White Space: Racism, Nationalism and Wilderness in the United States

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ABSTRACT

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In the United States, the history of racism and racial oppression is often unexamined within environmental and preservationist movements. Wilderness preservation and access to nature has been used as a method of reinforcing racial hierarchy and promoting and advancing White agendas. Environmental heroes like John Muir promoted racist viewpoints toward others through a vision of wilderness that was exclusive and inaccessible. National Parks and other wilderness areas displaced the original inhabitants of the land now are representative of nature as a place of exclusion. In order to have success with their environmental goals, White environmentalists need to recognize and account for the racism, imperialism, and nationalism, both intentional and unintentional, that has harmed their movement.

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Introduction

How do we define nature? What qualifies as wilderness? How do we decide which types of environments are worthy of our protection? Do we protect remote mountaintops? Farms? Urban green spaces? What about buildings - are those inside or outside of our definition of what is natural? In the United States, it has primarily been White persons that have set the discourse and established those definitions and boundaries, and although these definitions have changed over time they have been employed in a way that upheld and reinforced the cultural dominance and values of the nation's White inhabitants. The environmental movement has been primarily made up of White voices that ignore the structural and systemic issues that cause environmental harm disproportionally to persons of color.

White environmentalists still revert back to familiar tropes and myths of national origin, and preservation of nature is used as a way to justify old nationalist and racist sentiments. The concept of "preserving the environment" has become another way of asserting colonialist and racialist impulses both inside and outside the borders of the United States as certain types of people and certain types of environments are given value over others. Efforts to acknowledge racial inequality within the environmental movement have been met with strong resistance. When the Sierra Club created a blog post titled "Yep, We're too White" in 2009, they received numerous outraged responses from White Sierra Club members who were upset that race was being brought up at all, upset at being called White, and who asserted that persons of color weren't doing their part to save the

environment in the first place (Brown 2009). Interestingly, the blog post by the Sierra Club has now been removed from their web site even though other articles from the same month – including one about an auction for the baby clothes of celebrity Melissa Joan Hart – still can be found.

The modern environmental movement in the United States emerged in the late nineteenth century and placed great emphasis on the preservation of nature, on keeping an untouched wilderness safe from the destructive tendencies of humans, and venerating certain places as examples of the sublime, where one could "glimpse the face of God" (Cronon 73). This movement, strongly tied to Romanticism, was led by individuals like Henry David Thoreau, who spent two years dedicated to simple living near Walden woods, and John Muir, whose lofty paeans to the Sierra Mountains are still plastered on the back of many a Volvo headed out for a weekend of camping. These and other early American environmentalists often spoke in terms that depicted nature as an uninhabited Eden that could restore the souls of the wearied. They focused on protecting wilderness from further human encroachment, while not seeing their own excursions into the wilderness as part of that encroachment. This concept of nature as something valuable and worth preserving was a shift from earlier American attitudes about wilderness as a dark, dangerous and evil place (Cronon 70). Though the movement from viewing nature as evil to sublime was an enormous change, the conception of nature as "other" or as separate from humanity was retained.

Environmental historian William Cronon has argued that we need to "rethink wilderness" and recognize that "Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it is quite profoundly a human creation" (Cronon 69). He goes on to state,

"there is nothing natural about the concept of wilderness. It is entirely a creation of the culture that holds it dear, a product of the very history it seeks to deny" (69). In order to understand how wilderness and environmentalism has been used to reinforce racial hierarchy, we need to examine how wilderness as a human creation came to be.

The Frontier Myth and Erasing the Indigenous

> *. . . Underneath all the conflicting images of the Indian one fundamental truth emerges – the white man knows that he is an alien and he knows that North American is Indian--- and he will never let go of the Indian image because he thinks that by some clever manipulation he can achieve an authenticity that can never be his.* - Vine Deloria Jr.

The particular constructed vision of nature as an Edenic wilderness for exploration by a chosen few has been reinforced through our stories and imaginings of early American colonists. Early settlers had a certain degree of fear of the wilderness and of the indigenous people in the so-called newly "discovered" land, and saw the wilderness as something that needed to be tamed and exploited for food and resources. Stories of the colonists' survival over wilderness represent powerful tales of American national origin, and have fed into the myth of white European-Americans as gifted hunters and legitimate conquerors of the land. The myth of our first Thanksgiving with food harvested by the Pilgrims is an example of this type of national origin story. Many believed that survival in a brutal environment shaped the nation and made Americans different from the British in character (Jordan 119). The doctrine of manifest destiny further legitimized the idea that Whites needed to enlighten and transform the nation by spreading "civilization" throughout the continent.

At the end of the nineteenth century, however, White Americans began to grow concerned that their wilderness was disappearing. The influential historian Frederick Jackson Turner, writing for the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1896, extolled the virtues of the American frontier and asserted that the wilderness had transformed Americans, and had made them not only different than Europeans, but also better (Nash 146). Turner reflected on the "blank slate" that had been presented to Americans in the form of the frontier and argued that it had contributed to a meritocratic nation that set the United States apart from old Europe. Theodore Roosevelt, who was an avid hunter and outdoorsman, responded enthusiastically to the writings of Turner. He explained that, "as our civilization grows older and more complex, we need a greater and not a less development of the fundamental frontier virtues" (Nash 150). These men attributed much of our national character to hardy ways of the early pioneers, and people like Roosevelt began to fear the detrimental effects of a lack of wilderness on the American character. When John Muir began to voyage out on his famous lengthy wilderness hikes he was influenced by these myths of national origin and the historical legacy of early pioneers and explorers. In a letter to his friend, Jeanne Carr, Muir wrote: "How intensely I desire to be a Humboldt!" in reference to the famous German explorer of Latin America (Letters to a Friend 9). Muir soon joined his voice in the growing chorus of people who wanted land within the United States permanently set aside for preservation (Nash 155). Both Muir and Roosevelt would become instrumental in the establishment of dedicated National Parks.

