MERCY, MERCY, ME (THE ECOLOGY): BLACK CULTURE, AESTHETICS, AND THE SEARCH FOR A 'GREEN' COMMUNITY

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Dedicated to my grandfather James Gray Sr., who was the first to instill in me a thirst for learning;

to my mother, Jacquelyn Marie Gray, who has been a pillar of support during this long journey;

and to my advisor, Dr. Victor Anderson, for countless hours of insight, correction, wisdom, and guidance.

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Introduction

My grandfather was a farmer. He owned several hundred acres of land just south of Atlanta, Georgia where he raised livestock and grew various crops. I can remember staying with him and helping on the farm during summers out of school. This included a variety of tasks from hanging tobacco in the barn after it had been picked by day laborers, to rounding up cattle when they would escape from the pasture. We would also go hunting and fishing and would bring whatever we caught back home for grandmother to cook for dinner.

I would occasionally help my grandmother out as well by gathering eggs from the chicken coop for breakfast or by picking tomatoes from the garden in the backyard. I would also pick blackberries from the bushes alongside the dirt road and whenever she found time grandmother would make my favorite dessert, blackberry pie. Of course, she always warned me not to eat the blackberries before I got home so that she could wash them off first. She was concerned that pesticides my grandfather sprayed on the tobacco to kill crop-destroying insects may have blown onto the blackberry bushes and that I would inadvertently digest them.

My grandmother, however, was not the only one who was concerned with the environment. As a farmer, my grandfather watched the nightly news for the weather report religiously, for if it didn't rain he worried that crops wouldn't grow. And if my cousins and I fished too often from one particular pond, he would admonish us to move to a different pond in order to conserve the population of fish. I can also remember during thunderstorms we would all gather together in the living room and sit quietly because, as

my grandmother would often say: “You don’t talk when God is working.” Collectively, these were among my earliest memories of nature and the environment.

I begin this dissertation with this personal account from my childhood because as much as my academic training, these experiences have shaped my understanding of nature. My summers spent with my grandparents on that farm taught me that the land is a constant and continuous source of substance if we care for it; it taught me that although there are dangers in nature, there is also great beauty; and most importantly it taught me an unparalleled respect and appreciation for the environment in which we live.

However, these experiences are not unique to my context. Historically, blacks have often been farmers and sharecroppers, knowledgeable about the delicate balance between humans and nature. Following the Emancipation Proclamation, many blacks continued in agrarian ways of living, staying on farms and raising livestock. Women often had gardens in the back of their homes where they grew fruits and vegetables, and gardens in the front that displayed the beauty of flowers like roses and tulips.[1] And even during the Great Migration, blacks that moved north carried with them ecologically conscious notions of living that were embedding within their very culture. These notions and ideas constitute the real lived experiences of black life and encounters with the nature.

Consequently, reading historical narratives of the U.S. Environmental Movement I found it odd that blacks were practically non-existent prior to the Environmental Justice Movement in the 80s. When blacks are mentions, it was often only in regards to environmental justice issues but rarely as lovers of nature. And hardly ever are accounts

[1] (Glave, Rooted in Earth 2010, 119)

of slavery and racism dealt with or even addressed. This missing information is what initially sparked the questions that lead to this dissertation research project.

Essentially, I wondered what was the nature of blacks environmental engagement with the U.S. Environmental Movement? How had blacks understood and communicated ecological concerns, and why weren't these accounts included within the mainstream historical accounts of environmental activism? How had blacks maintained environmental consciousness while being forced to till the land during slavery? And finally, given the pervasive influence of the black church within black life, what role had black religion and spirituality played in black environmental engagement?

In answering these questions, this dissertation argues that blacks not only exhibited environmental consciousness during the U.S. Environmental Movement, but that black expressive culture's aesthetic productions provides an emotive understanding of the grotesque nature of U.S. environmental history. In contrast to the standard cognitive narrative advanced by whites, black expressive culture operates at the level of performance and sensory perception and evokes the pathos of U.S environmental concern.

Yet, with black communities experiencing extreme rates of sickness, poverty, incarceration, and death, many may ask, why should blacks care about environmental issues? Why should black communities care about nature when young black bodies are piling up in streets? Of course the very framing of these questions are misplaced. Blacks have always cared about the environment and historically blacks have understood that environmental concerns are connected to broader socio-economic quality of life issues such as health, stability, and fulfillment. Consequently, it is not strange to hear Stevie

Wonder reference air pollution in his 1973 hit single, "Living for the city," a song about a young man who moves from Mississippi to New York in pursuit of a better life but instead experiences racism, crime, and poverty.

As a primary source of investigation then, this dissertation draws from the expressive elements of black life and culture. The philosopher John Dewey wrote: "esthetic experience is a manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization, a means of promoting its development, and is also the ultimate judgment upon the quality of a civilization."[2] Dewey believed that by understanding the aesthetic experiences of a civilization, we could come to understand their culture. Thus, art is not merely an aspect of culture but it is the ultimate judge of culture. As we analyze and critique a work of art, we are also learning about the people and the civilization from which it emerged. He writes: "Works of art are means by which we enter, through imagination and the emotions they evoke, into other forms of relationship and participation than our own."[3]

Consequently, art criticism is an intercultural endeavor. Language barriers separate us and provide a false perception of difference. Through engagement with a different culture's art however, one is able to find similarities that speak to universal human experiences that bind us all together. One is also able to enter emotionally into the suffering and triumphs of a civilization. Dewey reminds us: "Art is a more universal mode of language than is the speech that exists in a multitude of mutually unintelligible

[2] (Dewey, Art As Experience 1934, 326)
[3] (Dewey, Art As Experience 1934,333)

forms."[4] Although the language of art must be acquired, it is not affected by the accidents of history that mark different modes of human speech. He writes:

> The power of music in particular to merge different individualities in a common surrender, loyalty and inspiration, a power utilized in religion and in warfare alike, testifies to the relative universality of the language of art. The differences between English, French and German speech create barriers that are submerged when art speaks.[5]

Thus, as oppose to arguing that blacks were engaged in and concerned with environmental issues throughout the U.S. Environmental Movement, this dissertation allows black expressive culture's art to speak. What one hears is the lament of a culture subjected to environmental alienation; the resistance of a culture that refuses to abandon their respect and appreciation of nature; and the hope for a time when not only will civilizations live in harmony with each other but also with their environment. This dissertation demonstrates that although slavery and segregation forced blacks into a position of alienation from nature, blacks have consistently and continuously expressed environmental concern.

However, this dissertation does more than merely depict black environmental concern, it argues that through black expressive culture one is able to gain an emotive understanding of the alienation and intimacy indicative of black environmental experiences. Each chapter of this dissertation provides a display that is reflective of this argument. Through literature, photography, music, and film, this dissertation takes the reader on a journey that enables one to see the devastation of environmental racism, hear the passion of environmental concern, and feel the emotions that have fueled black environmental consciousness.

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[4] (Dewey, Art As Experience 1934, 335)
[5] (Dewey, Art As Experience 1934, 335)

Methodology

Methodologically speaking, this dissertation draws on Stuart Hall's essay, "Encoding, decoding". Hall writes:

> The apparatuses, relations and practices of production thus issues, at a certain moment (the moment of production)/circulation) in the form of symbolic vehicles constituted within the rules of 'language'. It is in this discursive form that the circulation of the 'product' takes place. The process thus requires, at the production end, its material instruments – its 'means' – as well as its own sets of social (production) relations – the organization and combination of practices within media apparatuses. But it is in the discursive form that the circulation of the product takes place, as well as its distribution to different audiences. Once accomplished, the discourse must then be translated – transformed again – into social practices if the circuit it to be both complete and effective. If no 'meaning' is taken, there can be no 'consumption'.[6]

What this dissertation does is to provide an interpretation for a variety of cultural products within black expressive culture. As stated earlier, I approach these products as modes of communication. They are signs that have been encoded with a story and a meaning and this dissertation offers a decoded interpretation of their message. It is not my assertion, however, that these products have only one interpretation or that the interpretation presented here is "the" authentic interpretation.

Hall notes that the meaning structures between encoder and decoder may not be perfectly symmetrical. This means that decoders bring a set of norms, socially and culturally, to the process of decoding that may or may not have been shared by the encoder. Consequently, this results in distortions and misunderstandings.[7] Consequently, no interpretation is able to reveal with 100% accuracy, the meaning of a sign.

[6] (Hall, Encoding, decoding 1993, 91)
[7] (Hall, Encoding, decoding 1993, 94)

Linguistically this amounts to the difference between a word's denotation, its literal meaning, and the word's connotation, its associated meaning. However, since all signs are coded, all words carry both denotative and connotative meanings, which are both universally and culturally determined. However, it is important to note that these signs are not arbitrary. Hall writes: "Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political order."[8] Thus, although signs are nuances, they are not ambiguous. Therefore, one can argue with a certain degree of certitude for one particular interpretation of another.

Hall writes: "Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed – the effect of an articulation between sign and referent – but to be 'naturally' given."[9] This is typically the case with visual signs where the image looks like the real world object. A picture of a cow therefore would seem universal, since it looks like a cow, whereas the word cow contains none of the properties of a real cow and thus will vary within different languages.

Yet, there still exists a way to determine the most logical meaning from a sign based upon certain social and political orders. This would amount a dominant or preferred interpretation. Hall writes:

> …we say 'dominant' because there exists a pattern of 'preferred readings'; and these both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized. The domain of 'preferred meanings' have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs: the everyday knowledge of social structures, of 'how things work for all practical purposes in this 'culture',

[8] (Hall, Encoding, decoding 1993, 98)
[9] (Hall, Encoding, decoding 1993, 95)

> the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits and sanctions.[10]

As Hall goes on to argue, dominant readings are not about a one-sided process, which govern how events are to be understood. Rather, it is the work that is required in order for a particular reading to qualify as plausible within the command of possible legitimate interpretations. He notes: "If there were not limits, audiences could simply read whatever they liked into any message. No doubt some total misunderstandings of this kind do exist. But the vast range must contain some degree of reciprocity between encoding and decoding moments, otherwise we could not speak of an effective communicative exchange at all."[11]

Hall distinguishes three hypothetical positions from which decoding discourse may be constructed: the dominant-hegemonic position, which is when the viewer takes the connoted meaning from an event and decodes it in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded; the negotiated code, which is when the viewer derives a negotiated 'local' version of the dominant-hegemonic position; and the opposition code, which is when the message in the preferred code is restructured within an alternate framework in order to serve a particular oppositional purpose. Although each of these readings constitute as dominant readings, the dominant-hegemonic position makes the most effort at reaching 'perfectly transparent communication'. This is because the dominant-hegemonic reading attempts to understand the original intent of the encoder. Thus, this is the position deployed within this dissertation. With references to personal biographies, historical happenings, and genealogical patterns, each reading presented of

[10] (Hall, Encoding, decoding 1993, 98)
[11] (Hall, Encoding, decoding 1993, 100)

these particular black cultural expressions attempts to determine the purpose and the intent of the artists. In this regard, these readings are neither arbitrary nor capricious. Rather, they fall within a dominant framework of legitimate and dominant interpretations.

Chapter Two

Chapter two begins by providing a historical account of black environmental experiences from slavery to the twentieth century and challenges what I call "racial opaqueness in the U.S Environmental Movement." In doing so, the social and historical factors that have contributed to the myth that blacks are unconcerned with environmental issues are addressed. It is shown that blacks have always demonstrated environmental consciousness through literature, poetry, religion, folklore, and other aesthetic modes of communication. This chapter then takes up the origin of this myth, namely, the normative way environmental thought has been traditionally framed by mainstream white environmentalists.

That is to say, nature[12] has most often been presented as a pristine wilderness without any attention given to the history of slavery and alienation experienced by blacks.[13] This alienation not only created a different perspective by blacks regarding the nature of nature, but it also cultivated a different method of environmental engagement. Traditionally a folk culture, black culture's environmental engagement is most visible within black expressive culture.

Drawing from cultural theorist Alain Locke and political theorist Kimberly Smith, the Locke/Smith thesis is presented as a means of analyzing and critiquing blacks

[12] Throughout this dissertation, the term 'nature' is deployed in its aesthetics sense. That is the emotively grasped, sensory perceived encounter one has with the natural world, which gives rise to art. See Dewey, Art As Experience 1934, Chapter 1.
[13] (Smith 2007, 8)

relationship with/to the environment[14]. Alain Locke believed that black art derived its vitality by recalling the experiences of black life.[15] Kimberly Smith argues that the system of slavery forced blacks into an intimacy with the natural environment but also tended to alienate them from it.[16] The Locke/Smith thesis, therefore, argues that black experiences with nature occur between the binaries of intimacy and alienation and are most effectively communicated via aesthetics. Four aesthetic modes of black expressive culture are then discussed in detail: literature, music, photography, and film. These modes of communication not only inform black's attitude regarding nature but they also influence their social and political actions as well.

The second half of Chapter two engages in an aesthetic critique of the role of literature in black environmental consciousness by providing a critique of religion and nature in the novel *Sula* by Toni Morrison. Drawing from philosopher Jerome Stone's definition of religious naturalism in *Religious Naturalism Today*[17] and Victor Anderson's definition of pragmatic naturalism in *Pragmatic Theology*[18] I argue that the religious sentiments expressed in *Sula* are those of religious naturalism, which understands God as a the totality of the universe considered religiously. This is outside of mainstream Christian thought and negates the notion that black religious perspectives are monolithic or solely influenced by the black church. It is shown that although the black church plays a critical role in black's perception regarding creation, evolution, earth, heaven, sin, virtue, and other ways on knowing, it is also the case that black religious sentiments are

[14] The term 'environment' is deployed in the political sense of the term, i.e. the Environmental Movement. Specifically, the term signifies the economic and political control of nature dictated by laws, legislation, and public policy.
[15] (Locke 2012, 135)
[16] (Smith 2007, 10)
[17] (J. Stone, Religious Naturalism Today 2008, 6)
[18] (Anderson, Pragmatic Theology 1998, 111)

varied and diverse. In the novel *Sula,* these religious sentiments influence the black community's view of nature, the universe, the landscape, and their sense of 'place'.

As I conclude, I turn to Robert Thayer and bell hooks for a comparison of the ways in which whites and blacks understand belonging and sense of "place" differently. This is critical in that it exposes the "grotesque"[19] nature of America's environmental history and the lasting effects of racism on blacks desire to connect with nature. While Thayer is able to find solace through a connection to the landscape[20], hooks wrestles with painful memories of racism and segregation[21]. Chapter two ends with three very clear themes being advanced; first, that slavery and racism have sought to alienate black's from nature; second, that in spite of this alienation, blacks have continuously and consistently exhibited an intimacy and concern for the environment; and third, that aesthetics within black expressive culture has played a significant role in demonstrating and articulating both of these realities.

Chapter Three

Chapter three of this dissertation focuses on the role of photos in the Environmental Justice Movement and the significance of these photos on black environmentally political engagement. Specifically, it covers the period between 1982 and 1994 when blacks became more visibly involved in environmental concerns on a political level. This included the drafting of *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States*, the first national study to suggest that income and race were contributing factors in the

[19] The term "grotesque" has several understandings within aesthetic philosophy. Here, I am referring to Victor Anderson's use of the term in Anderson, Beyond Ontological Blackness 1995, 120 and Anderson, Creative Exchange 2008, 10

[20] (R. L. Jr. 2003, 61)

[21] (hooks 2009, 11)

siting of landfills, refineries and other noxious facilities[22]; the development of the Environmental Equity Group; the formation of the First National People of Color Environmental Summit; and the signing of Executive Order 12,898.

This chapter contends that these developments within the arena of pubic policy were influenced and fueled by photos depicting the atrocities of environmental injustice such as those from the Warren County PCB landfill protest.[23] In one of these photos, included in *Dumping in Dixie* by Robert Bullard, individuals are shown lying prostrate in front of dump trucks as they attempt to halt the entry of toxic chemicals into their community. In another photo, individuals are marching holding signs in protest against the pollution of their community.[24] Such photos were clearly intended to evoke outrage as well as inspire activism. Additional photos, included within Environmental Justice literature during this period, as well as those displayed on ads, often showed the hazards of environmental injustice and chronicle the actions of communities resisting this assault on their health and safety.[25]

In order to understand the methodology behind the use of these tactics, I return to the Locke/Smith thesis from Chapter two. Drawing from John Dewey's aesthetic philosophy and Alain Locke understanding of cultural vitality, I argue that these photos convey a universal aspect of suffering. According to Dewey, disequilibrium and adaption are critical experiences in the development of art[26] and as Alain Locke argued, the experience of slavery and bondage provided this for blacks[27]. According to Locke, black

[22] (United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice 1987)
[23] (R. Bullard, Dumping in Dixie 1994)
[24] (R. Bullard, Dumping in Dixie 1994)
[25] (Sze 2007, 99)
[26] (Dewey, Art As Experience 1934, 58)
[27] (Locke 2012, 58)

art, therefore, depicts something that other cultures do not, and this provides it with its cultural vitality.

