

AFR 372C: Race, Capitalism & the Environment (30620)

WGS 340 (45080) / GRG 356T (36860)

Flags: Global Cultures & Cultural Diversity in the U.S.

Spring 2020

Professor: Dr. Pavithra Vasudevan



Image courtesy of North Carolina Environmental Justice Network

Overview

This course offers an introduction to environmental politics through the fields of political ecology, critical race studies and eco-feminism. We will examine environmental contestations to understand how humans relate to nature in the context of global racial capitalism and the possibilities for creating a more sustainable world. We will explore how racism is foundational to environmental exploitation and consider why global struggles for racial justice are crucial for protecting both people and the earth. Reflecting principles of environmental justice,

the course material respects the lived experiences, leadership and intellectual insights of racialized peoples as a vital source of knowledge.

Drawing on literature and film, investigative reporting and primary documents, in addition to academic publications, we will investigate:

What is the relationship between race and nature in capitalism?

Why does racial justice matter for the earth?

How does environmental racism work in a globalized world?

What strategies do marginalized peoples employ to survive and enact social change?

How do we build a world that values the diversity of human and non-human life?

What's this class about?

This is an interdisciplinary survey course, combining critical theory, social science and environmental humanities, to examine how the exploitation of natural resources is connected with the racism of colonization and capitalism. We will begin with an introduction to the structural logics that shape the modern world, including the human-nature binary, settler colonialism and racial capitalism. We will apply these concepts to explore contestations over water, land, food, waste, metal, and weather, by diverse actors including governments, corporations and social movements. Our goal is to understand how space and resources are manipulated to reproduce unequal environments, reflecting racial, classed and gendered dynamics, and how alternate visions for socio-ecological sustainability seek to challenge and undo racial capitalism. In closing, we will reflect on how the planetary crises we face demand a rethinking of humans, earth and life itself.

Topics include:

- conservation and wilderness preservation
- waste and toxicity
- food justice and sovereignty
- urban ecology, clean water and safe housing
- sustainable energy production
- global climate justice

What will you take away from this class?

- An introduction to why environmental issues are political problems
- Experience applying critical race and gender analysis in addressing socio-ecological issues
- An appreciation for the significance of movements for environmental justice
- Invaluable critical thinking, reading and writing skills, as well as practice working in both teams and independently
- A sense of your capacities and potential contributions in creating change

How will you learn?

The course is structured as weekly units organized around key concepts. Each week, we will closely read foundational scholarly texts that offer a nuanced understanding of complex environmental problems. We will apply these theoretical insights to specific case studies to explore their relevance in the real world, through guest speakers, documents produced by grassroots movements, journalistic accounts and primary research. Alongside these critical analyses, we will engage with creative work from various genres (memoirs, short stories, nonfiction essays, poetry and film), to inspire deeper reflection on the complexities of environmental issues and their impact on human and non-human lives, including our own. Reflecting ethical commitments to diverse knowledges, the class will incorporate work by a range of thinkers, activists, and artists, and encourage you to consider yourselves as knowledge producers based on your unique skills and interests.

About me

I am a geographer working in critical race and feminist studies. I use cultural methodologies, including performance and visual methods, to study environmental racism in collaboration with those whose lives are devastated by global capitalism. I enjoy teaching as part of my scholarship and activism, and am interested in how we can create a more just university. In my past life, I ran afterschool programs for high school youth, developed curricula for nonprofits, and danced professionally. I am a lifelong student of movement, trained in traditional and contemporary South Asian dance forms, yoga and Aikido, and I bring this bodily sensibility to my work.

Course site and materials

The course Canvas site is an invaluable resource: <https://utexas.instructure.com>. All class materials will be uploaded on Canvas, including readings, detailed instructions for assignments and grading rubrics. No textbook purchase is required.

*** Note: Class schedule and readings may be modified from the original syllabus.*

*Please check Canvas regularly for updates.***

Assessment

Your course grade includes 4 components, each worth 25% of your total grade: Participation, a cumulative take-home Exam, a Group Project, and an independent Creative Writing Project. I describe each component below. Additional instructions and grading rubrics for each assignment will be provided on Canvas.

Grading policy, late work and extra credit

Every assignment is worth points, totaling 1000 points for the course. The chart below shows each assignment, its point value, and percentage of the total grade.

Discussion forum posts and responses must be completed by the assigned date and time; *no exceptions will be made*. For the Group and Creative writing projects, I will deduct 10% from the final grade for each day that an assignment is late. After 3 days, the assignment will not be accepted and you will receive 0 points.