But what of the American Indians who had already occupied the land on which the national parks were to be built? Had there ever been a frontier or blank slate to begin with? The "uninhabited wilderness" that National Parks set out to preserve was in fact by and

large already occupied by Indigenous populations. Early proponents of National Parks had spoken of American Indians as part of the "wild" nature of the parks and thus had sought to include them within the park boundaries. Henry David Thoreau and George Catlin were both advocates for allowing American Indians to remain in National Parks, although for self-serving and paternalistic reasons as they wished to learn from the "children of nature" (Spence, 11) and not have them be "civilized off the face of the earth" (22). However, John Muir and others objected. Their vision of nature was of an Eden free of humans, and certainly free of the "inferior" American Indians. Historian Mark Spence notes that John Muir found the Mono people of the Yosemite region to be "mostly ugly, and some of them altogether hideous" said that they "had no right place in the landscape" and that they detracted from the "solemn calm" of the wilderness when he was in their presence (109). In Yosemite, Yellowstone and in nearly all of the National Parks to follow, American Indians were systematically removed from both the physical environment of the National Parks and of the stories and histories of the parkland. If you visit a National Park today, you may see only brief references in park literature to the early inhabitants of the land who are usually presented as a noble race of people who passively "vanished" or who are presented under the "unthreatening guise of 'first visitors'" (Nash 5). By presenting the Indigenous as "first visitors" innocence is implied of the subsequent "visitors" who displaced the first.

In other histories of our National Parks, indigenous Americans have been ignored outright, and early America has been portrayed as an empty vessel that was waiting to be filled with White European setters. The perception White settlers had of a virgin wilderness was partly influenced by the large number of American Indians that had died due to diseases brought by the Europeans. The America that many colonists saw upon

arrival looked like an idealized pastoral landscape partly due to the agricultural practices and orchards left behind by displaced inhabitants. Whites planted hop farms in the Pacific Northwest on land they thought was natural prairie, but in fact had been created by the Tlingit people through "long-term fire-ecology management" (Raibmon 127). American Indians have since been often portrayed in simplistic and stereotypic ways as passive stewards of the land and as a people who "lived as one with nature." They are rarely portrayed as agriculturalists or as people with any dominion over their environment. By reinforcing the myth that American Indians had and continue to have no impact on the Earth they are deprived of individuality and agency and are kept frozen in a pre-modern time. It is easier to strip people of their land and human rights if you have made them invisible first, and by the 1930s Indigenous territories comprised only 4% of their original size (LaDuke 14). To acknowledge that American Indians had marked and shaped the land and had agricultural practices would have raised uncomfortable questions about land rights under colonial land policies and would also be contrary to the imagery of pre-colonial America as an untouched Eden.

When White settlers needed a reason to justify the slaughter and forced removal of American Indians from their homeland, they created a fiction of vicious savages living in a frightening wilderness (Hundorf 20). However, the colonists eventually claimed ownership of much of the continent and "as the nineteenth century progressed… the conquering culture began to reimagine the objects of its conquest" (20). Where it had originally benefited Whites to paint the Indigenous as dangerous and to promote the construct of nature as a dark and evil place, those images began to change to suit new purposes. Popular culture began to romanticize the idea of the American Indian and what it would be like to

be “Native”. New stories were woven into the myths of our national origin; tales of heroic and brave Noble Indians and a race of people that had quietly “vanished”. Shari Hundorf, a professor of Ethnic Studies and Comparative Literature, has analyzed the tendency for Whites to imitate and romanticize American Indians and states, “Going native . . . expresses European America’s anxiety about conquest and serves in part to recast this terrible history by creating the illusion of white society’s innocence” (21). This leads to cultural fascination and appropriation of Native clothing and art at the same time there is a pervasive unwillingness to acknowledge or speak of the violence and brutality that marked White contact with American Indians.

Persons within the modern environmental movement still often use stereotypical images of American Indians as a tool to advance their ideas about nature and appropriate American Indian imagery and sayings. In one famous example, the “Crying Indian” public service advertisement of the 1970s used the image of a tearful, “traditionally dressed” American Indian (played by an actor of Italian descent) to urge people to “Keep America Beautiful” (Strand). Environmental groups that continue to have a predominately White membership still too often ignore the modern American Indian voice and even work against Indigenous interests. Environmental groups have at times been in the forefront of attempts to block Indigenous hunting and fishing rights and land reclamation efforts, and have often been silent on the fact that environmental toxins disproportionately affect Indigenous people.

African Americans, Slavery and the Environment

The concept of nature and land has also been implicated in the subjugation of African Americans, and the places that many African Americans live and work have not been seen as environments worthy of protection. Early colonists used arguments about nature and descent in order to promote the racial hierarchy of colonial America, and to justify the existence of racially marked institutions such as slavery (Jordan 103). As historian Winthrop Jordan illustrated in his work *White Man's Burden*, "whitest Europe" had recently come into contact with "blackest Africa" and British colonists had transformed from a society that frowned upon slavery to one with a robust chattel-slave system over a relatively short period of time (Jordan 103). Slavery was put forth as simply a natural part of human biological existence. Conversely, miscegenation was presented as "unnatural", and was perhaps the strongest taboo in early American society. In an extreme form of racial othering, African Americans were also often likened to apes, a comparison that Thomas Jefferson himself made in *Notes from Virginia* (Jordan 180). After establishing African Americans as "dark" and "animal-like" they were deprived of both land and labor through the institution of slavery.