Applying this perspective to photos from the Environmental Justice Movement and drawing from Kimberly Locke's work in *African American Environmental Thought*, this chapter argues that black experiences of environmental intimacy and alienation are visible via environmental justice photography. Photos of the Environmental Justice Movement reflect a reality experienced universally by those that are marginalized because of environmental neglect and capitalist greed. Ultimately, these pictures transmit this universal environmental concern.

This leads to a critique of Rob Nixon's concept "the environmentalism of the poor"[28]. Although Nixon focuses primarily on the tactical responses to environmental devastation by international communities, several similarities to black American communities are present. Drawing parallels between the ways in which these international minority communities respond to environmental concerns in comparison to U.S. blacks offers additional support to the universal aspect of the Locke/Smith thesis.

Chapter three concludes by arguing that the Environmental Justice Movement was an aesthetic experience and that its cultural products, i.e. the environmental photos, which played a roll in its growth and development, exhibit artistic vitality. It is this vitality, which gives these aesthetic productions their value within the black community and their universal significance. Not only do they communicate the environmental consciousness of the black community but they also provide a universal critique of environmental exploitation and inspire resistance against environmental destruction.

[28] (Nixon 2011, 4)

Chapter Four

Chapter four then engages in an aesthetic critique on the role of music during what is regarded as the Modern Environmental Movement. This period is traditionally understood as the years between the mid-sixties and the early eighties. During this time environmental concerns regarding pesticides, pollution, and toxic chemicals were pervasive. Then president, Richard Nixon, declared the seventies "the decade of the environment"[29] and more environmental legislation was passed during this decade than any other era. Much of the activism during this time has been contributed to the publication of *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson, which detailed the harmful effects of pesticides such as DDT on birds and humans.[30] Rarely is the development and growth of the Environmental Movement during this era attributed to blacks, or black expressive culture.

This chapter, however, argues that environmental songs written and performed by black musicians such as Mercy, Mercy, Me by Marvin Gaye; Pollution, by Bo Diddley; and Saturn by Stevie Wonder, all record the significance of black musicology in undergirding and advancing environmental consciousness and activism within black communities. Drawing from Mark Anthony Neal's research on polytonality[31] and Geneva Smitherson work regarding tonal semantics[32], it is argued that these songs exhibit a unique sound that is both appealing and compelling within black culture. The specialized rhythms and inflections within these musical masterpieces function as a type of aural

[29] (Daynes and Sussman 2010, 82)
[30] (R. Carson 1962)
[31] (Neal 1999)
[32] (Smitherson 2000)

community for blacks and provide the emotional and mental transcendence that precedes physical transcendence.[33]

I refer to these artistic expressions as eco-protest songs and define them as: "an objection to the disregard for human's interrelationship with their environment, communicated through melody, harmony and rhythm."[34] This chapter argues that eco-songs served three primary functions within the black community: as a source of lament, as a source of resistance, and as a source of hope. Although countless songs fall within each of these categories and many songs convey more than one of these individual themes, for the purpose of this chapter only the three songs previously mentioned are critiqued.

Mercy, Mercy, Me by Gaye is offered as an example of the lament that black communities felt suffering from the Mercury Crisis and witnessing countless oil spills into oceans. Pollution by Diddley provides an example of resistance as he encourages listeners to throw their garbage in the trash and not on the street. And Saturn by Wonder expresses a similar eschatological hope for a better place that we also find in sorrow songs[35].

Eco-protest songs were more than modes of entertainment and by placing them in juxtaposition with significant environmental concerns during this era one is able to observe their contemporary relevance. They served as means of education, awareness, organization, reflection, affirmation, and outrage. By evaluating these songs and the role they played both culturally and historically, this dissertation demonstrates that blacks

[33] (Neal 1999, 39)
[34] (T.-L. J. Gray 2013, 165)
[35] (DuBois 1903, 192)

were indeed concerned and engaged with environmental issues during the Modern Environmental Movement.

Chapter Five

Finally, Chapter five looks at the role of film in conveying issues of environmental injustice as well as the portrayal of religion and spirituality by minorities who oppose ecological violence enacted through capitalism and globalization. This chapter begins by looking at the role of racism and "other-ing" in films such as Tarzan. Drawing from Professor Jacqueline Bobo's essay, "The Politics of Interpretation: Black Critics, Filmmakers, Audiences,"[36] Professor Herman Gray's essay, "Television and the Politics of Difference,"[37] Professor Stuart Hall's essay, "New Ethnicities;"[38] and Kenneth Cameron work in *Africa on Film*[39], I provide a critique on the representation of race and Africa in films.

The remainder of the chapter then provides a critique of the movie *Avatar* by director James Cameron. First, it is argued that *Avatar*'s ideological message qualifies it as a part of black cinema. Tommy Lott's argument for Third Cinema in his essay, "A No-Theory Theory of Black Cinema,"[40] is evoked here and substantiates this claim. Ultimately, *Avatar* provides insight into the ways in which globalization affects minority populations domestically as well as abroad. It also provides perspective regarding the ways in which this devastation is communicated by minorities within public spaces.

Although *Avatar* takes place on a distant planet and with a non-human species, the "other-ing" of the Na'vi parallels that of black communities in the U.S. Professor

[36] (Bobo 1992)
[37] (H. Gray 2005)
[38] (Hall 1996)
[39] (Cameron 1994)
[40] (Lott 1997)

Charles Long's *Significations* is significant in explicating these parallels.[41] The Na'vi are regarded as savages and considered insignificant in the pursuit of the valuable mineral unobtainium; on Earth, poor and minority communities are also deemed as "others" and subjected to violence in the pursuit of wealth. Drawing from David Schlosberg book *Defining Environmental Justice,* this chapter argues that this is evident in the realm of environmental justice as it pertains to distribution, cognition, participation, and capabilities.[42]

This chapter also points out that although minority communities are often at a political and economic disadvantage in the fight against environmental injustice, they are not helpless. In the movie *Avatar* the Na'vi fight back against environmental exploitation and the destruction of their communities with the help of Eywa, their deity. Religion and spirituality guides the Na'vi's environmental consciousness and allows them to resist the efforts by humans to destroy their home. This also parallels the plight of poor and minority communities in the U.S., as religion is often one of the primary means by which these communities find encouragement to organize and oppose governmental and military assaults. This is evident in the actions of individuals such as Charlotte Keys, founder of *Jesus People Against Pollution.*[43]

In conclusion, it is argued that film in significant in the realm of black environmental consciousness as a means of conveying the problems of environmental injustice within a public forum. Racism and environmental exploitation are daily concerns for communities suffering from capitalist greed and the disregard of their health and safety. As Chapter three argues, these communities respond with the only tools

[41] (Long 1995)
[42] (Schlosberg, Defining Environmental Justice 2007)
[43] (Ruffin 2010, 89)

assessable to them, which are often aesthetic i.e. literature, music, photography, and film. Following *Avatar's* phenomenal success, several efforts have been taken within the international realm to protect Brazilian rainforest.[44] Such efforts are only a glimpse of the potential film has in spreading awareness and inspiring action. This chapter contends that until similar project begin to take place within poor, black, and brown communities within the U.S., blacks and environmentalists will have failed to fully enlist the power of film in the pursuit of sustainability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are three dominant and recurring themes throughout this dissertation. They are attention to the voices of those that are marginalized, acknowledgment of the significance of aesthetics within black life and culture, and recognition of the history of environment engagement within black communities. In explicating these themes, this dissertation argues that slavery and racism left a lasting impression on black environmental consciousness resulting in expressions of both intimacy and alienation.

What this dissertation offers, however, beyond a cognitive understanding of black environmental activism is sensory engagement with black environmental concerns. By evoking the art of black expressive culture one is able to see, hear, and feel the environmental experiences of U.S. blacks. However, this engagement need not be relegated to minority communities. Dewey once wrote: "A technical high-brow presentation would appeal only to those technically high-brow; it would not be news to the masses."[45] Essentially, Dewey understood the power of art to appeal to the senses and

[44] I am referring specifically to the attention to suspend the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam project.
[45] (Dewey, The Public and Its Problems 1927, 183)

to communicate ideas. As this dissertation depicts, artistic modes of communication provide a deeper level of engagement with a culture's values and concerns. As it pertains to black environmental history, this engagement reveals experiences of lament, resistance, and hope.

Currently, this is the only exhaustive environmental critique of black aesthetic products in the U.S. from slavery through the 21st century. It is my hope, however, that this research will encourage individuals to take a closer look at the contributions of all communities as nations continue to search for answers to environmental challenges. Given the basic environmental premise that all of our actions effect others and thus we must learn to respect each other within a global community, it would seem that finding common ground and shared experiences in which to communicate and understand each other is an excellent place to start.

Chapter 2

Environmental Experience and Religious Naturalism in Black History and Culture: An Eco-critical reading of *Sula* by Toni Morrison

Introduction

This chapter provides a historical account of black environmental experiences from slavery to the twentieth century. I give special attention to the notions of alienation and intimacy as well as beauty and burden. It examines the effects of this history on the development of black culture and religious experience in Toni Morrison's *Sula.* Morrison presents a portrait of U.S. black religiosity, which is influenced by American history and black environmental experiences. My reading argues for a depiction of these experiences from the perspective of religious naturalism and demonstrates how blacks were able to experience cultural fulfillment and transcendence in the face of environmental limitations.

By these terms, I am thinking of Professor Victor Anderson's usage in *Beyond Ontological Blackness,* he writes:

> Cultural fulfillment is the reflexive integration of basic human needs and subjective goods. It involves the satisfaction of categorical goods that human beings minimally require for maintaining biological life (life, safety, work, leisure, knowledge, and the like). It also involves the satisfaction of subjective goods (friendship, peace of mind, integrity of conscience, and spiritual meaning) that individuals require for alleviating subjective alienation, assuring subjective equilibrium, and realizing positive personalities.

I argue that in the face of devastation, disappointment, racism, betrayal, finitude, and even death, cultural fulfillment and transcendence are both visible in the history of black environmental experiences.

In the first part of this chapter, I trace the development of U.S. black environmental experiences from slavery to the early twentieth century. While not exhaustive, this account nevertheless connects the African experience of slavery to the American pragmatic tradition in the development of an African-American religious naturalism. In the second half of this chapter, I offer a reading of Toni Morrison's novel, *Sula,* which provides a portrait of black environmental experiences from the perspective of religious naturalism. This is evident in Morrison's fictional residents of Medallion, Ohio, who maintain a unified concept of experience, a belief in human transcendence, and an understanding of the world as changing. Ultimately, this way of thinking shapes their culture, their understanding of nature, and their understanding of God.

I. Racial Opaqueness in the U.S. Environmental Movement

Many chronologies on the American environmental movement such as Mark Dowie's *Losing Ground* and Thomas Wellock's *Preserving the Nation* begin with the early nineteenth century nature writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Henry David Thoreau. As Wendell Berry and Bryan Norton both point out, those within this period are often divided into two groups. There were preservationists such as John Muir who held that nature should be preserved free from human interference. Muir, the son of strict Calvinist parents, regarded nature as the handiwork of a divine creator and believed creation held intrinsic value beyond human utility. In *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* he wrote:

> The world, we are told, was made especially for man – a presumption not supported by all the facts. A numerous class of men are painfully astonished whenever they find anything, living or dead, in all God's

> universe, which they cannot eat or render in some way what they call useful to themselves.[46]

On the other hand, there were conservationists such as Gifford Pinchot who held that nature should serve human needs. Although conservationists believed in the wise management of natural resources so as to ensure their availability to future generations, they held that these resources should be used to improve present society. Pinchot wrote: "The first principle of conservation is development, the use of the natural resources now existing on this continent for the benefit of the people who live here now."[47]

Elaborating on these two opposing nineteenth century perspectives, in *Towards Unity Among Environmentalists,* Norton presents the twentieth century environmentalist Aldo Leopold as a mediating figure. He writes:

> Aldo Leopold led two lives. He was, in the best tradition of Gifford Pinchot, a forester and a coldly analytic scientific resource manager, devoted to maximizing resource productivity. But Leopold was also a romantic, who joined the Forest Service because of his love for the outdoors, a love he never lost or fully subjugated to the economic 'ciphers' that so constrain public conservation work.[48]

Norton goes on to write, "Leopold, I will assert, has been the most important figure in the history of both environmental management and environmental ethics."[49]

My concern with these depictions of the origins of American environmental history is not that they are inaccurate, but rather they are incomplete. Dowie's, Wellock's, and Norton's accounts all disregard the efforts of blacks. Throughout their accounts there is no mention of contributions by W.E.B. Du Bois, George Washington Carver, or Booker T. Washington. Although Dowie and Wellock make mention of the

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[46] (Muir 1918, 136)
[47] Pinchot, Gifford (2012-05-17). The Fight for Conservation (Kindle Location 295). . Kindle Edition.
[48] (Norton 1991, 39)
[49] (Norton 1991, 39)

Environmental Justice movement in the twentieth century, Norton does not. Unfortunately, such instances of ignoring the contributions of black and brown voices within U.S. environmental history are not uncommon. For instance, in *First Along the River,* Benjamin Kline covers the entire span of the U.S. Environmental Movement from the 1400s to the close of the twentieth century with no mention of U.S. black's contributions until 1985.

This absence is indicative of what Prof. Charles Long refers to as opacity. He points out specific empirical languages are not transparent, but rather opaque. Long writes: "When opacity (the specific meaning and value of another culture and/or language) is denied, the meaning of that culture as a human value is denied."[50] By imposing dominant cultural understanding onto that which is unrecognizable, "…one is able to divorce oneself from the messy, confusing welter of detail that characterizes a particular society at a particular time."[51] The resulting façade of epistemological transparency coupled with epistemological certainty furthers the interests of dominant culture by shaping both the social world and knowledge in their favor. By not addressing this opacity, environmentalists further perpetuate the inaccurate perception of black involvement in America's environmental history.

This is evident in Aldo Leopold's argument regarding social and ecological progress. He writes:

> The extension of ethics…is actually a process in ecological evolution….The first ethic dealt with the relation between individuals….Later accretions dealt with the relation between the individual and society….There is as yet no ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it….The extension of ethics to this third element in human environment is, if I read

[50] (Long 1995, 117)
[51] (Long 1995, 117)

> the evidence correctly, an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity. It is the third step in a sequence. The first two have already been taken.[52]

Kimberly Ruffin points out that Leopold writes of progress in ecological evolution, while overlooking the contemporary experiences of enslavement and racial discrimination.[53] As history demonstrates, rarely have minorities been included in the canon of environmental scholarship in any significant or substantial way. Their perspectives, which are no doubt regarded as "messy" in U.S. environmental history, disrupt the account of Romantic and pristine wilderness that whites often present with epistemological certainty. Consequently, the opacity of blacks environmental experiences is most often exempted from the standard narrative of American environmental history.

Unearthing Black Environmental Experiences

In *Rooted in the Earth,* Diane Glave argues that: "Stereotypes persist that African Americans are physically and spiritually detached from the environment. This wrongheaded notion is so ingrained in our culture that many blacks, themselves, have begun to believe it. However, nothing could be less true. From ancient Africa to the modern-day United States, people of African descent have continued a legacy of their relationship with the land."[54] Former slaves such as George Moss Herbert, Albery Allson Whitman, Henry Bibb and Frederick Douglas all concerned themselves with the American landscape and nature.

"A black Thoreau," Whitman wrote in 1884:

> Oh! Does not Nature teach us primal bliss?
> Who has not felt her lessons in his youth?
> And having felt, who can forget forsooth!

[52] (Leopold 1949, 238)
[53] (Ruffin 2010, 158)
[54] (Glave, Rooted in Earth 2010, 3)

The voice of birds, the toil and hum of bees,
And air filled with sounds, sweet and uncouth,
Dark heights, majestic woods and rolling seas
Have been my teachers, and my teachers still be these![55]

Whitman's metaphor of nature as a teacher is reminiscent of Emerson's essay "The American Scholar," where he writes: "The first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature."[56]

The poetry of George Moss Horton serves as a testament to enslaved blacks insistence on articulating their ecological perspectives even while living in an era where they were denied the privilege to read and write. In his book *The Hope of Liberty,* published in 1829, Horton evokes images of streams, gardens, insects and blooming forest. He concludes "On Summer" writing:

Pomacious orchards now expand
Their laden branches o'er the lea;
And with their bounty fill the land,
While plenty smiles on every tree.

