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Spring 2025 office hours: Mondays 11:00am – 1:00pm, Wednesdays 10:30 – 12:30pm, and by appointment.
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CST7936.003
Theorizing Infrastructure (in South Florida)
Mondays, 1:00 – 3:50pm
Room CU 301



As the promises of modernity are crumbling under neoliberal austerity and climate change, the ruins of liberalism are manifest in the sociomaterial remnants of oil wells and superhighways, water pipes and shipping channels, fiber-optic cable and an ever-growing pile of rubble—
Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel, *The Promise of Infrastructure* (2018)

[I]n the political and cultural imaginary, infrastructure has gone from perennial bit player to a starring role—Henry Ivry, “What is the Infrastructure of Critique” (2024)

Course Description:

To the delight, if also surprise, of millions of Americans the 117th Congress of the United States passed a bill with bipartisan support: the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2022. Elected officials condescended to cross the proverbial aisle in order to fix the crumbling bridges and roads that ferry everyday American workers. Infrastructure is largely understood in terms of brick and mortar, asphalt and steel—the “hard” infrastructures of fossil-fueled modernity. There are also so-called “soft” infrastructures like public school systems, the Internet, or those discursive infrastructures that seem to elude collective understanding—the political-cultural matrix that manufactures the desire for things like automobility or speed. In this interdisciplinary seminar we shall study the origins of infrastructure as a concept to denote electrical grids, highway interchanges, and water systems as well as an organizational logic that has worked to realize, celebrate, and often conceal our political and cultural desires.

We will begin our discussion with the “birth of energy” as an idea, and its transformation in the 19th century from an ancient source of vitality into a marketable substance called power—a substance that could be triangulated through the engineering marvel of an electrical “grid.” We will explore understandings of energy and the production of power through an examination of the relationship between the machination of labor—human and nonhuman—and the birth of the modern factory system, when the “satanic mills” of the British Romantic imagination would be transformed into the grand “machine[s] in the garden” of American industry. Here we will turn to that great American “leviathan,” the locomotive—Walt Whitman’s “emblem of motion and power,” as well as Standard Oil tycoon Henry Flagler’s means of expansion into the lower quadrant of the Everglades to accommodate the “magic city” of Miami.

Conjoining the ethnographic work of Marjorie Stoneman Douglass, Laura Ogden, and Meredith Berman Ellis with the literary prose works of Karen Russell and Tananarive Due, we will consider the coterminous destruction of the amphibious infrastructures of the Miccosukee nation, the draining of the Everglades basin through unprecedented capital campaigns of development, the populations rendered invisible by disaster, and the material entrenchment of Jim Crow laws in the interest of building and sustaining what have become Florida’s lower counties. We will then move into discussions around petroculture, mobility, and the birth of the interstate—the latter also a replacement for further investment in rail infrastructure—with a screening of *The Florida Project* (2017) along with readings from beyond the sunshine state including Helena María Viramontes’s novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*.

We will also consider other ruminations on petroculture and infrastructure, comparing the picaresque musings of novelist Chris Abani with the urban planners who see his fictional Lagos as the “next Venice”—a version of amphibious infrastructure that is being heralded in a moment of techno-utopian fervor. Engaging Dutch architect Ram Koolhaas, whose work on Lagos will resonate directly with projections of Florida’s imminent submersion, we will consider the hydropolitics of several endangered cities: Lagos, Miami, and Mumbai among others. Here we shall also attend to questions surrounding “public works” and the “common good,” querying why the governor of Florida, following Hurricane Milton, would so easily pronounce the private sector as far more equipped “than government” to attend to such extraordinary crises.