Prior to the American Revolution, even many Southerners had been uncomfortable with slavery. Those who supported it often saw it as a necessary evil but not something they wanted to be a defining characteristic of their nation (Jordan 125). In the post-revolutionary period, however, the American South began to romanticize slavery and the plantation lifestyle that employed it. Nostalgic images of the "Old South" and pastoral images were conjured up as the North began to take on a contrasting industrial tone. The

South was to represent the natural order of things while northern industry was invoked as the antithesis of this "simple" and "natural" way of life. Abolitionists had to counter images of the slave as a contented worker of the land by invoking their own use of the pastoral. During the Missouri Compromise debate, New Hampshire governor William Plumer attacked slavery as an assault on nature, which deprives the slave of the fruits of their labor and upends the human tendency to care for and tend to land. He argued:

> Give such a man the fee simple of a barren rock, arid he will cover it with verdure; plant him in a desert, and fertility will spring around him. Convenience and con-tent are the companions of his toil, and wealth follows in the train of industrious freedom. On the contrary, the slave and his taskmaster, placed in a land flowing with milk and honey, would convert even the Garden of Eden into a desert and a waste (Finseth 232).

Pro-slavery forces countered that whites were superior to blacks by nature and by the will of God (Ford 416). Through the ideology of paternalism, politicians like James Henry Hammond argued that the "'patriarchal' system of slavery was 'the sacred and natural system' because it placed the laborer 'under the personal control of a fellow-being endowed with sentiments and sympathies of humanity'" (Ford 514). Both sides in the debate over slavery used images of nature and the pastoral, in one case to help justify the continuation of slavery as natural, and in the other case to argue that it tainted the land.

For enslaved African Americans, nature could represent both forced labor and inequality one hand, and an opportunity for freedom and resistance on the other. Whites would hunt for leisure and the pleasure of the resulting feast, while slaves labored over the game that would be theirs to haul back to the plantation, butcher and serve to White

masters (Glave and Stoll 6). At the same time, African Americans were often able to refashion their knowledge of hunting and the land into opportunities, food, and medicine. Enslaved persons who had knowledge of the land could gain a better situation for themselves. In some instances, knowledge of the regional ecology could provide slaves with a means for subversion and freedom – by escape through the woods on foot or even by poisoning their master using their knowledge of plants and wildlife (Stewart 15).

Some post-slavery African American literature expresses ambivalence toward nature. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Dubois explained what working on the land had come to represent for some African Americans: "In well-nigh the whole rural South the black farmers are peons, bound by law and custom to an economic slavery, from which the only escape is death or the penitentiary" (21). The pastoral world that was so revered and idealized by whites in their literature was conversely invoked by some African American writers as a reminder of both the labors of slavery and the broken promises of the reconstruction era. African Americans never got their dreamed-for 40 acres and a mule, and many who remained in the South were hired back onto plantations as low-paid sharecroppers. Some African American writers also depicted the industrial North as a land of promise and salvation at a time when many Whites in the North were lamenting the environmental problems associated with industrialization.

Northern industrialism in many ways was presented in sharp contrast to the Southern nostalgic pastoralism, and this presented a tension between the different conceptions of what was natural, and what was a valuable way to spend both your work and leisure time. Upper-class whites who left their troubles behind and went for lengthy hikes into the woods were considered hardy pioneers – their industriousness was not

questioned and their doing so was considered for the good of their health. During this same time period, African Americans were often being characterized as lazy and prone to idleness (Hogue 27). And while writers such as Muir advocated seeking personal happiness and wisdom through connection with and hikes into nature, writers such as W.E.B Du Bois advocated the elevation the Black person through education. Consider this selection on hiking by John Muir from his book *Our National Parks*: "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves" (42). Muir, whose statements on nature have become so influential in the environmentalist movement, presents a picture of wilderness as therapeutic and restorative. Nature had become a recreational pursuit of the leisure class, and there was a strong implication that nature could be a way to escape "others" outside of their class and racial boundaries. The escapist imagery is still often invoked in support of nature exploration – a leisure activity to restore the minds wearied by civilization and industrialization. Contrast the quotation by Muir with this one from W.E.B Du Bois, as he was describing walking through the countryside in search of a teaching job:

> I see now the white, hot roads lazily rise and fall and wind before me under the burning July sun; I feel the deep weariness of heart and limb as ten, eight, six miles stretch relentlessly ahead; I feel my heart sink heavily as I hear again and again, "Got a teacher?" Yes. So I walked on and on --- horses were too expensive --- until I had wandered beyond railways beyond stage lines, to a land of "varmints" and rattlesnakes, where the coming of a stranger was an event, and men lived and died in the shadow of one blue hill. (Du Bois 61)

Certainly there was much variation in how African Americans viewed nature, but some African American writers spread the idea that it was the industrial North and education that held promise, not the pastoral countryside, which was instead associated with forced labor, lynching, and broken promises.

