

## Topic: TOXIC BODIES

### CMCL C661 Environmental Communication and Public Culture; CULS C701

Spring 2012 12-2:30pm Tuesdays in C272 or “Brigance Library” of C.O.B.

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Discourse about toxic bodies—intersex fish, five-legged frogs, “pre-polluted” babies, children with asthma, adults with breast cancer, veterans with Gulf War-related illnesses—abounds in these times. Our responses to these bodies—including our own bodies, to greater and lesser degrees—are telling indicators of how we feel about what and who is normal, acceptable, and worth saving, as well as what and who is not. Informed by feminist theories of intersectionality, cultural studies theories of resistance, and environmental justice scholarship on the intertwined relationship between environmental quality and social justice, this seminar aims to explore the cultural and political conditions that have made possible toxic bodies and the movements that are emerging in response to them.

Questions we will discuss may include: how have nature, biology, culture, and technology intertwined in ways that blur boundaries between each of these categories? What are the stakes of troubling bodies? Which legal, economic, and political frames of body politics enable toxic cultures? How do we decide which bodies constitute a “new normal” and which should provoke concern? Is there a value to characterizing these times in terms of biopolitics, necropolitics, or cyborg politics? How can we reimagine citizenship through toxic pollution (via mobility, stigma, property, consent, etc.)? How do health and illness shape our political imaginaries? How do we resist literal pollution without further stigmatizing or marginalizing those most impacted or other nonnormative bodies? What can we learn from movements of anti-toxic advocacy? Is the Precautionary Principle an ethical and viable goal in contrast to seemingly related logics, such as preemptive war? Since environmental sustainability is defined as a commitment to future generations, what can cultural critics who theorize the future gain from this paradigm and vice versa?

Discussions and final papers will engage bodies (human or nonhuman) literally polluted by toxics or metaphorically imagined as “polluted,” as well as movements mobilized around and by toxic bodies.

Required seminar readings: essays that can be found on Oncourse, as well as the following books, which are available at Boxcar Books (<http://www.boxcarbooks.org/>):

*Toxic Exposures: Contested Illnesses and the Environmental Health Movement* Phil Brown (Columbia University Press, 2007) 978-0-231-12948-0

*Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Stacy Alaimo (IU Press, 2010) 978-0253222404

*Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge*, Linda Nash (U of CA P, 2007) 978-0520248878

*Disability and Mobile Citizenship in Postsocialist Ukraine* Sarah D. Phillips (IU Press, 2010) 978-0253222473

*Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty: Environmental Politics, Technoscience, and Women Workers*, Michelle Murphy (Duke UP, 2006) 978-0822336716

*Sense of Place and Sense of the Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, Ursula K. Heise (Oxford, 2008) 978-0195335644

*Territories of Difference: place, movements, life, redes*, Arturo Escobar (Duke UP, 2008) 978-0822343271

## SEMINAR EXPECTATIONS

### **Engaged Participation**

A seminar is meant to call forth the critic in each of us so that we may engage in dialogue with each other. Although we all have various experiences and levels of expertise related to the topics that will arise this semester, each one of us is expected to raise questions of interest or uncertainty on a weekly basis. You are not expected to dominate each discussion or to ignore your peers. We, inevitably, will disagree. Disagreement is not a problem from a rhetorical perspective. Rather, it suggests the opportunity for further dialogue and engagement. Instead of aiming to resolve the “right” answers, we will attempt to grapple with which ones are more or less telling or significant to our research. Thus, your comments should be constructive and aim for specificity (noting a specific passage from the assigned readings, an example of a current event, how it relates to someone else’s project, et cetera). Ideally, we will be able to learn from each other this semester—which, I believe, is the primary goal of a seminar.

You have to attend to participate. Ideally, you will never miss seminar; however, one unavoidable absence will not change your final grade. **IF you are absent for more than one week and wish to maintain good standing in the seminar**, you will need to write a minimum of a 5-page paper on the readings for the additional absence(s). The paper will need to perform a constructive way to respond to the readings with a thesis and argument that you believe is significant, citing at least one specific passage and grounding your argument in evidence that is relevant to your point. Such a paper cannot replace the value of seminar discussion, but it is better than nothing.

### **One Discussion Prompt: You will be assigned one week.**

For your given week, you should identify two passages from the readings that most resonate or provoke you. You and perhaps another seminar participant will be expected to help launch our discussion orally, though you need not collaborate. (In general, you should be able to do this any week, but this assignment is designed with the hopes of encouraging all voices to speak—and some to listen.)

