

# Black and Green: Environmental Justice in the Afro-Americas

ENST 311, Rice University  
T/Th 3:10-4:30 pm

Location: Zoom (link on Canvas course page)

Prof. Sophie Moore [slm17@rice.edu](mailto:slm17@rice.edu)

Virtual office hours W 1-3 pm

Sign up here:

<https://calendly.com/profsophiemoore>

*This syllabus is subject to revision at any time. Please check Canvas regularly for the most up to date version.*



<https://www.ncfolk.org/2017/inside-nc-birthplace-of-environmental-justice/>

### *Learning Objectives*

With a focus on the experience of Afro-descendant people in North, South, and Central America, in this course students will:

- Identify and discuss the role that race plays in the production of environmental harms.
- Identify and discuss the social, political, and economic drivers of environmental injustice.
- Identify, analyze, and articulate the strategies that Black people have used to organize around environmental issues.
- Identify and analyze connections between past and present iterations of intersecting struggles for racial and environmental justice.
- Develop critical thinking, reading, and writing skills through weekly assignments and group discussion.
- Experiment with creative practices through which to build and communicate knowledge about environmental justice.
- Get through a difficult semester together by cultivating kindness, generosity, and curiosity toward ourselves, each other, and the course material.

### *Course Description*

From Haiti's 2010 earthquake to Hurricane Harvey in 2017, environmental harms have disproportionately affected people of color across the Western hemisphere. The burdens of toxic exposure, environmental hazards, and the ecological impacts of climate change and extreme weather events have long been unevenly distributed along racial lines in the United States, the Caribbean, and Latin America. What does environmental justice look like for Black people of the Americas, and what role have colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism played in the production of such uneven geographies?

"Black and Green: Environmental Justice in the Afro-Americas" takes up these questions by looking at the ways that Afro-Americans have experienced and organized around environmental change in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, with a focus on the racialization of environmental impacts and responses by Black-led movements for environmental justice. Our aim in this course is twofold: 1) to understand the commonality of struggle around environmental issues for Black people of the Americas; and 2) to understand the specific ways that Afro-Americans have organized around environmental issues, the changes their work has produced, and the challenges it has encountered at multiple scales.

### *Course Structure*

This course will be conducted entirely online in Spring 2021, primarily via Zoom. We will decide together whether sessions will be recorded and archived. ENST311 is an upper-division course with fewer than 10 students, which gives us the opportunity to focus on

real-time dialogue, collaborative work, and flexible use of class time. This course does not include a lecture component; the majority of our time (T/Th 3:10-4:30 pm) will be devoted to group discussion. As such, readings and assignments are to be prepared in advance of our scheduled meeting time for the date under which they are listed. All readings are either posted to Canvas or are URLs linked to on the syllabus.

Please feel welcome to visit virtual office hours at any time throughout the semester, either individually or as a group (sign up via Calendly (<https://calendly.com/profsophiemoore>)). I will also open our weekly Zoom sessions 10 minutes before class begins and keep them open for 5-30 minutes after the end of each class, as needed.

### *Assignments*

Assignments listed below include a percent-of-final-grade breakdown to give you an idea of their relative weight. As this course is based on a contract grading system, please take these weights as a guide and not a set of rules.

1. Collaborative mapping project: environmental justice micro-geographies (5%)  
**due 2/4 at 3 pm**
2. Reflection paper: August 28, 2005 / August 25, 2017 (10%)  
**due 2/11 at 3 pm**
3. Annotated bibliography relevant to a selected environmental justice issue (15%)  
**due 3/9 at 3 pm**
4. Mid-semester self-evaluation  
**due 3/12 at 11:59 pm**
5. Mock "Third National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit" (25%)  
**due 4/5 at 3 pm**
6. Reflection paper: Black Lives Matter for Environmental Justice (10%)  
**due 4/20 at 3 pm**
7. Final creative project (zine, video, website, or other creative medium accessible online) or academic essay (35%)  
**due 5/7 at 11:59 pm**
8. End-of-semester self-evaluation  
**due 5/10 at 11:59 pm**

### *Assessment*

Your final grade for this course will be based on a contract grading system. That means I will be providing feedback on your assignments, rather than evaluating them with a letter grade. At mid-semester and at the end of the semester, you will conduct a self-assessment, reflecting the quality of your work and participation in the class, and provide a suggested grade. At the end of the course I will consider your suggestion and accept your recommendation if the evidence and reasoning you provide aligns with my own notes and observations. If there is a discrepancy, we'll have a conversation about it.

