

A6840 Archives of Toxicity

Professor: Mark Wasiuta

Fall 2025

Thurs. 11:00 – 1:00 Buell 300 S

Office Hours: Tuesdays 3:00 – 4:00 or by appointment

E-mail: mw2283@columbia.edu



First V2 rocket launch at Launch Complex 3, Cape Canaveral, Florida, 1950.

Seminar Description

Archives and toxicities proliferate. This seminar will read the tensions and implications of this twin proliferation through environmental and atmospheric texts, records, and inscriptions. The course will outline a recent history of toxicity to relate architecture, cities, and the air we breathe to chemical traces and their accumulations. The seminar will ask how toxicity—in all its forms, from petrochemicals to particulates and from opiates to air pollution—became a salient and defining feature of the last century and an environmental, psychological, and cultural force conditioning our chemical subjectivities.

Addressing the 1966 LSD conference at the University of California, psychedelic activist Timothy Leary proposed a “molecular revolution” supported by a science of drug use that would radically reorient attitudes to psychedelic chemicals and to their social and political dimensions. Leary envisioned a future in which a billion-dollar marijuana industry would sponsor art spectacles for enhancing sensory awareness. Leary’s assessment of America’s relation to drug use was both astute and flawed. We do have a billion-dollar marijuana industry but by the 1970s Leary’s “politics of ecstasy” had shifted from ecstatic chemical contamination to human growth centers guided by meditation, New Age self-improvement techniques, and processes of personal purification.

Leary’s molecular revolution attempted to define and direct the intersection of human life, consciousness, and the toxic atmospheres of modernity. Its psychedelic vision is only one residue of an extensive and pervasive toxic economy that, like Leary’s ecstasy, veers between the processes and rhetoric of contamination and purification. Ralph Nader argued that unregulated car exhaust was a form of chemical warfare being waged on the American population. In the late 1960s, Leary’s molecules and Nader’s smog aligned—along with the clouds of Napalm and Agent Orange swirling in Southeast Asia—as different atmospheric agents of the evolving state this class will describe and theorize as “chemical modernity.”



Computer Operators, Eastern Airlines reservation center, Miami, Florida, 1970. Photograph Bruce Dale.

The toxic clouds of chemical modernity have hardly settled. We all continue to live with toxic legacies and we are all chemical subjects. This seminar will plumb readings from architecture, ecology, and environmental thought, in order to view, assess, and conceptualize the impact of toxic events, exposures, scenes of transmission, and their molecular histories. The course will track the banal and spectacular aesthetics of chemical modernity, its economy of contamination

and purification, and the techniques of measurement, regulation, and representation through which toxicity and pollutants—as well as their territories and their architecture—come into view.

The course will grapple with the “depositing” of toxic and environmental archives—where they appear, where they are preserved, what toxic evidence they offer, and what deposits, chemicals, and particulates they register. With particular attention to architecture, we will ask how to read toxicity not only as environmental tragedy or as the atmospheric unconscious of modernity, but also as a sign and the materialization of a culture of contamination. Borrowing tools and techniques from ecocriticism the class will locate signs of toxicity across a range of sites, conditions, and formations. Archives of toxicity may write themselves into the air, soil, water, and buildings around us, but they also accumulate within myriad systems of representation. Readings will cover toxic histories, theories, and methodologies, as well as texts that will help us assemble toxicity’s archives and interpret their spatial, urban, territorial, impact.

With attention to questions of environmental justice, we will ask about toxicity’s uneven distribution and concentration. One image of chemical modernity is a world slowly filling with and absorbing new compounds, like lungs breathing in smoke or a swimming pool swirling with chlorine. But as contamination zones such as Love Canal in the 1970s or the Superfund sites that surround us illustrate all too clearly, chemical modernity is unevenly distributed. It flows around territorial, architectural, and spatial contours—organized by race, class, and income—to impact bodies, buildings, sites, and cities differently. Sloterdijk describes the reorganization of the world into zones of breathable and unbreathable air. We will formulate ideas and approaches to these spatial and territorial toxic jurisdictions.

In our current climate, toxicities of different kinds continue to proliferate, even as many recede from view and escape regulation, assessment, and attention. The class will ask about this disappearing act and where it leads us within the contemporary logics and tropes of contamination and purification. It will also follow the media implications of this disappearance, asking what tools and techniques of recording, registration, and visualization are activated or deactivated within and by toxic politics and toxic forums.

Requirements and Grades

Students are expected to attend all sessions and keep up with readings. The grade for this class will be determined as follows:

Class Presentations and Participation	50%
Final Research Paper or Project	50%

Readings

As mentioned above, the readings will be drawn from a range of sources. Some sessions will focus on the problematics of environments and archives. What does toxicity write? Others will relate to specific environmental and toxic conditions and to the question of how to work across different disciplines.

Class Presentations

Two presentations will be required. The first presentation will be for initial research directions and research materials. A final presentation of nearly completed work will be at the end of the semester. In addition, there will be two writing and archive exercises over the semester.

Final Paper or Project

Students will submit a 15 to 20-page paper on a topic developed through conversation in class or in office hours, and following group discussions and presentations. Topic discussions will take place the fourth week of the seminar and formal one-page abstracts describing research topics and critical approaches will be submitted the fifth week of the seminar. Alternative research presentation formats may also be possible—you must discuss with me and I must approve before the abstracts are due. Topics will be driven by student research interests and may involve historical or contemporary sites, conditions, episodes, or spaces of toxicity, however this is conceived or conceptualized. A topic may involve buildings, landscapes, monuments, or infrastructures critical to the formation of chemical modernity. It might veer toward the aesthetics of contamination and toxicity or to exhibitions, films, artistic works that contend with these questions, themes, or conditions. Or students may decide to work with particular texts. Across all approaches the projects will be asking about the constitution of environmental archives and the archival forms and dimensions of toxicity, whether on paper, on film, in the air, underground, or enclosed by buildings.