We will then explore literary explorations of Florida’s embattled future, including Lily Brooks-Dalton’s disturbingly proleptic novel *The Light Pirates*, Karen Russell’s cli-fi tale of revolutionary adaptation “The Gondoliers,” and Gabriel Ojeda-Sague’s prose poem *Losing Miami*—a poem that deftly contemplates the “permacrumble” that constitutes our coastal infrastructures; and we will conclude our semester-long adventure in theorizing infrastructure with the radical hope and revolutionary possibility imminent to speculative writers and theorists who find opportunity in that “permacrumble.” Here we will read Dominic Boyer’s work on revolutionary infrastructures, the After Oil School’s arguments regarding “storytelling and worldmaking,” and solarpunk fictions that bring to life the sorts of solar-powered infrastructural utopias first imagined over a century ago. We shall also consider biketopian landscapes that similarly envision viable alternatives to our petrodystopian hellscape. As a capstone project, students shall then design their own revolutionary infrastructures: whether retrofitting Miami’s permacrumble, or perhaps imagining alternative pasts—speculating on possible trajectories for a South Florida that was never drained. Such speculations will further demonstrate the degree to which our imaginations are contoured by the sociomaterial infrastructures that we inhabit, while also inspiring us to consider the possibility of creating sustainable infrastructures at the edge of climate chaos.

Required Texts:

Mario Alejandro Ariza, *Disposable City: Miami's Future on the Shores of Climate Catastrophe*, ISBN-13: 978-1-5417-8846-6

Lily Brooks-Dalton, *The Light Pirate*, ISBN: 978-1538708286

Becky Chambers, *A Psalm for the Wild Built*, ISBN: 978-1-250-23621-0

Gabriel Ojeda-Sagué, *Losing Miami*, ISBN: 978-1948700177

Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, ISBN-13: 978-0452273870

All readings appended with an asterisk () will be made available on Canvas.

Class requirements and Policies:

- **Keyword essays:** each student will prepare two brief (2-3 page) expositions over the course of the term that tackle key terms—e.g., “energy” or “power.” Essays shall respond to a key text from our weekly readings and should contain: clear explanations of central concepts along with close readings of key passages to explicate your chosen concepts. It is expected that the short essays will follow a logical research itinerary—that is, the keyword essays are designed to offer an opportunity to explore ideas and concepts with an eye toward the final project.
- **Seminar leadership:** each student will select a weekly discussion to lead. This will require a brief (3-5 minute) synopsis of central ideas; a selection of keywords to anchor class conversation; and a minimum of two questions for class discussion. **Students are encouraged to lead a discussion based upon the same text for which they prepared a keyword essay.*
- **Infrastructural Disruption Essay:** each student shall write an essay about infrastructural disruption—something that all of us have experienced at some point in our lives. In Florida, we often expect power outages after a storm; or maybe the internet goes out, or the road is blocked. Ordinarily we experience these failures as losses, frustrations, unpleasant experiences—not least because they are out of our control. This essay is an exercise in disrupting that kind of disruption. Each of you will choose to disrupt your experience of infrastructure—maybe you ride a bike somewhere instead of driving down the road, maybe you read by candlelight—and reflect on the experience, paying special attention to what is lost or gained, what “affordances” (a term we will discuss a lot) the experience offers to you.
- **Florida Infrastructure Project:** for your final project, you are to redesign an existing infrastructure project in Florida. This may be an intersection or a roadway that you transform into a viable walk and bike route; this may be a retrofitted building that you reimagine in the context of the many “green-blue” infrastructure projects in South Florida; or this may be a speculative historical project in which you imagine south Florida prior to the drainage campaigns of the nineteenth century. Whichever you pick, you are going to offer a complete history of the site; a justification for its transformation; and an outline of the proposed project. You are also going to employ at least two readings from class—from different disciplinary perspectives—that support your justification.

Grading policy:

Keyword essays: 40%

Seminar leadership: 15%

Infrastructural Disruption Essay: 20%

Florida Infrastructure Project: 25%

Attendance/Lateness Policy:

Your presence is vital to our classroom community, so regular attendance is required. You are expected to come to class prepared to discuss assigned texts and to produce written responses both in class and at home.