In 1919 the four-day Chicago race riot left 38 people dead and hundreds more injured. The incident that sparked the riots occurred on a particularly hot summer day in Chicago when African Americans as well as Whites looking for a place to cool off clashed at the informally segregated Hot and Cold Beach on Lake Michigan. A group of five boys on a raft drifted from the "Black Beach" and crossed over into the water of the "White Beach". A White beachgoer saw the boys and began throwing rocks. One of these struck 14 year old Eugene Williams who slipped into the water and drowned. When a White officer refused to arrest the rock thrower, fighting between Whites and Blacks broke out and rapidly escalated into the worst race riot of Chicago history (Fisher 64). While many historians have considered the drowning of Williams to be a symptom of underlying political and labor issues, historian Colin Fisher argues, "it is a mistake to interpret Eugene Williams's drowning and the immediate conflict on the Lake Michigan shore as a mere symptom of deeper underlying issues. We need to take the supposed symptom—conflict over access to nature—seriously as a significant cause of racial tension" (66). African Americans had endured years of being barred from parks and beaches by White youth gangs and White officials in the Chicago park district. The YMCA, YWCA, and Boy Scouts of America of Chicago practiced segregation within their organizations, and the local environmental group Prairie Club outright barred African Americans from membership until 1939 (Fisher 69). Contrary to the stereotype that African Americans simply had no time to enjoy nature

because of their class status, a great many of them struggled and fought for access to a nature that had been claimed as the domain of Whites.

Modern environmentalists still often do not see the urban industrial environment as worthy of the same kind of environmental protection urged for remote wilderness areas, and have not addressed historical disparities like those that were so sharply on display in early 20th century Chicago. The industrial is still seen as separate and apart from nature. African Americans have often been shut out of the environmental movement and discourse. There is a growing environmental justice movement that has been sharply critical of groups like the Sierra Club for focusing only on the constructed nature of that which is "out there" and absent of people, while ignoring environmental issues within cities and in other areas with high concentrations of people of color. Those within the environmental justice movement argue that we need to redefine nature to include urban space, thus breaking down barriers of race, class and gender. Since America had to construct people out of the environment to begin with (as with American Indians), there is no reason to consider only empty land as worthy of protection. Both nature and race are constructions, and promoting essentialist views of either one is damaging.

Over the years environmentalists and scholars have made a show of head-scratching over their perception that African Americans do not participate in outdoor activities as frequently as Whites. Yet these same environmentalists refuse to see African Americans' spaces as natural and continue to deny the role that racism has played in the history of land usage and environmental efforts. In the 1960s some scientists endeavored to discover why African Americans did not typically swim as well as Whites. Instead of considering the history of unequal access to swimming pools and beaches, and violent incidences like the

one that sparked the Chicago race riots, the scientists came to the stunningly foolish conclusion that African Americans must simply be biologically less buoyant than Whites (Allen 408). White environmentalists need to acknowledge how racism and segregation have shaped African American experience with nature.

While DuBois himself may have willfully turned away from nature, other African American writers have taken different perspectives toward wilderness, urbanization, and race. Consider the poem by Langston Hughes "Lament for Dark Peoples":

I was a red man one time,
But the white men came.
I was a black man, too,
But the white men came.

They drove me out of the forest.
They took me away from the jungles.
I lost my trees.
I lost my silver moons.

Now they've caged me
In the circus of civilization.
Now I herd with the many —
Caged in the circus of civilization. (1-16)

Hughes mourns what he sees as a forced disconnect between people of color and nature, while at the same time reinforcing the idea that the urban is separate from wilderness. Ed

Roberson displays yet another perspective in his poem "Urban Nature" which erases the divide between wilderness and the city entirely:

> The bus stop posture in the interval
> of nothing coming, a not quite here running
> sound underground, sidewalk's grate vibrationless
> in open voice, sweet berries ripen in the street
> hawk's kiosks. The orange is being flown in
> this very moment picked of its origin. (9-14)

In her book *Belonging: a Culture of Place*, writer and cultural critic bell hooks takes a view somewhat similar to the poem by Langston Hughes while she documents her own return to the rural south. She identifies a hidden history of agrarian African Americans in the American South, whose "legacy of self-determination and hard work was a living challenge to the racist stereotype that claimed blacks were lazy and unwilling to work independently without white supervision" (43). Instead of seeing African Americans as merely victims, or characterizing them in stereotypical ways, environmentalists must recognize the varied ways they did and do experience nature.

John Muir and the Trouble with Prophets

"The gross heathenism of civilization has generally destroyed nature, and poetry, and all that is spiritual." - John Muir

A key figure in the environmental movement who promoted the othering of persons of color and the racializing of nature was John Muir. Considered to be the father of the

National Parks, Muir's writings about nature shaped how Americans viewed wilderness and his long battle for the preservation of his beloved Sierra Mountains invigorated generations of wilderness advocates. In 1892 he co-founded the Sierra Club, an organization that claims to be the largest and oldest grassroots environmental organization in the United States ("welcome"). Muir was a staunch preservationist and led the first major battle of the Sierra Club, the failed attempt to prevent the damming of the Hetch Hetchy Valley in the Sierras (Nash 180). He attained a cult-like status during his lifetime, became like a prophet promoting the veneration of nature, and is still a figure so revered today that the date of his birth became Earth Day and his image has been placed on the California state quarter. However, environmental pioneers like Muir tapped into and reinforced American myths of Manifest Destiny and the Vanishing Frontier which motivated White Americans to claim and protect the nation's so-called virgin land from others.

