

SOSANT9100A/B

WATER, SOCIETY, ECOLOGY: Situated Knowledges of Flows and Models

Autumn 2023

Teaching was done by Gregg Hetherington (Concordia University), Nikiwe Solomon (University of Cape Town), Dr Cecilia Ojemaye (University of Cape Town), Heather Swanson (UiO and Aarhus University), Gro Ween (University of Oslo), Pierre du Plessis (University of Oslo) and Knut G Nustad (University of Oslo). Knut G Nustad was responsible for the course.

Course Description

Attending to the centrality of water to colonial expansion and contemporary political economy, this course focuses specifically on the materiality of water – liquid flows around hard surfaces; flows through bodies; urban streams and oceans; urban biogeochemistries – with the aim of further developing our critical thinking skills about water, its many political, social, and economic framings, and their enactment in water-related infrastructures. It explores different disciplinary knowledges and conceptualisations of water, and different ways of understanding both the histories and the futures of water.

By its very design, this course encourages participants to think comparatively and connectively across disciplines and places. Taking two river-scapes as its starting point – one in Oslo, Norway, and the other in Cape Town, South Africa – the course explores water-related histories, property relations, ecological assemblages at each site. Participants will also meet online to discuss the sites' similarities, differences and connections, while considering how such cross-site thinking can deepen our analyses of environmental issues.

Taught simultaneously at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo and Environmental Humanities South/Anthropology at the University of Cape Town, this course aims to prepare graduates for ecological dialogue and environmental governance questions across North-South divides – specifically seeking to be alert to where and how local ecologies intersect with colonial histories of water control, contemporary neoliberal approaches to the privatisation of water, and their effects on environmental justice.

Because water exceeds disciplinary boundaries, the course will introduce different practices for knowing river-scapes. This includes moving beyond rivers themselves, as waters are by their very nature connected. At both sites, we will also consider terrestrial links and interfaces with bays and fjords, alerting us to the necessity of systemic thinking about water. Field activities will include mapping, stream walks, and talks by diverse regional experts. Students will learn how to use observation techniques drawn from both ethnographic and scientific methods.

The course is both *transdisciplinary* – to prepare students to reach beyond traditional disciplines – and *hemispheric* – to facilitate, in a teaching context, a stronger understanding of what capacitates and/or impedes North-South conversations. Students will study very similar curricula in Oslo and Cape Town, while exploring river-based field sites in their respective cities. Projects based on field research will be shared in video-conference and web-based

discussions to enable comparisons about human-land-water interfaces, both between rivers and between cities.

Student's feedback

The students were very positive about the course learning outcomes, as well as the instructors' enthusiasm and preparation. The students were also very positive about the quality, content, and quantity of the course readings. They reported that the field trips and outdoor components were an important element of the course and provided major benefit, but that the walking-intensive trips might have been better divided up across multiple days rather than being placed on the same day. In addition, while the students said they very much benefited from the engagement with the instructor based in South Africa, they would have liked more substantial online interactions with students from UCT.

Overall assessment and further development

Based on the students' feedback and our own observations, we are confident that the overall quality of the course was high. We plan to make the two changes suggested by the students regarding the field trip and interaction with UCT students. Furthermore, we would like to try to arrange the schedule next time so that the guest lecturer from Canada, who was present for half of the course this time, could be there for the whole time. We are already planning to offer the course again in 2025, and we look forward to integrating these developments then. Overall, the course seems to reinforce the value of bringing field excursions and hands-on methods activities into dialogue with readings and lectures.