non-normative, or radical techniques, theories, or collaborations can transform Geography into “a practice of freedom,” to borrow from bell hooks’ (1984) theory of education in *Teaching to Transgress?*

The Geography Graduate Program pursues its curricular goals through small, intensive graduate seminars designed with an openness to student and teacher experimentation and potential, and through a mentoring and support system designed to ensure both upward and downward accountability to the communities of which we are a part—in the department, at Rutgers, in the academy, and in society at large. This involves treating training in Geography as an individualized journey, one that extends the etymology of our field—“geo” + “graph”, or the writing of the world—to the writing of the geographical self. Being a geographer means developing a critical self-awareness of how one moves through the world and with what implications for the human and non-human entities with which they connect. It involves seeing how conventions or traditions of movement—driving to work, residing in a white neighborhood, living in a settler state—normalize and reproduce unequal systems of benefit and harm. The Geography faculty is committed to fostering each graduate student’s journey by tailoring the course of study to the scholarly and social commitments that student brings, with the goal of transforming those commitments into powerful tools of discovery and positive societal and environmental change.

Practically, this means ensuring a tremendous amount of curricular flexibility, with only two required courses for all students. This also involves a commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging in Geography, which we seek to model through relations of mutuality, respect, and care in teaching, research, and advising. But, we recognize that this is hard work—it is an active process that we can rarely fully live up to—and that it alone is not enough to encompass the healing and justice-oriented work necessary to confront the U.S. and imperial racial system of which we are a part.

The academy, and Geography in particular, plays a central role in this racial system, which, as Rutgers Geography alumna Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) reminds us, maintains the “state-sanctioned production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.” Rutgers Geography is inspired by the leadership of scholars and activists—especially Black, Indigenous and People of Color—who have been raising the cry for racial justice in response to the deepened racial disparities induced by the COVID–19 pandemic and ongoing police brutality and anti-Black violence. We are also inspired by those who have been raising that same call, despite so rarely being heard, for decades prior—including in our own discipline. We recognize Ibram X. Kendi’s (2019) charge that “the only way to undo racism is to consistently identify it and describe it—and then dismantle it.”

As a Geography Graduate Program, we commit to this difficult and collaborative work by dedicating ourselves to an interrogation of the classroom space and our enacted pedagogies: are they equitable? Are they anti-racist? Enacting an anti-racist pedagogy is more than adding diverse content to a course or curriculum, important as that is. It is “about *how* one teaches, even in courses where race is not the subject matter” (Kishimoto 2018). Anti-racist pedagogy is a “paradigm located within critical theory utilized to explain and counteract the persistence and impact of racism using praxis as its focus to promote social justice for the creation of a democratic society in every respect” (Blakeney 2011). Geography is a discipline uniquely oriented toward identifying and describing the spatial predicates of social and human–environment relations that produce “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.” It thus lends itself to a pedagogical approach aimed at revealing unjust relations within society, and it is uniquely suited to dismantling those unjust relations by identifying and fostering geographies of freedom. But, developing anti-racist geographical practice is not an easy task. There is no magical “anti-racism” text or device or method or program. Anti-racist pedagogy is an experiment on which we commit ourselves to embark and that must infuse our wider ethics of practice so that we can remake Geography, so that we can help re-write the world.

The two core courses for all Rutgers Geography graduate degrees—601, Geographic Perspectives, and 602, Research Design—are designed to provide a foundation for students to share with faculty in this positive project. These are courses designed with input from the Graduate Curriculum Committee, which includes one graduate student representative. 601 offers a critical introduction to the history and theory of the discipline, examining how Geography has

understood, misunderstood, or might better understand human–environment relations. 602 introduces students to different approaches to geographical explanation while attending to how epistemology and theories of change conceal or make visible specific relations and structures, and it asks how geographers can harness existing and emergent methods of analysis to geographically diagnose the conditions in which we live.

Our project of making a better Geography, though, takes place most intensely in the culture of practice in which we all share: in department meetings and seminars, in admissions and hiring decisions, and in informal meetings, greetings, and learning activities of all varieties. We commit to a mutual process of learning as a key step toward environmental and societal repair.

#### References:

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- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Routledge.
- Kendi, I.X. (2019). *How to be an Antiracist*. One World.
- Kishimoto, K. (2018). Anti-racist pedagogy: From faculty's self-reflection to organizing within and beyond the classroom. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 21(4): 540-554.