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History 338: Colloquium in U.S. Urban Environmental History

Spring 2005
Wednesdays, 2:30 - 4:20
King 339

In this course, we will be looking at changing urban environments, environmental influences on cities, the environmental impact of urban places, and the concerns and influence of urban environmental activists in the United States. We will be questioning the anti-urban bias of much environmental history, and interrogating definitions of "nature" and "culture" that place people and their habitats outside of the "natural" world.

Reading:

The following books are available at the Oberlin College Bookstore, and are on reserve at Mudd Library.

Cronon, William. *Nature' Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1991.

Davis, Mike. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. New York: Vintage Press, 1990.

Jackson, Kenneth. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Kelman, Ari. *A River and its City: The nature of Landscape in New Orleans*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Klinenberg, Eric. *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Osofsky, Gilbert. *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto*. New York: Harper Collins, 1966 (2nd edition, 1971; reprint of 2nd edition, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996).

In addition, a number of shorter readings are available on reserve at the library, on electronic reserve (ERES): <http://eres.cc.oberlin.edu>, and through other on-line databases.

The primary objectives of this class are to master a significant body of literature in the field of urban environmental history, to learn to think critically and creatively about the history of urban environments, and to develop the reading, writing and discussion skills that are critical to historical inquiry. To meet these goals, this course emphasizes readings, discussions, and original research.

Attendance at every class meeting is required, as are careful and thoughtful preparation for class discussions. In a seminar class as large as this one, it is of critical importance for every seminar member not only to contribute thoughtfully to our conversations about the readings, but also to work consciously to facilitate a successful large group discussion.

To prepare for each meeting, each student is asked to prepare a list of discussion questions for the week's readings. These questions should demonstrate a critical understanding of the authors' major arguments, and should remain focused on what we can learn from the readings themselves, rather than speculating about things the authors have not addressed. Questions of evidence, of approach, of assumptions, of style are all appropriate, as are questions of comparison between that week's readings and earlier readings or discussions. Keep in mind that the goal is to facilitate high-level, evidence-based discussion, not speculation.

The question lists, which should include at least two questions and may be preceded by a brief paragraph of thoughts about the reading if that seems helpful (no more than 200 words), will be an important part of the weekly work for this class, and will help structure our weekly discussions. The lists are due at 6 pm on Tuesday each week. They should be posted to the "discussion board" section of the course Blackboard site, which will have a discussion thread for each week. We will all then refer to the documents in preparing for our discussions on Wednesday. These posts will not be individually graded, but will be considered as part of your discussion grade for the class, which accounts for 60% of your final grade. Late postings will not be accepted, and missing postings will bring your discussion grade down.

Because so much of the final grade is dependent on class participation and Blackboard postings, I will give each of you a midterm grade assessment, so that you can gauge how things are going, and so that you can make adjustments if need be. Also, you are always welcome to come by my office hours to discuss the class and your participation in it.

In addition to the Blackboard postings, you will be writing a ten- to twelve-page research paper on a topic of your choosing in the field of urban environmental history. A proposal for the research paper, worth five percent of your final grade, is due on October 12th, in class, in hard copy. The final paper, worth 35 percent of your grade, is due on the last day of class, December 14th, in hard copy.

Due dates for proposal and the final paper should be taken seriously. However, unlike Blackboard postings, they will be accepted late, albeit with significant penalties. Papers will lose one-third of a letter grade for every 24-hour period they are late. That means, for example, that a paper that normally would have earned a B+ would earn a B if it were turned

in the morning following the due date. It is not possible to pass the class without turning in both the proposal and the paper.

The research proposal and the final paper should be submitted in hard copy, and should be double-spaced, with one-inch margins, and in a twelve-point font. Page limits and word limits should be taken seriously. In addition, you must use computers responsibly. Please remember that computers are always crashing, and printers are always jamming, and networks are always going down; be sure to have enough time and enough back-ups that you can meet deadlines.

To summarize, the course will be graded as follows:

Course participation, including weekly Blackboard postings:	60%
Paper proposal:	5%
Research paper:	35%

Schedule of Classes and Assignments:

Week One

Wednesday, September 7 **Introduction**

Week Two

Wednesday, September 14 **The Nature of Cities**

Reading:

William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis* (especially chapters 1,2,3 and 6).

William Cronon, "The Trouble With Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," from William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995; paperback edition, 1996), 69-90. Available on ERES

Week Three

Wednesday, September 21 **Definitions and Themes**

Reading:

Martin Melosi, "The Place of the City in Environmental History," *Environmental History Review* 17:1 (Spring 1993), 1-23. Available on ERES

Richard White, "The Nationalization of Nature," *The Journal of American History* (December 1999), 976-986. Available on ERES

Joel A. Tarr, "Urban History and Environmental History in the United States: Complementary and Overlapping Fields," *H-Environment: Historiography Series in Global Environmental History*, November 30, 2000). Available on-line at: <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~environ/historiography/usurban.htm>

Week Four

Wednesday, September 28 **Space, Place, and Urban Landscapes**

Reading:

Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City*

And search for recent columns and op-eds by Kelman (see *Slate*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and other publications. Try Lexis/Nexis and see what you turn up).

Week Five

Wednesday, October 5 **Suburbanization**

Reading:

Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*

Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1991), 3-15. Available on ERES

Week Six

Wednesday, October 12 **Research Workshop**

Paper Proposal Due

Week Seven

Wednesday, October 19 **Constructing the Ghetto**

Reading:
Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto*

Week Eight

Wednesday, March 26 **Fall Recess: No Class**

Week Nine

Wednesday, November 2 **Power and Control**

Reading:
Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*
John McPhee, "Los Angeles Against the Mountains," in
McPhee, *The Control of Nature* (New York: Farrar, Straus,
and Giroux, 1989), 183-202. Available on ERES

Week Ten

Wednesday, November 9 **Environmental Justice**

Reading:
Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave*
Ellen Stroud, "Troubled Waters in Ecotopia:
Environmental Racism in Portland, Oregon," *Radical History*
Review 74 (Spring 1999): 65-95. Available on ERES

Week Eleven

Wednesday, November 16 **Guest Speaker: Eric Avila, UCLA**

Reading:
Eric Avila, "Popular Culture in the Age of White
Flight: Film Noir, Disneyland, and the Cold War
(Sub)Urban Imaginary," *Journal of Urban History* (Nov
2004) 31: 3 - 22. (available on-line. Do an OBIS search for
the *Journal of Urban History*, and connect to the on-line
version).

Week Twelve

Wednesday, November 23 **Presentations**

Week Thirteen

Wednesday, November 30 **Presentations**

Week Fourteen

Wednesday, December 7 **Presentations**

Week Fifteen

Wednesday, December 14 **Final Thoughts and Conclusions, and a Look Ahead**

Final Paper Due