Oh fertile borders, near the stream,
Now gaze with pleasure and delight;
See loaded vines with melons teem—
'Tis paradise to human sight.

With rapture view the smiling fields,
Adorn the mountain and the plain,
Each, on the eve of Autumn, yields
A large supply of golden grain.[57]

Despite his hostile environment in slavery, Horton's poems nevertheless reveal a powerful connection to the land.[58]

[55] (Ruffin 2010, 45)
[56] (Emerson and Atkinson 2000, 44)
[57] (Horton 1829, 14)
[58] (Ruffin 2010, 40)

Henry Bibb's account of nature during his escape from slave catchers in Louisville, Kentucky is not as romantic as is Horton. For Bibb, the terrain represented an array of obstacles and traps: "I dare not go into the forest, knowing that I might be tracked by bloodhounds, and overtaken."[59] Bibb, moreover, saw cities being "like a person entering a wilderness among wolves and vipers."[60] The only place Bibb found welcoming was the border between plantations and forest where he could avoid white patrols and receive help from other slaves. In this regard, we see that blacks have often inscribed the land with meaning.

In *Congaree Sketches,* Adams presents the folktales of blacks in South Carolina, often set in the Congaree Swamp, which lies on both sides of the Congaree River a few miles from Columbia, South Carolina. These tales frequently depict the swamp as frightening and unnatural as in "The Big Swamps of the Congaree," where Tad refers to the swamp as a place, "…where owls on a dead limb talk of de dead, talks wid de dead and laughs like de dead."[61] However, the swamp also becomes a place of justice as in the story of Ole Man Rouse, a white man who lived during slavery times and would often drown slaves as well as freedmen. While fishing, however, a group of blacks attack and drowned Old Man Rouse leaving his spirit to suffer torment in the swamps where he once tormented blacks. We see this theme repeated in the story of Old Man Rogan, a white man who also took great pleasure it splitting up black families by selling mothers from children and husbands from wives. In death, his spirit also is restless and wanders the Congaree Swamp.

[59] (Smith 2007, 26)
[60] (Smith 2007, 26)
[61] (Adams 1987, 5)

Reflecting on these kinds of stories, Spencer Shaw notes how the rich mosaic of oral literature by black storytellers also included a wide array of animals, haunt, and preacher stories, conjure tales, master/slave anecdotes, exaggerations or lying tales, trickster yarns, homilies and proverbs, riddles, ballads, epics, hero tales and legends, games, sermons, blues, spirituals, slave and work songs.[62] Within the verbal art of blacks, we see humor, creativity, and an unparalleled wit as depicted in the stories of former slave, Simon Brown.

In *The Day When the Animals Talked,* William Faulkner retells stories Brown once told him. These tales take place against the backdrops of plantations, riverbanks, crops, fields, deep woods, caves, country roads and other familiar locations with animals as the actors. As Shaw points out, these stories were more than amusement. Enslaved storytellers took advantage of the naiveté of their supposedly intellectually superior masters by telling what seemed to be childlike tales but which in reality projected protest, personal experiences, hopes, and defeat in the subtle guise of simplistic fictional characters.[63]

In stories like "Brer Wolf Plants Pinders," Brer Wolf, an enemy of Brer Rabbit, asks Brer Rabbit if he would like to do some farming together. Brer Rabbit agrees and they decide to plant pinders, or peanuts. Brer Rabbit tells Brer Wolf to go and buy the peanuts, to cook them, and meet him in the field the next day. When they meet, he tells Brer Wolf to dig the holes and says that he will follow behind him to plant the peanuts and cover the holes. Instead, however, Brer Rabbit eats the peanuts and only pretends to place them in the hole prior to covering them. Weeks later when Brer Wolf wonders why

[62] (Faulkner 1993, xiii)
[63] (Faulkner 1993, xiv)

the peanuts haven't begun to sprout, Brer Rabbit suggests that maybe ground moles ate the peanuts while they weren't looking. In this tale and other, blacks often saw themselves in Brer Rabbit, physically small and weak but skilled tricksters and smarter than their slave owners.

Another example is the story of "Brer Tiger and the Big Wind." In this account a famine comes across the land and there is only one place with plenty of food and a spring that never runs dry, but Brer Tiger who lives there refuses to allow the other creatures to come near. When Brer Rabbit learns of this he states, "It's not right for one animal to have it all and the rest have nothing."[64] The next day all the animals come together and trick Brer Tiger into thinking that a strong wind is coming that will blow all the people off the earth. As they beg Brer Rabbit to tie them, Brer Tiger is awakened and insists that Brer Rabbit ties him instead. Once Brer Rabbit sees that Brer Tiger can't move he calls for all the other creatures to come and see.

> Look, there's our great Brer Tiger. He had all the pears and all the drinking water and all of everything, enough for everybody. But he wouldn't give a bite of food or a drop of water to anybody, no matter how much they needed it. So now, Brer Tiger, you just stay there until those ropes drop off you. And you, children, gather up your crocus sacks and water buckets. Get all the pears and drinking water you want, because the Good Lord doesn't love a stingy man. He put the food and water here for all His creatures to enjoy.[65]

In this account Brer Rabbit not only tricks the adversary Brer Tiger, but he also brings about environmental justice and ecological harmony. Tales such as these, however, are rarely regarded as 'ecological' literature. This is because they do not fit within the traditional categories of conservation and preservation, which are most often deployed by white environmentalists as they frame environmental scholarship. Yet, these tales speak

[64] (Faulkner 1993, 90)
[65] (Faulkner 1993, 94)

to the profound way in which blacks understand nature, their environment, and the American landscape.

II. Framing Black Environmental Experiences

Kimberly Smith points out in *African American Environmental Thought* that part of the problem in articulating African American environmental history lies in the way in which one defines "environmental thought." If one holds to the definition that environmental thought is a set of ideas and arguments aimed at preserving the wilderness and maintaining a viable ecosystem, there is little within the African American tradition that applies. What is needed are multiple frameworks that help to conceptualize the diversity of environmental experiences encountered specifically by blacks. Dianne Glave, Kimberly Ruffin, and Kimberly Smith offer such frameworks albeit with different lenses.

Glave provides a reading in *Rooted in the Earth* in which she situates black environmental experiences within the traditional binaries of preservation and conservation. She writes: "George Washington Carver, Ned Cobb and Thomas Monroe Campbell are all distinctive voices in an expansive environmental history, reflections of preservation-conservation defined and practiced by African Americans." However, she observes that they did not employ the same stringent lines of demarcation as white men. "Carver, a director of the Tuskegee Experiment Station, did not divide preservation and conservation but instead entwined the two. He advocated for protection of, or 'justice' for, the soil in nature in the tradition of preservation. He also experimented with crops using the soil."[66]

[66] (Glave, Rooted in Earth 2010, 7)

Writing of W.E.B. Du Bois, Glave points out: "Though Du Bois emphasized conservation by pointing out the diminishing returns brought on by excessive cotton harvests, he also hinted at a philosophy of preservation by describing the environment in human and lyrical ways."[67] Although Glave's argument for Du Bois here is largely conjecture it is clear that she views Carver, Du Bois and other blacks are mediating figures between conservation and preservation, in a way similar to Norton's description of Aldo Leopold.

Yet, Glave acknowledges that these categories are inadequate. She writes:

> Enslaved people did not stumble upon or discover wilderness. Instead, African Americans actively sought healing, kinship, resources, escape, refuge, and salvation in the land. The environment held social meaning for enslaved people. Contrary to the dominant purist sort of preservation that emphasized places and not people – the practice and ideology of whites – African Americans acknowledged and emphasized the communities populating those wild places.[68]

Thus, for blacks, wilderness was the source of sustenance, but also a place of danger. And just as it was a place of hope for escape, it was simultaneously a place filled with fear of capture as recounted by Henry Bibb.[69] Attempting to frame black environmental experiences within the categories of conservation and preservation exposes the degree in which these categories are insufficient. Most importantly these categories presuppose ownership of the land, a right blacks were denied.

Oppose to working within the confines of these categories, as does Glaves, Ruffin looks at the verbal art and eco-literature of blacks through the categories of beauty and burden. By beauty and burden, Ruffin refers to both the burden of a historical and present era of environmental alienation experienced by African Americans in juxtaposition with

[67] (Glave, Rooted in Earth 2010, 88)
[68] (Glave, Rooted in Earth 2010, 8)
[69] (Smith 2007, 6)

the beauty that blacks experienced in nature coming from a cultural tradition that enables and encourages human and nonhuman affinity. Although blacks struggle with the burden of being ecological outcast, they still enjoy acting outside of this reality. She writes: "The psychological promise of analyzing the beauty and burden together is that it gives African Americans a point of entry into ecological discussion that includes but is not limited to domination."[70] In these terms, Ruffin is able to speak of the cruelty of slavery upon black's relationship with the land while simultaneously accounting for the poetry of blacks such as Whitman and Horton. Most valuable, however, about Ruffin's approach is her turn to artistic productions as a means of understanding black environmental thought. She writes:

> Artistic products are a reservoir of moments of insight that wrestle with a history of environmental injustice and a desire for environmental belonging….Artistic traditions are a key part of solving the problem at hand because they have been a prime place of ecological agency, particularly when micro- and macroaggressions have discouraged African Americans from natural associations in the physical environment.[71]

Rather than drawing from various artistic products, Ruffin limits her critique to ecoliterature. Ruffin notes: "Although *Black on Earth* is not presented as a comprehensive study of African American ecoliterature, it contains a diversity of texts that support the significance of my central theory."[72] She draws from nineteenth-century texts as well as the oral history of the Federal Writers' Project Former Slave Narratives and includes contributions from George Moses Horton, Albery Whitman, Frank X Walter, Harriett Tubman, George Washington Carver, Octavia Butler, Alice Walker, and Jayne Cortez.

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[70] (Ruffin 2010, 16)
[71] (Ruffin 2010, 10)
[72] (Ruffin 2010, 20)

Although Ruffin offers readers a way to think about the particular texts she chooses to engage, it is evident that even these categories do not encapsulate the vast array of African American environmental thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Although beauty and burden are important aspects of black ecoliterature, they cannot account for the humor, wit, or justice motifs found in the trickster tales of Brer Rabbit or the Congaree Tales by Edward Adams.

Kimberly Smith offers, yet, a third approach. She deploys the concept of "possession" of the land as a guiding principle in understanding black experiences with nature and the American landscape. She notes that the idea of possession takes on three different understandings within black writings: (1) Land may simply be a commodity, something to be owned or traded, (2) Land could be a source of creative energy, the particular manifestation of a universal life-force, or (3) Land could be conceived as common ground, the thing a social group holds in common.

Smith further frames the environmental experiences of blacks during the nineteenth and early twentieth century as pivoting between intimacy and alienation. She points out that the system of slavery forced slaves into an intimate relationship with the land while their labor without reward alienated them from it. Smith further observes that within the black tradition the American landscape is not a pristine innocent wilderness, which needs to be protected, but rather a corrupted land scarred from slavery and in need of redemption.[73] For many blacks, this redemption was only possible through land ownership and the ability to reap the benefits of their land labor.

Smith, therefore, focuses on the agrarian aspirations undergirding the antislavery movement. Not only did antislavery advocates hope to destroy the plantations system of

[73] (Smith 2007, 8)

controlling nature and labor, but they also hoped to institute Jeffersonian democratic agrarianism. This social and political philosophy largely advocated by Jefferson held that owning a farm and cultivating it through one's own labor created virtues conducive to good citizenship, including self-sufficiency, industriousness, humility, spirituality, and prudence.[74] Support of this idea is evident in the writings of prominent blacks such as Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglas, and W.E.B Du Bois.

Largely denied land ownership following emancipation, Smith points out that the question of black's emotional connection to the American landscape and spiritual relationship to nature became a leading topic among black elites. They held that slavery had impaired environmental stewardship and resulted in a racially charged landscape resulting in the alienation of blacks. How could blacks experience home in America or a sense of belonging within the American landscape while simultaneously being denied possession of the land?

In consideration of Glave and Ruffin, I believe that Smith's argument is the most compelling framing devise for understanding the opacity of black environmental experience and thought. By framing black environmental experience and thought within the overlapping spheres of curse and redemption, intimacy and alienation, and possession of the land, she provides multiple conceptual tools from which to understand black environmental experiences. She also resists the tendency towards reductionism by describing recurring patterns of thought that emerge from within black environmental literature and experiences. Smith's argument is preceded by that of Alain Locke, which is also situated at the intersections of race, culture, and nature. I now turn to Locke's theory below.

[74] (Smith 2007, 44)

Philosopher Alain Locke argues that black's spiritual relationship with nature was forged during their unique experience in slavery. He writes in *The Poetry of Negro Life:*

> With this generation of Negro poets, a folk temperament flowers and a race experience bears fruit. Race is often a closer spiritual bond than nationality and group experience deeper than an individual's: here we have beauty that is born of long-suffering, truth that is derived from mass emotion and founded on collective vision. The spiritual search and discovery which is every artist's is in this case more than personal; it is the epic reach and surge of a people seeking their group character through art.[75]

According to Locke, African American's intense experience with their environment, which Smith describes under the notions of intimacy and alienation, resulted in the development of a culture, which was collectively Negro and distinctly American. Through collective memory and authentic artistic expression, Locke argued that the articulation of black's experience with the natural and social world could redeem the American landscape.

The Locke-Smith thesis provides critical understanding of U.S. black ecological strivings. That is, their struggle to possess and redeem the land from the curse of slavery as manifest through their pursuit of land ownership, their insistence on nature appreciation, and their quest for a sense of environmental belonging in a nation that denied them acceptance. Navigating these intersections, Locke argues that aaesthetics played a key role in black life and culture. This is not only evident in ecoliterature but also quilts and gardens that came to defined U.S. black homes. Gardens, especially, became sources of aesthetic hope and ecological belonging as black intellectuals sought to articulate their significance.

[75] (Locke 2012, 58)

III. Gardens as a Source of Aesthetic Hope in the Black Community

During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the notion that natural beauty had important spiritual benefits fueled the creation of public parks and rural reform throughout the U.S. Preserving the natural beauty of public lands became a national priority as Yellowstone and Yosemite both came under the protection of the National Park Service. Smith points out that the progressive preservation and urban reform movements, both of which aimed at preserving natural beauty through the creation of public parks, coincided with elite discourse regarding the role of the home and family in moral uplift. Rooted in the 1830s notion of the "cult of domesticity," it was believed that the private home, through feminine virtue, sympathy, affections and aesthetic beauty, provided a sanctuary of moral uplift to men and a guide to virtuous citizenship for children.

Home gardens, therefore, became a way for blacks to aesthetically redeem the land. In these gardens, black women planted vegetables, fruits, flowers, shrubs, trees, and plant. As Glave notes, vegetables were grown primarily to sustain families, but flowers were for viewing and pleasure: "…beaconing neighbors to look closer or visitors to chat in the yard's fragrance and color."[76]As black environmental history indicates, as will be discussed below, Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, and W.E.B Du Bois supported home gardens, albeit with differing justifications.

Washington regarded gardens as important because, like farming, they offered blacks opportunity to exert independent agency over the land. More importantly, they fit within his philosophy of social uplift as a way to combat racial prejudice by placing black homes on the same level with white middle-class standards. For Washington, the more

[76] (Glave, Rooted in Earth 2010, 119)

black homes looked like white middle-class homes, the less reason whites would have to believe in black inferiority.[77] This was extremely important given the notion that the "shack" represented the pervasive stereotype of the black aaesthetic.

Carver, however, spiritually understood the benefit of gardens for black homes, believing that gardens would bring blacks into a greater awareness of God as creator. As bell hooks comments in *Belonging,* "Carver wanted everyone, but especially black folks, to engage in careful husbandry with the earth. Engaged with issues of sustainability before these concerns were popular, he continually worked to teach reverence for the earth."[78] Gardening for Carver was a way for blacks to come in contact with God. As he saw it, maintaining a caring relationship with nature was a means of having union with the divine.

Du Bois, moreover, saw gardens as a means of creating a distinct racial identity. He held that slavery had destroyed enslaved Africans home life and left the black home void of spiritual insight. As oppose to mimicking white middle-class standards, which Washington supported, Du Bois held that rebuilding the black home presented the opportunity for blacks to express their own ideals. To him, this was a moment of serious deliberation, which represented more than a mere difference of quality. Rather, home gardens reflected the kind of community blacks were to become and the culture they were to build. Believing that black ideals of life would be more sensitive to natural beauty than white ideals, Du Bois saw gardens as reinforcing a distinct racial identity of slaves a primitive folk who held a distinct connection to nature.

