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. In this course, 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 racial groups’ 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 is designed to introduce students to some of the most critical skills involved in college-level study, including participating in seminar discussions, critical thinking and reading, analytical writing, and individual and collaborative research skills. To that end, there will be many small assignments of various types. Students are expected to do the readings listed for each date before they come to class and to complete all assignments by the due date. There will be many opportunities—both required and voluntary—to work with me and with the course Writing Associate to discuss paper ideas, to go over drafts, and to consult on the group project. As a class, we will visit the library and the Allen Art Museum. There will also be one required evening film screening on either October 9th or October 12th to watch *Into the Wild*. 
Required Texts
The following books are available at the college bookstore and are on reserve at Mudd:

Olivia Butler, The Parable of the Sower
Melissa Checker, Polluted Promises
William Cronon, Changes in the Land
Kimberly Smith, African American Environmental Thought
Mark David Spence, Dispossessing the Wilderness

Readings marked with an asterisk (*) on the syllabus are available on the course blackboard site under the “Course Readings” heading. I highly recommend that you print out the online readings and bring them with you to class.

Assignments

1. Participation and Attendance (20%)

   Attendance: This is primarily a discussion course and your consistent attendance is required. If you have more than two unexcused absences, your final grade will be affected. Absences will only be excused in cases of illness or personal emergencies. Repeated late arrivals may also affect your grade. Please be present and ready to work at the start of the class.

   Discussion: You should come to every class having done the reading and prepared to participate in discussion by speaking, listening attentively to others, encouraging others to comment, arguing respectfully, asking questions, and summing up comments of others. We will always discuss the readings that are listed under the date for that particular class session (i.e., you should come to class on September 4th having read the Cronon and Burke articles and being ready to discuss them). If you are not comfortable 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 a good paper, and everyone will be encouraged to hone their discussion skills throughout the semester.

2. Three Short Written Exercises (5%)

   Each student will be required to complete three short exercises, due on September 9, September 23, and 30.

   Rules for all three:
   1) You may not exceed one page, single-spaced
   2) NO use of passive voice allowed
   3) NO use of adverbs allowed

   These 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 4-page film analysis paper (20%): first draft due Oct. 16; final draft due Nov. 2

   For this paper, students will be asked to analyze the film, Into the Wild—a recent representation of nature and wilderness in popular culture—in light of the
readings that we will be doing as a class about the idea of wilderness. There will be an evening viewing of the film on Oct. 13, and the movie will also be available on reserve at Mudd. In this paper of approximately five pages, analyze the representations of nature and wilderness in this film (in the plot, dialogue, visual framing, music, editing, etc) in the context of the course unit on wilderness. More details will be handed out in class.

4. A 6-page analysis of Parable of the Sower (20%): due in class on November 25

*Parable of the Sower*, a science fiction novel by Octavia Butler, explores a dystopian American future beset with both environmental and racial crises. In a paper of no more than 6-pages, consider one of the following questions:

1) What has gone wrong in Butler’s view? Drawing on what we have read in class to date, make an argument about how realistic this portrayal is and how valid her concerns are.

2) Butler’s work is fiction, which offers a different way of exploring and knowing the world than non-fiction research and writing. Write an essay that explores the value of fiction in understanding environmental racism and that compares what readers might be able to learn from this novel with the other types of reading that we have done in class.

3) Butler paints a picture of society that is falling apart, but the main character in the novel develops her own vision of what is necessary to survive and create a new social order. Explore this vision in relation to what we have learned about environmental activism and analyze the solutions proposed in the novel.

5. Group Presentation (15%)—To take place during class on Dec. 7 or Dec. 9

The class will be split into four groups early in the semester. Each group will be responsible for preparing a presentation and teaching half of a class session about a particular topic that relates to environmental racism or environmental justice. Possible topics include: transportation issues; food and food policy; Hurricane Katrina or other so-called “natural” disasters; garbage and recycling programs; energy issues; and climate change. We will brainstorm other ideas in class as well.

