COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course considers the production, management, and disposal of garbage as a dynamic cultural phenomenon that can lend insight into a broad array of questions at the nexus of environment and development. Most broadly, unpacking waste’s deep political and cultural dimensions provides for critical reflection on urbanism, social relations of difference, global economic processes, and people’s relationships to nature. After exploring theories of waste and value, the course examines a broad selection of historic and contemporary geographies of waste for insight into specific debates and phenomena inscribed within these larger themes. The first half will focus on waste production, consumption, and environmental justice in New York and the U.S. Part two connects these patterns to global geographies through considering transnational waste flows, the management of global commons, toxic disasters, and waste livelihoods. Specific topics include: waste work in NYC; recycling reconsidered; e-waste trades; pickers’ politics; carbon as global dirt; and the art of rubbish.
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

• To critically reflect upon the creation and destruction of value through examining discourses and practices of waste.
• To explore concepts and histories of development in a diverse set of contexts, from New York City to India, through a close examination of the politics of consumption and disposal.
• To better understand questions of sustainability, urban ecological design, and people’s relationship to nature in the city through unpacking our relationship to trash.
• To consider the role of stigmatized labor in constructing and upholding gender, race, and class difference.
• To consider our own practices of consumption and waste through examining the specific waste geographies of New York City.
• To explore a set of social movements and artistic practices derived from the creative power of waste.

REQUIREMENTS

• Class attendance, participation, field trip, reading response, and discussion
You are expected to read all assigned materials, attend all classes, and participate actively in discussions. If you are unable to attend class, you must let me know and come to my office hours that week. If you miss a film screened in class, you must view it in your own time. You will only be allowed one unexcused absence during the semester without penalty. Consistent lateness will be penalized as well.

Field Trip: You are required to attend the course field trip to Fresh Kills Park on October 23rd. If you cannot attend, you complete a make-up assignment.

You are expected to write a reading response and help lead class discussion for one week during the semester. Your reading response should be no more than one page, critically analyzing the readings in relation to the larger themes of the class, and should be emailed to me by 8pm the evening before. Working with a partner also assigned for that week, you are expected to come up with some points of discussion for analyzing the assigned texts.

• Writing Assignments

Essay #1: Theorizing Waste
Drawing on the readings for Week 2, write a short paper describing why waste provides a particularly insightful lens into understanding environment, development, and culture. Describe the complexity of waste as a cultural phenomenon and use this to reflect on relations of uneven development, unequal social relations, and people’s relationships to nature. Be sure to draw on and cite all four texts and feel free to draw from the additional readings. Length: 3–4 pages (12 pt. font, double-spaced). Due Sunday, Sept. 20th.

Essay #2: Garbage in Gotham
Drawing on Weeks 3–7 and the field trip to Fresh Kills Park, write a short analytical paper considering the politics of garbage in New York City. You can choose your own focus,
which may be the collection system, the labor force, or the contested history of disposal, but be sure to make an argument in analyzing that subject. You must cite at least 3 class readings, but feel free to draw on additional resources. Length: 5-7 pages (12 pt. font, double-spaced). Due Sunday, Nov. 1st.

**Essay #3: Global Garbage**

Choose a topic from Weeks 8-13 on global garbage. Drawing on at least three of the course texts and 3 additional readings, provide an in-depth analysis of the topic that incorporates and goes beyond what was discussed in class. Additional reading from the syllabus and further research will help you to analyze the topic further. For instance, you could draw on a new example or geographical place to provide a comparison to the examples provided in class (e.g. examine e-waste in Ghana or environmental disaster in Tianjin). Length: 8-10 pages (12 pt. font, double-spaced). Due Sunday Dec. 13th.

**Late policy:** Turning assignments in on time is very important in this class. If you need to request an extension, you must do so well in advance of the assignment’s due date. Unless you have received an extension from me (only granted for serious/ medical issues), lateness will be penalized as follows: each day that your paper is late, your grade will drop 1/2 of a grade point (e.g. from a B+ to a B). You are required to inform me if the paper is going to be more than two days late.

**Course Grades:**

- Attendance/Participation/Field Trip/ Response & Discussion: 35%
- Essay #1 Theorizing Waste: 15%
- Essay #3: Garbage in Gotham: 20%
- Essay #4: Global Garbage: 30%

**OFFICE HOURS and CONTACT**

I will hold office hours on Tuesdays from 11am-12:30pm and on Thursdays from 10am-12:30pm, in my office by appointment. You can sign up for office hours here: [http://goo.gl/5i46R](http://goo.gl/5i46R). If you are unable to meet during my office hours, email me to schedule a separate meeting.