[77] (Smith 2007, 92)
[78] (hooks 2009, 61)

Du Bois' argument is significant as it conveys the dominant theme within environmental thought among black elites after the turn of the twentieth century. That consisted of the Romantic notion of southern blacks as a peasant community with an organic connection to the land. On this belief, it was claimed that if creative energy is derived from nature, then only people with a connection to the natural world would be able to develop a folk culture sufficiently vital enough to inspire a great civilization.[79] Consequently, Du Bois encouraged blacks to draw from their collective experience with the natural world in order to produce a literature, music, and art that would inspire the nation.

Locke agreed with Du Bois that the black folk tradition in slavery offered vitality to black expressive culture. He also held that black art, as an extension of black experiences with nature, could serve as a source of inspiration towards greater environmental stewardship and ecological harmony. This perspective challenged the traditional notion of environmentalism as primarily a white, middle-class undertaking. Whereas the privileged position of whites allowed them to appreciate the non-instrumental value of nature, one free from human suffering and oppression, this imaginary was not based in reality. Instead, as John Dewey observed, the world around us is one of beauty and complexity, potential and uncertainty, and as, in the language of Victor Anderson, grasped fundamentality aaesthetically as grotesque. Thus for Locke, the vitality of black art was based in its ability to simultaneously and authentically depict these experiences of suffering and cruelty, hope and joy.

Presenting black environmental experiences and art within the Locke-Smith thesis, I now turn to an aaesthetic reading of Toni Morrison's novel *Sula.* Sula is

[79] (Smith 2007, 98)

significant because it depicts the environmental consciousness and religious perspectives of a black community in the twentieth century in their struggle to possess the land amidst themes of intimacy and alienation, curse and redemption. In this text, readers meet the intersections of race, culture, and nature played out among black residents in this small town located on the hills of Medallion, Ohio.

IV. *Sula* and Religious Naturalism

Set in the early twentieth century, *Sula* takes place where our ideological history concludes. In the small town of Medallion, Ohio, blacks are second-generation descendants of slavery and live in the area of town known as the Bottom. Local folklore has it that the Bottom received its name from a trick perpetrated against a former slave when a white farmer promised him freedom and a piece of "bottom land" if he completed some difficult tasks. When the time came for the white farmer to pay up, he told the slave that the bottom land wasn't the valley, as the slave had presumed, but rather that it was the hills because that's the bottom on heaven. The slave graciously accepted and consequently, the blacks ended up with hilly land, "where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slide down and washed away seeds, and where the wind lingered all through the winter,"[80] while the whites lived on the rich valley floor where farming was easy.

In contrast to this account of the past, Morrison introduces readers to the Bottom in the future. She begins: "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread

[80] (Morrison, Sula 1982, 5)

all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom."[81] This framing of the Bottom's past and future, as points of environmental hardship, is significant as it foreshadows the role environment will play within the lives of the residents.

I am primarily interested in the ways that black's environmental experiences in the Bottom shape the resident's religious perspectives. I argue that *Sula* depicts environmental challenges from the perspective of religious naturalism. By religious naturalism, I rely on Jerome Stone's definition. He writes:

> On the topic of God I find that religious naturalists tend to fall into three groups: (1) those who conceive of God as the creative process within the universe, (2) those who think of God as the totality of the universe considered religiously, and (3) those who do not speak of God yet still can be called religious….What distinguishes my use of the term 'religious naturalism' from that of some others is my inclusion of the first two groups within the term.[82]

Following Stone's use I also include all three of these categories within my understanding of religious naturalism.

More specifically, however, I suggest that the black religious naturalism, as portrayed in *Sula,* reflects Victor Anderson's definition of pragmatic naturalism. In *Pragmatic Theology* he defines this as:

> …a particular way of construing reality which is the undifferentiated totality of experience. For pragmatic naturalists, all conscious differentiations of reality are related to the ways in which human beings identify the various qualities of world experience. Reality is the world in its concrete actuality and transcendent potentiality. The world and its processes are contingently related, and the world processes are open to the novelties that arise from the transcendent potentialities of reality. Pragmatic naturalists do not see reality as fixed or closed. Rather, it is fluid, dynamic, processive, and exhibits the possibilities of tragedy and irony in human experience. In its concrete actuality and transcendent

[81] (Morrison, Sula 1982, 3)
[82] (J. Stone, Religious Naturalism Today 2008, 6)

> potentiality, reality discloses itself in the paradoxical, rhythmic push and pull of formation and deformation, life and death, and emergent galaxies and collapsing universes.[83]

As it pertains to Stone's three categories of religious naturalists, Anderson would fall within the second. That is, Anderson understands God as simply a name for the totality or unity of the World as encountered via finitude and transcendence. Although the residents in the Bottom use God-language and theological term, they are often used with this similar understanding. Additionally, the religious naturalism in the Bottom is evidenced through their unified concept of experience, their belief in human transcendence, and their understanding of the world as fluid, dynamic, and processive.

The concept of unified experience is best articulated in Anderson's discussion on the grotesque. For Anderson, the grotesque is the apprehension of experience as inclusive of the unresolved ambiguities that lie between the absurd and sincere, the comical and tragic, the estranged and familiar; the satirical and playful, and the normalcy and abnormality.[84] Anderson rejects any tendency towards a reductionist theory of experience or any attempt at render it within an essentialist category.

This is critical in recovering U.S. black environmental experience because it resists the tendency to view nature as wholly good, as in traditional white nature writing, or wholly bad, as suggested by environmental justice advocates. Each of these views is problematic because a wholly good nature renders U.S. black experiences during slavery opaque while a wholly bad nature renders the possibility of an black environmental ethic impossible. Thus, black environmental consciousness must strive for a unified understanding of all environmental experiences.

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[83] (Anderson, Pragmatic Theology 1998, 111)
[84] (Anderson, Creative Exchange 2008, 11)

As predicted in the introduction of *Sula,* the Bottom is perpetually plagued with strange and erratic ecological happenings. One night the wind tears through the city breaking windows, destroying tress, and shaking the very foundation of buildings. Residents wait up half the night frightened and expecting rain but nothing comes. One year a plague of robins cover the town for days, disrupting everything from yard work to leisure, with no explanation other than the fact that a similar occurrence has happened before. And in 1941, a blanket of ice covers the city for days destroying the harvest, confining everyone to their home, and resulting in all manner of sickness and illnesses.

These events are contrasted against the favorable treatment by nature to whites who live in the valley. Twice Morrison writes: "the hills protected the valley where the white folk lived." This paradox is telling. As Smith points out, blacks have often viewed nature as cursed from slavery and in need of redemption. The portrayal of nature as being hostile to blacks, yet, protective of whites suggests that residents of the Bottom view nature as complicit in racism. However, according to Smith, redemption of the land was thought to be possible through land ownership. This ideology undergird Field Order No 15, which granted freedmen forty acres and a mule following the abolition of slavery. As stated earlier, Washington, DuBois, and Carver all believed if blacks could own the land and benefit from their labor on it, the land would take on a new meaning beyond that of white supremacy and enslavement. When this failed, they supported the cult of domesticity and the idea that there were spiritual benefits one could derive from the beauty of aaesthetic landscaping and home gardens.

Notwithstanding the hostile disposition of nature towards blacks in *Sula,* then, spiritual intimacy is displayed through gardens. Nel is struck by the smell of gardenias

from the magnificent garden in the back of her grandmother, Cecile Sabat's, house when she and her mother, Helene Wright, travel to New Orleans. The smell of gardenias lingers in the air as Helene's mother Rochelle enters the room. Later, when Helene returns to Medallion, she establishes the practice of having seasonal altar flowers in the town's black church.

Eva Peace also has a garden of forsythia bushes, sweet peas and clovers along the side her house. Ironically, we learn of this garden when she jumps from her third floor window and lands in it attempting to save her daughter, Hannah, who catches on fire in the front yard. In spite of this bad fortune, however, residents in the Bottom view tragedy and aberrations as much a part of nature as is grace. Morrison writes: "They lived with various forms of evil all their days, and it wasn't that they believed God would take care of them. It was rather that they knew God had a brother and that brother hadn't spared God's son, so why should he spare them?"[85] Here, the language of God and God's brother is used in the Andersonian sense, as reference to good and evil experiences within nature. A similar refrain is echoed at Chicken Little's funeral. Morrison writes: "…when they thought of all that life and death locked into that little closed coffin they danced and screamed, not to protest God's will but to acknowledge it and confirm once more their conviction that the only way to avoid the Hand of God is to get in it."[86]

The residents of Medallion, therefore, do not separate nature from God nor do they separate good and evil. Rather, they maintain that reality is an undifferentiated totality of experience. Morrison states, "There was no creature so ungodly as to make then destroy it. They could kill easily if provoked to anger, but not by design, which

[85] (Morrison, Sula 1982, 118)
[86] (Morrison, Sula 1982, 66)

explained why they could not 'mob kill' anyone. To do so was not only unnatural, it was undignified."[87] For residents in the Bottom, then, it was not the presence of evil, which was unnatural, but rather the attempt at destroying it. Yet, beyond their acceptance of the world as given, residents in the Bottom still maintained a belief in the potential for human transcendence. Morrison writes:

> They [residents of the Bottom] did not believe Nature was ever askew – only inconvenient. Plague and drought were as "natural" as springtime. If milk could curdle, God knows robins could fall. The purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined (without ever knowing that had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance.[88]

In another passage, Morrison writes that the residents of the Bottom saw evil as something to be recognized, dealt with, survived, outwitted, and triumphed over.[89] In spite of racism, aberrations, death, and evil, residents of the Bottom believed that transcendence was still possible.

By transcendence, I rely on Stone's notion of "situation transcendence," which is both imminent and episodic. In this regard, I utilize Stone to explain the transcendent metaphysics held by residents in the Bottom. For Stone, transcendence is not necessarily a theological category. He writes: "Situational transcendence has been defined…as referring to resources of growth and renewal which are transcendent, that is, unexpected, uncontrolled, and superior in power and worth to the antecedent ingredients of the situation as perceived by an individual or group."[90] Transcendence is inclusive of virtues such as openness, courage, and hope in moments of defeat and despair.

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[87] (Morrison, Sula 1982, 118)
[88] (Morrison, Sula 1982, 90)
[89] (Morrison, Sula 1982, 118)
[90] (J. Stone, The Minimalist Vision of Trascendence 1992, 33)

Of course, the Bottom faces its fair share of defeat and despair. In addition to ecological aberrations, the one economic hope for the town, the building of New River Road, which was suppose to connect Medallion to Porter's Landing, never saw completion. Of course, it is never of any value to the black men in the Bottom anyway as they were continually passed over for less fit white men. Much like freedmen following emancipation who desired to own the land, the men of the Bottom longed for the opportunity to contribute to the landscape and to be able to say they had built the New River Road.

Yet, in the absence of a viable connection to the land blacks chose to develop relationships and build communities as a means of cultivating a sense of 'place'. As oppose to resigning themselves to environmental determinism, blacks in the Bottom respond to the environmental limitations with openness to the possibilities of courage, love, and joy.

For instance, the character Sula is repeatedly presented as a type of natural evil. Morrison writes:

> In their world, aberrations were as much a part of nature as grace. It was not for them to expel or annihilate it. They would no more run Sula out of town then they would kill the robins that brought her back, for in their secret awareness of Him, He was not the God of three faces they sang about. They knew quite well the he had four, and that the fourth explained Sula.[91]

Thus, when Sula sleeps with Nel's husband, places Eva in an old people's home, and is accused of pushing five year old Teapot off her porch; the people do not respond with anger. Rather, it results in a type of communal transcendence.

> Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was

[91] (Morrison, Sula 1982, 118)

> identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst.[92]

This 'accountable yet mysterious' response to evil is what Stone calls the result of unexpected and uncontrolled forces of good in relation to the perceived situation. Nothing from within the situation, therefore, indicates that Sula's sleeping with the town husbands would make the women better wives, or her being accused of pushing Teapot would cause his mother to stop drinking and become a devoted parent.

Likewise, no one would have predicted that the lack of work on the New River Road would result in marriage for Jude Greene. He was twenty, a waiter at the local hotel, and not making nearly enough to support a wife. When he initially mentioned marriage, the idea of the New River Road held promise for him to be a man and do real work. Yet, after standing in line for six days and being looked over for thin white boys, Greeks, and Italians, he got the message. And so Morrison points out:

> …it was rage, rage and a determination to take on a man's role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down. He needed some of his appetites filled, some posture of adulthood recognized, but mostly he wanted someone to care about his hurt, to care very deeply.[93]

As Stone notes, one type of situational transcendence are moments of extremity. These are moments of despair or jubilation when one becomes aware of one's human limitations. "Often in these moments the good which comes to the self comes through some form of personal meeting. Often there is an unexpected and powerful good which moves in acts of love or forgiveness….the appreciation of the preciousness of another human can at any time be vehicles of transcendent renewal and resource."[94] This is

[92] (Morrison, Sula 1982, 117)
[93] (Morrison, Sula 1982, 82)
[94] (J. Stone, The Minimalist Vision of Trascendence 1992, 34)

evident as Nel learns of Jude's despair: "His fears lest his burst dream of road building discourage her were never realized. Nel's indifference to his hints about marriage disappeared altogether when she discovered his pain. Jude could see himself taking shape in her eyes. She actually wanted to help, to soothe…"[95] Consequently, just as the community experiences situational transcendence through closer familial ties, Jude experiences situational transcendence in Nel's love.

As articulated above, pragmatic naturalism categorically rejects the idea of existence as fixed or closed. Rather, reality is constantly in process, developing, fluid and dynamic. The future is open to life and death, pleasure and pain, success and failure. Such openness is precisely what makes transcendence possible in the face of despair and existence precarious in the face of transcendence.

After Nel discovers that Sula has slept with Jude, he abandons her and the children. Nel is sitting on the bathroom floor and reflects on Sula's belief that doing anything forever and ever was hell. In the midst of agony, she disagrees:

> 'If I could be sure that I could stay here in this small white room with the dirty tile and water gurgling in the pipes and my head on the cool rim of this bathtub and never have to go out the door, I would be happy. If I could be certain that I never had to get up and flush the toilet, go in the kitchen, watch my children grow up and die, see my food chewed on my plate…Sula was wrong. Hell ain't things last forever. Hell is change.' Not only did men leave and children grow up and die, but even the misery didn't last. One day she wouldn't even have that.[96]

Here, one can not help but recall Dewey's assertion in *The Quest for Certainty* that "Man who lives in a world of hazards is compelled to seek for security."[97] Consequently, Nel is not only distressed over the pain she feels from betrayal by Jude and Sula but also at the

[95] (Morrison, Sula 1982, 83)
[96] (Morrison, Sula 1982, 108)
[97] (Dewey, The Quest for Certainty 1930, 7)

fact that she has no idea what the future holds. She realizes that "The world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable. Its dangers are irregular, inconstant, not to be counted upon as to their times and seasons. Although persistent, they are sporadic, episodic."[98]

Shadrack, the World War I veteran who returns from battle with shell shock, faces a similar awakening when Sula dies. Having experienced the immediacy of death in war, Shadrack returned to Medallion and instituted January 3rd as National Suicide Day, the one day of the year that people who wanted to die could kill themselves. Like Nel, Shadrack wanted security from the unknown and the uncontrollable. He had once said to Sula, as a distraught young girl, 'always,' to convince her of permanency.

Yet, in 1940 when Sula died, seeing her body lying lifeless on the table revealed to him that he had been terribly wrong. There was no such thing as 'always'. Death and tragedy were as unpredictable in the Bottom as the weather, which perhaps explained the unexpected sunshine on January 3rd 1941. As Shadrack carried out his annual Suicide Day march through the city, that year was different.

"By the time Shadrack reached the first house, he was facing a line of delighted faces. Never before had they laughed. Always they had shut their doors, pulled down the shades and called their children out of the road."[99] But that year, the sun had literally beckoned them to come out and play. Little by little the crowd grew as they march through the city, down New River Road, and found themselves at the mouth of the abandoned river tunnel were lie their broken dreams and promises. It was there, for the first time, that the residents of the Bottom disobeyed their own rule. They attempted to

[98] (Dewey, Experience and Nature 1981, 43)
[99] (Morrison, Sula 1982, 159)

destroy evil. Yet, as the earth gave away at their feet they found themselves in a chamber of water, deprived of the sun that had brought them there and many died.[100]

For blacks in the Bottom, living was not easy. They faced racism, economic depression, illness, plagues, alienation, tragedy, despair, and even death. Morrison nevertheless describes the Bottom as a 'place'. If it is the relationships that justify such a claim, not even those last. And surely it's not the landscape, which was hostile to their hopes, dreams, and aspirations.