Grade Scale:

Florida Atlantic University follows a plus/minus (+/-) grading system. Numeric Values for this course are as follows: 93-100 A; 92-90 A-; 89-87 B+; 86-83 B; 82-80 B-; 79-77 C+; 76-73 C; 72-70 C-; 69-60 D; 59-0 F

FAU ATTENDANCE POLICY:

Students are expected to attend all of their scheduled University classes and to satisfy all academic objectives as outlined by the instructor. The effect of absences upon grades is determined by the instructor, and the University reserves the right to deal at any time with individual cases of non-attendance. Students are responsible for arranging to make up work missed because of legitimate class absence, such as illness, family emergencies, military obligation, court-imposed legal obligations or participation in University- approved activities. Examples of University-approved reasons for absences include participating on an athletic or scholastic team, musical and theatrical performances and debate activities. It is the student's responsibility to give the instructor notice prior to any anticipated absences and within a reasonable amount of time after an unanticipated absence, ordinarily by the next scheduled class meeting. Instructors must allow each student who is absent for a University-approved reason the opportunity to make up work missed without any reduction in the student's final course grade as a direct result of such absence.

STUDENT ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES: In compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA), students who require reasonable accommodations due to a disability to properly execute coursework must register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS)—in Boca Raton, SU 133 (561-297-3880); in Davie, LA 203 (954-236-1222); or in Jupiter, SR 110 (561-799-8585)—and follow all SAS procedures. For more information, see <http://www.fau.edu/sas/>

COUNSELING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES (CAPS) CENTER: Life as a university student can be challenging physically, mentally and emotionally. Students who find stress negatively affecting their ability to achieve academic or personal goals may wish to consider utilizing FAU's Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) Center. CAPS provides FAU students a range of services – individual counseling, support meetings, and psychiatric services, to name a few – offered to help improve and maintain emotional well-being. For more information, go to <http://www.fau.edu/counseling/>

CODE OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY: Students at Florida Atlantic University are expected to maintain the highest ethical standards. Academic dishonesty is considered a serious breach of these ethical standards, because it interferes with the university mission to provide a high quality education in which no student enjoys an unfair advantage over any other. Academic dishonesty is also destructive of the university community, which is grounded in a system of mutual trust and places high value on personal integrity and individual responsibility. Harsh penalties are associated with academic dishonesty. For more information, see: http://wise.fau.edu/regulations/chapter4/Reg_4.001_5-26-10_FINAL.pdf

Class Schedule: (subject to change depending on class progress)

Week 1: Energy & Infrastructure (1/6)

Cara New Daggett, "Introduction: Putting the World to Work," from *The Birth of Energy: Fossil Fuels, Thermodynamics, and the Politics of Work**

Gretchen Bakke, "Introduction," from *The Grid: The Fraying Wires Between Americans and our Energy Future**

Nikhil Anand, Ankhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel, "Introduction: Temporality, Politics and the Promise of Infrastructure," from *The Promise of Infrastructure**

Brian Larkin, "The Poetics and Politics of Infrastructure"*

Yaffa Truelove and Anu Sabhlok, "Introduction," from *Gendered Infrastructures: Space, Scale, and Identity**

Week 2: Machines & Work (1/13)

Karl Marx, "Fragment on Machines," *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy**

Patrick Chamoiseau, from *Slave Old Man**

Charles Dickens, from *Hard Times**

Timothy Mitchell, "Introduction" and "Machines of Democracy" from *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil**

Rebecca Solnit, "Detroit Arcadia"*

Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry Murals**

Week 3: Trains (1/20)

Leo Marx, "Sleepy Hollow 1844," from *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America**

Walt Whitman, "Ode to a Locomotive in Winter"*

Elia Kazan, *East of Eden**

Henry Flagler Museum, "Florida East Coast Railway" (permanent exhibit)

Greg Allen, "Florida's Brightline Railroad Is Nation's Deadliest After High Rate Of Track Deaths"*

Week 4: Settler Infrastructure, Swamp Sublimes, and Drainage (1/27)

Henry Flagler Museum, "Oh Florida!" (through April 2025)

Michael Grunwald, "A Requiem for Florida"*

Jack Arnold, *The Creature from the Black Lagoon**

Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, from *The Everglades: River of Grass**