As documented in *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*, John Muir traversed the countryside by foot on a journey that took him through Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, Florida and Cuba less than two years after the Civil War ended. It was the earliest of his famous journeys through nature, and since the journal was not published during his lifetime the text is more frank and less flowery than in his later works that were written and heavily edited with an audience of his followers in mind. What is most striking about the text is the way that he not only avoids directly stating his opinion on slavery, he also either avoids talking about people and towns altogether or speaks of them in a disdainful or racist manner. Only twenty-two towns are mentioned in his writing, which means he either avoided talking about some or avoided traveling through them

deliberately ("A Thousand Mile Walk" xx). Those towns he passed through he often referenced only very briefly and in mostly negative ways, using terms such as "filthy," "ugly," and "primitive". In one selection from his journal he describes the town of Philadelphia, Tennessee in one brief sentence before moving on to use scientific terminology in describing the surrounding trees: "*September 14*. Philadelphia is a very filthy village in a beautiful situation. More or less of pine. Black oak most abundant. Polypodium hexagonopterum and Aspidium acrostichoides [Christmas Fern] most abundant of ferns and most generally distributed" (33).

Muir in many passages makes negative generalizations about African Americans, especially the recently freed slaves he encounters. He describes the African Americans he meets in rural Georgia: "The negroes are easy going and merry, making a great deal of noise and doing little work. One energetic white man working with a will would easily pick as much cotton as half a dozen Sambos and Sallies" (51). He contrasts the perceived laziness of the independent freed slaves with the African Americans in a nearby town who still work for their former masters. He reflects on the beautiful plantations worked on by the latter and notes that: "The negroes here have been well trained and are extremely polite. When they come in sight of a white man on the road off go their hats even at a distance of forty or fifty yards and they walk bare headed until he is out of sight" (52). While it is impossible now to know precisely what he meant by such comparisons, the impression a reader of that time might have come away with was that Muir believed African Americans had been more productive and better off under slavery, and under the strong supervision of Whites. Ironically, while he was harshly judging the industriousness of others, Muir himself was a

self-described "botanist" who had quit his job and was wandering through the countryside by living off handouts and money sent to him by his brother.

In *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*, Muir at times compares American Indians and African Americans to animals. In one section of his journal, Muir compares a recently freed slave boy he encounters to something even *less* than an animal: " . . . a burly little negro boy rising from the earth naked . . . but it certainly is not quite in harmony with Nature. Birds make nests and nearly all beasts make some kind of bed for their young; but these negroes allow their younglings to lie nestless and naked in the dirt" (107). Muir remains mostly silent on the issue of slavery, despite the fact that his traveling took him through the lands of persons freed from slavery only two years prior. He sometimes mentions in passing that someone brought up the "question of slavery." In this passage he makes it clear that he does not want to discuss it:

> Arrived at night at the house of Captain Simmons, one of the very few scholarly, intelligent men that I have met in Florida. He had been an officer in the Confederate army in the war and was, of course, prejudiced against the North but polite and kind to me nevertheless. Our conversation, as we sat by the light of the fire, was on the one great question, slavery and its concomitants. I managed, however, to switch off to something more congenial occasionally — the birds of the neighborhood, the animals, the climate, and what spring, summer, and winter are like in these parts. (111)

During the same time frame as *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*, many of Muir's contemporaries, such as Henry David Thoreau, were not only discussing slavery and its aftermath, but were quite outspoken on the topic and in championing equality.

Muir's most derogatory terms are reserved for African Americans, but he also ridicules some White farmers, and at times seems to show a disdain for humanity in general. He sleeps in a graveyard one night, and comments that he would prefer to "dwell with the dead than with the lazy, disordered living" (Muir 67). He mentions that he hopes that alligators get to enjoy the pleasure of eating people occasionally (99) and that if a war were to break out between human and animals he "would be tempted to sympathize with the bears" (122). How did a man with such extreme views become a revered figure of environmentalism? Some of it is likely due to the showier, less prickly language he used in his later and more famous travel journals, like *My First Summer in the Sierra*. Some of it may be due to the truly unique and daring quality of his travels at that time. Whatever the reasons, the continued uncritical veneration of Muir by environmentalists needs to be rethought given his views on race and on the place for humans in nature. The Sierra Club, despite their claim of wanting to be a more diverse organization, still heavily promotes a view of John Muir as their founder and an environmental hero, and does not address what he said about African Americans, or that he advocated for the dispossession of American Indians from National Park lands. While his adventurous spirit should still be celebrated, it must be done with the realization of the nationalistic tone he set for keeping nature and humans separate and of his damaging racial attitudes. The intersection of race, nationalism and Whiteness continues to manifest in the environmental discourse in specific times and locations, such as the symbolism of Alaska, the rhetoric of Nazi Germany, and in contemporary dialogue between the U.S. and China.

Alaska as the Final Frontier and a Contemporary Muir

Environmentalism and environmental symbols can appeal to broad nationalistic thinking in expressions of love for one's country. Certain animals such as the eagle and polar bear have become both symbols of our nation and of the environmental movement. In fact, many of the animals with which we hold a particular national fascination are individualist hunters – traits that Americans like to self identify with. Yet we ignore the behavior of our nationally symbolic animals that do not suit our imaginations. Eagles, for example, often scavenge for food in road kill and garbage, a fact that is rarely acknowledged. Instead we present our national bird as powerful and victorious over smaller creatures. Polar bears are similarly portrayed as powerful, solitary hunters. Images of polar bears in jeopardy are often used by environmentalists in their efforts to fight global warming, because they are seen as such a powerful and decidedly "American" animals. While patriotic songs often extol the virtues of the varied American landscape from "sea to shining sea", certain specific locales are held in more esteem than others. The majestic mountains and raging Mississippi are assigned greater value than the lowly wetland marsh or even the western prairie (Cronon 73).