Opportunities for extra credit are built into class participation (maximum points shown in parentheses below). For example, if you attend every class, you will have earned 10 points extra credit. For an additional 10 points, you may attend a lecture or event and write a response post on the Discussion Forum. See below for details. Final grades are firm and there will be no additional curve.

Component (due date)	Points (Max)	% of Grade
Participation	250	25
Attendance	100	
Discussion Forum Reflections (5)	50	
Discussion Forum Responses (5)	50	
In-Class Activities	50	
Exam	250	25
Cumulative take-home exam (Apr. 6)		
Group Project	250	25
Proposal (Mar. 27)	50	
Preparation (Apr. 17)	100	
Presentation (Apr. 27, Apr. 29, May 4)	100	
Peer evaluations (May 6)	0	
Creative Writing Project	250	25
Proposal (Feb. 26)	25	
Preparation (Mar. 11)	50	
Process (Apr. 13)	75	
Product (May 13)	100	
TOTAL	1000	100

Participation (25%)

Attendance

Attendance will be taken every class (total 100 points). There is a built in allowance for up to 4 absences without a point penalty, regardless of the reason. However, you are responsible for any class content missed due to absences. *Please check in with other students to cover material you miss; I will not go over class content with you individually.* Since this is a discussion-based course, missing class will adversely impact your understanding of course material and preparation for exams.

In-class activities

You will periodically receive points for participation in in-class activities (total 50 points). *You cannot make up points from in-class activities*, regardless of the reason you miss class.

Discussion forum: Reflections and Responses

You are required to write 5 weekly posts on the Discussion Forum reflecting on readings in response to a prompt (see schedule below for opportunities). Engaging consistently with the readings in this way will help you prepare for class and serve as a helpful way to review for exams. Your reflections must be posted by 11:59pm on Sunday. The goal of the reflections is to learn how to engage seriously with scholarly work. Each post is worth a maximum of 10 points (total 50 points).

In addition to your own reflection, you must read your classmates' posts and respond to at least one of them 5 times. Your responses must be posted before class on Mondays to receive credit. You can earn 10 points for each response (total 50 points).

Exam (25%)

You will be given one take-home exam on April 1 (due before class time on April 6) that will assess your ability to *define key terms, apply concepts, and synthesize arguments*. The exam will be cumulative and draw on all course material, including readings, class discussions and lectures.

Group project (25%)

This project is an opportunity for you to *apply and communicate critical analysis* with the class on a contemporary environmental topic of interest to you. With your assigned group members, you will choose *a current event* that will you be researching and teaching the class about. The project is scaffolded, involving four phases: Proposal (memo outlining topic and individual contributions-50 points); Preparation (annotated bibliography involving background research- 100 points); Presentation (a concise and creative sharing of knowledge with the class- 100 points); and Peer evaluations (post-project reflection on group members' contributions-no points). *Each assignment, apart from the Peer evaluations, will receive a shared group grade*, requiring group members to contribute equally and practice producing knowledge through collaboration. *If a group member is found has not contributed equally to the group project, according to their peer evaluations, their group project grades will be marked down accordingly.*

Creative writing project (25%)

For the final project, you will write a nonfiction essay in response to a prompt, that explores the question of *human-environment relations, ecological sustainability and racial justice*. This project is also scaffolded, involving four phases: Proposal (memo outlining topic and form- 25 points); Preparation (annotated bibliography involving background research- 75 points); Process (rough draft for peer review- 50 points); and Product (the final revised submission- 100 points). Nonfiction essay writing

offers practice in *conducting secondary research* on a topic that you care about and *writing persuasively for a general audience*.

Please note: All assignments in this course may be processed by TurnItIn, a tool that compares submitted material to an archived database of published work to check for potential plagiarism. Other methods may also be used to determine if a paper is the student's original work. Regardless of the results of any TurnItIn submission, the faculty member will make the final determination as to whether or not a paper has been plagiarized.

Schedule

**** Class schedule and readings will be updated on Canvas, please check regularly.****

Note: Readings for each day are listed under “Prepare for Class” and should be read *prior* to arriving in class. All required reading will be posted on the Canvas site. Assignments should be submitted *before* the dates and times listed.

