Winter 2019 | University of Toronto | Department of Geography & Planning

GGR1411: Nature and Justice in the Anthropocene

COURSE OUTLINE

Course Instructor:  Prof. Neera Singh
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Class Meetings:  Room: SSH 5016G (Sid Smith Hall)
Tuesdays 5-7 PM

Office Hours:  Room: SSH 5023
Tuesdays 1-3 PM (or by appointment)

Course Overview:

The ‘Anthropocene’, a proposed epoch, signals an era when human action is marking Earth’s geology and ecosystems and is likely to diminish conditions for life (as we know it) on the planet. ‘Anthropocene’ is a contested term that obscures the fact that not all humans are equally implicated in the planetary ecological crisis. Regardless of the name that we use for this era, it is clear that the current times of ecological precarity challenge us to rethink our ways of being and belonging to the world. The course draws from Indigenous ontologies and philosophies and Western social theory, especially theories of affect, new materialism, more-than-human geographies, and posthumanism to rethink socio-nature relationality. We will explore how these theoretical resources help us think anew human ways of relating to the rest of the world and provide tools for enacting alternate socioecological futures. Topics covered include: environmental thought and activism, environmental and climate justice movements, post-capitalist economic practices and transition discourses.

This seminar will be guided by the following questions: 1) How do we begin to comprehend the current moment of ecological crisis (what has brought us here)? 2) How can we better understand collective human dominance without obscuring power differentials and inequities within and between human societies? 3) How do we reconfigure nature-society relations to address the ecological crisis? 4) How do we conceptualize justice not only in terms of intra-species justice (for humans present and future generations) but also for more-than-humans and beyond human-scale? and 5) What theoretical and methodological tools enable us to rethink the human and reconfigure our ways of living on the planet and support socially-just transitions?

In the seminar, I will work with you to foster engaged and active learning, guided by principles of collaboration, mutual support, and ethics of care. Course assignments and grading scheme reflect a commitment to these principles. Our collective learning will depend on everyone’s engaged participation and commitment to respectful and collaborative learning environment.
Course Requirements and Marking Scheme Summary

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<td>Final Paper proposal</td>
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Reading Responses (30%)
You will post at least 8 weekly commentaries (about 400-500 words) on the Blackboard by Monday at 12 PM (for weeks other than the ones in which you are facilitating). Please do not be late in posting them as we all need to read them before class. Please read and be prepared to engage with the commentaries of at least three other seminar participants. Your response to the weekly readings should ideally include:

- A concise paraphrase of the key argument of the pieces you have read, the evidence used, and the general structures of the arguments. As you read, try and figure out the argument the author is making and if it stands in its own terms and then see if it can be read critically from your own research standpoint or from the point of other critics.
- As you evaluate and think through these readings, you may want to pose questions to the author, to yourself, and to the rest of us. This critical dialogue with the author may include: How and why the argument works or does not work, and most importantly what work do these ideas do? Does thinking with these ideas help you and if yes, how?
- Raise questions for discussion and clarification in seminar.

Seminar Contributions (12%)
The quality of our collective learning will depend on the contributions that each one of us makes to collective learning and to nurturing learning environment. If you miss a class, or are not fully present, others will miss you and your contribution. Mutual respect and care for each other and for the learning space – the readings, engagement on Quercus and in class - is critical for the success of the seminar. In addition to assigned weekly readings, please read as many ‘reading responses’ on Quercus as you can, prior to class – but do not read them before you have done the readings. Remember that your perspective and how you engage with the readings is unique – do not interpret the readings through the lenses used by your colleagues. Your participation in class will be assessed not on the basis of how much you speak, but on the basis of the quality of your contributions – your engagement with the readings and with your colleagues and your contributions to creating an environment where we all feel respected and cared for.

In addition to contributions in class, you are also encouraged to post reflections on class discussion after class on Quercus. These reflections will be optional – to make the process of sharing spontaneous and not forced. You can use seminar reflection discussion board as a way of continuing seminar discussion online. This thread can also be used to post additional resources that you may want to share with colleagues. We will discuss modalities of ‘discussion’ on Quercus in class. In-class and online contributions together will comprise 10% of your grade.
Seminar Facilitation (15%)
In pairs, you will take the responsibility of leading the seminar at least once, between weeks 3- week 12. Please feel free to be creative in your class facilitation. Your facilitation should highlight key issues raised by the readings (questions it generated for you, critiques of the arguments made by the authors, points that need further clarification) and raise questions that could generate valuable discussion during the seminar. Seminar facilitation should not be presentation-heavy. The idea is to create a generative learning environment. Please send me your ideas for seminar facilitation by Friday at noon – so that I can provide inputs. In week 2, we will work out a schedule for seminar facilitation in class.

Final Paper/ Project (Proposal 8% and Final paper 35%)
The final paper can take different forms. In addition to traditional research paper, I am open to dissertation proposal, annotated bibliography for comps, as well as creative writing projects as the final project – as long as it draws from the conceptual resources from the course. You may choose a topic and option that fits your research interests and contributes to furthering your program requirements (comps, dissertation proposal, grant application, thesis chapter).

