



The City Institute at York University (CITY)

Engaging Scholars: Critical Urbanism at York University

A half day of presentations by York PhD
students engaging in critical urban studies

Thursday April 3, 2014

305 York Lanes

ABSTRACTS

Bryony Halpin (PhD Candidate, Faculty of Environmental Studies)

The Sweet Life on Toronto's Sugar Beach - city building in the shadow of colonialism

The Toronto waterfront is the largest urban revitalization project in North America. Funded by all three levels of government and massive private sector capital injections, the waterfront's hyped destiny is to usher Toronto resolutely into the realm of the Global City network (Sassen). Sugar Beach is an artificial urban beach that was unveiled at the beginning of the development and acts as the project's iconic "playful" space, the prologue to a narrative that stories the waterfront as a previously under-utilized wasteland that has the power to be transformed; a terra nullius. With its' sun-seekers protected by candy-coloured umbrellas, Sugar Beach also sits in the shadow of the Redpath Sugar Refinery. In this presentation, I critically explore Sugar Beach as a site of the remaking of settler colonial dominance, revealing the hidden histories of the space that are, and have been Indigenous and racialized since contact. In the thinking of Avery Gordon's "hauntings", how is Sugar Beach in its newest costume not telling - and thus haunted by - the history of settler nation on Indigenous land, and the slave and indentured labour that enabled the commodity of sugar to be the beacon of colonial capitalism (Ashcroft, Ahluwalia and Knight)? This work presents the opportunity to trouble a seemingly innocuous space of leisure by exploring its settler colonial contours. To do this thoughtfully, I must also trouble my own role as a researcher and downtown resident who benefits from the settler privilege resulting from an expanding city and economy.

Peter Hobbs (PhD Candidate, Faculty of Environmental Studies).

Hazmat Suits and Lemonade: On the Ambient Politics of Lead

If you live in a city, there is little doubt that traces of lead can be found in your blood. In a 2013 report, Health Canada acknowledged that lead has achieved a ubiquitous presence in the world as the result of human activity. By mining and incorporating lead into essential commodities (batteries, radiation shielding, soldering), we have, in effect, befriended it, turning it into a companion species. But unlike the ubiquitous dog or cat, lead is a well-known poison that attacks the human brain, causing learning disabilities and countless fatalities. The idea that we have befriended a deadly poison should not sit well with a country's population, however lead is absent from common lists of environmental concerns. It is usually seen as old news, a problem that was dealt with in 1980s, along with acid rain.

My primary goal is to tell a story of Toronto by relying on a number of images that reveal a counter-history of lead, one that goes against the grain of the broad consensus that lead poisoning belongs to the past. Originally these images were meant to warn the general public of the dangers of

lead and at the same time assure that everything was under control. However, these images retain an unnerving sense of uncertainty, bolstering the idea that the politics of lead continues to be exceedingly messy, with much room for contest and dissension.

Alexandra Flynn (PhD Candidate, Osgoode Hall Law School)

The Cities Within: Governing “Local” and “City-wide” in Toronto

When we think of city governance, we conceive of a single body - comprised of a mayor and councillors - that determines policies, positions and contents of by-laws. In reality, given the tremendous scope of matters within their jurisdiction, large cities must delegate responsibility to committees, commissions and other bodies to consider certain matters, sometimes as final decision-makers. My dissertation asks how the distinctions between “local” and “city-wide” are conceived of and reflected in the City of Toronto’s governance model. More specifically, I will inquire as to how the City of Toronto has delegated authority to community councils by reframing and decentralizing what are understood as “local” issues, and how the City conceives of and incorporates other institutions operating at the sublocal level, including neighbourhood associations and business improvement areas.

As a stepping stone to this larger inquiry, the focus of this paper is how existing academic research makes room for the institutions of local decision-making in Canadian cities. Academic research on urban governance broadly, and local decision-making specifically, has largely taken place within the American context. While this literature provides a helpful theoretical background, it does not take into consideration Canada’s unique legal, social and historical municipal setting. This paper will bridge the work of scholars Richard Ford Thompson, Richard Schragger and Gerald Frug, who have examined the theoretical justifications for “localism,” or deference for local decision-making, together with more recent Canadian scholarship examining how jurisdictional boundaries and multiple overlapping institutions operate in the practice of local-decision-making. Building on the works of Hoi Kong and Nicholas Blomley, I will locate the theoretical framework by which overlapping community-level institutions may be understood in Canadian cities.

Francesca D’Amico (PhD Candidate, History)

“It’s A Big Daddy Thing”: Black Power, Gender, Sexual Scripts and The Stories Rappers Tell of the Inner City, 1980-1990

Hip Hop culture, both a marginalized and wilfully marginal form of black cultural expression, developed amid federally mandated social science poverty research and the outcomes of the post-industrial urban crisis. White male progressive ethnographers insisted that this form of black urban culture that developed in America’s inner cities was a set of coping mechanisms, rituals, or oppositional responses intended to deal with racism and poverty. By the 1980s, the marketplace became fascinated by the urban poor in ways that problematically essentialized and reduced black bodies and identities. Hip Hop as such, became a site where inner city life was conveyed to the mainstream; Rap music in particular supposedly functioned as a mirror that reflected an elusive “authentic” ghetto sensibility of urban conflict, pathos and anxiety, and rappers were considered the street’s journalists who communicated the story. Though 1980s Rap storytelling has largely been understood as shaped by race and class, this paper will examine the ways in which it has been powerfully demarcated by gender and sexual scripts. It will demonstrate that the genre privileged a masculinist ethos and set of racialized and class-based gender and sexual-specific scripts that often conditioned, and at times constrained, the sorts of stories emcees could tell and which emcees could tell them. As a site where performative-discursive hetero-normative gender and sexuality identities were continually reinforced and reproduced, 1980s Rap music’s storytelling capacity in the mainstream market, then, was strongly framed by notions of gender and sexuality that were prominently shaped by artistic interpretations of the Black Power Movement.

