

FYS 127: Race-ing the Environment
Fall 2019
T/TH 9:30-10:50, King 121

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Office Hours:
Mondays, 10:00am-12:00pm
Wednesdays, 1:30pm-3:30pm
(and by appointment)

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Nature, wilderness, and race seem like basic terms with well-established meanings. But as we will explore together in this course, ideas like nature and race are in fact socially constructed, created by people and societies in different historical moments and subject to change over time. This course brings together two vital areas of study—race and the environment—to ask what we can learn by exploring America’s environmental history through the lens of race. During the semester, we will study many different topics related to the relationship between race and the environment in the United States, including how European colonialism changed the American landscape; the construction of the idea of “wilderness” and the founding of National Parks; different cultural beliefs about, and approaches towards, the natural world; whiteness in the mainstream environmental movement; and environmental racism and environmental justice.

As a First Year Seminar, this course will introduce students to some of the most important skills demanded by college-level study, including participating in seminar discussions, critical thinking and reading, analytical writing, doing research, and working collaboratively. There will be many opportunities to work with me and with our Writing Associate to discuss paper ideas, go over drafts, and consult on course assignments. As a class, we will visit Mudd Library and the Allen Art Museum, and will watch the films *Pocahontas*, *Into the Wild*, and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

Required Texts

The following books are available at the college bookstore and are on reserve at Mudd:

- Melissa Checker, Polluted Promises (2005)
- William Cronon, Changes in the Land (2003 edition)
- Dina Gilio-Whitaker, As Long as Grass Grows (2018)
- Kimberly Smith, African American Environmental Thought (2007)
- Mark David Spence, Dispossessing the Wilderness (2000)

Readings marked as BB on the syllabus are available on the course blackboard site under the “Course Readings” heading. Full citations for every reading are on the blackboard site. I highly recommend that you print out the online readings and bring them with you to class.

Learning Objectives

- Gain an introduction to American environmental history and its connection to US racial histories
- Develop an in-depth understanding of environmental racism and environmental justice
- Analyze comparative racial histories and perspectives in relation to environmental issues
- Learn to read critically, to identify a text’s key argument, approach, and use of evidence; and to evaluate the merits of writing from different disciplinary perspectives

- Improve writing skills and become adept at reviewing and revising written works
- Communicate ideas orally and feel comfortable engaging in vigorous discussions with peers
- Know how to find and evaluate different kinds of materials for social science research
- Collaborate effectively with a group on a research presentation

Assignments: Your final grade for FYS 127 will be based on your in-class participation, several short writing exercises, 2 longer papers, a group presentation, and a final project.

1) Participation and Attendance (20% of final grade): The first and most important component of success in any college class is showing up ready to engage with the class material, which means you have to do the reading listed before each class session before the class meets. There is NO substitute for doing the reading. FYS 127 is a discussion-based seminar and the quality of discussions depends on coming prepared to class ready to discuss the assigned material. Attendance is expected; your participation grade will be affected if you have more than one unexcused absence. Absences will only be excused in cases of illness or personal emergencies. If you must miss class for illness or an emergency, please email me *before* class starts to let me know.

You should come to prepared to participate in discussion by speaking, listening attentively to others, encouraging others to comment, arguing respectfully, and asking questions. As a rough rule of thumb, you should plan on spending at least two to two and a half hours outside of class preparing for every class session. If you are uncomfortable speaking in class, please come see me so we can develop strategies to improve your discussion skills. Being able to express your ideas and respond to others is as vital for your success in college as being able to write effectively, and everyone will be encouraged to hone their discussion skills throughout the semester. Participation means not only showing up but really being present in the classroom. That means arriving on time and once you arrive, not walking in and out of the classroom while class is going on unless you are having a real crisis (in other words, bring your drink with you and use the restroom before you arrive!)

