

STSO 6961: Bodies, Institutions, Infrastructures

Fall 2023, Fridays, 9-11:50

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Office Hours: Fridays 1-2:30 and by appointment

Course Description

This course asks students to work through basic ontological and epistemological questions in humanistic and social scientific research and writing: what is the world composed of and how do we know it as scholars? How do we convey what we know through genres of writing and presentation? How do scholarly forms of representation create new ideas about the things we study, and how do the things we study become concretized through our forms of presentation? In pursuit of answers to these questions, we focus on three kinds of knowable objects—bodies, institutions, and infrastructures—and how they have been conceptualized in the context of materialist approaches to embodiment and everyday worlds of human (and nonhuman) experience. Throughout the course, the motivating goal is to plumb your beliefs about the world and how it is knowable and to experiment with ways of representing the world and things in it as knowable objects and processes. To meet these ends, we read widely, but circle the Spinozist materialism of late 20th century and early 21st century scholars—many of whom directly inform the work of scholars in science and technology studies, as well as influence contemporary scholarship across the humanistic social sciences and humanities. We read, watch, and listen widely too, all in an effort to unsettle traditional modes of thought and find new ways of crafting objects, observing interactions, and conveying them as knowable.

The course is structured around three objects--bodies, institutions, and infrastructures—with texts that seek to provide ways of describing each of these kinds of things in the world. Students are asked to use the texts they encounter in class as prompts to explore the bodies, institutions, and infrastructures that animate their research. This occurs through two descriptive papers and one synthetic paper (outlined below), which is intended to help students further their research projects in dialogue with contemporary perspectives in materialist approaches.

A note about reading: There is a lot of reading in this course and much of it is difficult. I don't expect you to master it, but to familiarize yourself enough with it to be able to have a conversation in class and to be able to return to it at some point in your future (when it's helpful or thought provoking). Similarly, although we don't read all of each of the books we'll be reading, it's helpful to own the texts so that you can return to them in the future.

Learning Outcomes

1. Students will demonstrate comprehensive grasp of key conceptual and theoretical developments in the field of Science and Technology Studies through reflexive reading and discussion of key texts reviewing literature in the field, including key theoretical texts in materialist philosophy.
2. Students will demonstrate fluency by participating in discussion to contextualize, compare, contrast, and think critically about approaches adopted by the authors addressed in the course.
3. Students will demonstrate ability to write empirically-driven descriptions motivated by approaches in materialist philosophy and related areas.
4. Students will demonstrate the ability to synthesize and reflect upon assigned readings, lectures, and classroom discussion through synthetic writing assignments and a collaborative project.

Describe a Body (20 points)—In 5-7 double spaced pages, describe a body, its qualities, and capacities. This could be a particular human or nonhuman body, it could be organic or not, imaginary or real. Fundamentally, it should be a body that is important to you in your research and something that you can return to as the basis for the assignments later in the course. In describing the body, rely on texts that we've studied in part one of the course—which you can explicitly be in dialogue with or use as inspiration. You don't have to agree with the texts, but rather use them as spurs to conceptualize what a body is, what it does, and what it is capable of. This needn't be an argumentative essay; it should fundamentally be an empirical description of a body.

Describe a Situation or Process (20 points)—In 5-7 double spaced pages, describe a situation or process that the body you examined in Describe a Body undergoes or participates in. In doing so, turn to the readings that we've completed in part two of the course, which you can use as explicit or implicit prompts for your writing. It may help to consider how your body interacts with a particular institution, ritual, or interaction. Consider: how does power operate in the interactions between the body and its situation? What forms of agency are produced and limited, and how are those agencies acted on by the body and other actors? How does the body change or persist through its institutional interactions? In answering these questions, you should primarily be providing an empirical description, although you may choose to make it argumentative.

Synthetic Foray (20 points)—Building on your Describe a Body and Describe a Situation or Process papers, prepare a 15-20 page synthetic paper that puts the body and its interactions into dialogue with infrastructures that facilitate (or don't) the body and its movements and goals. Drawing on readings from part three, consider how infrastructures create the conditions for the body to interact with other bodies, and how the body and its institutional contexts interact with other bodies and institutions. It may help to compare two different infrastructures and their impacts on the body; in so doing, you may choose to make this an argumentative paper (which might also be a critique of particular infrastructures).