Email: I am best reached by email at rcf2@nyu.edu. Although I do encourage you to stay in touch with issues of concern, I also urge you to be considerate with your emails. I will do my best to reply within 24 hours.

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html](http://www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html) for a full description of the academic integrity policy.
READINGS and FILMS

Required readings for the course are listed in the weekly syllabus. All readings are either available at the NYU bookstore, through the library’s electronic resources (with a link on NYU Classes), or in the library’s reserves. Additional readings are listed as a starting place for further research for the papers and class discussion.

Required Books
Required readings for the course are listed in the weekly syllabus. Background readings are also listed, for further research. All readings are either available through NYU Classes, in the library’s reserves, or at the NYU Bookstore.


Related Films
The following is a list of some relevant films which will either be screened in class or you are encouraged to watch in your own time. Some films can be viewed online and others are available in the Avery-Fischer Center at Bobst.

*Wasteland* (Dir. Lucy Walker) (2011)  
*Garbage Dreams* (Dir. Mai Iskander) (2009)  
*Gone Tomorrow* (2002)  
*Ghana: Digital Dumping Ground* (2009). PBS.  
*Exporting Harm: The High-Tech Trashing of Asia* (2009).  
*BAN*  
*DIFE!* (Jeremy Seifert)  
*Welcome to Lagos* (PBS)  
*Voyage of the Mobro 4000* (2013)  
*Plastic Bag* (Werner Herzog) (2009)  
*Trashed* (Dir. Bill Kirkos) (2007)  
*T-Shirt Travels* (2001)  
*The Clean Bin Project*  
*Away: A Story of Trash* (2011)

Other Resources

*Discard Studies Blog* : http://discardstudies.com/  
*Story of Stuff Project* : http://storyofstuff.org/  
*MIT Trash Track Project* : http://senseable.mit.edu/trashtrack/
Trash Matters
Exploring Development, Environment, and Culture through Garbage
Course Syllabus

Week 1. Introduction
(September 3)

Week 2. Theorizing Waste and Value: Environment, Development, and Culture
(September 10)


Additional Reading:


Week 3. The Rise of the Discard Society
(September 17)


Film: Gone Tomorrow (Heather Rogers)
Additional Reading:

Week 4. Garbage in Gotham
(September 24)

Readings TBA.

Week 5. Waste Work in New York City
(October 1)

Nagle, Robin. On the Streets and Behind the Trucks with the Sanitation Workers of New York City. Farrar, Straus and Giroux [Chapters 1-6, 17-19 and Postlude].

Guest Lecture with Professor Robin Nagle (NYU)

Week 6. Recycling Reconsidered
(October 8)


Week 7. Waste and Environmental Justice in the US
(October 15)


Additional Reading:
Week 8. Toxic Exports: Global Dumping and E-Waste Recycling

(October 22)


Film: *Exporting Harm: The High Tech Trashing of Asia*

*Additional Reading:*


Week 9. Environmental Disasters, Toxicity, and Biocitizenship: Bhopal

(October 29)


Additional Reading:

FIELD TRIP TO FRESH KILLS PARK ON FRIDAY OCTOBER 23RD (12PM-3PM)

Week 10. Designing Waste Solutions
(November 5th)

Other Selections TBA.

Guest lecture with Gallatin Professor Mitch Joachim.

Week 11. Waste Livelihoods: The Zabaleen of Cairo
(November 12)


**Additional Reading:**


**Film:** *Garbage Dreams*, New York: Iskander Films, Inc; Cinema Guild, 2009.

**Week 12. Picker Politics in Brazil**

*(November 19)*

**Readings TBA.**

**Film:** *Wasteland*

**NO CLASS Thanksgiving Holiday**

*(November 26)*

**Week 13. Global Dirt: Carbon**

*(December 3)*


Whittington, Jerome (N.D.) “Accounting for Atmosphere: Climate change, speculative materialism and a politics of the possible.” Unpublished manuscript.


**Guest Lecture with Professor Jerome Whittington (National University of Singapore)**
Week 14. Wrap-Up and the Art of Rubbish
(December 10)