William Payne (PhD Candidate, Geography) and Oscar Torres Arroyo (PhD Candidate in Urbanism at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México)

Beyond the Metropole: Theorizing Queerness and the Urban in Acapulco, Mexico

Using the coupled lenses of global urbanism and queerness, this paper theorizes relevant dynamics in Acapulco (Guerrero, Mexico), a city peripherally situated in the global south yet with longstanding entangled transnational connections. This exploration responds to the call to look beyond the metropole for “new spaces of the political” and considers the “processes of subalternity” through which “post-colonial subjects make a place in the world” (Agamben 1999; McCann et al 2013). Brown (2008) proposes that urban homosexualities outside the global north need to be theorized, “on their own terms, taking into account local histories, geographies and indigenous conceptualizations of homosexuality.” Acapulco provides a compelling case study as a site where class and race intersect with sexuality such that it has been a destination for some queers while also dangerous and unpredictable for others, a sociopolitical space where cultural norms of masculinity have collided with multiversal expressions of sexuality imbued with patterns of exploitation that have gained the attention of the state. A significant node in the Spanish empire during colonial times, a key destination during the twentieth century rise of international tourism, and a place now securitized as “dangerous”, Acapulco is also the site of evolving LGBTTTI movements and communities and shifting patterns of gay tourism that can be productively theorized. This paper uses ethnographic research to consider the role of homonormativity in the neoliberalization of social processes in a city marked by organized violence that also aspires to global status even as it struggles with an antipathetic reputation.

Sean Gustini (PhD Candidate, Education)

City and Country and the Subject of the Ontario Child, 1893-1902

In May 1893, The Gibson Act was passed in Ontario, which “enfranchised” childhood in the province. It patently stated that parenthood was provisional, that children were the property of the state. John Joseph (J.J) Kelso was named the Superintendent of Neglected or Dependent Children and was charged with the task of educating public sentiment with regards to the Act, which was largely concerned with removing poor children from city to country. Kelso documented this “child-saving” movement in a dense personal scrapbook of collaged articles from 1893 to 1930. Through an ethnography of these scrapbooks from 1893-1902, I explore the object of childhood and the subjectivity of children in Ontario through the relationship of city and country which emerge as “characters” in Kelso’s scrapbooks. Through Biblical themes the country is presented as Eden, the city as Sodom and Gomorrah; through an artistic literary reading we can trace the desire to return to the motifs of the folkloric, pre-class agricultural communal; through a Protestant Evangelical reading we can sense the tension in the need for childhood depravity to validate the conversion experience against the innocent, idealized childhood images of the Idyllic and Rousseau. Childhood in Ontario was also greatly informed by its Other: the thousands of British Home Children who were imported as farm labour to buttress an Imperial agricultural economy. This story of childhood is an anxious tale about the future of a province, a nation, an Empire, and Christian Civilization that lies in the “country” both materially and imaginatively; and thus critically informs the idea of “city.”

Umit Aydogmus (PhD Candidate, Anthropology)

The Ottoman-Inspired Commodities and Neo-Ottomanist transformation of Istanbul

This paper is concerned with the material remaking of Ottoman Empire and the increasing production and circulation of Ottoman-inspired commodities in Istanbul under the Justice and Development Party (JDP) rule (2002-). These commodities include, but not limited to, household goods, furniture, decorative items, clothing apparel and artwork in recent years. I locate this production and circulation within the broader transformation of public spaces in Istanbul under the JDP rule. As part of this transformation, the JDP engages in neoliberal-capitalist onslaught of public

places, urban, and rural areas and environments with its construction led economic growth policy. Moreover, the JDP coats and normalizes this transformation with a novel discourse, Neo-Ottomanism. The Gezi Park Protests in 2013 have also proved the contentious nature of the Neo-Ottomanist discourse in public life.

The Ottoman-inspired touristic commodities, visual products, and culinary creations were around in Istanbul before the rise of the JDP. However, in this paper, I trace the relations between the neo-Ottomanist transformation of Istanbul and growth of a quasi-public commodity culture. In this context, I ask: How do these commodities and regimes and relations of production (and the gendered relations of consumption they promote) provide an angle to understand Istanbul's transformation? What are the specificities of the gendered domesticities, "curated" historic visions and public imperialities do these commodities evoke in urban Istanbul? This provides an examination into the political-economic semiotics of these commodities and how the critical semiotics of commodities can contribute to the existing research on the neoliberal-capitalist urbanization and its everyday formations.