Laura Ogden, from *Swamplife: People, Gators, and Mangroves Entangled in the Everglades**

Week 5: Jim Crow Florida (2/3)

N.D.B. Connolly, from *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida**

Meredith Berman Ellis, "Weathered remains: Bioarchaeology, identity, and the landscape"*

Tananarive Due, from *The Reformatory**

Marvin Dunn, from *A History of Florida: Through Black Eyes**

Katja Esson, *Razing Liberty Square**

Week 6: Highways & Concrete (2/10)

Cristián Simonetti, "Concrete Solarities," from *Solarities: Elemental Encounters and Refractions**

Helen Kapstein, "Petroart," from *Petroforms**

Sean Baker, *The Florida Project**

Week 7: Petroculture & Traffic (2/17)

Jeffrey Insko, "Tim Kaine's Orange; or, Stuck in Traffic"*

Stephanie LeMenager, "Infrastructure, Again and Always"*

Ivan Illich, "The Industrialization of Traffic," from *Energy and Equity**

Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus*

Week 8: Hydropolitics (2/24)

Nikhil Anand, "A Public Matter: Water, Hydraulics, Biopolitics"*

Craig Colten, from *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature**

Lucas Bessire, "Lines" from *Running Out: In Search of Water on the High Plains**

Evan Bennett, "Sewer," from *Tampa Bay: The Story of an Estuary and its People**

Week 9: Spring Break (3/3)

Week 10: "Mediating Infrastructure" in Miami (3/10)

Karen Russell, "The Gondoliers," from *Orange World and Other Stories**

Anna Kornbluh, "In the Air Tonight: Mediating Infrastructure with *Miami Vice*"*

Michael Mann, *Miami Vice**

*Dr. Balkan is participating in the Energy Democracy colloquium at Rice University; class will not be held on Monday 3/10. There shall be an interactive discussion board on Canvas; and, pending student availability, a class session on Friday 3/14.

Week 11: Amphibious Infrastructures (3/17)

Jeffrey Huber, from *Salty Urbanism: A Design Manual for Sea Level Rise Adaptation in Urban Areas**

Chris Abani, from *Graceland**

Bregtje van der Haak, *Lagos/Koolhaas**

Week 12: Sacrifice Zones (3/24)

Lauren Groff, "Boca Raton"*

Lily Brooks-Dalton, *The Light Pirates*

Week 13: Losing Miami (3/31)

Mario Alejandro Ariza, *Disposable City: Miami's Future on the Shores of Climate Catastrophe*

Ashley Dawson, from *Extreme Cities: The Peril and Promise of Urban Life in the Age of Climate Change*

Gabriel Ojeda-Sagué, from *Losing Miami*

Week 14: Revolutionary Infrastructures (4/7)

Winona LaDuke & Deborah Cowen, "Beyond Wüindigo Infrastructure"*

Dominic Boyer, "Living with Fossils" and "Revolutionary Infrastructure, or What Is To Be Done," from *No More Fossils**

After Oil School, "Storytelling and Worldmaking," from *Solarities: Seeking Energy Justice**

Becky Chambers, *A Psalm for the Wild Built*

Week 15: Sunshine States (4/14)

Stacey Balkan, "Electric Ladyland: Anticolonial Solarpunk as Infrastructural Resistance in Two Works of Speculative Fiction"*

Elizabeth Chatterjee, "The poor woman's energy: Low-modernist solar technologies and international development, 1878–1966"*

Rhys Williams, "'This Shining Confluence of Magic and Technology': Solarpunk, Energy Imaginaries, and the Infrastructures of Solarity"*

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein, *Sultana's Dream**

Week 16: Bike City? (4/21)

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*

Ivan Illich, "The Energy Crisis," from *Energy and Equity**

Stacey Balkan, "A Just Future for Cycling?"*

John G. Stehlin, from *Cyclescapes of the Unequal City: Bicycle Infrastructure and Uneven Development**

Elly Blue, selections from *Biketopia: Feminist Bicycle Science Fiction Stories in Extreme Futures**