

Feces: A Cultural and Scientific Excursion **Oberlin Experimental College**



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Course Credits:

We will meet from 7:00-8:15 pm on Tuesdays, with location TBD. You will receive 0-1 credit hours for this course.

Course Description:

Shit happens, but do we ever think about it? Over the course of this semester, we hope to break the silence surrounding poop and explore how we think about our excrement and what that means for the world we inhabit. This class will draw from a variety of interdisciplinary readings to cover a wide range of poop-related topics including art, gender, health, the environment, and farts. The course will include short lectures, discussions, and a field trip to the Living Machine.

Goals and Objectives:

While the subject of poop is rarely examined from an academic standpoint, critically analyzing how we think about and deal with excrement is important for better understanding society, culture, science, the environment, and ourselves. Excrement plays a major role in our everyday lives and influences our interactions with and perceptions of others on both personal and larger scales. Additionally, the ways our society deals with human and animal waste can have long-lasting and far-reaching impacts on the environment and public health. Through this course we hope to develop a critical and creative dialogue about excrement, how we deal with it, and the implications of those methods. The class will also address the significant roles of feces in art, literature, daily conversations, and jokes. Over the course of the semester, we hope to synthesize perspectives on poop from multiple disciplines to gain an appreciation for the many ways we can think about excrement. We also want to encourage students to use their presentations to further explore or introduce topics related to excrement. These presentations will broaden the variety of subjects covered and will hopefully result in conversations that are both fluid and unexpected. Like diarrhea.

Attendance Policy:

Students are expected to attend each class meeting or to communicate with the instructors if they are unable to attend. Students are also expected to come to class prepared to participate in class discussions. More than two absences will result in a failing grade.

Assignment Descriptions:

Each student will be required to give one five-minute presentation about a relevant topic of interest. Students can use PowerPoint, handouts, or other visual aids to supplement their presentations. Presentation times will be assigned during the first week of class.

Final projects will be due at the beginning of the last class. For this assignment students should demonstrate an understanding and engagement with one or more major themes discussed in the course. This project is open-ended and can be produced in a creative format (i.e., poster, creative writing, art, pamphlet) or as a 4-6 page research paper. Students should briefly (for approximately 3 minutes) present their project during our last class meeting. If students choose to do a creative project, they should also submit a 1-2 page explanation of the project. We will be scheduling individual appointments during Weeks 10 and 11 of the course to discuss project ideas with each student.

Primary Readings (scanned readings to be provided through email):

George, Rose. *The Big Necessity: The Unmentionable World of Human Waste and Why It Matters*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008. Print.

Haslam, Nick. *Psychology in the Bathroom*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Print.

Jenkins, Joseph. *The Humanure Handbook*, 2nd ed. Grove City, Pennsylvania: Jenkins Publishing, 1999. Print.

Lewin, Ralph A. *Merde: Excursions in Scientific, Cultural, and Socio-Historical Coprology*. New York: Random House, 1999. Print.

Molotch, Harvey, and Laura Norén, eds. *Toilet*. New York: New York UP, 2010. Print.

Praeger, Dave. *Poop Culture: How America is Shaped by its Grossest National Product*. Los Angeles: Feral House, 2007. Print.

Roach, Mary. *Gulp: Adventures on the Alimentary Canal*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013. Print.

Waltner-Toews, David. *The Origin of Feces: What Excrement Tells Us About Evolution, Ecology, and a Sustainable Society*. Toronto: ECW Press, 2013. Print.

Course Schedule:

Section 1: How we think about poop

Week 1, Feb 10: Thinking about Poop and Course Overview

Reading:

Lewin, "Terminology and Cultural Attitudes," pp. 3-10; Waltner-Toews, "Hercules and all that Crapper," pp. 86-106.

Optional Reading:

"Poop. Magical, magical poop," (<http://www.beatricebiologist.com/2011/07/poop-magical-magical-poop.html>); "Poop quotes," (<http://poopquotes.tumblr.com>).

Discussion questions:

1. What are different words that we can use to talk about poop, and when should we use them in an academic context?
2. What can we learn about feces through this course, and what are our goals for the semester?
3. What do you hope to get out of this course?

