

COMS 400—Critical Theory Seminar

Department of Art History & Communication Studies
McGill University
Seminars: T 11:35-14:25
Arts W220

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“You just have to get together with people and try to do something different. You know, I really believe that. But I also recognize how truly difficult that is to do.”

- Fred Moten, on figuring out how to teach a good class (*New Yorker*, April 30, 2018)

This course builds on the foundations of critical social thought to engage students in intensive study of emerging and contemporary themes in social and cultural theory related to media and communication studies. Focus will be on current texts and debates of significance in the field, and will include prominent work in areas including political economy, feminism, gender and sexuality studies, postcolonial and critical race theory, radical democracy, environmentalism, posthumanism and media and cultural studies. In particular, this year’s seminar will focus on critical theories of environment, with an emphasis on “materialist” currents in contemporary environmental thought, including historical materialism (eco-socialism; Marxist critiques of fossil capitalism and “green” capitalism); biopolitical materialism (environmentality, economization of “life”; resource mediation); and feminist, posthumanist, and decolonial materialisms. These will be considered in light of contemporary environmental issues including climate change, energy transition and environmental in/justice.

Learning objectives:

- Develop an understanding of selected area(s) of contemporary critical theory (as described above)
- Develop conceptual tools and vocabularies for critical engagement with current issues in media, communication, politics and culture (as described above)
- Develop advanced abilities of close reading, textual analysis, verbal expression and scholarly writing

Required texts:

Required texts will be available as .pdf files on the course website or via the McGill Library.

Course requirements:

Seminar engagement	-	25%
Short papers (3 x 25%)	-	75%

Seminar engagement will consist of vigorous engagement in weekly discussions of assigned texts, and will include required engagements such as posing questions and topics for weekly discussion, collaborative interpretation of texts, and collaborative paper workshops. Consistent absence or non-engagement will affect your grade.

Short papers will consist of three papers of 1250-1500 words due on prescribed dates as indicated in the course schedule. Papers will provide a critical response to course readings. Additional guidelines concerning short papers will be posted on myCourses early in the term.

Electronic mail:

E-mail inquiries regarding substantive course material (i.e., material in course readings; ideas discussed in class) or to make appointments, will receive a prompt and courteous reply. My strong preference, however, is that substantive inquiries are made in class or in the Course Matters discussion forum, so that other students may benefit from them; in some cases, replies to substantive inquiries will recommend that the issue be raised in class, for this reason. Additionally, students should be aware of the following guidelines:

1. I read and reply to electronic mail once daily, typically during the morning of standard working days. Under no circumstances will I read or reply to e-mail outside business hours. Do not expect that I will read or reply to an e-mail inquiry after 5 pm or on weekends.
2. Notification by electronic mail of a missed assignment or examination due to illness will be accepted but, in some cases, appropriate documentation will also be required.
3. Grade inquiries/disputes will not be considered or discussed via e-mail. All grade inquiries should be made in person during office hours, or by appointment.
4. I will not reply to e-mail inquiries regarding course matters (such as assignment requirements, due dates, exam structure, etc.) that clearly arise from lack of attendance or inattention to the course syllabus. Inquiries requesting clarification will receive replies, though I would strongly prefer these inquiries to be made in class or during office hours, so that others might benefit from the replies.

Grading:

Grades will be assigned according to the scale set out in the Arts and Sciences calendar, reproduced here. Students should note the following “definitions” attached to letter grades, as these will be observed strictly: “good” work will receive a grade in the C range; “very good” work will receive a grade in the B range; “excellent” work will receive a grade in the A range; the grade of A will be reserved for work that is unambiguously “outstanding.”

Grade Appeals: Assignments are graded on performance, not effort. Grades are final, except where a mistake has been made in calculation. The professor will consider a grade change under the following conditions: (a) if an error has been made in calculation, or (b) if you have not been held to the same standard as everyone else. If you seek clarification of a grade you have received, you should visit the professor during office hours. In the event that you feel you have received an undeserved grade and wish to dispute it, you must make your case in writing within 10 working days of receiving the grade, including a rationale for any requested change of the grade, accompanied by the original graded assignment (retain a copy for yourself). If a third party reviewer deems the original grade to be inappropriate, it will be revised up or down accordingly. The reviewer’s grade overrides the original grade.