In an attempt to build a bridge between the ideological history of black environmental experiences in the first half of this chapter and the environmental experiences that shapes the religious naturalism of blacks in *Sula;* I contend that the idea of 'place' is much broader than relationships or geographical location. Rather, 'place' speaks to the unique environmental experiences that shape black life and culture. It is within these experiences that one may find the potential for a black environmental ethic.

V. Bio-regionalism and the sense of 'place'

Just as Morrison begins *Sula* by framing the Bottom as a locale of ecological destruction, she also begins and ends the novel by framing the depiction of the Bottom as a 'place'.[101] Within environmental scholarship the deployment of this term is significant. As Robert Thayer Jr. points out in *Lifeplace: Bioregional Thought and Practice,*

> A bio-region is literally and etymologically a 'life-place' – a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climactic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human and nonhuman living communities. Bioregions can be variously defined by the geography of watershed, similar plant and animal

[100] (Morrison, Sula 1982, 162)
[101] The first line of Sula begins, "In that place…," and within the last paragraph Nel states, "…the Bottom had been a real place."

> ecosystems, and related, identifiable landforms (e.g., particular mountain ranges, prairies, or coastal zones) and by the unique human culture that grow from natural limits and potentials of the region.[102]

By all accounts then, the Bottom represents a life-place, or a bio-region. It is defined by the natural boundaries of the hills, which separates it from the valley, and provides the context for a uniquely human experience based on erratic weather events and difficult farming practices. Yet, bioregionalism is about more than merely an awareness of shared geographical space. Thayer goes on to write:

> When I look beyond the pragmatic requirements of a life-place approach, I see a simple set of axioms: People who stay in place may come to know that place more deeply. People who know a place may come to care about it more deeply. People who care about a place are more likely to take better care of it. And people who take care of places, one place at a time, are the key to the future of humanity and all living creatures.[103]

The benefit of bioregional thinking, therefore, is the environmental responsibility and care that is intended to follow one's 'sense of place'.

As Thayer argues, globalization blurs social spaces through consumerist homogeneity and corporate economic concentration. Bioregionalism resists such tendencies by decentralizing social identities and reinforcing life-place culture. Thayer's cultural life-place hypothesis is that, "Human culture is best suited to naturally defined regions and reasonably sized communities. Bioregions, or life-places, are the evolutionary norm, not the exception."[104] Consequently, he writes,

> In this strange postmodern condition, the idea of literal and figurative common ground on which a culture can aggregate is the subject of considerable debate. We now enter truly uncharted cultural territory, where a strange admixture of global and local identities pulls us to and fro,

[102] (R. L. Jr. 2003, 3)
[103] (R. L. Jr. 2003, 5)
[104] (R. L. Jr. 2003, 61)

> As the globe 'shrinks' and becomes more 'accessible,' so, too, does our social resistance increase and our affinity for the local deepen.[105]

In his own account of moving from Boulder, Colorado to Davis, California, Thayer discusses the dissonance he initially experienced within his new and unfamiliar surroundings. However, over the past thirty years, he has not only come to embrace Putah Creek country as home, but as a life-place. From this experience he articulates five steps toward a life-place practice: awareness, acceptance, education, engagement, and actualization. Thayer argues that when commitment to these processes is practiced by many inhabitants, a life-place "comes alive" and a life-place culture is formed. The result is a community of trust, faith and creativity as residents envision a life-place future.

In understanding the particular bio-region in which one resides, however, Thayer points out the importance of bridging the gap between those first people who originally inhabited a life-place and the current residents seeking to live in greater harmony with the natural territory. Recalling the first people of his own specific bio-region, he notes that at the time of European settlement the Native Americans were at "central California cultural climax," that is a sufficient balance of human habitation with their surroundings so as to achieve a significant population density with little apparent detriment to the region.[106]

Thayer then proceeds to discuss the culture and practices of these indigenous tribes without making any mention to the fact that not only does the presence of Europeans diminish the Native American's population through dietary effects, disease and social factors; but that they are then forcibly removed from the very bioregions they have established these life-place practices. For Thayer to assert, then, that one should adopt life-place practices to develop a sense of place without taking into consideration

[105] (R. L. Jr. 2003, 64)
[106] (R. L. Jr. 2003, 56)

the limitation presented by racism and oppression is not only fallacious, but also indicative of his position of white privilege.

By contrast, in bell hooks account of her search for a "sense of place" she articulates a thirty-year journey, which eventually brings her back to her origins in Kentucky. However, for hooks this is not an easy decision as she wrestles with the incidents of racism she experienced as a little girl, which still torment her psyche. She writes, "…our move away from that culture [life in the Kentucky hills] into the mainstream world and its values meant that it was white supremacy which shaped and informed the nature of our lives once we were no longer living in the hills. It was this legacy of racial threat and hate that engendered in me the desire to leave Kentucky and not return."[107]

Yet, hooks does return. She finds that racial oppression and white supremacy is not endemic to her hometown and decides that terrorism from strangers is no better than terrorism at home. Unlike Thayer, hooks and the first people who lived near Putah Creek do not have the cultural privilege to establish home wherever they choose based on the simple appropriation of life-place principles. Instead, they must account for racism, white supremacy, cultural hegemony, and violence.

hooks' ultimately resolves that the only way she can truly experience a sense of place is by returning to the place of her origins in the South. She writes that a reciprocating connection to the land where one lives is fundamental to the culture of belonging.[108] Yet, she is clear that although Kentucky presents the greatest potential in her pursuit, it is still a dream tainted by effects of racism. Returning to Kentucky,

[107] (hooks 2009, 11)
[108] (hooks 2009, 217)

therefore, allows hooks to reconnect with nature, face the terror of racism experienced in her youth, and strive to make a difference in a place she still calls home.

When Nel returns to the Bottom in 1965, perhaps she too is in search of a place of belonging as she reminisces over the past. As the Bottom is undergoing suburbanization, she notes how white folks are now building expensive hilltop homes with a river view in the Bottom while the blacks are anxious to leave in lure of life in the valley. This is both environmentally and culturally problematic. Not only are the nightshades and blackberry patches being torn from the roots to make room for a new golf course, but as Nel notes,

> These young ones kept talking about the community, but they left the hills to the poor, the old, the stubborn – and the rich white folks. Maybe it hadn't been a community, but it had been a place. Now there weren't any places left, just separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by.[109]

So one is left to ask, what can be made of this sense of 'place' in the Bottom? And how does it inform environmental and religious attitudes of the residents?

Conclusion

Nevertheless, we must still wrestle with the reality that as *Sula* ends, the town's river is polluted, all the fish have been killed, and nature is being destroyed. This is certainly not an ideal ending to an argument suggesting a black environmental ethic. Yet, this is precisely what Anderson would refer to as the grotesque. We are left with ambiguity and disharmony. As hooks notes, "Returning to one's native place is not an option for everyone but that does not mean that meaningful traditions and values that may have been a part of their past cannot be integrated into homeplace wherever they make it."[110] Perhaps, then, the Bottom still lives on within the cultural memory of the blacks

[109] (Morrison, Sula 1982, 166)
[110] (hooks 2009, 213)

who have departed. Or, perhaps people who inhabit this place hundreds of years in the future now will look back on the culture of these first people as they seek to cultivate practices of ecological respect and harmony within this life-place.

Whatever it is that we chose to infer from the environmental destruction of the Bottom, Morrison refuses the inclination to provide a nice, storybook ending. Rather, I conclude with as many questions as I began. Can the land be redeemed for blacks through Locke's cultural theory of plurality? How significant is the roll of nature in the development of black culture? Do black environmental experiences convey a spiritual responsibility to protect nature? And if cultural vitality is displayed through art, what do the artistic productions in U.S. black culture tell us about their environmental experiences and perceptions toward nature? I take up these questions and others through a Smith-Locke reading of the Environmental Justice Movement within the following chapter.

Chapter 3
Aesthetic Experience and
Cultural Vitality in the Environmental Justice Movement

Introduction

This chapter focuses on black environmental experience of activism and protest by providing a critique of the Environmental Justice Movement from 1982-1994. Special attention is given to John Dewey's concept of "aesthetic experience" in *Art and Experience,* and Alain Locke's notion of "spiritual advantage". By aesthetic experience, Dewey refers to the interaction between an organism and its environment, which involves the constant rhythm of disequilibrium, struggle, harmony, and balance. Locke argues that the unique history of struggle experienced by African Americans is a "spiritual advantage" to the Negro artist. I argue that this period in U.S. black history exhibits both aesthetic quality and cultural vitality evident in its development from domestic protests to an international concern.

Chapter one shows that black's environmental experiences are far from monolithic but varied and diverse. This was intended to extend the canon of black environmental engagement beyond that of environmental justice and situate it within a more comprehensive and historical context. Although extremely significant to black environmental thought, environmental justice is only aspect of black environmental engagement. Furthermore, black responses to environmental concerns extend beyond that of activism and protest. The goal of the previous chapter was to offer a broader perspective from which to view and understand black environmental consciousness but not to disregard the significance of activism and protest within the history of black

environmental engagement. It is to this aspect of black environmental consciousness that the present chapter turns.

I. Black Environmental Activism and Protest

History indicates that religious, social, and political protests by black communities have been critical to their cultural growth and development. Sociologist James M. Jasper points out in "The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive In and Around Social Movements," that protests often evoke emotions among participants, which helps to reinforce a strong sense of community, establish a collective identity, and bind them together.[111] It is the experience of protest itself that provides the type of intense engagement between an organism and its environment necessary for aaesthetic experiences and essential to artistic vitality. I develop these aspects of black environmental consciousness as they relate to the role of *photos* and *picturing* in the quest for environmental justice. I show that the significance of these photos within black environmental consciousness is derived from their representational force in black aesthetic experiences. To open this experience up, I turn to John Dewey account from *Art as Experience*.

John Dewey and Aesthetic Experiences

Dewey offers a theory regarding the process by which works of art come into existence. He notes that art is frequently separated from the everyday doings of life and regarded as remote and disconnected from what is considered common. This results in a wall built around art that renders its general significance opaque. Yet, in order to

[111] (Jasper 1998)

articulate a theory of art one must understand the means by which a works of art becomes a work of art. This means understanding the conditions of their origins as well as their operation in experience. Dewey begins with the world of animal existence and observes that humans are similar to animals in their interaction with the world.

> While man is other than bird and beast, he shares basic vital functions with them and has to make the same basal adjustments if he is to continue the process of living. Having the same vital needs, man derives the means by which he breathes, moves, looks and listens, the very brain with which he coordinates his senses and his movements, from his animal forbears. The organs with which he maintains himself in being are not of himself, but by the grace of struggle and achievement of a long line of animal ancestry.[112]

According to Dewey, adjustment and accommodation are natural aspects of human and animal experiences. These intense interactions between creatures and their surrounding environment result in temporary moments of disequilibrium as they struggle to regain harmony. As they overcome these dangers and regain equilibrium, an aesthetic quality is produced. The difference in humans and animals, Dewey would argue, is that humans have the ability to reflect upon these experiences and to communicate them through artistic expression.[113] Art, therefore, is the consummation of one's interaction with one's surrounding environment, representative of experiences of tension and struggle, and achieved harmony.

However, not all experiences exhibit aesthetic quality. Dewey writes: "we have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and only then is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences.... Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its on individualizing

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[112] (Dewey, Art As Experience 1934, 12)

[113] This perspective is that of John Dewey however, this topic is now hotly debated among animal psychologists who question whether animals reflect, adapt and adjust similar to humans.

quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience."[114] These "real experiences" exhibit consummation and are complete because they absorb the conflict of the past and anticipate the potential for the future.

In many of our experiences, however, we are not concerned with a unity of the past and the future nor or we interested in the achievement of harmony. As Dewey describes it: "There are beginnings and cessations, but no genuine initiations and concluding. One thing replaces another, but does not absorb it and carry it on. There is experience, but so slack and discursive that it is not an experience. Needless to say, such experiences are anaesthetic."[115] Consequently only "real experiences" reach consummation, and consummation exhibits unity. This unity has an aesthetic quality that quality becomes the basis for works of art.

Art is significant to culture, because it communicates these aesthetic experiences to the next generation. It conveys what has been important in the development of a race, a civilization, or a community.[116] It is: "a record and celebration of the life of a civilization, a means of promoting its development, and is also the ultimate judgment upon the quality of a civilization."[117] This Deweyan understanding of art is critical towards understanding Alain Locke's cultural theory and provides greater understanding of artistic vitality

Alain Locke and Artistic Vitality

Kimberly Smith has pointed out that the migration of blacks from the South to the North and from rural life to city life during the twentieth century presented a problem for

[114] (Dewey, Art As Experience 1934, 36)
[115] (Dewey, Art As Experience 1934, 41)
[116] Dewey holds an elite concept of art, which is contested among other aaesthetic philosophers.
[117] (Dewey, Art As Experience 1934, 339)

those who held that black art provided the only authentic depiction of African American culture. Such thinking was supported in large part by appeals to artistic primitivism and literary regionalism. Primitivism suggests that blacks were closer to nature based on their racial essence and that this created their childlike and unmediated relationship with nature thought to be visible within their artistic productions. Regionalism, on the other hand, proposed that black art was influenced by nature's spiritual vitality derived from black's rural environment. Although these views cultivated an interest in black art, their foundations were based on scientific racism, which Locke categorically rejected.

Locke argued that the authenticity of black art was not based on a racial essence but rather on racial experience. Drawing from Dewey's understanding of art as the consummation of experience with the external environment, Locke saw black art as an articulation of black's collective experiences. Thus, for Locke, the cultural vitality exhibited in black art was derived from a deep sense of race consciousness, which was able to connect blacks to their roots in slavery and in the South. However, Locke's understanding of culture was expansive. By replacing nature's vital power with cultural vitality, he legitimates not only black cultural experiences in nature but also those within urban settings. Moreover, since an authentic expression of black culture required an appeal to black's collective experiences, nature was important inasmuch as it contributed to the experiences of southern blacks and the struggle of slavery. For Locke, then, culture did not depend upon a shared life-place, as Thayer argued, nor did it require a return to one's origin and roots as in hooks.[118] Rather, culture is ultimately determined by shared experiences.

[118] See Chapter One for a detailed discussion of Thayer and hooks' theories of "belonging".

Following Dewey, Locke argues that a vital culture is one that expresses intense experience with the external environment.[119] He writes: "All classes of people under social pressure are permeated with a common experience; they are emotionally welded as others cannot be. With them, even ordinary living had epic depth and lyric intensity, and this, their material handicap, is their spiritual advantage."[120] Similar to Dewey's argument that aaesthetic experience is derived from struggle between an organism and its environment, Locke argues that a culture's "spiritual advantage" is derived from the common experience of social pressure. Locke also follows Dewey in his assertion that this "spiritual advantage" is articulated through a culture's art.

However, what Dewey refers to as the aaesthetic quality in experience, Locke calls a spiritual advantage. Morever, what Dewey refers to singularly as an organism creating art out of it's personal experience with it's environment, Locke articulates in plurality, namely, the common emotions of a group that has experienced social pressure. As oppose to experiences with nature serving as an impetus for vitality, Locke argues that vitality is derived from particular kinds of experiences. He proposed that black's experiences during slavery and Jim Crow provided a unique type of encounter with social pressure and that this was the true source of their artistic vitality. Locke continues: "So, in a day when art had run to classes, cliques and coteries, and life lacks more and more a vital common background, the Negro artist, out of the depths of his group and personal experience, has to his hand almost the conditions of a classical art."[121]

[119] (Smith 2007, 198)
[120] (Molesworth 2012, 183)
[121] (Molesworth 2012, 183)

What Locke deemed to be the "spiritual advantage" of black culture was not its connection to nature but rather its depiction of what is fundamentally and uniquely human. Agreeing with Dewey, Locke maintained that nothing was more fundamentally human than the universal experience of struggle and triumph, chaos and harmony. The experience of slavery provided black culture with an aptitude for universal resonance and the capacity for continued meaning and purpose, thus its "spiritual advantage". Furthermore, since these experiences were not experienced in isolation from community and society, Locke believed that this spiritual advantage was collective and generative. Hence, it was a cultural inheritance passed on though artistic vitality. For Locke, then, a culture's social struggle, and thus it's vitality, is reflected through its art. The significance of Locke's cultural theory is helpful in understanding how social struggle and triumph represented in and by black arts empowered black activism and protest in the U.S. Environmental Justice Movement.

II. The Environmental Justice Movement

The protest of a PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) landfill by Warren County, North Carolina residents in 1982 is most often recited as the origin of The Environmental Justice Movement. Robert J. Burns, a businessman, had deliberately dumped more than 30,000 gallons of PCB-contaminated oil along the highway shoulder of fourteen counties in North Carolina. After discovering and digging up this soil, the State decided to build a PCB landfill in Warren County. Warren County was far from the most suitable location for this landfill due to its shallow water table and the fact that the majority of residents

derived their drinking water from local wells. However, the county also had the highest numbers of blacks in the state and was ranked 92 out of 100 in median family income.