In a similar fashion, we as a nation venerate the "great state of Alaska" as our "last frontier" – a designation that serves to carry on the myth of American discovery, rugged individualism, and uncharted wilderness into the twenty-first century. The word "Alaska" as a term has been imbued with meaning and values and it conjures up certain images and expectations. People go there to "find themselves", to "get back to nature", and to "reconnect with America." The contemporary population is overwhelmingly transitory and

migratory, with only 38.1% of the Alaskan population having been born in Alaska and most of the migrants coming from the lower 48 (Williams 3). These travelers and migrants to Alaska include an eclectic mix of people ranging from disaffected hippies to right-wing secessionists. Yet as John McPhee described in his book *Coming into the Country*, many of the people who go to Alaska in order to escape find that once they arrive they cannot afford to pay the airplane pilot fees that would get them to the fishing streams, to hunt big game, or to participate in the expensive, highly skilled wilderness community they sought (McPhee 27). Another book about Alaska, *Into the Wild,* recounts the story of a white upper-class youth named Christopher McCandless who gave all of his money to charity and traveled to Alaska. The book became a best seller and a spawned a movie due in large part with American fascination with the state. Reviewers of the film and book dedicated much commentary to describing McCandless's foolishness that led him into such an extreme situation, where he ultimately starved to death in the wilderness. But perhaps McCandless was following an American directive to its extreme conclusion – to seek a wilderness so devoid of the presence of humans that the self is obliterated, and humanity is erased from nature. Could not McCandless have been another Muir had he survived? And could not Muir (who almost starved in Savannah Georgia and then nearly died of Malaria in his travels through Florida) have been another McCandless?

John Muir had left his beloved California to travel in Alaska, afterwards proclaiming that it was even greater, even more beautiful than California and held more promise. His disdain for tourists had led him to a place where he could live out the fantasy existence of a frontiersman or an explorer in what he believed was its most real sense. The way Muir described Alaska was as an empty, expansive void waiting to be filled. Once

again, he virtually ignored the existence and knowledge of the Indigenous population, even though some of them served as his guides while he was there. He occasionally made comment of them as though they were simply items suitable for photography and his own bemusement. Muir describes one instance were he "looks up to find a group of Eskimos . . . men, women, and children, loose and hairy like wild animals" (Our National Parks 9).

Modern descriptions of Alaska as the last frontier can be heard in environmental discussions around the use of the oil reserves – both the left and the right sides of the political debate over drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) invoke images of the importance of the wild Alaskan resources. Preservationists cry out against tainting the "last frontier" by exploiting it for oil. Proponents of oil drilling point to the wealth of resources there and the long tradition of mining and exploring for riches in the northern state. Both sides in the debate want something from the Alaskan land – one side frames it in the terms of what we can enjoy as eco-tourists and the other in the value of resources extracted. There is little evidence that within the dominant White culture either side has the interests of Indigenous Alaskans in mind, although they are both quick to use Native voices *if* they can be used in support of their cause. Proponents of drilling in ANWR claim the support of Iñupiak people who live within ANWR. Opponents of drilling claim the support of the Gwich'in people, who hunt caribou that live within refuge boundaries (Wallace 50). The importance of the frontier in American discourse is clearly displayed in what we write about Alaska and in how we view it as a symbolic frontier, and in how it becomes a symbol used by environmentalists.

Love of Land, Nationalism, and Imperialism

While Alaska may symbolize some of the nationalistic tendencies within the United States, veneration of the environment and protection of it has been deployed in nations other than the United States for racist and nationalist purposes. It is also used to justify Imperialism and colonialist control over people of other nations. In early twentieth century Germany, Nazism became at times intertwined with the environmental conservation movement. The German Nazi ideologist Richard Darré made popular the phrase "Blood and Soil" in his book *Neuadel aus Blut und Boden* ("A New Nobility of Blood and Soil") that extolled the virtues of people united by blood working on the land of their ancestors. In the early days of Nazi power, a number of environmental reforms were implemented and Germans were encouraged to move back to a countryside that was depicted in romantic and pastoral terms (Radkau, 261). While it would be an overstatement to say that Nazism was truly "green" ideologically[1] there is evidence that the Nazis used environmental rhetoric when it served their racist and eugenicist agendas, and likewise for a time the German environmentalists appealed to Nazism and the *völkisch* movement for the purpose of advancing their environmental goals (264).

Environmentalism and love for the land can all tap into pride for one's nation in ways that are counter-productive or even dangerous, especially since many modern environmental threats are dangers on a global scale that reach beyond any geopolitical boundaries. Likewise, efforts by environmental groups to buy up large areas of land in other countries to "preserve" it can tread a very fine line between concerns for a

[1] For an recent examination of environmentalism in Nazi Germany, see "The Green and the Brown, a History of Conservation in Nazi Germany" by Frank Uekötter.

threatened environment and flexing imperialistic might over the economic and social interests of another nation's people. In the early 1990s Richard Leakey was appointed by the Kenya Wildlife service to eliminate the poaching of elephants. Maasai people were forcibly removed from their ancestral land, and Leakey ordered the construction of a fence to keep people out of the area and the wildlife in. He then employed well-armed guards who were authorized to shoot poachers on site. The program was considered by the World Bank and many environmental groups to be a success though many of the Maasai have complained that their interests have been completely ignored ("Living Together"). The actions of environmentalists and NGOs must be scrutinized when there can be self-serving, financially and racially motived reasons to take control of land from other people in the justification of saving the elephants.