DATE	CLASS FOCUS	PREPARE FOR CLASS	ASSIGNMENTS DUE TODAY
Week 1: Openings			
Wed 1/22	Introductions Syllabus review	-	-
Week 2: On Humans and Nature			
Mon 1/27	Politicizing nature	William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness”; Michael Watts, “Nature as Artifice and Artifact”	Discussion Forum (**due Sun. 1/26**)
Wed 1/29	Activity: Close reading		
Week 3: On Race and Indigeneity			
Mon 2/3	Foundations of Modernity	Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, <i>An Indigenous People's History</i> : Ch 2 (pp32-44); C.L.R. James, <i>Black Jacobins</i> Ch 1 (pp6-26)	Discussion Forum (**due Sun. 2/2**)
Wed 2/5	Activity: Mapping history		
Week 4: On Race and Nature			
Mon 2/10	Redefining the ‘environment’ Guest speaker TBD	Nishime and Williams, “Why Racial Ecologies?”; Laura Pulido on racial capitalism	Discussion Forum (**due Sun. 2/09**)
Wed 2/12	Mini-lecture / Activity: Visualizing Race, Capitalism and the Environment		
Week 5: Land			
Mon 2/17	Relationality vs. property Guest speaker TBD	George Lipsitz, “The Racialization of Space and the Spacialization of Race”; Dian Million, “We are the Land, and the Land is Us”	

Wed 2/19	Activity: Recalling home	Lauret Savoy, <i>Trace</i> (pp1-48)	
Week 6: Water			
Mon 2/24	Commodity vs. commons	Karen Bakker, "The 'commons' vs. the 'commodity'"	Discussion Forum (**due Sun. 2/23**)
Wed 2/26	Film: "Thirst" (TBD)	<i>This Stretch of the River</i> , Selections	Creative writing: Proposal (** due 2/26**)
Week 7: Creative Pause			
Mon 3/2	Storytelling the Earth	Angela Last, "We are the World?"; Houston and Vasudevan (TBD)	
Wed 3/4	Poetry event TBD		
Week 8: Food			
Mon 3/9	Food geographies	Ashante Reese, <i>Black Food Geographies</i> (pp19-43)	Discussion Forum (**due Sun. 3/09**)
Wed 3/11	Food justice	"Struggles of La Via Campesina" Report	Creative Writing: Preparation (** due 3/11**)
SPRING BREAK: No class on 3/16 and 3/18			
Week 9: Waste			
Mon 3/23	Gendered burden of toxic waste	Julie Sze, "Denormalizing Embodied Toxicity"; Winona La Duke, "Akwesasne: Mohawk Mother's Milk and PCBs"	Discussion Forum (**due Sun. 3/1**)
Wed 3/25	Case Study: Transnational activism en los dos Nogales	Joni Adamson, "Throwing Rocks at the Sun" (TBD)	Group Project: Proposal (**due Fri. 3/27**)
Week 10: OPEN			
Mon 3/30	Topic TBD		
Wed 4/1	<i>Exam review</i>	Exam Review Guide	
Week 11: Intermission			
Mon 4/6	Writing day - no class		Take home exam (** due Mon. 4/6 before class**)
Wed 4/8	Group project research day ** MEET in PCL Learning Lab2**		
Week 12: Weather			
Mon 4/13	Climate justice in Austin Guest speaker TBD	Neil Smith, "There's no such thing as a natural disaster." Available: http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Smith/	Discussion Forum (**due Sun. 4/12**); Creative writing: Process (** due Mon. 4/13 **)
Wed 4/15	Unnatural disasters Guest speaker TBD		Group Project: Preparation

	Group Project check-in		(**due Fri. 4/17**)
Week 13: Life			
Mon 4/20	Life after/in colonial and capitalist violence Activity: Peer Review	Michelle Murphy, "Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Reactions"; Kriti Sharma, <i>Interdependence</i> : Intro, Ch1, Conclusion	Discussion Forum (**due Sun. 4/19**)
Wed 4/22	Rethinking life Film: "Pumzi"		
Week 14: Anthropocene			
Mon 4/27	Climate change and justice; Group presentations	Kyle Whyte, "Way Beyond the Lifeboat"	Group Project: Presentation
Wed 4/29	Group presentations; Activity (TBD)		Group Project: Presentation
Week 15: Closing			
Mon 5/4	Group presentations; Evaluations		Group Project: Presentation
Wed 5/6	Worldbuilding in the Apocalypse		Group Project: Peer Evaluation (** due 5/6**)
FINAL: Creative Writing: Product (** due 5/13, a week after last Wednesday class. **)			