Grade	Grade point	Percentages
A	4.0	85 - 100
A-	3.7	80 - 84
B+	3.3	75 - 79
B	3.0	70 - 74
B-	2.7	65 - 69
C+	2.3	60 - 64
C	2.0	55 - 59
D (Conditional Pass)	1.0	50 - 54
F (Fail)	0	0 - 49

Nondiscrimination and academic conduct:

As academics, we value equality of opportunity, human dignity, and racial, ethnic, sexual, physical, and cultural diversity. Be assured that we will promote a safe and conducive environment for learning. This will include enforcing the norms of open inquiry, respectful dialogue, and tolerant disagreement. In accordance with University [policy](#), we will not tolerate discrimination or harassment based on race, colour, sex, gender identity or expression, pregnancy, family status, sexual orientation, civil status, age (except as provided by law), religion, political conviction, language, ethnic or national origin, social condition, a disability or the use of any means to palliate a disability.” If there is something I can do to make the class more hospitable, please let me know.

Additional information:

Accommodations: If you require accommodations due to special circumstances, challenges or disabilities, please notify both the professor and the Office for Student Accessibility and Achievement as soon as possible. The OSAA provides a broad range of support and services to assist students, faculty, and staff with disabilities. (1010 Sherbrooke Ouest, Suite 410, 398-6009 (voice), 398-8198 (TDD) (<https://www.mcgill.ca/access-achieve/>). Every effort will be made to accommodate students with special needs arising from learning challenges and disabilities.

Please note the above commitment to accommodate applies equally to survivors of sexual assault and/or harassment on or off campus. Survivors are encouraged to consult the resources provided by the Students' Society of McGill University (<https://ssmu.ca/resources/sexual-violence/>), the Sexual Assault Centre of the McGill Students' Society (<http://www.sacomss.org/wp/>) and the McGill Office for Sexual Violence Response, Support and Education (<https://www.mcgill.ca/osvrse/>).

Academic resources: Students looking for additional assistance with academic reading, study, research and writing skills should consult the McGill academic resources website www.mcgill.ca/students/academicresources/.

Counseling: The McGill Wellness Hub provides personal, academic, and career counseling to undergraduate and graduate students. They also offer workshops on study skills, multiple choice exams, text anxiety/stress management. The hub is located on the third floor at the Brown Student Services building (3800 MacTavish St.; 514.398.6017; <https://www.mcgill.ca/wellness-hub/>).

Illness: Students are responsible for material covered in all classes, including those missed due to illness. Copies of lecture notes from missed classes should be solicited from classmates, as they will not be made available by the professor. Examinations will not be re-scheduled, and assignment/exam due date extensions will not be considered, for any reason other than emergency or documented illness or distress. Anyone unable to attend or complete examinations assignments due to illness or distress is expected to make every effort to contact the professor prior to the examination or due date, and to co-operate in arranging a make-up examination or revised due date. Appropriate documentation may be required to support requests for special consideration due to illness (see the "Illness" tab at www.mcgill.ca/oasis/programs/common-issues).

Language: In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

Conformément à la Charte des droits de l'étudiant de l'Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté (sauf dans le cas des cours dont l'un des objets est la maîtrise d'une langue).

Academic integrity: McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/). L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (veuillez consulter le site www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/).

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1 (January 9): Entrance

I. Eco-Marxism (and beyond)

Week 2 (January 16): Primitive Accumulation

Karl Marx. "Part Eight: So-Called Primitive Accumulation" *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1 (Penguin 1976 [1867]) 873-926

Glenn Coulthard. "Karl Marx, Settler-Colonialism, and Indigenous Dispossession in Post-White Paper Canada," *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minnesota 2014) 7-15.

Robert Nichols. "Marx, after the feast," *Theft is Property: Dispossession and Critical Theory* (Duke 2020) 85-115

Iyko Day. "Eco-Criticism and Primitive Accumulation in Indigenous Studies," in C. Lye and C. Nealon (eds.) *After Marx: Literature, Theory, and Value in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge 2022) 40 - 54

Week 3 (January 23): Metabolic Rift and Social Reproduction

Karl Marx. "Preface," *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Progress Publishers 1977 [1859]) 1-4

John Bellamy Foster. "The Metabolism of Nature and Society," *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (Monthly Review 2000) 141-142; 147-177

Brett Clark & Richard York. "Carbon metabolism: Global capitalism, climate change, and the biospheric rift," *Theory & Society* 34 (2005) 391-428

Stefania Barca. *Forces of Reproduction: Notes for a Counter-Hegemonic Anthropocene* (Cambridge 2020) 41-61

Week 4 (January 30): Commodification and Real Subsumption (of Nature?)