2) Three Short Written Exercises (10%)

Each student will be required to complete three short written exercises, due in class on September 10, September 19, and October 1. These short exercises are designed to help you recognize writing as a process and to improve your basic writing skills. Exercises should not exceed one page, single-spaced, in 12 point font. Each exercise will focus on a particular writing skill or style. Exercises will be graded on a scale of 1-10. Any exercises that receive a 7 or less will need to be revised and resubmitted.

3) A film analysis paper (15%): first draft due Oct. 15; final draft due Nov. 1

For this paper of approximately 1250 words (4-5 pages), students will analyze 2007 feature film *Into the Wild* in light of the readings that we will be doing as a class about race and wilderness.

4) A comparative and analytical paper (20%): due in class on November 26

This paper of approximately 1500 words (5-6 pages) will ask students to compare the African American and indigenous experiences with environmental racism based on the material in *Polluted Promises* and *As Long as the Grass Grows*.

5) Group Presentation (Presentation 10%): to take place on either Dec. 10 or Dec. 12

The class will be split into four groups early in the semester. Each group will be responsible for undertaking a final project and for teaching half of a class session about their chosen topic. Projects can explore specific moments of historical connection between race and the environment; a specific type or instance of environmental racism; transportation issues; food and food policy; Hurricane

Katrina or other “natural” disasters; garbage and recycling programs; energy issues; or the environment and immigration policy and history, among many others. We will brainstorm and select project topics in class. Groups will then plan a presentation that includes oral presentations, leading a discussion, and an in-class activity. Groups should decide upon one reading for the rest of the class to do in advance of the presentation. Course WA Lily Jones will be available throughout the semester to consult with you as you work on their presentations.

6. Research Project (25%)—Due by 11:00 a.m. on December 19th

Drawing either on research you did for your group or on another topic of your choosing, the final project for FYS 127 asks you to showcase what you have learned in the class by connecting your own research to course themes. Final projects may take many forms: you may choose to write a research paper, to do a creative project like writing a children’s book, developing a school curriculum, or making a video podcast, or website. But whatever you choose, you will need to draw on a minimum of six different sources from outside the class while also incorporating material that we’ve covered in class. If groups would like to continue to work together on the final project, they may ask approval to do so. Group projects will need to be more substantive than individual projects. A one-paragraph proposal for your final project is due in class on November 12.

Course Policies

Discussion: Talking about race and inequality can be difficult. All of us share a responsibility to make this an enriching and safe space for making arguments, expressing our views, disagreeing with others’ ideas, and raising questions. “Safe” is not the same as comfortable; there may be moments of discomfort in discussion, but students should treat their classmates with patience and respect.

Late Policy: Assignments must be submitted on time to receive full credit and all assignments must be completed in order to pass the class. If an assignment is due at the beginning of class, it must be turned in at the start of class to count as on time. An assignment that is handed in late will be marked down 1/3 of a grade for every 24 hours it is late (i.e., a B paper would become a B- paper). Assignments submitted more than a week after the original due date cannot receive higher than a C-. Requests for extensions must take place before the assignment is due. I will grant extensions in cases of illness or family emergencies, but not because you have another paper due on the same day, so please plan ahead.

Oberlin Honor Code: All work for this course must be done in compliance with the Oberlin Honor Code so you should familiarize yourself with it. You must write and sign the honor code on all the written work you hand in for this class. The Honor Code reads: “I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code on this assignment.” Any cases of plagiarism will be dealt with immediately according to the letter of college policy. You must acknowledge when you use the ideas of other people (whether that be other students or published materials from websites, books, the media, etc.). If you have questions about citations, academic honesty, or the acceptability of collaborations, please see me.

Educational Access: I am committed to creating inclusive learning environments and to designing a course in which all students can learn. If any aspects of the instruction or design of the course result in dis/ability-related barriers to your participation, please let me know. If you receive any specific accommodations, please provide documentation from the Disability Service Office.

Extra Help: My door is open if you seek extra help or just want to talk! Drop in during my regularly scheduled office hours or make an appointment. The best way to reach me is by email.