Assignment:

Begin a poop journal--Write about your own poop habits, your thoughts about poop, or daily observations about poop-related topics. While this will not be submitted for a grade, we encourage students to begin to develop greater consciousness and critical thinking about poop with this assignment. During future meetings students may have the option to share poop journal entries with the class.

Week 2, Feb 17: The History of Toilets

Reading:

Praeger, "How Do you Doo," pp. 29-48; Molotch and Norén, "Which Way to Look?" pp. 47-63.

Optional Reading: Jenkins, "Composting Toilets and Systems," pp. 121-133.

Discussion questions:

1. What has led to the development of the toilet?
2. In what ways might the modern toilet be beneficial and detrimental for society and the environment?
3. What are viable alternatives to the standard toilet in American society?



Week 3, Feb 24: The Psychology of Poop

Reading:

Haslam, "Introduction," pp. 1-12; Praeger, "The Shaming of the Poo," pp. 51-64.

Optional Reading:

Haslam, "The Irritable Bowel" and "The Anal Character," pp. 17-34, 67-92.

Discussion questions:

1. How are concepts from psychology applicable to understanding poop and pooping behavior?
2. In what ways do you agree and disagree with the psychological analyses of poop presented in the readings?
3. What can we learn about poop in society and culture from psychology, and how can we apply these findings to our daily lives?

Week 4, Mar 3: Feces in Art and Language: The Symbolisms of Poop

Reading:

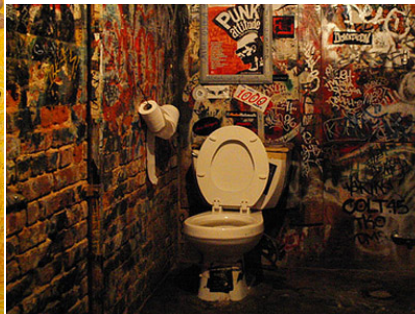
Praeger, "Of Movements and Men: Poop in Art," pp. 145-155; Haslam, "Potty Mouth," pp. 93-104.

Optional Reading:

Haslam, "Toilet Graffiti," pp. 114-135.

Discussion questions:

1. How valid is Praeger's list of symbolic meanings of poop, and what are possible applications of these meanings? Can you think of examples when each would hold true?
2. Why can art that incorporates poop be so contentious?
3. Why do poop-related swear words carry such resonance, and how can this depend on context?



Section 2: Farts and Scatological Humor

Week 5, Mar 10: Farts

Reading:

Haslam, “On Flatulence,” pp. 52-66; Roach, “Dead Man’s Bloat” and “Smelling a Rat,” pp. 233-251.

Optional Reading:

“No, Smelling Farts Can’t Cure Cancer,” (<http://www.iflscience.com/health-and-medicine/can-smelling-farts-cure-cancer>); “Job Opportunity: How About an Exciting Career as a Professional Fart Smeller?” (<http://gizmodo.com/5966617/job-opportunity-how-about-an-exciting-career-as-a-professional-fart-smeller>).

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you learn anything surprising about the role of flatulence in psychology and science?
2. Why are farts both considered gross and funny?



Week 6, Mar 17: Potty Break (AKA Midterms Week): Poop and Humor

Assignment:

Find or think of something funny related to poop to share with the class. This could be a video, a picture, a joke, a poem, a story, etc.

Reading:

David Sedaris, “Big Boy,” (<http://www.esquire.com/print-this/sedaris-big-boy-1199?page=all>); Cindy LaCom, excerpt from “Filthy Bodies, Porous Boundaries,” (<http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/11/11>); Look around PoopReport.com and the PoopReport.com Facebook Page (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/PoopReportcom-The-Intellectual-Appreciation-of-Poop-Humor/191207137608017?sk=timeline>).

Optional Reading: <http://www.kptv.com/story/20532464/local-stop-signs-vandalized-with-toilet-humor>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KojmqsTZC-U>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rs24Ct8VslQ>.