Once residents discovered that their community had been selected, they organized and formed the Warren County Citizens Concerned about PCBs. Local leaders including Ken Feruccio, Reverend Luther Brown, Reverend Leon Whire and Dollie Burwell organized protest against the landfill. As the state began hauling more than 6,000 truckloads of the PCB-contaminated soil to the landfills, members of the community and local churchwomen laid their bodies down in front of the oncoming trucks to stop progress.[122] Within just two weeks, 414 protestors had been arrested making this the first time in U.S. history that anyone had been jailed trying to halt a toxic waste landfill.[123] This brought national attention to the issue of institutionalized environmental racism and national civil rights leaders, black elected officials, environmental activists, and labor leaders from across the nation eventually joined residents in their fight. Although protesters were unsuccessful in blocking the PCB landfill, they succeeded in organizing a public against environmental racism[124] and calling attention to this instance of social conflict.

The following year, the *Siting of Hazardous Waste Landfills and Their Correlation with Racial and Economic Status of Surrounding Communities* was issued by the U.S. General Accountability Office. It reported that three out of four off-site commercial hazardous waste landfills in the southeastern U.S. were located within

[122] (Glave 2006, 195)
[123] (R. Bullard 2000, 31)
[124] Rev. Benjamin Chavis was the first person to define environmental racism as racial discrimination in the enforcement of environmental laws, the siting of toxic waste disposal and polluting industries, and the exclusion of people of color from environmental decision-making.

predominately black communities.[125] This led the United Church of Christ Commission of Racial Justice to produce the first national study showing the connection between waste facilities and demographic characteristics.[126] Their report, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* (1987), suggested that income and race were the two most significant indications of where landfills, incinerators, sewage treatment plants, lead smelters, refineries, and other noxious facilities would be located. Of the two factors, race was often more significant than income.[127]

Following this report, the Congressional Black Caucus met with the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) to discuss their findings and to ask that they address the needs of poor and minority communities being disproportionately affected by environmental risks. As a result, in July 1990, the EPA created the Environmental Equity Workgroup to assess issues of environmental equity among racial minorities and low-income populations. That same year sociologist Robert Bullard published *Dumping in Dixie* exposing that toxic facilities in the South were more likely to be located in black neighborhoods than whites. Bullard's was the first significant text produced from the Environmental Justice Movement and corroborated what both the U.S. General Accounting Office and *Toxic Race and Waste in the United States* had discovered, namely, that income and race were the most significant factors in determining where toxic facilities were located. Bullard found that although blacks comprised only 28% of

[125] (Bul0520)
[126] (Bul0520)
[127] (B. F. Chavis 1987)

the city's population, 100% of the city owned landfills in Houston, TX were located in black neighborhoods.[128]

By 1991, blacks organized the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. Held in Washington, DC, this four-day event was attended by more than 650 grassroots and national leaders from around the world. From this gathering a manifesto[129] emerged providing a set of 17 Principles of Environmental Justice.[130] Among these were: (1) that public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination or bias, (2) the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation, and (3) the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality health care.[131]

Bullard later wrote that this meeting: "was probably the single most important event in the environmental justice movement's history."[132] This is because the Modern Environmental Movement, which had taken place following the publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962, failed to connect with the concerns of poor and minority communities. As Bullard pointed out and as discussed in the previous chapter, it was supported mainly by middle- and upper-middle-class whites and the focus was largely placed on wildlife preservation, resource conservation, pollution abatement, and population control.[133] The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit not only mobilized

[128] (R. Bullard 2000, 40)
[129] Similar manifestos have emerged from gathering such as the *Manifesto To the League of Nations* following the 2nd Pan-African Congress and the *Black Manifesto* by Reverend Dr. James Forbes.
[130] See Appendix
[131] (Schlosberg 2007, 66)
[132] (Bul0520)
[133] (R. Bullard 2000, 1)

blacks on environmental issues, but it extended the environmental conversation to address public health, economic development, and minority communities.

By 1992, the Environmental Equity Workgroup released the report, "Reducing Risk in All Communities" and made eight recommendations to the EPA towards minimizing environmental injustices.[134] Among these were: (1) EPA should increase the priority that it gives to issues of environmental equity, (2) EPA should selectively review and revise its permit, grant, monitoring and enforcement procedures to address high concentrations of risk in racial minority and low-income communities, and (3) EPA should expand and improve the level and forms with which it communicates with racial minorities and low-income communities and should increase efforts to involve them in environmental policy-making.[135]

Later that same year, a study by the *National Law Journal* uncovered inequalities in the way EPA enforced cleanup of toxic waste sites and punishment of polluters. Staff writers indicated: "There is a racial divide in the way the U.S. government cleans up toxic waste sites and punishes polluters. White communities see faster action, better results, and stiffer penalties than communities where Blacks, Hispanics and other minorities live. This unequal protection often occurs whether the community is wealthy or poor."[136]

After years of protest, the first culminating victory for the Environmental Justice Movement came in 1994 when then President William Jefferson Clinton signed into effect Executive Order 12,898 encouraging federal actions to address environmental

[134] See Appendix
[135] (Wolcott 1992, 10)
[136] (Lavelle and Coyle 1992)

justice in minority and low-income populations. Under this order was also the creation of the OEJ (Office of Environmental Justice) whose goal was to establish an environment where all people enjoy the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and are provided equal access to the decision-making process to maintain a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work. This historic moment represented the culminating efforts of countless organizations, churches, and activists in their pursuit of environmental justice. However, as this chapter argues, it also reflects the vital role of photography on the consciousness of society towards acknowledging the plight of those disproportionately affected by environmental risks and burdens.

III. 'Picturing' Environmental Justice

Utilizing photography to inspire action has been critical to the Environmental Justice Movement from its beginning. For instance, six photographs dominate Bullard's 1990 edition of *Dumping in Dixie*. Among them, one is of Rev. Benjamin Chavis at the National Press Club in Washington D.C., where he released the *Toxic Waste and Race Report.* Two are of residents protesting toxic facilities, while the remaining three show the proximity of various toxic facilities to residential communities.

In the chapter where these photos are found, Bullard writes: "Unwanted land uses engender a sense of unfairness because they 'gravitate to disadvantaged areas: poor, minorities, sparsely populated, or politically underrepresented communities that cannot fight them off and become worse places to live after they arrive.'"[137] He continues: "Opposition leaders in all five communities used direct action – including protest,

[137] (Bullard, Dumping in Dixie 1990, 45)

demonstrations, and press lobbying – in tandem with petition drives."[138] Such tactics have been critical to black American protest since slavery. The photo of Chavis with other environmental justice advocates standing behind him depicts the entry of such tactics by blacks within the realm of environmental policy (Figure 1), and there is an additional photo of more than a dozen protesters standing in front of the Louisiana State Capitol holding signs that reads: "We must end the emissions of cancer causing chemicals into our air. This must be done for our kids sake."[139] (Figure 2) As one is able to observe, from the beginning of the Environmental Justice Movement, black's concerns for the environment have extended beyond the immediacy of their present situation and included care for posterity.

The second edition of *Dumping in Dixie,* published in 1994, includes twelve photos.[140] Among these are two from the first edition (Figure 1 & Figure 3), as well as some additional ones of environmental protesters.

[138] (Bullard, Dumping in Dixie 1990, 74)
[139] (R. Bullard, Dumping in Dixie 1990, 77)
[140] (R. Bullard, Dumping in Dixie 1994)

FIGURE 1: Rev. Benjamin F. Chavis Jr. at the National Press Club in Washington D.C.

FIGURE 2: Protesters standing in front of the Louisiana State Capital

FIGURE 3: Houston's Northwood Manor Residents Protesting


FIGURE 4: African American community located near toxic waste facilities

FIGURE 5: African American school located across near toxic facilities

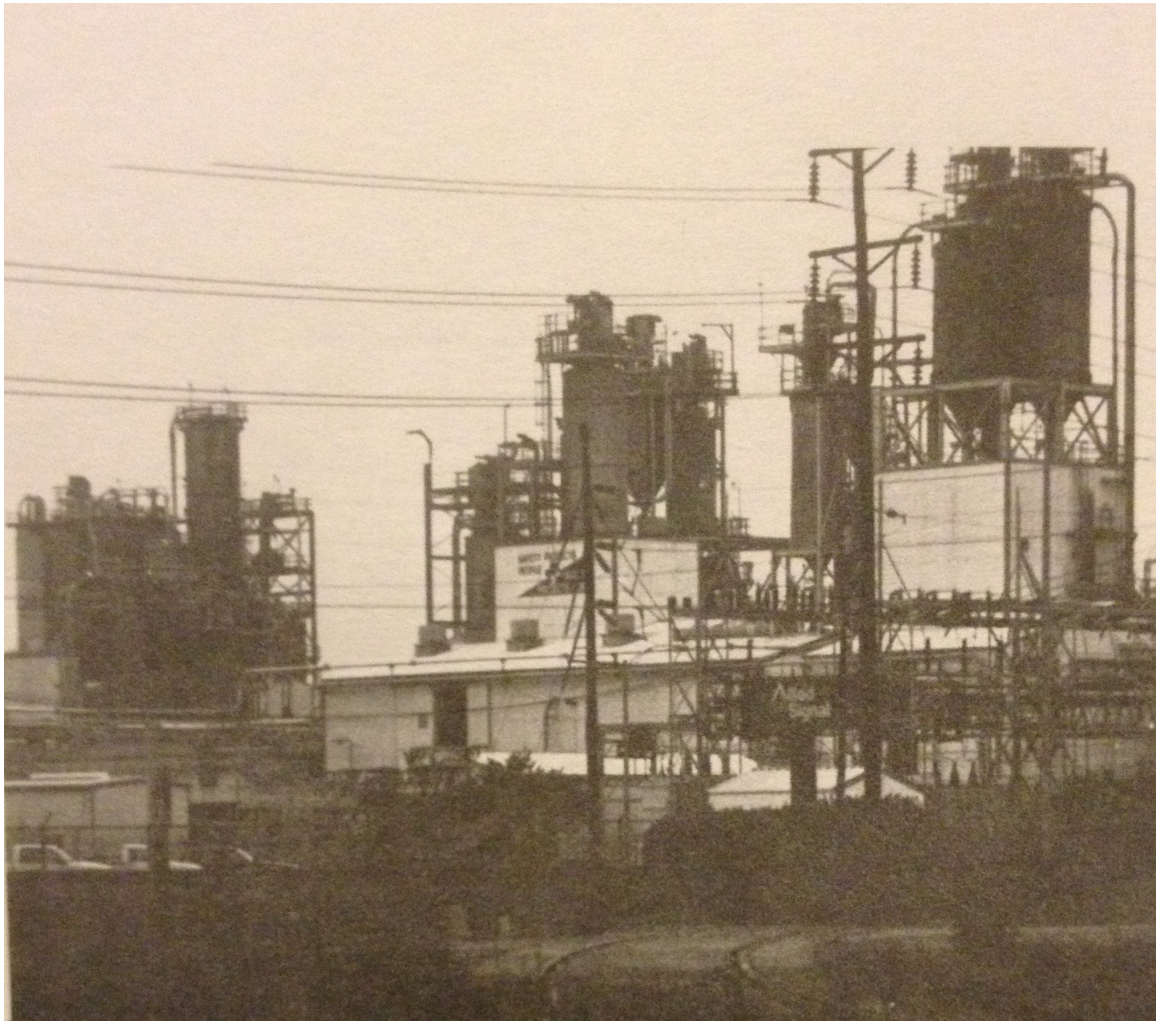

FIGURE 6: Chemical Power Plant located near African American community

FIGURE 7: Black leaders marching at Warren County demonstration


FIGURE 8: Warren Country protesters lying prostate in front of oncoming dump trucks

(Figure 8) is from the Environmental Movement's inception and shows Warren County protesters lying prostrate in front of dump trucks loaded with PCB-tainted dirt. In this photo the residents are being stood over by police depicting the vulnerability and lack of resources experienced by many minority communities facing environmental racism. Their willingness to endanger their lives attempting to halt the entry of these toxic chemicals into their neighborhood conveys that for them immediate death is synonymous with the slow death of cancer and poisoning provided these toxins are allowed into their community.

However, it would be inaccurate to interpret this photo as weakness on behalf of environmental justice advocates. (Figure 7), just above this image, is a photo of Reverend Leon White, Mrs. and Dr. Joseph Lowery, Walter Faultroy, Ken Ferruccio, and Dr. James Green marching arm and arm during a Warren Country demonstration. In contrast to (Figure 8), (Figure 7) exhibits strength, determination, and resilience. Although lacking economic and political capital, these photos reflect the history of resistance and protest characteristic of oppressed minority communities.

The black community within the U.S. specifically has a long history of struggle and protest. Adriane Lentz-Smith notes:

> The black freedom struggle predated the end of the Civil War and has lasted long beyond the 1965 Voting Rights Act, with African Americans defining themselves in relation to community, state, and nation all the while. Stories of African American resistance are as old as stories of Africans in America. However, within an understanding of African American history that takes assertions of self and citizenship as continual, certain moments emerge as particularly formative, or even transformative.[141]

[141] (Lentz-Smith 2011, 4)

The Environmental Justice Movement is such as moment. With strong similarities to the resilience exhibited during World War I and the unity of the Civil Rights Movement, blacks deployed similar strategies including rallies and boycotts.

By 2000, when the third edition of *Dumping in Dixie* was published, three photos specifically captured the victories and successes of the Environmental Justice Movement.

FIGURE 9: First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit 1991

FIGURE 10: Crew cleans up lead-tainted soil in West Dallas, Texas

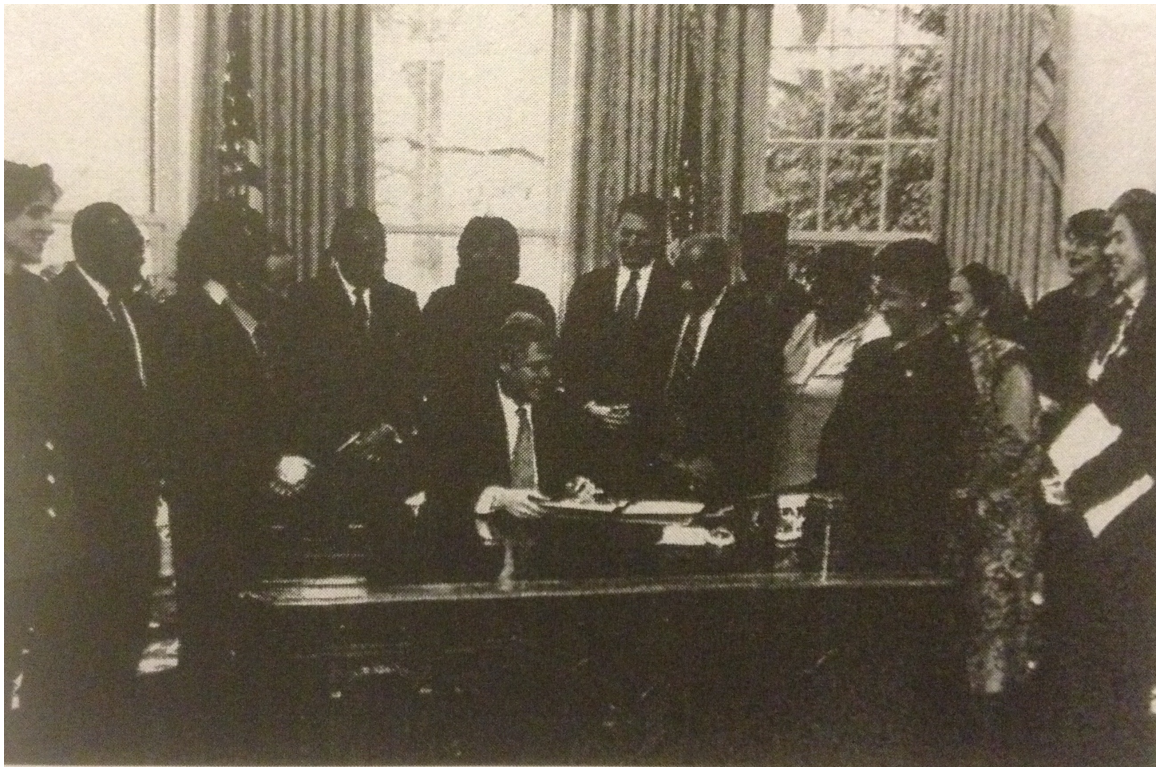

FIGURE 11: President Clinton signing Environmental Justice Executive Order 12898

(Figure 9), taken in 1991, shows the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, which Bullard called the single most important event in the

Environmental Justice Movement's history. This summit reflected the growth of the Environmental Justice Movement and exhibits solidarity. In this photo activists from different ethnicities and nationalities stand together on the steps of the nation's capital holding a sign for the International Indian Treaty Council, an organization of indigenous peoples collectively fighting for the rights of indigenous people around the world.

