Geography 516
Urban Geography: Urban Natures
Tuesdays 1:40-4:40, LCH-B120

Instructor: D. Asher Ghertner
Office: B-238, Lucy Stone Hall
Office Hours: Wednesdays, 11am-1pm or by appointment
Email: a.ghertner@rutgers.edu

Course Introduction

Urban natures are variously described as decaying or fecund, moribund or overflowing, restricted or boundless, terminal or networked. As palimpsests and temporal assemblages of built form, communicative media, and ecological flow, cities are variously hailed as the solution to the global climate crisis or its deepest cause, the sites of concentrated ecological death or the wastelands from which new, even mutant, life can emerge. In the Anthropocene—the name given to our present era defined by a “great acceleration” of the production of waste combined with intensified human and non-human vulnerability to environmental change precipitated by that waste—cities evoke contrasting sentiments and political affinities. They also sit most exposed to the deepening uncertainties of environmental change, concentrating not just symbolic and economic functions—as “the urban” has been framed historically—but also vulnerabilities and violences. Cities place bodies in relations of collective dependence, but also expose them to heightened environmental and social risk, from extreme weather events to leaded water intake and industrial accidents.

In the face of what Rob Nixon (2014) calls the “centripetal force of the dominant Anthropocene species story”—a story of the human as collective ecological force—this course seeks to
understand urban space through more centrifugal stories that “acknowledge immense inequalities in planet-altering powers.” We do so by adopting an understanding of urban nature as both the ecological dynamics and material transformation of cities, as well as the shifting ecological imaginaries about the city. How do urban subjects become enmeshed in commodified nature that is at once intimate and local, collective and global? How have ideas about nature been used to entrench urban inequalities and produce eco-social difference? What are the environmental underpinnings of diverse urban citizenship claims that challenge these inequalities? How is the planetarity of ecological change magnified, elucidated, or countered in everyday sites of urban space making? By taking up political ecology’s historical focus on the relationship between social marginalization and ecological degradation, we consider urban marginality as a condition that both restricts livelihoods but also occasions new environmental experiments.

The course is divided in three parts. Part I examines Foundations of urban political ecology: the production of space, urban metabolism, and environmental justice. Part II turns to the Elements of urban political ecology, considering the rich concepts and metaphors that have been developed in the political ecological study of key resource systems: Water, Air, Earth, Waste, and Shit. Part III considers Compositions of ecological flow and political practice, attending to how the materiality of resources and the urbanized systems governing their distribution become political infrastructures for contesting and producing new socio-natures: hydraulic citizenship, atmospheric attunement, toxic intimacy, racial ecology, and ruination.

Requirements

This course will be run as a reading-intensive seminar. Each week we will systematically discuss the argument, method, and presumptions of the key texts; present our ideas and questions to each other; and generally learn from the diverse backgrounds and perspectives we all bring. Accordingly, it is imperative that everyone comes fully prepared to participate. The goal is to foster a rich interactive and collaborative space open to diverse and divergent interpretations of text and method.

Each student will be expected to undertake the following:

(i) To prepare a one-page critical commentary on each week’s readings and to post this commentary on the week’s forum on Sakai by the Monday evening (no later than 9 pm) prior to the Tuesday class.

(ii) To lead/chair two class discussions, which involves a short (~10 minute) presentation of the key theoretical and conceptual issues pertaining to the readings of the selected week. This does not mean a summary of the authors’ main arguments or an expansive literature review. Rather, it means laying out key empirical, theoretical, or methodological contributions of the texts, and posing a set of questions to open up conversation. What shared themes, methods, critiques, or concepts emerge from the readings? What might we learn by asking questions posed in one text of an accompanying text? I will circulate a sign-up sheet during week 1 for you to choose the weeks you’d like to present. This will be done in groups of two.

(iii) To write a course paper approximately 20 pages in length that deploys concepts from the
course in the analysis of an issue, debate, theme, or phenomenon of your choosing. This does not mean that one has to study urban natures explicitly, or have an environmental focus in your writing or research. Any project attentive to urban spatial dynamics, past or present, can be written about for this paper. The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate that you can leverage theoretical insights linked to the seminar to make an intellectually rigorous argument around an empirical or philosophical problem of your choosing. This paper can take the form of a research proposal, although it does not have to.

**Assessment**

Students will be assessed according to the following scheme:

- Critical commentaries & presentations: 35%
- Classroom participation: 20%
- Course Paper: 45%
- **Total**: 100%

**Readings**

Most readings will be posted on the course website on Sakai. We are reading a few monographs in their entirety, all of which are available at the Rutgers Bookstore (Barnes and Noble) in New Brunswick:


**Seminar Outline**

**Week 1 (January 22nd) – Introduction**

**Background readings:**
Raymond Williams. 1876. “Nature” and “City,” in *Keywords*. Oxford University Press.

**Part I – FOUNDATIONS**

“Practical activity writes upon nature.” - Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p.117.
Week 2 (January 29th) – The Production of Space/Nature

Readings:

Additional Optional Readings:

Week 3 (February 5th) – Environmental Justice

Readings:

Additional Readings:
Week 4 (February 12th) – The Urbanization of Nature

**Readings:**

**Additional Optional Readings:**

Part II – ELEMENTS

Week 5 (February 19th) – Water

**Readings:**

**Additional optional readings:**
Week 6 (February 26th) – Shit
Guest seminar discussion with Lalit Batra, Minnesota Geography

Readings:
Lalit Batra. Draft chapter from Untouchable Labor and Sanitation Infrastructure in Delhi.

Additional Readings:

Week 7 (March 5th) – Earth
Guest seminar discussion with Dr. Mazen Labban, Visiting Professor, Rutgers Geography

Readings:


**Additional readings:**

**Week 8 (March 12th) – Trash**
*Guest seminar discussion with Dr. Rosalind Fredericks, Associate Professor, Gallatin School, NYU*

**Readings:**


**Additional Optional Readings:**


**Week 9 (March 19th) – No Class, Spring Break Week**

**Week 10 (March 26th) – Air**

**Readings:**


**Additional Optional Readings:**

Part III – COMPOSITIONS

Week 11 (April 2nd) – Hydraulic Citizenship

Readings:

Additional Readings:
Yaffa Truelove. 2011. “(Re-)Conceptualizing water inequality in Delhi, India through a feminist political ecology framework.” Geoforum 32: 143-152.

Week 12 (April 9th) – Atmospheric Attunement

Readings:

Additional readings:

Week 13 (April 16th) – Racial Ecologies

Readings:

Additional Readings:

Week 14 (April 23rd) – Toxic Intimacies

Readings:

Additional Optional Readings:

Week 15 (April 30th) – Ruin, Risk, and Repair in the Anthropocene

Readings:


Additional optional readings:


--------------- Papers due May 10th -----------------