I will respond to your mid-semester assessment with feedback on your performance, including areas of improvement, especially for you to meet the requirements for the grade that you would like to receive. You are encouraged to meet me in office hours to further discuss your grade, performance, and learning experience.

There is a body of research supporting skepticism on the value of letter grades and a number of professors across the country who practice “contract grading” and even “ungrading.”

A few resources on the topic:

- Colleen Flaherty. [When grading less is more](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/04/02/professors-reflections-their-experiences-ungrading-spark-renewed-interest-student). *Inside Higher Ed*. April 2, 2019. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/04/02/professors-reflections-their-experiences-ungrading-spark-renewed-interest-student>
- Jesse Stormel. [Why I don't grade](https://www.jessestormel.com/why-i-dont-grade/) (personal website). <https://www.jessestormel.com/why-i-dont-grade/>
- Example of [contract grading](https://miriamposner.com/dh150w15/contract-grading/) by Professor Miriam Posner, UCLA (personal website) <https://miriamposner.com/dh150w15/contract-grading/>

I recognize that gendered, racial, and other intersectional disparities might predispose some students to undervalue their course performance and give themselves a lower grade. We'll talk about this in class, but I want to flag it in our syllabus: in your self-evaluations, be honest and realistic (and I ask that you justify your evaluation and grade decision with evidence) but don't undervalue yourself.

### *Grading Contract*

#### **What is required for an “A” grade:**

- Attendance at Tuesday and Thursday Zoom sessions. You may miss two sessions, no questions asked.
- Participation: Showing up to class having done the reading or prepared any other materials, with notes, comments, and questions at the ready. Contributing (both by listening and by sharing your thoughts), in a generous and thoughtful way to group discussions.
- Writing thoughtful and introspective self-evaluations (mid-semester and end-of semester). Metacognition, or reflecting on your own thinking process, is an important form of learning and critical awareness.
- Submitting thoughtful, well-written work. See each assignment handout for specific expectations. I expect that you've put in significant work on your final project, and that this effort shows.
- Complete all assignments and submit them on time. I expect you to submit all five of your additional assignments, and they should be thoughtful, deeply engaged with course material, well-written and/or showing evidence of fully engaged participation. An assignment can be late if it's pre-arranged or because of an emergency.

**What is required for a “B” grade:**

- Make sure you read the “A” grade expectations first
- Attendance at *most* Tuesday and Thursday Zoom sessions. You may miss four sessions, no questions asked..
- Participation: See “A” grade expectations. For a “B” grade I expect that you (at the very least) participate in group discussions and show up having done the reading/prepared the day's materials.
- Writing thoughtful and introspective self-evaluations (mid-semester and end-of semester). Metacognition, or reflecting on your own thinking process, is an important form of learning and critical awareness. This requirement is the same as for an “A” grade.
- Submitting thoughtful, well-written work. See “A” grade expectations. For a “B” I still expect your final project to be thoughtful, interesting, and demonstrate effort. However, it may not be as polished, professional, and rigorous as “A” projects.
- For a "B" grade, I still expect you to submit all five additional assignments, and that these are all thoughtful, engaged with course material, and well-written. These assignments, however, may be less deeply engaged with course material or less rigorously executed than those meeting the "A" standard.

**What is required for a “C” grade:**

- Please read the requirements for “A” and “B” grades first.
- Attend *most* Zoom classes. You may miss six sessions, no questions asked.
- Complete your self-evaluations.
- Submit at least four out of five assignments (excluding the final project), with these being thoughtful and well-written.
- Complete your final project, meeting all the requirements for this assignment.

If you do not participate in class at all, miss more than six sessions, and/or do not submit your final assignment, you are likely headed for a “D” or “F” grade. If you are moving in this direction I’ll ask for a meeting so we can discuss the strategies to help you pass the course.