Discussion questions:

1. What makes poop-related topics so funny?
2. In what situations do we use scatological humor, and for what purposes?

Section 3: Impacts of how we think about poop

Week 7, Mar 31: Toilet Culture

Reading:

Molotch and Norén, “Dirty Spaces” and “The Restroom Revolution: Unisex Toilets and Campus Politics,” pp. 25-41, 191-207.

Optional Reading:

Praeger, “Rites of Passage: Techniques and Tools,” pp. 65-82; Molotch and Norén, “Pissing without Pity: Disability, Gender, and the Public Toilet,” pp. 167-185.

Discussion questions:

1. How are public restrooms used, and what does this mean for the people who use them?
2. How are bathrooms used to separate and exotify people?
3. What factors shape and are shaped by the design of the bathroom and the toilet?
4. How do the practices that we follow in restrooms disconnect humans from their poop?

Week 8, Apr 7: Poop in Gender and Class

Reading:

“How a Lack of Toilets Puts India’s Women at Risk of Assault,” (<http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2014/06/09/319529037/indias-rape-uproar-ignites-demand-to-end-open-defecation>); skim “Cleaning Human Waste: ‘Manual Scavenging,’ Caste, and Discrimination in India,”

(http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/india0814_ForUpload.pdf).

Optional Reading:

Praeger, “The Medium is the Mess,” pp. 183-187.

Discussion questions:

1. How are poop and the structure of restrooms used (symbolically and physically) to reinforce social inequalities and stereotypes?
2. Which factors may influence the ways in which poop and restroom use intersect with identity, and what are the outcomes?
3. How are images of filth and contamination used to perpetuate inequality and legitimize subjugation of groups of people?



Week 9, Apr 14: Wastewater Treatment and the Environment

Class tour of the Living Machine in the AJLC. Meeting time TBD.

Reading:

http://www.oberlin.edu/newserv/stories/living_machine_release.html; Petersen, “Alienation and Ecotechnology: An Ecologically Designed Landscape”; RadioLab podcast episode, “Poop Train” (<http://www.radiolab.org/story/poop-train/>); Waltner-Toews, “The Other Dark Matter,” pp. 107-121.

Optional Reading:

Waltner-Toews, “Know Shit,” pp. 167-190; “Meat Made From Human Feces: Hoax or Japan’s Best New Invention?” (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/nadiaarumugam/2011/07/08/meat-made-from-human-feces-hoax-or-japans-best-new-invention/>).

Discussion Questions:

1. How can excrement can cause environmental harm and accelerate global climate change, and how should we deal with these problems?
2. What happens to our poop after it is flushed? How is wastewater treated?

Week 10, Apr 21: The Role of Feces in Disease and Medicine

Reading:

George, “Introduction,” pp. 1-13; RadioLab podcast episode, “Parasites,” minutes 22:30-45:18 (<http://www.radiolab.org/story/91689-parasites/>); “Putting Someone Else’s Poop in Your Body Could Literally Save Your Life” (<http://jezebel.com/5976823/putting-someone-elses-poop-in-your-body-could-literally-save-your-life>).

Optional Reading:

“Who owns your poop?,” Hawkins and O’Doherty; “Q&A: Scientist Studied His Poop for a Year to Learn About Gut Bugs” (<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/07/140724-gut-microbes-bacteria-bugs-science-health-food-weird/>).

Discussion Questions:

1. How do current medical treatments rely on poop?
2. In what ways can poop pose a health risk, and in what ways can poop and the organisms living in it be beneficial to our health?



Photo: *Vibrio cholerae*, the bacterium that causes cholera

Section 4: Conclusions

Week 11, Apr 28: The Future for Feces

Reading:

George, “The Robo-Toilet Revolution: The Actress and the Gorilla” and “The End: Small Energy,” pp. 39-63, 224-238.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some exciting technological advances for toilets and sanitation?
2. How can more people gain access to toilets and sanitation?
3. How should we deal with poop for a sustainable future?

Week 12, May 5: Wrap Up

Assignment:

Final Projects to be presented and submitted during class.

Discussion questions:

1. What did you gain most from this course?
2. How can your exploration of feces have a lasting impact on our daily lives?