I am also open to your working together in teams (or 3-4) to write a collaborative paper (it is expected that this paper will be more ambitious in scope than an individually written paper). Creative forms of writing – a multi-layered text using personal voice interspersed with scholarly writing, autoethnographic writing, a personal manifesto for how you intend to ‘live the anthropocene’, are also welcome. In all cases, I will expect scholarly depth and engagement with the conceptual material of the course.

Possible options include:

Option A – Research Essay/Proposal/Grant/Comp: This paper should not exceed 6500 words, plus bibliography. I recommend this for students who are clear of their research topics/questions (advanced MA and PhDs).

Option B – Annotated Bibliography
For those who are beginning to fine-tune their research question and theoretical focus, this may be a good option. The length should not exceed 6000 words and could include 2-4 books and 15-20 articles. The annotated bibliography should have an introduction of 1000 -1500 words discussing the question/s that you aim to address/explore in the bibliography and why you selected the list of texts you did. The introduction will be followed by critical discussion of the reading list, approximately 500 words for each reading.

Option C – Creative Writing
I am open to ideas! Give a detailed proposal of what you would like to do!

Final Paper Proposal (8%) Due February 26, 2019
For all the above options, you will submit a 2-page proposal stating your research questions (or goal), citing relevant literature, theoretical tools, possible case studies and some sample readings that you intend to use. Time permitting we will have discussion on your paper ideas in class.

Assignment Submission and Late Penalty
All assignments for this class are to be submitted electronically via Quercus. There will be a late
penalty of 5% for each day late. No assignments will be accepted more than one week after the due date unless you have obtained prior permission from me, or in the case of documented illness or other extenuating circumstances.

**Academic Integrity/ Plagiarism**
Please familiarize yourself with what counts as academic misconduct:  
http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/osai/The-rules/what-is-academic-misconduct

Also, check out the rules relating to how to document the sources of information that you use and how to avoid plagiarism:  
http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize

**Accessibility Needs:**
The University of Toronto is committed to accessibility. If you require accommodations for a disability, or have any accessibility concerns about the course, the classroom or course materials, please contact Accessibility Services as soon as possible, and let me know how I can help! For details see:  http://studentlife.utoronto.ca/as/

**Required Books**


Recommended:

Part I: The Anthropocene and the Anthropo-not-Seen

Week 1: January 8, 2019
Introduction & Stage Setting

Margaret Atwood. 2009. Time Capsule found on a Dead Planet. Reproduced in “I’m with the Bears: Short Stories from a Damaged Planet”. Verso. 2011

Unearthing the Capitalocene: Towards a Reparations Ecology--
https://roarmag.org/magazine/moore-patel-seven-cheap-things-capitalocene/

Week 2: January 15, 2019
Current Ecological Crisis: What got us here


Recommended:

Week 3: January 22, 2019
The Anthropocene or the Anthropo-not-Seen

Tsing, Anna. Mushroom at the End of the World—Part II “After Progress: Salvage Accumulation” (pp. 57-144)

Recommended:

1 The course readings are tentative. I will modify the readings based on students’ interests and backgrounds.
Part II: Towards a New Earth and a New Humanity

**Week 4: January 29, 2019**

**Reanimating the World I: Indigenous Ontologies & New Materialism**

Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter*: Chapter 1-3 & Preface

Parts of Robin Kimmerer book. [1-71, 105-140]


**Recommended:**


**Week 5: February 5, 2019**

**Reanimating the World II: Kincentric Ecology**


**Engagement Blog: What the Seed Knows of Soil**


**Recommended:**


**Week 6: February 12, 2019**

**Rethinking the Human I: Nurturing Other-than-Capitalist Subjectivities**


Recommended:


Reading Week: No Class: February 19, 2019 (Optional Meeting to discuss Final Paper ideas?)

Part III: Nurturing “Life-in-Common”: Towards a Pluriversal world

Week 7: February 26, 2019

Justice and Value


Week 8: March 5, 2019

Ethics of Care and Human Co-Becomings


Singh, Becoming a Commoner.


Recommended:


Week 9: March 12, 2019
Affective Political Ecology

Recommended/ Optional (Possibility of organizing around specific research interests of seminar participants)

Background reading on affect theory:

Week 10: March 19, 2019
Nature Conservation in the Anthropocene/ Green Economy and its Critique
(Readings to be finalized later)
Recommended:

**Week 11: March 26, 2019**

**Post-capitalist Alternatives**

**Week 12: April 2, 2019**

**Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet**
Transition discourses, transition town movements, urban gardens, food sovereignty, Indigenous resurgence.
More open-ended exploration: The commons, peer-to-peer production, alternative currencies, time-banking, degrowth.

Chapters from the book, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet.*

Recommended:
Macy, Joanna, and Chris Johnstone. *Active hope: How to face the mess we're in without going crazy.* New World Library, 2012.