(Figure 10), taken in 1992, showing crews cleaning up lead-tainted soil in West Dallas, Texas following the out of court settlement between local Dallas Housing Authority residents and the West Dallas RSR lead smelter. After being located only fifty feet from the housing project for over fifty years, the company was finally held accountable for lead pollution that caused illnesses among local children. Both of these images were included in the second edition of the book.

However, a third photo taken in 1994 (Figure 11) depicts environmental justice leaders standing around the desk of President Clinton as he signed Environmental Justice Executive Order 12898 into law. Although there were, and still are, many pervasive environmental justice concerns, collectively these photos depict victories and the subsequent culmination of the Environmental Justice Movement as it grew from a community problem to a national public policy issue. These photos are more than depictions of environmental rallies and protest but they literally provide faces to the victims of environmental racism.

Three years later, as concerns regarding air pollution and respiratory health were prevalent, WE ACT (West Harlem Environmental Action) initiated an ad campaign also utilizing photos as a means of publicizing risks to black and brown communities (Figure 12). In 1988, the MTA had built its sixth diesel bus depot in northern Manhattan and in

close proximity to a middle school and a 1,200-unit subsidized housing facility. As a part of the campaign to get the MTA to switch to natural gas for its city buses since its Long Island fleet already ran on natural gas, WE ACT sponsored advertisements that read: "If you live uptown breathe at your own risk. Diesel bus fumes can kill."[142]

[142] (Sze 2007, 99)

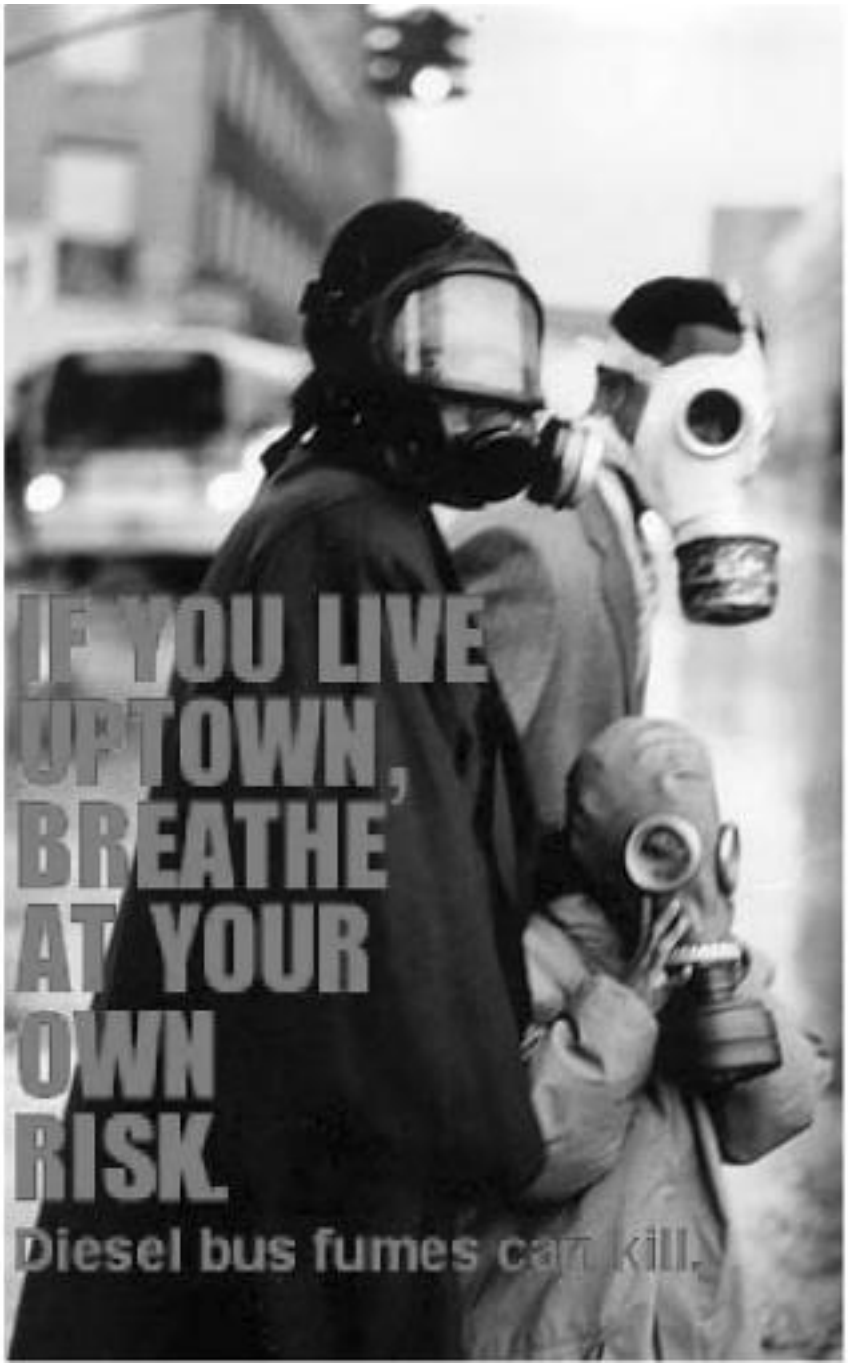

FIGURE 12: WE ACT Dirty Diesel Campaign Image

Another version of the ad read: “6 out of 7 of Manhattan diesel bus depots are located uptown. This puts the health of a half million mostly African-Americans and Latinos at risk. Don’t just breathe this all in. Do something. Because clean air is a right,

not a privilege, even if you live above 96th St."[143] A photo of two adults and a child wearing large gas masks accompanies this advertisement. The representational force of this picture undergird black's concern for posterity we see in (Figure 2) and it was undoubtedly intended to spark controversy and inspire communities to get involved.

Consequently, what we find is that the Environmental Justice Movement was infused with photos and pictures that depicted the harsh realities of environmental injustice and issued a call to arms. Although we cannot know for certain their impact, we do know that these pictures were deployed by communities with limited resources and little power. Thus, they reflect more than the standard environmental themes we find in the nineteenth century. These pictures combine the social, political, economic, spiritual, environmental, all within the aaesthetic. Such tactics, however, are emblematic of poor communities attempting to resist environmental assault that often affects every aspect of their lives. Rob Nixon examines this reality in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor.* I now turn to his discussion of the ways in which poor and disenfranchised groups particularly in the global South resist environmental threats. By global South, Nixon refers to the developing countries, also referred to as Third World. This includes Asia (with the exception of Japan, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan), Central America, South America, Mexico, Africa, and the Middle East (with the exception of Israel).

Aesthetics and the 'Environmentalism of the Poor'

In 2009 Mohamed Nasheed, then president of Maldives, held an underwater cabinet meeting wearing scuba diving gear and an oxygen mask. Seated at a conference table anchored to the sea floor of the Indian Ocean in front of a Maldivian flag, President

[143] (Sze 2007, 99)

Nasheed signed into law the nation's commitment to become carbon neutral within ten years. With its highest peak standing at only seven feet and seven inches, Maldives is currently the planet's lowest lying country making global warming and rising sea levels a particularly pervasive concern for this tiny nation. If sea levels continue to rise, it is quite possible that Maldivians will become the world's first nation of climate change refugees. Maldives' effort to become carbon neutral is a reflection of this very real threat to the country's livelihood and their continued existence.

However, this declaration was perhaps more symbolic than it was effective in reversing climate change. As an island with a population of less than 400,000, quantitatively speaking, the nation has very little impact of the future progress of global warming. So what is one to make of this elaborate spectacle of signing national policies into law underwater? Nixon states that this underwater cabinet meeting offers "an image of reverse inundation that speaks directly to the environmentalism of the poor."[144] According to Nixon, this serves as an example of the tactics being deployed by poor and minority populations when their vernacular landscapes are displaced by official ones resulting in environmental hazards and threats to their community. He writes:

> A vernacular landscape…is integral to the socio-environmental dynamics of community rather than being wholly externalized, treated as out there, as a separate nonrenewable resource. By contrast, an official landscape…is typically oblivious to such earlier maps; instead, it writes the land in a bureaucratic, externalizing, and extraction-driven manner that is often pitilessly instrumental.[145]

He goes on to write that such impositions on indigenous populations often results in displacement and rebellion.[146]

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[144] (Nixon 2011, 266)
[145] (Nixon 2011, 17)
[146] (Nixon 2011, 17)

However, for Nixon, not all displacement is physical. Although he addresses those that are forcibly removed from their native lands in the pursuit of development and natural resources, he also refers to what he calls "displacement without moving," to account for those that experience the loss of land and resource from beneath while remaining in the same location. This is a loss that leaves the community stranded in a place that has been stripped on the characteristic, which once made it inhabitable.

Nixon offers as an example the current plight of Jamaica. Drawing from Stephanie Black's documentary *Life and Debt,* "a film about arrivals, departures, and those unable to arrive or depart"[147] Nixon points out the negative effects of the arrival of the "free market". Planes deliver subsidized American milk, onions, and potatoes at prices that make it impossible for unsubsidized Jamaican farmers to compete. The resulting agricultural collapse renders the island dependent on tourists for economic stability. Oftentimes this results in the erosion of long-term relations natives have with the land as the government has to cater to pleasure-seeking tourists. Residents are thus dislocated in that the land is no longer able to support them, yet they are unable to depart. This as an example of the slow violence of neoliberalism and neocolonial politics of unequal freedom of movement has increased the mobility of tourists while limited the movement of those in the global South.

The way in which these vulnerable populations that are often considered disposable resists such assaults, however, is what Nixon refers to as the "environmentalism of the poor."[148] Nixon's discussion of the "environmentalism of the poor" is significant for two reasons. First, although Nixon focuses primarily on the global

[147] (Nixon 2011, 20)
[148] (Nixon 2011, 4)

South and not minorities within the U.S., there are striking similarities. Both groups are regarded as insignificant in the pursuit of wealth and neoliberal policies; I discuss this in greater details in chapter four. Additionally, both groups deploy art as a means of resistance, a theme that runs throughout this dissertation.

In recounting practices of environmental injustice in the Niger Delta, Nixon notes the activism of Ken Saro-Wiwa. Saro-Wiwa, a Nigerian writer, television producer, and environmental activist, utilized aaesthetics to protest Shell and Chevron's inhumane practices as well as their destruction of the land through excessive drilling. For decades Shell and Chevron made billions while natural gas fouled the Ogoni air, croplands were scarred by oil spills, and drinking and fishing waters were poisoned.

Saro-Wiwa utilized the tools available to him to bring attention to these issues writing over twenty books including novels, plays, short stories, children's tales, poetry, histories, political tracts, diaries, satires, and newspaper columns. He also produced the TV comedy *Basi and Company,* a satire that lampooned the wide-spread corruption of Nigeria by money thirsty oil companies and corrupt governmental officials. In 1995 Sara-Wiwa was executed on what many believe to have been trumped-up murder charges. His death inspired further protest and led one artist to produce the picture in Figure 13.

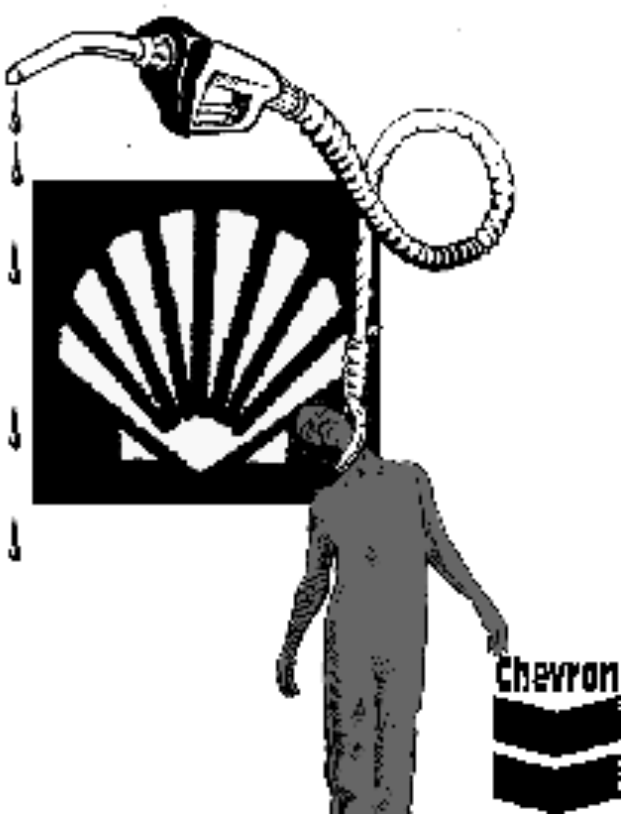

FIGURE 13: Depiction of Sare-Wiwa's Execution

The second reason Nixon's discussion of the "environmentalism of the poor" is important is because many minorities within the U.S. experience encounters similar to "displacement without moving". Take for instance the case of residents in Shell Bluff, Georgia.[149] Shell Bluff is a small isolated, rural community located near the Savannah River, which has become the target of several nuclear facilities. Prior to these plants, the people of Shell Bluff enjoyed a thriving community. They fished, swam, and played in the Savannah River and surrounding creeks. They farmed the land and hunted in the forest. However, since the building of the Savannah River Nuclear Bomb Plant and the Vogtle Nuclear Power Plant, the river has become lifeless. Fish have sores, bark is falling

[149] (Tatum 2012)

from trees, and the odor of poison deters people from venturing into nature. People within 10 miles of the plant live in fear of a radiation leak or an explosion. Moreover, similar to native Jamaicans, they are often relegated to certain areas of the community, which they at one time roamed freely.

Understanding why it is that minority communities often choose to deploy art as a means of environmental protest is critical in understanding how these artistic productions actually function in bringing about environmental consciousness. I now return to the Maldives underwater cabinet meeting, Nixon writes: "…without the compensatory agency that media images of the meeting bestowed on it, the Maldivian flag would have been left to flap invisibly underwater in the Indian Ocean currents."[150] However, it is Nixon's assertion that by symbolically depicting the involuntary conquest of Maldives, this visual imagery demands recognition for those typically regarded as invisible.[151] (See Figure 14 & Figure 15) He writes, "The Maldivian flag planted at the underwater cabinet meeting is a flag of involuntary conquest, a territorial marker not of national ascent but of national decline, as a nation-state subsides towards obliteration."[152]

[150] (Nixon 2011, 266)
[151] (Nixon 2011, 266)
[152] (Nixon 2011, 266)