Population Fears and the "Right" Kind of Babies

Racism and nationalistic pride can also be identified in discourse surrounding population trends. In the modern environmental landscape, race is still used to motivate people through fear, and not always in subtle ways. The Christian right has recently been using certain types of environmental rhetoric when advocating for "native born" Christians to have more babies. In the film *Demographic Winter* the filmmakers interview various "experts" who are sounding alarm bells over the "troubling drop in birthrate" and the "degradation of the family." However, it is soon clear that they are not talking about a drop in *all* births, but in births in Western societies, "developed" countries and specific native-born races within those geographic places. One commentator laments that "It is entirely

possible that the French will disappear, that there will be not native born French that come from the traditional French population." Another commentator mentions the teachings of Malthus and Darwin and then says, "certain kinds of human beings are on the way to extinction" (Stout). By referencing Malthus, who was concerned about population growth, the filmmakers are sending a clear signal that the filmmakers are not just concerned about declining birthrates in the west, but in the rise of birthrates in "others." In a 2006 edition of Fox News' *The Big Story*, John Gibson urged viewers to "Do your duty. Make more babies." He called attention to an article claiming half of all children under the age of five in the United States are "minorities". Gibson said in response: "By far, the greatest number are Hispanic. You know what that means? Twenty-five years and the majority of the population is Hispanic" (Gibson). It is clear that Gibson's message is directed at White, "native born" Americans.

Most speakers within the mainstream environmental movement may not be as overtly racist as the commentator on Fox News or *Demographic Winter*, but are nonetheless reaffirming certain racial hierarchies and stereotypes themselves. Concerns over population growth and immigration have long been a motivating factor for many American environmentalists, especially after the book *Population Bomb* was published in the late 1960s by Paul Erlich. In *Population Bomb* Erlich warns of the environmental catastrophe that will result from people having too many children. Gaylord Nelson, who as governor of Wisconsin and later as a US Senator authored many important and valuable pieces of legislation and founded Earth Day, dedicated the later part of his life to trying to convince US environmentalists that they needed to focus more on stopping immigration and population growth. In a keynote speech to a conference on promoting watershed

stewardship, Nelson asked, "With twice the current population, will there be left any wilderness areas, remote and quiet places, habitat for song birds, waterfowl, and other wild creatures? Certainly not very much" (Nelson). He appealed to nationalism and expressed worry that the US would soon be "no better" than the countries that immigrants were leaving. While at first glance the positions of environmentalists who say "less babies" and the Christian right who say "more babies" seem in opposition, upon closer examination there are strong implications that they are united in concerns that the "wrong kind" of babies are being born, or are immigrating into the United States.

Population concerns also become part of the discussion of global warming when the discourse turns to the "threat" of the growing populations and economic strength of India and China and the resulting increases in consumption and emissions. The language that is used to describe the Chinese in particular is often tinged with fear and plays into old stereotypes, and the same neo-Malthusian arguments about population growth used by the political right. In a book from 2000 titled *Thunder from the East: Portrait of a Rising Asia*, the authors draw upon this fear of China when discussing the global warming crisis:

> Asian pollution mostly kills Asians. But increasingly, filth is becoming as cosmopolitan as a business executive, traveling around the world—and this makes environmental problems particularly difficult to tackle. If the theories of greenhouse gases causing global warming are correct, then a carbon molecule emitted in China will threaten the Long Island shoreline as much as a carbon molecule that wafts up from a New York City smokestack. Asia is still a minor source of greenhouse gas emissions, but the trendline is ominous: The two fastest-growing major sources of green-house gases are

> China and India. Within the next decade or so, China will surpass the United States and become the leading source of greenhouse gas emissions. So if the seas rise and the world's climate changes, it will be Asia that will push the world over the edge. In the twenty-first century, the battle over carbon emissions may be one of the most poisonous confrontations between Asia and the West. (Kristof and WuDunn 299)

This selection represents China as a threat against the United States and the places we hold as symbolically important such as Long Island. It also seems to give the United States a pass on being the world's number one polluter, and instead blames China as being the country that will "push us over the edge." The conversations over global warming at the December 2009 United Nations summit in Copenhagen were an interesting continuation of this debate almost ten years after *Thunder from the East* was written. News reports of the summit continually portrayed the debate as being largely between the United States and China (which has now surpassed the United States in carbon pollution). United States climate ambassador Todd Stern was quoted as saying, "We absolutely recognize our historic role in putting emissions in the atmosphere, up there, but the sense of guilt or culpability or reparations, I just categorically reject that" (Hood). China's ambassador Yu Qingtai reacted by saying that "rich countries had caused the problem of global warming. They therefore had to pay to help poor countries switch to low-carbon technology and shore up their defenses against climate change" (Hood). The choice of Ambassador Stern in using the particular term "reparations" is interesting, given the way the word has become strongly associated with the mostly unpopular idea of payments to African Americans for slavery. There is a tendency among White Americans to want others to "get over it" and

forget injustices in the past, and this attitude appeared to be on display at the Copenhagen climate summit. Moreover, the United States is in a position where they could easily subvert the intended purpose of a climate change summit, as what we have often seen in the global warming debate is the "redeployment of traditional U.S. environmental tropes in ways that soft-pedal environmental justice goals in favor of a geopolitical agenda that aims to preserve U.S. economic and political power" (Ziser and Sze 387). As long as the United States sees a political advantage in production methods and lifestyles which result in high carbon emissions we will likely not support any international carbon reduction treaties.