*Accommodations and Support*

Please be in touch with me in the first week of class should you wish to discuss accommodations for a documented disability. This course is intended for all Rice students, including those with mental, physical, emotional, or cognitive disabilities, illness, injuries, impairments, or any other condition that tends to negatively affect one’s equal access to education. If, at any point in the term, you find yourself not able to fully access the space, content, and experience of this course, you are welcome (but not required) to contact me by email or during office hours to discuss your specific needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic heightens challenges that students may face in meeting basic needs, including those for food, shelter, and a safe and accessible learning environment. If you are comfortable doing so, I invite you to share any challenges you are facing with me privately so that we can work to accommodate your needs. You can

schedule an appointment with a Student Success Initiatives advisor at <https://success.rice.edu/form/make-an-appointment>. The Rice Counseling Center can be contacted at 713-348-3311 or at <https://wellbeing.rice.edu/>.

### *Course Schedule*

#### *Week 1 Black Lives Matter for Environmental Justice*

1/26 Welcome & explore the Environmental Justice Atlas ([ejatlas.org](http://ejatlas.org))

(in class) "How Black Lives Matter And Environmental Justice Are Connected"  
(6 min video)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Di-JmGwjoOs>

1/28 Pellow, David N. 2016. "Toward a Critical Environmental Justice Studies: Black Lives Matter as an Environmental Justice Challenge."

Who Is the We in "We Are Causing Climate Change?" *Slate* article, 2018  
<https://slate.com/technology/2018/10/who-is-we-causing-climate-change.html>

#### *Week 2 Reimagining Justice*

2/2 Pulido, Laura, and Juan De Lara. 2018. "Reimagining 'Justice' in Environmental Justice: Radical Ecologies, Decolonial Thought, and the Black Radical Tradition."

2/4 Watch *Geographies of Racial Capitalism with Ruth Wilson Gilmore* (16 min)  
<https://antipodeonline.org/geographies-of-racial-capitalism/>

(in class) present & discuss **collaborative EJ map**

#### *Week 3 Unnatural Disasters*

2/9 Collins, Timothy W., Sara E. Grineski, Jayajit Chakraborty, and Aaron B. Flores. 2019. "Environmental Injustice and Hurricane Harvey: A Household-Level Study of Socially Disparate Flood Exposures in Greater Houston, Texas, USA."

Wagner, Laura Rose. 2016. "Chronicle of a Disaster Foretold"

2/11 **Reflection paper: August 28 2005 / August 25, 2017** & in-class discussion

Optional viewing:

*Trouble the Water* (96 min. Katrina documentary; available via Kanopy)

watch trailer <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cq426VjZD1E>

watch film <https://rice.kanopy.com/video/trouble-water-1>

*Week 4 Toxic Exposures*

2/16 NO CLASS – extreme weather

\*2/17 Attend PLANET NOW! virtual event on Afro-Indigenous intersections in environmental justice, featuring a conversation between Drs. Michelle Murphy, Beth Rose Middleton, and Malcom Ferdinand. Register at <https://enst.rice.edu/planet-now>

2/18 NO CLASS – attend Planet Now! on Wednesday 2/17 instead

*Week 5 Afro-Indigenous Intersections in Environmental Justice*

2/23 Discussion with Dr. Beth Rose Middleton  
Bring Qs from the talk last week!

Middleton, Beth Rose. 2015. “Jahát Jat’totòdom: Toward an Indigenous Political Ecology.” In *The International Handbook of Political Ecology*, 561–74.

2/25 Discussion w/ Drs. Michelle Murphy & Malcom Ferdinand  
Bring Qs from the talk last week!

Excerpts from: Lerner, Steve. 2010. *Sacrifice Zones: The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the United States*.

Excerpts from: Sze, Julie. 2007. *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice*.

Murphy, Michelle. 2017. “Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations.”