Weekly Reading Guide (20 points; 2 points each)—See Appendix A. Reading Guides are a proxy for participation, and I ask that students come prepared for weekly discussions by having completed the assigned reading and taking the time to work through a Reading Guide. You should turn in one Reading Guide each week, but it's your choice which reading you choose to focus on; you cannot turn in more than one each week. Completed reading guides should be 3-4 pages long and should be legible to you (i.e. I am not the audience for your Reading Guides, you are, and they should be completed in a way that is usable and useful to you).

Collaborative project & Reflection (20 points)—In partnership with one or more other students in class, develop a collaboration that responds to concerns associated with the course. This should be a creative opportunity and can take the form of any number of possibilities (which I don't want to delimit here). Along with whatever your collaborative project is, please prepare a 3-5 page reflection on the collaborative process and how it shaped the outcome as well as your working process.

Reading List

Books have been ordered at the campus bookstore. If a book is available through the library, a link is provided below. It is **highly recommended** that you bring a copy of the text to class on the day of discussion (either as a book or as a PDF) for the purpose of facilitating a course discussion. Additional texts will be made available through Blackboard. Optional texts are marked with a #.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Chen, Mel. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.

#Deleuze, Gilles. *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. Translated by Robert Hurley. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1988.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Vol. 2. Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, MN, 1987.

Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Elias, Norbert. *The Civilizing Process*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Malden: Blackwell, 2000.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Translated by Robert Hurley. Vol. 1. The History of Sexuality. New York: Vintage, 1990.

#Gatens, Moira, and Genevieve Lloyd. *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Gidwani, Vinay. *Capital, Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Kirby, Vicki. *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1991.

Massey, Doreen. *For Space*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005.

Serres, Michel, and Bruno Latour. *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*. Translated by Roxanne Lapidus. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Weheliye, Alexander. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.

Wynter, Sylvia. *We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk About a Little Culture: Decolonising Essays 1967-1984*. Edited by Demetrius L. Eudel. Leeds, UK: Peepal Tree Press, 2022.

Style Matters

All written work should be double-spaced, 12 point font, in Times New Roman, with 1 inch margins on all sides, and page numbers. Citation should follow Chicago 17th, and look like this: (Author Year, Page), e.g. (Wolf-Meyer 2009, 408). Please use citation management software (i.e. Zotero or similar) and make your life easier!

Code of Conduct

Students should use inclusive, nondiscriminatory language in class, coursework, and in correspondence. If you feel that another student (or the instructor) has transgressed this norm, please contact the instructor as soon as possible to remedy the situation.

Contacting Me

I tend to only check my email during business hours and during the week; if you have an emergency, please know that it's very likely that I won't read your email after 4 PM. I will respond as soon as possible, but in the case of non-emergencies, please allow up to two business days to receive a response. Because our class meets at 9 AM on Fridays, it's unlikely that I'll be able to respond to any email sent to me on Thursdays or before class meets—please keep this in mind.

Disability and Accommodation

If you have experiences that suggest you may have a learning disability or have sensory or mobility impairments, please contact RPI's [Disability Student Services](#) to discuss accommodations. Disabilities should be registered with the university so as to ensure that the institution is acting in a manner that is responsible for supporting your experience as a student—and providing instructors with the resources you need to achieve positive outcomes.

Grading policy

Grade modifiers are in effect for **all courses at Rensselaer**. Numerical weights associated with these grades are as follows: A=4.0, A-=3.67, B+=3.33 B=3.0, B-= 2.67, C+= 2.33, C=2.0 C-= 1.67, D+=1.33, D=1.0, F=0.0 (includes FA, Administrative Fail, the grade you receive if you do not turn in work or arrange for incomplete). Incompletes are rarely granted and must be negotiated in advance or an FA will be assigned. To arrange an incomplete, you must turn in concrete schedule for completion next term and submit this request to the registrar on the correct form. Graduate students must maintain a cumulative GPA above 3.0 to remain in good standing.

Academic Integrity

Academic misconduct of any sort will not be tolerated. Evidence of academic misconduct – which is not limited to plagiarism and cheating – will result in an immediate failing grade in the course and actions as dictated by university policy regarding academic integrity for graduate Students.

