INTRODUCTION

After conferences in Montpellier, Poitiers and La Réunion (France, 2015, 2016 and 2018), as well as Kalkutta (India, 2018) and Purchase (NY, USA, 2019), this is the 6th opus of this conference cycle in Montreal, Concordia University. An “ecotone” initially designates a transitional zone between two ecosystems, for example between land and sea. The “Ecotones” program (2015-2020) is a cycle of conferences which aims to foster this term traditionally used in geography and ecology and to broaden the concept by applying it to other disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities. An “ecotone” can thus also be understood as a cultural space of encounters, conflicts, and renewal between several communities. This interdisciplinary conference cycle will more specifically focus on colonial and postcolonial port cities as ecotonic dialectics between places and non-places.

Commonly understood, a port is the site where ships’ passengers enter or exit, and cargo is loaded or unloaded. Thus, it represents the flow of people and exchange of goods, in the age of sail, as well as in the modern era of urban and semi-urban dynamics, a matrix for identity formation, cultural transitions and environmental adaptation.

Port cities, however, are also placed. Cities such as Georgetown in Guyana, Shanghai, Darwin, Saigon, Liverpool, Calcutta, Naples, or Montreal among many others, may be viewed through longstanding geographic imaginaries, linguistic collectivities and/or colonial and postcolonial histories, suggesting an ongoing struggle over who claims the city (in Montreal’s case, unceded territory), and gestures towards political, social, or economic insecurities apparent in the spatial configurations of urban life, with implications that potentially destabilize national narratives. For example, as an island in the Saint Lawrence River, the city of Montreal is not only connected to multiple elsewhere through migration, but also through trade. The Saint Lawrence opens on to the Atlantic ocean through which flowed a long-standing trade in bauxite from towns in the Caribbean to Quebec (following circuits laid by imperialism). Thus, ports shape material channels of profit and power, as well as modes of resistance that occur around these networks of control.

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Lastly port cities occupy that liminal space between land and water, an in-between ecotonic zone of transition. Port cities are often referred to as nonplaces – gateways subject to global forces that historically shaped transoceanic connections, expansion into hinterlands, and crossroads of historical and contemporary encounters. Nonplaces within cities are commonly perceived as liminal locations reduced to their function of transportation or commercial nodes, or as locations that crush the sense of individual empowerment. But artists, writers, critics and researchers have depicted them as multiple, paradoxical spaces, where new possibilities arise and new cultures emerge. Nonplaces may produce social flows and networks that are not only a defining feature of our “supermodernity,” but also in the long-arc of urban and semi-urban dynamics, a matrix for identity formation, cultural transitions and environmental adaptation.

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POST/COLONIAL PORTS:
PLACE AND NONPLACE IN THE ECOTONE

Conference: October 24 - 26, 2019

Concordia University, Montreal
Milieux Institute:
1515 St Catherine W., EV 11.45

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
Institute for Urban Futures

Tour of Montreal (Sex Work Industry in a Port City) with Karen Herland