### **One Keyword (4 pages, minimum): 1/31**

You each will be assigned a keyword to define. This assignment is inspired by the work of Raymond Williams. You should consider the political, cultural, historical, corporeal, and toxic significance of the term in your definition. The readings for the day will provide a solid foundation, but additional research will be illuminating. Haraway, p. 279-280, note 1 on “technoscience,” offers one model.

(Cont’d)

**Final Assignment Proposal Abstract (1 page or 300 word maximum): 3/20**

The Final Assignment Proposal requires that you write an abstract: (1) committing to one form of the final assignment (options below); (2) naming the primary thesis question(s)/claim/theme that you are hoping to pursue; (3) explaining how you plan to develop your argument (e.g., what resources—archives and/or repertoires—will you draw from?; which disciplines of academic journals and books will you pursue? that is, which conversation are you attempting to join?; what is the type of analysis—close readings, discourse analysis, etc.—are you planning to undertake?); and (4) illustrating how the final will engage at least one theme/reading of the course. Just like a submission to an academic conference or a journal, this abstract is meant to be brief, but condense, provocative, and well thought out.

**Final Assignment Presentation (15 mins max): 4/10 or 4/17**

You will be expected to be prepared, informed, and inspiring in an oral presentation in class on your final-paper-in-progress.

**Final Assignment: 4/24**

Depending on where you are in your studies, you have options for the final assignment, although all should engage theme(s) and reading(s) of this seminar: (1) a manuscript length essay engaged with course reading(s) and theme(s) based on original research, as you would write for submission to a particular journal; (2) a theoretically-intensive literature review-based paper in which you draw upon the published works on a focused area of interest raised by a course reading(s) to make an argument about what has been said already in this area (and/or has not) *and* what you would like to add/amend/challenge at a future point in time; OR (3) an empirically-intensive research paper in which you conduct rigorous original research (ex., interviews, participant-observation, significant archival analysis) inspired by a question raised by a reading(s) in the course.

**SCHEDULE****Jan 10: intros**

(intro lecture informed by Pezzullo's publications on toxic pollution and bodies)

**Jan 17: epidemiological dilemmas & environmental health movements**

Read: Brown and

Michael R. Reich, *Toxic Politics: Responding to Chemical Disasters*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, 1-16.

**Jan 24: trans-corporeality & normativity**

Read: Alaimo and

Giovanna DiChiro, "Polluted Politics? Confronting Toxic Discourse, Sex Panic, and Eco-Normativity," In *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, Eds. Bloomington, IN: IU Press, 2010, 199-230.

**Jan 31: keywords... bio-power, necropolitics, & cyborgs**

Read: Michel Foucault, "one: 11 January 1978," 1-27; "government & governmentality" by Michel Senellart, 386-391, in Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*. Michel Senellart, Ed. Palgrave/McMillan, 2004.

Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 11-40.

Nicole R. Fleetwood, "Failing Narratives, Initiating Technologies: Hurricane Katrina and the Production of a Weather Media Event," *American Quarterly* 58.3 (2006, September): 767-789.

Donna Haraway, "FemaleMan©\_Meets\_OncoMouse™. Mice into Wormholes: A Technoscience Fugue in Two Parts," *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium. FemaleMan©\_Meets\_OncoMouse™*. (Routledge, 1997), 49-118, notes 279-292.

**Feb 7: ecologies of dis-eased bodies**

Read: Nash

**Feb 14: toxic citizenship**

Read: Phillips; note: author will visit class 1-2:30pm

**Feb 21: a history of uncertainty**

Read: Murphy

**Feb 28: the limits and possibilities of living without borders**

Read: Heise

**Mar 6: theories of movements in a global and place-based age**

Read: Escobar

**(Mar 13: spring break)**

**Mar 20: prospectus assignment due** (no assigned readings)

**Mar 27: theorizing the cultural politics of the future through sustainability**

Read: TBA (could include: Muecke, Grossberg, Edelman, Muñoz, excerpts from *Silent Spring*, *FutureNatural* and *Our Stolen Future*)

**April 3: the future of (eco-)cultural studies**

Read: TBA (could include debates on precautionary principle by Patterson & McClean, Mandel & Gathii and Sachs, as well as debates over the idea of an "ecocultural studies" by Slack, Sandilands, and Berland)

**April 10: final presentations**

**April 17: final presentations**

**April 24: final seminar discussion, in class evaluations, & paper due**