

Overview:

More than almost any other ecological niche, waterways across the globe bear witness to the severe consequences of climate change. These ecological consequences are not confined to a single nation or political entity. The challenges facing the world's rivers are truly global. In North America, the Colorado River is dramatically drying up; several of Amazonia's mighty rivers have faced periods of almost complete dryness. The Amazon River Basin, the largest in the world, has been in a state of exceptional drought, driven by low rainfall and consistently high temperatures, fueled by the unprecedented fires that have taken place in the region in recent years. In the first days of February 2025, a river close to Buenos Aires turned red, having been compared to a river of blood; this is likely the consequence of chemical waste from industries operating close to its shores, but there is still no conclusive finding regarding the origin of this unexpected - and likely also deadly - event. At the same time, the Panama Canal - a key infrastructural construction involving waterways - has become suddenly visible in geopolitical discourse and US foreign policy. Asia's major rivers are similarly imperilled. These alarming scenes are at the origin of the preoccupations that have brought us to think critically about the forms, meanings and futures of our global waterways.

The environmental crises enjoins us to confront our relationship to water as a natural resource of increasing scarcity and unequal access; as both a source of human flourishing and, as in rising oceans and floods and droughts, a threat to it; as a medium of connection and separation between peoples, and as a conduit for cultural and economic exchange. "Global Waterways: Between the Natural World and the Built Environment" invites scholars researching water as a political concern, including everything from the natural water cycle to municipal sewage treatment, from oceans and rivers to dams and reservoirs to join in a common conversation about what water offers as an analytic across the humanities.

At this conference we seek to explore the ways in which waterways are imagined, traversed, transformed, engineered and lived in different political and historical contexts. We want to bring together scholars whose work addresses the relationships between waterways and culture, between rivers and aesthetics, between water and resistance. How do human communities conceive of themselves next to and together with waterways? How do waterways can be read as linked to national imaginaries? And how these appropriations of waterways from the perspective of the state can generate conflict with local perspectives, with riverine communities for example? The construction of dams, and its powerful and sometimes dramatic consequences on local populations and biodiversity, constitutes an additional element to be explored in connection with the issues.

Our conference is explicitly global in orientation and multi-disciplinary in practice, bringing together scholars working history, literature, architecture, cultural studies, anthropology, and on diverse waterways from across Asia, Latin America, the United States.