Each group will meet outside of class to research their topic; groups will also be expected to meet with the Writing Associate to discuss their plans. Presentations will be expected to explore what exactly the problem is, how the issue/problem developed historically, what the racial issues involved are, and what kinds of activism or organizing are going on today in relation to this issue.

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. Further details about the project and presentation guidelines will be handed out in class.

6. Final Paper/Project (20%)—Due by 4 p.m. on Sunday, December 19th

Using the information you discovered doing your group presentation, produce either a short research paper (no more than 8 pages) or a creative project based
on your research (for example, a children’s book, a school curriculum, a pamphlet, a webpage, a short video presentation, etc.). Whether presenting the research in a paper or a creative project, you must use at least six different sources. More details will be handed out in class.

Course Policies

Discussion: Talking about race and inequality can be difficult or controversial in the classroom. All of us share a responsibility to make this a safe space for articulating ideas and asking questions. “Safe” is not necessarily the same as comfortable; there may be moments of discomfort in discussion, but students should treat the comments of their classmates with patience and respect.

Late Policy: Assignments must be submitted on time to receive full credit. 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 gladly grant extensions in cases of illness or family emergencies, but I will not give an extension because you have another paper due on the same day, so please plan accordingly.

Incomplete Work: All work must be completed in order to pass this course. You cannot pass the class if you fail to complete any one of the assignments.

Classroom Conduct: Please come to class on time, and once you’re here, plan on staying for the full class session. I consider it disrespectful to me and rude to the rest of the class when a student walks out once class has started and walks back in a few minutes later. Also, be sure to TURN OFF your cell phone before class starts.

Oberlin Honor Code: Please familiarize yourself with the Oberlin Honor code. This class will follow the policies described online. You should 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.” All work for this course must be done in compliance with the Oberlin Honor Code, which means that it must be your own. 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.

Students with Disabilities: If you receive any disability-related accommodations, please provide documentation and let me know early in the class so that any necessary accommodations can be arranged.

Extra Help: My door is open if you ever feel you need extra help or direction in any way, or if you would like to discuss the reading or other topics of interest to you. Besides my regularly scheduled office hours, I am available by appointment. The best way to reach me is email.
Course Schedule

September 2: Introduction

Your first assignment: Come introduce yourself during my office hours by Tuesday, September 16th (and preferably earlier!). If you can’t make office hours, let me know and we can figure out another time that you can drop in.

Part I: Considering Cultural Constructions

September 4: Rethinking Nature

William Cronon, “In Search of Nature” in Uncommon Ground, 23-36*
Tim Burke, “Staying Afloat: Some Scattered Suggestions on Reading in College”*

Bring in a found object that presents nature in some way

September 9: Rethinking Race (Exercise #1 due in class)

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

Writing Exercise #1: Write a summary of what you consider the key points of the readings to be. Do not use any passive voice (to be verbs) or adverbs. Summaries may not exceed one-page, single-spaced. Summaries are due at the beginning of class.

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

September 11: Race, Culture and Attitudes Towards the Land

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

September 16: Race, Culture and Attitudes Towards the Land

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

September 18: African Americans, Latinos, and the Environment (Exercise #2 due in class)

Kimberly Smith, African American Environmental Thought, pp. 1-97

Writing Exercise #2: Write a brief reflection (no more than 1 single-spaced page) about your own attitudes towards the environment and what factors shaped the way you view the environment. Remember: no passive voice and no adverbs! Reflection pieces are due at the start of class.

September 23: Close to Nature: Racial Constructions and Cultural Stereotypes
George Gatlin on Indians, Nature, and Civilization, 1844*
Philip Deloria, “Natural Indians and Identities of Modernity” in *Playing Indian*.