Neil Smith. "Nature as Accumulation Strategy," *Coming to Terms with Nature: Socialist Register 2007*. Eds. Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (2007) 16-34

William Boyd, W. Scott Prudham, & Rachel Schurman. "Industrial Dynamics and the Problem of Nature," *Society and Natural Resources*, 14: 7 (2001), 555-570

Johanna Oksala. "Feminism, Capitalism and Ecology," *Hypatia* 33:2 (2018) 216-231

Søren Mau. "The Capitalist Reconfiguration of Nature," *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital* (Verso 2023) 253-272

Week 5 (February 6): Workshop (optional)

Collaborative paper workshop ***Papers due Friday, February 9 at 5 pm***

II. Fossil Capitalism, the Capitalocene, Green Capitalism

Week 6 (February 13): Fossil capitalism

Andreas Malm. "The Origins of Fossil Capital: From Water to Steam in the British Cotton Industry," *Historical Materialism* 21.1 (2013) 15-61

Timothy Mitchell. "Carbon democracy," *Economy and Society*, 38:3 (2009), 399-432

Ryan Cecil Jobson. "Dead Labor: On Racial Capital and Fossil Capital," *Histories of Racial Capitalism*. Eds. Justin Leroy and Destin Jenkins (Columbia UP 2021) 215-230

Week 7 (February 20): The Capitalocene (and its critics)

Jason W. Moore. "The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of our Ecological Crisis," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44:3 (2017) 594-630

Matthew T. Huber. "Ecology at the Point of Production: Climate Change and Class Struggle," *Polygraph* 28 (2020) 23-43

Michael Gaffney, Claire Ravenscroft & Casey Williams. "Capitalism and Planetary Justice in the 'Web of Life': An Interview with Jason W. Moore," *Polygraph* 28 (2020) 161-182

Week 8 (February 27): Green Capitalism

Jesse Goldstein. "Non-disruptive Disruptions: Cleantech and the New Green Spirit of Capitalism," *Planetary Improvement Cleantech Entrepreneurship and the Contradictions of Green Capitalism* (MIT 2018) 17-36

Adrienne Buller. "Sirens: Distraction and Dispossession in Carbon Markets," and "Ghosts: Valuing a Disappearing World," *The Value of a Whale: On the Illusions of Green Capitalism* (Manchester 2022) 57-98; 227-267.

Week 9 (March 12): Workshop (optional)

Collaborative paper workshop ***Papers due Friday, March 15 at 5 pm***

III: Capitalist/Colonial Environmentalism

Week 10 (March 19): Environmentalism

Michel Foucault. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978* (Palgrave 2007) 20-23; 47-49

Timothy W. Luke. "On Environmentalism: Geo-Power and Eco-Knowledge in the Discourses of Contemporary Environmentalism," *Cultural Critique* 31 (Autumn 1995) 57-81

Arun Agrawal. "The Analytics of Environmentalism," *Environmentalism: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects* (Duke 2005) 216-230

Ferhat Taylan. "Mesopolitics: Foucault, Environmental Governmentality and the History of the Anthropocene," *Foucault and the Modern International*. Ed. Phillippe Bonditti (Palgrave 2017) 261-272

Week 11 (March 26): Economization

Timothy Mitchell. "Can the Mosquito Speak?" *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (California 2002) 19-53

Michelle Murphy. "Economization of Life: Calculative Infrastructures of Population and Economy," *Relational Architectural Ecologies: Architecture, Nature and Subjectivity*. Ed. Peg Rawes (Routledge 2013) 139-153

Orit Halpern, Robert Mitchell and Bernard Geoghegan. "The Smartness Mandate: Notes Toward a Critique." *Grey Room* 68 (2017) 106-29.

Week 12 (April 2): Toxicity

Traci Brynne Voyles. "Sacrificial Land," *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* (Minnesota 2016) 1-18

Max Liboiron. "Land, Nature, Resource, Property," *Pollution is Colonialism* (Duke 2021) 39-79

Elizabeth A. Povinelli. "Toxic Late Liberalism," *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism* (Duke 2021) 36-59

Week 13 (April 9): Workshop (optional)

Collaborative paper workshop ***Papers due Friday, April 12 at 5 pm***