Course Schedule

September 3: Introduction

Tim Burke, "Staying Afloat: Some Scattered Suggestions on Reading in College" (BB)
Handouts on the "Seven Common Writing Sins" and Passive Voice (BB)

Part I: Understanding Cultural Constructions

September 5: Cultural Constructions--Rethinking Nature

William Cronon, "In Search of Nature" in Uncommon Ground, 23-56 (BB)

Bring in a found object of your choice that presents or represents nature in some way.

September 10: Cultural Constructions--Rethinking Race (Exercise #1 due in class)

Audrey Smedley, Race in North America, 1-9, 13-35 (BB)
Omi and Winant, Racial Formation in the United States, Introduction and
Chapters 4-5, pp. 1-5, 53-91 (BB)

Writing Exercise #1: Write a summary of what you consider the key points of the readings to be. Your goal in the exercise should be to identify and concisely summarize the most important ideas/arguments in these readings. You may use bullet points, but you must use whole sentences. Summaries may not exceed 1-page, single spaced.

Part III: Race, Culture, and Attitudes towards the Environment

September 12: Race, Culture and Attitudes Towards the Land

William Cronon, Changes in the Land, preface through Chapt. 4, pp. xv-81

September 17: Race, Culture and Attitudes Towards the Land

William Cronon, Changes in the Land, Chapt. 5 to end, pp. 82-186

September 19: African Americans, Latinos, and the Environment (Exercise #2 due)

Kimberly Smith, African American Environmental Thought, 1-97
Barbara Deutsch Lynch, "The Garden and the Sea: U.S. Latino
Environmental Discourses and Mainstream Environmentalism" (BB)

Writing Exercise #2: Write a brief autobiographical reflection (no more than one single-spaced page) about your own attitudes towards the environment and what factors shaped the way you view the environment. Use only active voice; no passive voice is permitted. Reflection pieces are due at the start of class.

September 24: Close to Nature: Racial Constructions and Cultural Stereotypes

Smith, African American Environmental Thought, 98-157
George Gatlin on Indians, Nature, and Civilization, 1844 (BB)
Philip Deloria, “Natural Indians and Identities of Modernity” in Playing Indian, 95-127 (BB)

Film Screening: Disney’s Pocahontas (Time and Place TBA)

September 26: Pocahontas discussion/ Brainstorming Group Projects

By 5pm on Wednesday, September 25: Post a short (no more than 2-3 paragraphs) proposal for a topic for the group project to the discussion board on the blackboard site. You should make a case for your idea, explain what questions the research could ask, and offer some suggestions of what kinds of sources/resources you might use to research the topic. You are trying to convince your classmates that this proposal should be chosen as one of the four group projects, so be sure to explain why you are passionate about it. Read through the proposals before coming to class today.

PART III: Race and Wilderness

October 1: The Trouble with Wilderness? (Exercise #3 due in class)

Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” Uncommon Ground, 69-90 (BB)
Roderick Nash, “The Value of Wilderness” in Major Problems in American Environmental History, 395-403 (BB)

Writing Exercise #3: In a very brief paper (no more than one single-spaced page), compare the arguments in these two readings. Where do they differ? What commonalities do they share? A comparison should not just list the points of contrast; you should offer an argument about what you consider the most important differences between the two readings. Edit your response carefully to be sure you are not committing any of the seven writing sins.

October 3: Creating and Preserving Wilderness: The Case of National Parks

Mark David Spence, Dispossessing the Wilderness (Intro-Chapter 6 and Conclusion, pp. 1-100, 133-139)

October 8: Racialized and Gendered Wilderness

Mei Mei Evans, “‘Nature’ and Environmental Justice” in The Environmental Justice Reader, 181-193 (BB)
Jake Kosek, “Purity and Pollution: Racial Degradation and Environmental Anxieties” in Liberation Ecologies, 115-132 (BB)
Bruce Braun, “‘On the Raggedy Edge of Risk’: Articulations of Race and Nature after Biology” in Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference, 175-203 (BB)

October 9: Film Screening—Into the Wild (Time and Place TBD)