**September 25: In-class Film Screening**

_Disney’s Pocahontas_

**September 30: Pocahontas discussion/ Brainstorming Group Projects (Exercise #3 due)**

_Writing Exercise #3: Write a 1-pg. proposal for a topic that would be suitable for a group project. In your proposal, make a case for your idea, explain what questions the research could ask, and identify the potential connections between your proposed topic and course themes. Proposals should not use passive voice or adverbs and may not exceed one single-spaced page. Proposals are due at the start of class._

**PART III: Race and Wilderness**

*October 2: The Trouble with Wilderness?*

_Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” *Uncommon Ground*, 69-90*
_Roderick Nash, “The Value of Wilderness” in *Major Problems in American Environmental History*, 395-403*

*October 7: Creating and Preserving Wilderness: The Case of National Parks*

_Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness* (entire)_

*October 9: Racialized and Gendered Wilderness*

_Mei Mei Evans, “‘Nature’ and Environmental Justice” in *The Environmental Justice Reader*, 181-193*
_Evelyn C. White, “Black Women and the Wilderness” in *The Stories that Shape Us—Contemporary Women Write about the West*, 376-383*
_Erik Uchida, “Minority Participation in Outdoor Recreation”*

*October 9th or 12th: Film Night—Into the Wild*_

*October 14: Visit to Allen Art Museum*

*October 16: Paper #1 Due*

_In class: Peer Reviews/Workshop of Drafts_

*October 21 and 23: FALL BREAK*

**PART IV: Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice**

*October 28: Defining Environmental Racism*
Winona LaDuke, “A Society Based on Conquest Cannot Be Sustained: Native Peoples and the Environmental Crisis”**
Laura Pulido, “Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California”**
Charles Mills, “Black Trash,” 73-91*

October 30: Environmental Justice: The Beginnings of a Movement

“Principles of Environmental Justice,” 1991*
Cole and Foster, “A History of the Environmental Justice Movement” in From the Ground Up, 19-33*
“Environmental Justice: An Interview with Robert Bullard”**
Dorceta Taylor, “Environmentalism and the Politics of Inclusion” in Confronting Environmental Racism, 53-61*

November 2: Revised draft paper #1 due by 10:00 pm

November 4: Critiquing Mainstream Environmentalism

“The Soul of Environmentalism”**
Giovanna Di Chiro, “Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environmental and Social Justice” in Uncommon Ground, 298-320*
Edwardo Rhodes, “What Has Gone Before: Why Race Was Not on the Original Environmental Agenda,” in Environmental Justice in America, 30-42*
Kim Allen, Vinci Daro, Dorothy Holland, “Becoming an Environmental Justice Activist,” in Environmental Justice and Environmentalism, 105-134*

November 6: A Southern Case Study, Part I

Melissa Checker, Polluted Promises, 1-103

November 11: A Southern Case Study II

Melissa Checker, Polluted Promises, 104-189

November 13: Library Visit (Meet in the lobby of Mudd Library)

Start reading Butler, Parable of the Sower, pp. 1-99

November 18: Imagining American Nightmares

Octavia Butler, Parable of the Sower, pp. 100-196

November 20: America Nightmares

Octavia Butler, Parable of the Sower, pp. 196-329

November 25: Paper Due—Parable of the Sower

November 27: NO CLASS—Thanksgiving

December 2: Group Time/What Makes a Good Presentation
Before class: Watch Majora Carter, "Greening the Ghetto" talk, posted online at www.ted.com and one other TED talk

December 4: Presentations—Groups 1 and 2

December 9: Presentations—Groups 3 and 4

December 11: Moving Forward, Conclusions and Party

Laura Pulido, "Sustainable Development at Ganados del Valle," 123-139*
Robin Morris Collin and Robert Collin, "Environmental Reparations," 209-221*
Read through website of Green for All, http://greenforall.org/
Winona LaDuke, "The Seventh Generation" in All Our Relations, 197-200*

December 19: Final Paper/Project due by 4:00 p.m.