In an even more bizarre section of the book *Thunder from the East*, the authors directly appeal back to late nineteenth century idea that the frontier society in the United States improved our national character and set Americans apart from others. They tell the story of a young Cambodian girl whose parents sold her into prostitution, and go on to state that:

> The cold, cruel discipline that Sriy's parents displayed is one of the lubricants of Asia's great economic machine. Asia rose from pain. America, aside from the Puritan settlements, was the opposite, nurtured by a profound optimism and a confidence in the manifest destiny not just of the nation but of each family. That is why American university students, cocky and fun-loving, always hoping the exams will be a breeze, have great fraternity parties, and conversely why Asian-Americans often ruin the grading curves. That is why Asian immigrants have come to dominate industries that put a premium not on language ability but on hard work: New Chinese immigrants work in their laundries seventeen hours a day . . . Its not brains but drive that propels

> Asians, . . . Asians have tended to see not silver linings but storm clouds. (Kristof and WuDunn 118)

The paragraph is loaded with stereotypes and racist imagery about Asians, and completely ignores the American racial problems masked beneath a term like "manifest destiny". Myths of the frontier are clearly on display and shown to be still fully in use by the journalist authors. Yet this book sold millions of copies, was well reviewed by sources such as *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus*, and hundreds of libraries own a copy of it. The authors are Pulitzer Prize winning journalists who had worked for years on the *New York Times* Asia desk before writing the book. Many people took their work seriously, which has troubling implications for how we as a nation are viewing of ourselves in relation to the idea of a growing Asian population, and how quickly we fall back into racist reductionist thinking when we perceive an outside threat by those who are different than us.

Resistance

White Americans have long used land and environment to divide, suppress, disenfranchise, and set non-Whites apart as "others." Through dispossession and unequal access to nature they have attempted to reinforce and perpetuate their sense of racial hierarchy and dominion. In American myth it is Whiteness that triumphs over nature, and lightness over the dark.

Yet time and time again, the non-White "others" have found ways to claim nature as their own, or to reclaim what was taken from them. Nature has provided many paths for resistance. When Japanese Americans were forced to farm in internment camps during

World War Two, they often did so on their own terms and began to leverage their labor as a bargaining point with camp administrators ("Japanese"). Slaves who were forced to hunt for their owners used the skills to provide more food for their own family. Tlingit who were told to farm hops and were additionally banned by law from enacting their traditional potlatch ceremonies, instead utilized the hops farming profits to enhance and reinforce their potlatch practices (Raibmon 104). bell hooks sees continued opportunity for African American resistance through claiming their own use of the pastoral as she argues: "Collective black self-recovery takes place when we begin to renew our relationship to the earth, when we remember the way of our ancestors. When the earth is sacred to us, our bodies can also be sacred to us" (40). White environmentalists frequently bemoan the lack of environmental activism they see undertaken by persons of color. However, they often define "environmentalist" in narrow, exclusive terminology and use "environment" in a similarly reductive fashion in order to demark areas Whites historically value. They do not see all of the ways that non-Whites have and continue to have a relationship with nature.

Conclusion

Whites within the environmental movement need to work to heal the "wounds of racism" and recognize that doing so is an integral part of the process of healing the wounds of the land. To do so they need to take rethink the heroes and symbols they use in their discourse. There are better heroes for the environmentalist movement than John Muir. There are still ways to recognize and appreciate the accomplishments of John Muir and others like him, but the environmental movement would be wise to take into account what

he did and did not do before utilizing him as a heroic figure for our time. He was silent on slavery although he lived and wrote during the civil war. He advocated for the dispossession of American Indians from their land in Yosemite and Yellowstone, setting a precedent that would be followed in many National Parks. He constructed a cult of nature, a reverence for wild and unspoiled land that has created a dichotomy between nature that is accessible and all around us, and nature as an untouchable Eden that is separate from us – and an exclusive terrain that only certain people would have access to. Continuing to venerate figures like Muir without critique could push people away from environmentalism. Better still than finding a new hero for the movement would be to move away from venerating certain individuals, places, and constructions of nature which are essentialist, exclusive, and inaccessible.

The world currently faces very real and very serious environmental threats such as global climate change, natural resource depletion and environmental toxicity. Environmentalists may fear that critiquing the movement at this critical time in history is a mistake, and that anti-environmentalists will use race as a wedge issue that will fragment the movement. However, environmentalists cannot "win" if they appeal only to a small percentage of the earth's population, if they do not work to remove the colonialist and imperialistic tendencies within their agendas, and if they do not examine the historical legacy of racism within their movement. Nature and access to recreational opportunities should not be a privilege afforded primarily to Whites, who have attempted to assert their ownership over nature while simultaneously using nature and science to justify their subjugation of other races. The construction of nature has become inextricably linked to

the construction of race, and they need to be examined both separately and in relation to each other.

Wendell Barry, in his work *The Hidden Wound*, describes the unexamined racism in the United States as something that harms everyone in our society, and is directly connected to environmental destruction. He writes that racism " . . . has disordered the heart of the society as a whole and of every person in the society. It has made divisions not only between white people and black people, but between black men and black women, white men and white women; it has come between white people and their work, and between white people and their land" (91). Unexamined racism within the environmental movement hurts the environmentalists individually and collectively, and prevents the healing of the land that is at the heart of the movement.

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