Course Schedule

Part One: Bodies

September 1

Deleuze, Gilles. "Spinoza and Us" In *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. Translated by Robert Hurley. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1988.

Gatens, Moira, and Genevieve Lloyd. [*Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present*](#). New York: Routledge, 1999. **Chapter 1**

In class: Lars von Trier's *The Five Obstructions* (2003)

September 8

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Vol. 2. Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, MN, 1987. **Chapter 6**

Serres, Michel, and Bruno Latour. *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*. Translated by Roxanne Lapidus. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995. **Second and Third Conversations**

September 15

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Vol. 2. Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, MN, 1987. **Chapter 1**

Wynter, Sylvia. *We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk About a Little Culture: Decolonising Essays 1967-1984*. Edited by Demetrius L. Eudel. Leeds, UK: Peepal Tree Press, 2022. **Chapters**

September 22

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

In class: Allie Light's *Conversations with Madwomen*

Part Two: Institutions

September 29

Describe a Body Due by 11:59 PM

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Vol. 2. Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, MN, 1987. **Chapter 13**

Douglas, Mary. [*Purity and Danger*](#). New York: Routledge, 2002.

October 6

Elias, Norbert. *The Civilizing Process*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Malden: Blackwell, 2000. **Part 1, Part 2 (I-III), Part 4**

October 13

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Translated by Robert Hurley. Vol. 1. The History of Sexuality. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Hacking, Ian. "Making Up People." In *The Science Studies Reader*, edited by Mario Biagioli, 161–71. New York: Routledge, 1999.

In class: Nicolas Philibert's *Every Little Thing* (1998)

October 20

Chen, Mel. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Vol. 2. Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, MN, 1987. **Chapter 10**

October 27

Haraway, Donna. [*When Species Meet*](#). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. **Chapter**

Weheliye, Alexander. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.

Part Three: Infrastructures

November 3

Describe a Situation or Process due by 11:59 PM

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1991. **Chapters 2 & 4**

In class: Brett Story's *The Prison in 12 Landscapes* (2017)

November 10

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Vol. 2. Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minneapolis:

University of Minnesota, MN, 1987. **Chapter 14**

Massey, Doreen. *For Space*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005.

November 17: AAA meeting in Toronto, No Classes

November 24: Thanksgiving Break, No Classes

December 1

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Vol. 2. Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minneapolis:

University of Minnesota, MN, 1987. **Chapter 12**

Gidwani, Vinay. [*Capital, Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India*](#). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

December 8

Last day to turn in collaborative projects

Reflection on collaboration due by 11:59 PM

Synthetic paper due by 11:59 PM

Kirby, Vicki. *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

Appendix A: Reading Guide for Non-Fiction

For each reading, you will need to fill out this form. Bring copies of each reading guide to class to receive credit and ensure that you understand each reading.

1. Who is the author? What kind of disciplinary background are they coming from (e.g. anthropology, history, sociology, medicine)?
2. Who is the piece written for? How can you infer the audience?
3. What is the main argument and goal of the writing? -- to verify something? or challenge a theoretical claim? In other words, if you had to explain it in class, how would you summarize it?
4. Identify the author's thesis. Can their argument be isolated in a single thesis? If not, what kinds of claims are they making and how do they do so?
5. What are the key concepts used? Are concepts challenged or invented?
6. How are citations used? Who is being cited and how are they being engaged with? Is the author building on other theories, contesting them, or doing something else?
7. What is the article, book, or chapters about, empirically? In other words, what is being studied as the object? Where are the events and people geographically situated? What is the scale of analysis? (e.g. nation, region, city, institution, person?)
8. What methods were used in collecting data? (ethnography, interviews, statistics, textual analysis, archival research?) Does the data look at what people do, say, or think? How was the data analyzed? What assumptions -- of the author or his or her society -- shaped the inquiry? What core values are assumed? What data would strengthen the text?
9. Discuss a passage (citing page number) that inspired you or frustrated you. Then type out a paragraph or two (160-300 words) discussing that passage (citing page number) and describing how it resonated or clashed with other course content (which might be a discussion, a film, or another text).
10. If you take one thing away from the text, what would it be? In other words, if you're telling a friend about this article or book, what's the one nugget you would share to start a conversation?