Ottawology: A Critical Study of the Nation’s Capital

How can the cholera epidemic of 1832 and the Spanish Flu help us contextualize Ottawa’s response to the opioid epidemic? How would a feminist sociological analysis help us make sense of both the flannel that floods the Glebe every game day and the “Log Driver’s Waltz”? In this series I draw on urban sociology, history, and human geography to offer a series of unique takes on Ottawa as both a national capital and a living city. This lecture series will focus on topics that will be approached from multiple perspectives allowing Ottawa to both be a lens through which to understand broader national processes, and as a city in its own right.

Lecture Outline:

Week 1: Introduction: from town to crown—a walking tour

This series will begin right in the heart of the capital. We will meet under Maman (the spider at the National Gallery), and I will lead a two-hour walking tour that takes us to Nepean Point, through Major’s Hill Park and around Parliament Hill. On this tour I discuss Ottawa’s location on unceded Algonquin land, and role as both a city and a national capital. I offer a brief history of the development of the city, and a series of provocations about what is and isn’t represented in Ottawa’s central ceremonial locations. We will end at the Centennial Flame on Parliament Hill.

Week 2: Public health: from cholera outbreaks to opioid crises

Nothing highlights human connectivity more than communicable diseases. Communicable diseases highlight how we are connected through the air we breathe and water we drink; they
also highlight when and how these connections become nefarious. In this lecture I look at the malaria and cholera outbreaks that occurred during the creation of the Rideau Canal, the Spanish flu of 1919, and current health crises.

Week 3: Ottawa: the city that fun forgot? Play, gender, class, and ability in the city

In this lecture I ask: where do the children (and the adults) play in Ottawa? We explore how play is both classed, gendered, and premised on certain embodied abilities. I detail how play has been designed into and expelled from imaginings of the city as a city and a capital. This lecture will cover the history of and current controversies surrounding the Rideau Canal skateway, lemonade stand permits, bike lanes, sports stadiums, and libraries.

Week 4: Home Sweet Ottawa

While Ottawa is presented as a home for all Canadians, it is an everyday home for one million Canadians. But the sense of ‘home’ takes varied forms. This lecture offers two parts: gentrification and homelessness. I begin by looking at practices of gentrification in central Ottawa locations: LeBreton Flats and Lansdowne Park. In the second half of the lecture we focus on questions of precarious housing and homelessness in Ottawa.

Week 5: Racialization & Immigration in Ottawa

Many participants may remember Marion Dewar’s Project 4000 campaign in the 1970s to resettle refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in Ottawa. Other participants may have
contemporary experiences with Syrian refugee resettlement. This week I detail how immigration policies imagined from politicians working on Parliament Hill led to tangible impacts on the city. We will also explore how the contributions of many historic non-White groups have been written out of the ceremonial spaces in the national capital.

Week 6: From War to the Violence at Home—a walking tour

In this final week, we will return to where we began, in downtown Ottawa for a second walking tour. Beginning at the National War Memorial, I offer a reading of how war memories are cast as central to national narratives in Ottawa, and more broadly in Canada. The tour will take us down Elgin Street to a series of monuments and discussions about multiculturalism, anti-poverty activism, colonial violence, and violence against women.

Tonya Davidson is an Instructor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Carleton University. Her research interests have focused on questions of memory, national belonging, and the built environment. More specifically, Tonya has spent many years studying the social lives of statues in Ottawa. Her sociological research has been published in the following journals: Journal of Canadian Studies, Space and Culture, the Public Historian, and Topia. She published the co-edited (with Ondine Park) Ecologies of Affect: Placing Nostalgia, Desire, and Hope (2011, Wilfrid Laurier University Press). She is currently working on a co-edited (with Ondine Park) book for sociology students called, Seasonal Sociology (University of Toronto Press, forthcoming). Tonya spends most of her time teaching first-year students, which she loves, but
she is looking forward to talking to a different demographic. In her free time she likes to give walking tours of Ottawa with Ottawa Detours.