October 10: Allen Art Museum Visit

Meet in Allen Art Museum

October 15: First Paper Due In class: Peer Reviews/Workshop of Drafts

PART IV: Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice

October 17: Understanding Environmental Racism

Robert Bullard, "Anatomy of Environmental Racism" in Toxic Struggles, 25-35 (BB)

Charles Mills, "Black Trash" in Faces of Environmental Racism, 73-91 (BB)

Lisa Sun-Hee Park and David Pellow, "Racial Formation, Environmental Racism, and the Emergence of the Silicon Valley," 403-422 (BB)

Vann Newkirk, "Trump's EPA Concludes Environmental Racism is Real," *The Atlantic*, February 28, 2018 (BB)

FALL BREAK—NO CLASS 10/22 or 10/24

October 29: Environmental Justice: History of the Movement

"Principles of Environmental Justice," 1991 (BB)

Cole and Foster, "A History of the Environmental Justice Movement" in From the Ground Up, Chapter 1, pp. 19-33 (BB)

Robert Bullard, "Environmental Justice in the 21st Century: Race Still Matters," *Phylon* (2001): 151-171 (BB)

Giovanna Di Chiro, "Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice" in Uncommon Ground, 298-320 (BB)

October 31: Critiquing Mainstream Environmentalism

Edwardo Rhodes, "What Has Gone Before: Why Race Was Not on the Original Environmental Agenda," in Environmental Justice in America, 30-42 (BB)

Carolyn Finney, "It's Not Easy Being Green" in Black Faces, White Spaces, 92-115 (BB)

Jake Kosek, "Purity and Pollution: Racial Degradation and Environmental Anxieties" in Liberation Ecologies, 132-142 (BB)

November 1: Revised Paper Due by 5:00pm

November 5: Environmental Racism: A Southern Perspective

Melissa Checker, Polluted Promises, 100-104

November 12: Environmental Racism: A Southern Perspective Continued

Melissa Checker, Polluted Promises, 104-189

**One-paragraph proposals for your final project topic are due in class today*

November 14: Visit to Mudd Library

November 19: Environmental Racism: An Indigenous Perspective

Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows*, Introduction-Chapter 4, pp. 1-90

November 21: Environmental Racism: An Indigenous Perspective

Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows*, Chapters 5-8, pp. 91-162

November 26: 2nd Paper Due In Class: *Peer Review and Discussion*

November 28—NO CLASS, THANKSGIVING BREAK

December 3: December 3: Race, Class, and Climate Change

Patrisse Cullors and Nyeusi Nguvu, “From Africa to the U.S. to Haiti, Climate Change is a Race Issue,” *The Guardian*, September 14, 2017 (BB)
350 Seattle, “Racism and Climate Change,” February 11, 2019 (BB)
Kalamoaka’aina Niheu, “Indigenous Resistance in an Era of Climate Change Crisis,” *Radical History Review* (January 2019): 117-129 (BB)
Beasts of the Southern Wild (screening TBD)

December 5: Moving Forward/Conclusions and Group Work Time

Mirupuri, Feldman, and Roberts, “Antiracism and Environmental Justice in an Age of Neoliberalism: An Interview with Van Jones” (BB)
Robin Morris Collin and Robert Collin, “Environmental Reparations” in *The Quest for Environmental Justice*, 209-221 (BB)

December 10: Presentations—Groups 1 and 2

December 12: Presentations—Groups 3 and 4

December 19: Final Paper/Project due by 11:00am.

Important Deadlines for FYS 127

September 10: Short exercise #1 due in class
September 19: Short exercise #2 due in class
September 25: Upload proposal for group project to blackboard discussion board by 5:00pm
October 1: Short exercise #3 due in class
October 15: *Into the Wild* paper due in class for peer review session
November 1: *Into the Wild* revised paper due by 5:00pm
November 12: One-paragraph proposal of final project topic due in class
November 26: Second paper due in class
December 10 and 12: Group Presentations
December 19: Final Project Due