Explore: EPA EJ mapping tool  
<https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/2015/06/15/60999/epa-mapping-tool-shows-houstons-hot-spots-of-toxic-risk/>

Optional: Watch *Shelter in Place: Living in the Shadow of the Petrochemical Industry* (48 min documentary, 2009). Available via Fondren Library / Films on Demand  
[https://fod-infobase-com.ezproxy.rice.edu/p\\_ViewVideo.aspx?xtid=42253](https://fod-infobase-com.ezproxy.rice.edu/p_ViewVideo.aspx?xtid=42253)

*Week 6 MIDTERM PAUSE*

3/2 NO CLASS – free day

3/4 Class time for discussion about annotated bibliographies due next week

*Week 7 Agriculture and Liberation*



3/9 **Midterm: annotated bibliography** relevant to the contemporary environmental issue you will address in your final project

3/11 Excerpts: White, Monica M. 2018. *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*.

"Prophetic Black Ecologies: Liberatory Agriculture on Beulah Land Farms"  
(article by Priscilla McCutcheon)

<https://www.aaihs.org/prophetic-black-ecologies-liberatory-agriculture-on-beulah-land-farms/>

### *Week 8 Organizing for Environmental Justice*

3/16 *NO CLASS – spring sprinkle day*

3/18 Alston, Dana. 1991. "Transforming a Movement." *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 2, no. 3/4 (1991): 1-29.

Bullard, Robert D. "Environmental justice in the 21st century: Race still matters." *Phylon* (1960-) 49, no. 3/4 (2001): 151-171.

Proceedings: First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit (excerpts)

### *Week 9 An Experiment in Organizing for Environmental Justice*

3/23 (independently) prepare for Environmental Leadership Summit

3/25 (in class) prepare for Environmental Leadership Summit

### *Week 10 Decolonization*

3/30 **Third National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit**

4/1 Sundberg, Juanita. 2008. "Placing Race in Environmental Justice Research in Latin America."

García-López, Gustavo. 2020. "Environmental Justice Movements in Puerto Rico: Life-and-Death Struggles and Decolonizing Horizons." *Society & Space*.  
<https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/environmental-justice-movements-in-puerto-rico-life-and-death-struggles-and-decolonizing-horizons>

LeBrón, Marisol. 2019. "The Protests in Puerto Rico Are About Life and Death." *NACLA*.



*Week 11 Abolition*

4/5 **Reflection: Environmental Leadership Summit**

4/6 Davis, Janae, Alex A. Moulton, Levi Van Sant, and Brian Williams. 2019. "Anthropocene, Capitalocene,... Plantationocene?: A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises."

Heynen, Nik. 2018. "Toward an Abolition Ecology."

4/8 *NO CLASS – spring sprinkle day*

*Week 12 Cultures of Justice*

4/13 Woods, Clyde. 2005. "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?: Katrina, Trap Economics, and the Rebirth of the Blues."

Listen: Pleasure/Liberation mixtape

<https://www.newblackmaninexile.net/2016/02/pleasureliberation-mixtape-experience.html>

4/15 Nocella, Anthony J., Priya Parmar, Don C. Sawyer, and Michael Cermak. 2017. "Hip Hop, Food Justice, and Environmental Justice."

*Week 13 Black Lives Matter for Environmental Justice*

4/20 **Reflection paper: Black Lives Matter for Environmental Justice**

4/22 Final project workshop and final reflections

*Week 14*

4/27 Final project presentations

4/29 Wrap up and course debrief

*Additional resources to explore:*

Deep South Center for Environmental Justice

<https://www.dscej.org/>

EPA.gov mapping tool

<https://ejscreen.epa.gov/mapper/>

Google Earth

<https://www.google.com/earth/index.html>

Black Lives Matter 101 - Class #2 - *Slow Death: Black Health and Environmental Justice* (1h55min; 2016)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcDTERE7xJ8>

*Black Tide* documentary about water and the sugar industry in South Florida (50 min; 2017)

<https://www.amazon.com/Black-Tide-Steven-Johnson/dp/B01IEEJRPM>

*The Big Fix* documentary about Deepwater Horizon spill (1h48min; 2011)

<https://youtu.be/O53wKRBRcVY>

*Flint's Deadly Water* (55 min Frontline documentary, 2019)

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/flints-deadly-water/>

*La Via Campesina: Globalize Hope* documentary about the history of international peasants' movement La Via Campesina (1h13min; 2019)

<https://tv.viacampesina.org/Globalize-Hope>