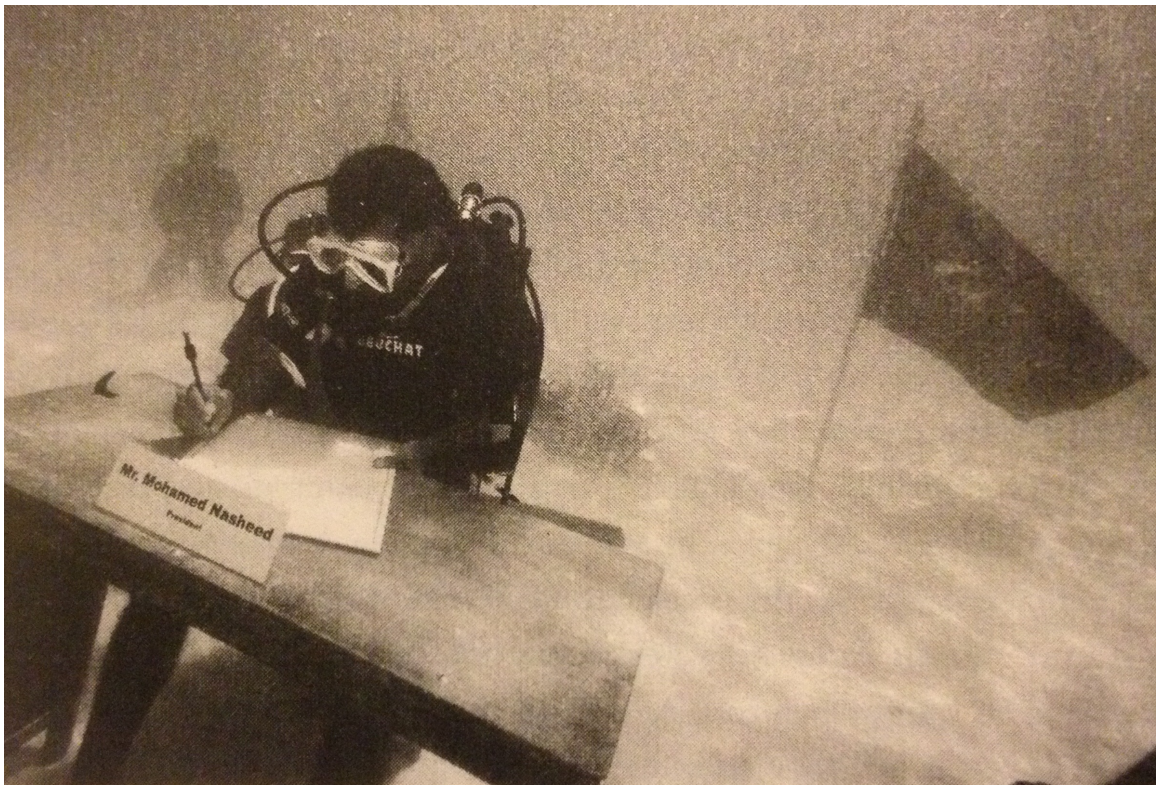

FIGURE 14: President Mohamed Nasheed signs legislation underwater

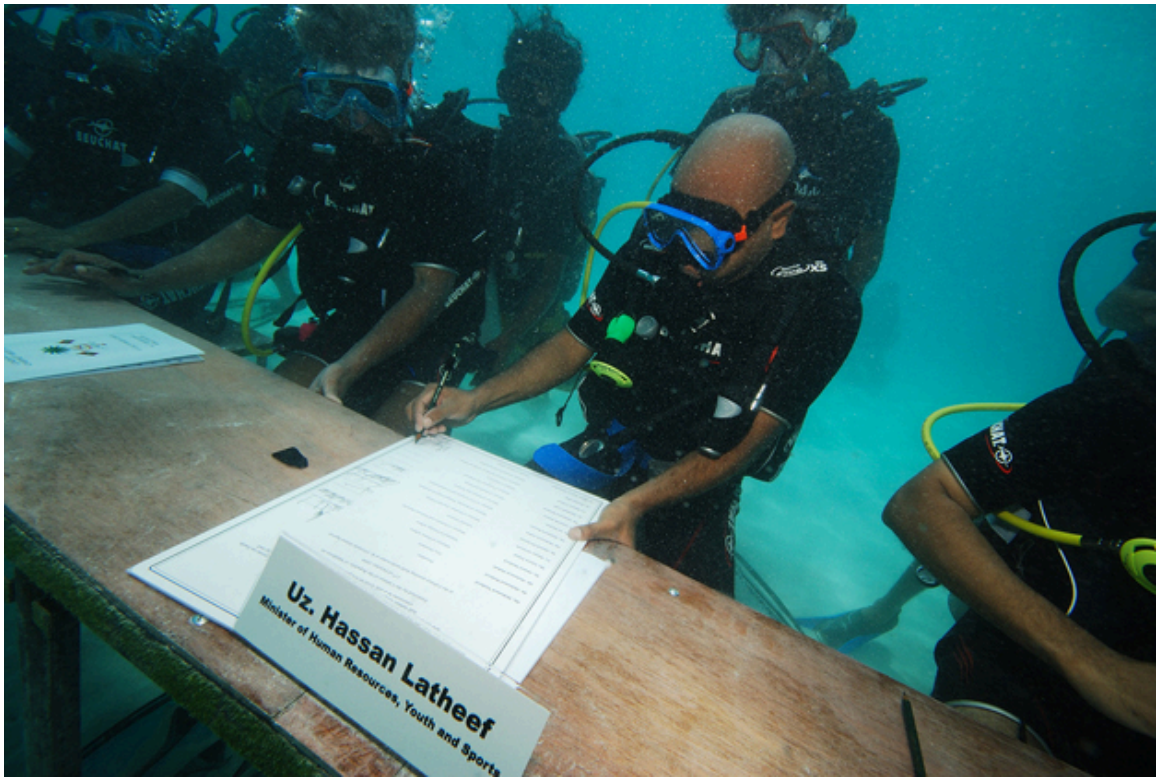

FIGURE 15: Maldives underwater council meeting

I agree with Nixon that the photo of the Maldivian president holding an underwater cabinet meeting communicates a significant message, but it is not one of conquest. It is one of adaption and accommodation. Opposed to being overtaken by rising sea levels, the Maldivians are showing that they are adjusting and adapting. Ultimately, such tactics will be necessary worldwide as climates become more erratic, temperatures rise, natural disasters increase, and resources become more limited.

As I have previously shown, art occupies a significant role as a means of environmental activism, specifically within black communities. Nixon's understanding of the "environmentalism of the poor" offers even greater clarity as to why it is that those displaced, whether physically or without moving, often resort to such strategies. Without economic and political power, organizing, protests, and art become the only forms of agency at their disposal to gain political recognition. As Nixon implies then, there is something greater at work in the display of these photos.

Looking at The Environmental Project in New Orleans reveals that often times the benefits of art produced by communities facing environmental racism is reciprocal. Founded in 1998, this initiative involves the collaboration of seven art groups and eight community organizations that are collectively focusing on environmental racism in Louisiana's Cancer Alley. Critical to this project has not only been artwork but the interaction between artists and organizers. As Rev. Audrey Johnson, liaison to The Environmental Justice Project in Louisiana, explains: "We have yet to find a tool as powerful as the arts to get people in our church thinking. People are so accustomed to being told by television what they are and are not capable of. Making art themselves helps show people – poor people, especially – just how creative and powerful they can

be."[153] Christian Unity Baptist Church has been one of the most enthusiastic community organizing partners. The membership regularly participates in creating plays, songs, and visual arts projects that deal with issues in their community and bring together poor, working-class and middle-class blacks in the congregation. Such involvement by the local church is not surprising and in many ways represents black religion at its best. It is well known that the black church was critical to the success of prior social movements within the black community such as the Civil Rights Movements, and as Schwarzman points out, The Environmental Justice Project understands itself as a successor to this legacy.

Junebug Productions, the umbrella company that created The Environmental Project, is a community-based theater ensemble in New Orleans founded and directed by John O'Neal. O'Neal, co-founder of The Free Southern Theater in 1963, sees Junebug Productions as an extension of this same work. The Free Southern Theater, which was conceived of as a "theater for those who have no theater," supported the work of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) by bringing church and other activist groups together in the pursuit of civil rights. Today, Junebug Productions strives to address post-segregation struggles within black communities, hence The Environment Project. The Project views environmental racism as the civil rights concerns of the present era. Represented by its political aaesthetic are the conflicts and resolutions, disequilibrium and harmony that mirror black's struggles during slavery and the civil rights movement. Similar to these intense experiences, the Environmental Justice Movement holds a significant place in African American history and its art possess a vitally that holds promise for a renewed environmental consciousness.

[153] (Schwarzman 1998, 277)

IV. The Environmental Justice Movement as Aesthetic Experience

The earlier review of the Environmental Justice Movement is significant for two reasons. First, it portrays both the context of struggle Dewey finds essential to an aesthetic experience and the social pressure Locke finds essential for a spiritual advantage. Second, this narrative demonstrates a clear understanding by blacks of the integration of past struggles into their present conflicts. This ability to find integration of the past into the present is significant as live creatures use past success to inform their present conflict.[154] Ultimately, this ability is what separates inchoate experiences from real ones. Dewey writes:

> To put one's hand in the fire that consumes it is not necessarily to have an experience. The action and its consequence must be joined in perception. This relationship is what gives meaning; to grasp it is the objective of all intelligence. The scope and the content of the relations measure the significant content of an experience. A child's experience may be intense, but, because of lack of background from past experience, relations between undergoing and doing are slightly grasped, and the experience does not have great depth or breadth.[155]

The ability to draw from the past as a means of determining actions in the present and anticipating results in the future, therefore, is as significant to an organism's struggle with its environment as is overcoming the struggle itself.

Glave points out that the Environmental Justice Movement clearly depicts this Deweyan awareness. She writes:

> The model of self-empowerment for environmental justice owes much to Martin Luther King Jr. In 1955, King, among others, transformed Rosa Park's refusal to sit at the back of the bus into a church-based movement, igniting the mid-twentieth–century civil rights movement. Throughout his

[154] (Dewey, Art As Experience 1934, 17)
[155] (Dewey, Art As Experience 1934, 46)

> ministry of nonviolent activism, King defined social justice through a biblical lens, agitating for civil rights, condemning the Vietnam War, and in his final act before he was assassinated, advocating for sanitation workers. His historical legacy has endured and is now a cornerstone of the environmental justice movement.[156]

Glave also shows the similarities between King's role in the 1968 Memphis, Tennessee, Sanitation Workers Strike, with that of twentieth and twenty-first century environmental activism. Both focused on health and safety concerns, both were led by black ministers, and both were driven by community protest and marches. Bullard refers to the environmental activism of King on behalf of the Memphis sanitation workers as well.[157]

What Glave and Bullard do not note is the fact that both the Civil Rights Movement and the Environmental Justice Movement were initially domestic protests that grew into international concerns. This is especially significant to Locke's theory of cultural vitality since it is the universal human element in intense experience, which produces a culture's spiritual advantage. In Locke's estimation, it is this universal appeal, which makes for classic works of art. We see this in his critique of Negro Spirituals.

> The universality of the Spirituals looms more and more as they stand the test of time. They have outlived the particular generation and the peculiar conditions, which produced them; they have survived in turn the contempt of the slave owners, the conventionalizations of formal religion, the repressions of Puritanism, the corruptions of sentimental balladry, and neglect and disdain of second-generation respectability. They have escaped the lapsing conditions and the fragile vehicle of folk art, and come firmly into the context of formal music. Only classics survive such things.[158]

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[156] (Glave, Rooted in Earth 2010, 128)
[157] (R. Bullard, Environmental Justice in the Twenty-First Century 2005, 19)
[158] (Molesworth 2012, 105)

This universality and survival is the result of a culture's vitality and is also visible in the growth and development of the Environmental Justice Movement.

As the Environmental Justice Movement grew, in 2002, a little more than a decade after the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, leaders decided to once again convene in Washington, D.C. for the Second National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit (Summit II). Similar to the 1991 summit, gatherers discussed critical issues such as childhood asthma, energy, transportation, "dirty" power plants, climate justice, military toxics, clean production, Brownfield redevelopment, sustainable agriculture, human rights, occupational health and safety, and farm workers.[159] A notable difference, however, were the participants. Not only were there twice as many attendees, but conferees had come from Mexico, Canada, Jamaica, Trinidad, Panama, Columbia, Dominican Republic, Granada, South Africa, Nigeria, the Philippines, India, Peru, Ecuador, Guatemala, the Marshall Islands, and the United Kingdom.[160]

Paul G. Harris notes that although the notion of environmental justice originated in the United States as a way of identifying and protesting against the disproportionate environmental burdens borne by poor and minority communities, environmental justice policies have increasingly become important considerations on the international scene.[161] With the rise of globalization, many have observed that poor countries share a similar plight as that of poor people, and actions in developed countries are causing harm in

[159] (Bul0524)
[160] (Bul0522)
[161] (Harris 2010, 59)

developing countries.[162] For example, the excessive consumption of individuals in developed countries, negatively impacts individuals in developing countries via climate change and deforestation. Economic pursuits and environmental devastation thus extends beyond the shores of the U.S. to negatively impact indigenous populations in the global South.

Resources such as tropical hardwoods of the Amazon rain forest and oil from beneath the Nigerian plains have been quickly disappearing[163] and once these resources are scarce, governments and multinational corporations are encouraged to suppress indigenous populations who attempt to protect their lands from further exploitation. Similar to domestic Environmental Justice concerns, poor and minority populations abroad face pollution of their communities and disproportionate environmental risks. In 1991 Lawrence Summers, then president of the World Bank, wrote a memo stating:

> I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that…I've always thought that countries in Africa are vastly under polluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles…Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries?[164]

Summers articulates a similar disregard for poor people and communities of color abroad as for poor communities and people of color domestically. These instances of oppression in India[165], Nigeria[166], and Indonesia[167] have resulted in international environmental justice concerns. These countries, and many others, share in the common experience of

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[162] (Harris 2010, 57)
[163] (Hernandez-Truyol and Powell 2009, 4)
[164] (Nixon 2011, 1)
[165] See: (Fortun 2001) for more regarding the Bhopal disaster of 1984
[166] See: (Comfort 2002)
[167] I am thinking specifically of reports of rape, dislocation, murder, and loss of burial grounds resulting from the palm oil plantations industry in Borneo, Indonesia.

social pressure as residents of Warren County and Shell Bluff and other black communities throughout the U.S.

In 1992, many of these concerns were addressed at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro. The theme of the summit was "environmentally sustainable development" and members representing 178 states discussed the links between poverty, development, and the environment. Members agreed that sustainable development must meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.[168] What emerged were four guiding precepts: (1) as long as millions of people are hungry or without shelter or jobs, development is a fundamental assumption; (2) there must be limits both to the use of resources and to population growth, and these limits must protect against the ecological disaster that would follow exceeding the capacity of our natural ecosystems; (3) change in the ecosystem from economic activity is not automatically adverse; (4) we cannot afford to let plants or animal species become extinct because the lack of biodiversity greatly limits the choices of future generations.

In essence, the pursuit of international environmental justice has followed a similar trajectory as the U.S. As Nixon shows in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, communities in the global South face a common plight as those in the U.S. Consequently, these communities have utilized protest, resistance, and aaesthetics in similar ways as the U.S. and towards a similar goal. These efforts are holistic and incorporate social, economic, political, and public health concerns. The U.S.

[168] (Hernandez-Truyol and Powell 2009, 109)

Environmental Justice Movement led the way in this realm and as Locke would argue, its artistic products will continuously serve as a source of inspiration and vitality.

Conclusion

It would be inaccurate to assert that photos and pictures have been the primary driving force behind the Environmental Justice Movement's success or environmental consciousness within black and minority neighborhoods. Communities have engaged in a variety of tactics in their resistance to environmental injustice including marches, prayer meetings, and protests. However, as this chapter depicts, it is negligent to dismiss the role of photos and pictures as means of communication, advocacy, and political maneuvering. Although the Environmental Justice Movement produced several books and significant pieces of legislation, when individuals think of this period they are most likely to recall the picture of individuals laying prostrate in front of oncoming dump trucks or communities protesting and rallying in opposition to pollution.

These photos represent an aaesthetic experience that is unique to black communities in the U.S. but also one that holds a universal appeal for minority communities worldwide. It is this ability, which provides these pictures with their artistic vitality and their universal appeal. As with the photo of the Maldivian president holding an underwater cabinet meeting, these pictures offer much more than an aaesthetic encounter. They inspire environmental consciousness and evoke resistance to environmental devastation. They illicit emotions of care, concern, and, at times, rage. Ultimately, they depict the human ability as a species to adapt, adjust, and accommodate to the immanent dangers of environmental crisis.

Chapter 4
"MERCY MERCY ME": Musicology in the Rhythm of Ecological Consciousness and Environmental Activism

Introduction

This chapter explores the significance of musicology in black expressive culture as a means of promoting ecological consciousness and environmental activism. Although it is well known that music has often played a critical role in black life, what is less known is the role that musicology has played in communicating ecological concerns within black culture during the U.S. Environmental Movement. This chapter argues that in addition to being artistic cultural expressions, black musicology was also deployed as a means of activism and protest against environmental destruction. This chapter focuses on three specific songs; *Mercy, Mercy, Me: The Ecology* by Marvin Gaye, *Pollution* by Bo Diddley, and *Saturn* by Steve Wonder. In this chapter I argue that these songs and others constitute a significant contribution to the U.S. environmental awakening. Collectively they depict conscientious engagement by blacks with the U.S. Environmental Movement and they most adequately portray the three central themes of lament, resistance, and hope commonly found in black ecologically conscious music.

Throughout this chapter, these ecologically musical expressions are referred to as eco-protest songs. I define eco-protest songs as: "an objection to the disregard for human interrelationship with the environment, communicated through melody, harmony, and

rhythm."[169] These songs make it clear that black communities were aware of and concerned with mainstream environmental issues such as overpopulation, species extinction, urbanization, pollution, renewable energy, and oil spills. As this definition stands however, eco-protest songs are not necessarily unique to black culture. Consequently, this chapter also addresses the ways in which these songs speak specifically to the environmental burdens and existential realities resultant from poverty and racism on black life. As a result, within black culture, eco-protest songs are often connected to communal and familial concerns and seek to bring awareness to issues of economic instability, public health, and environmental racism.

I. Tonal Semantics and Black Expressive Culture

In explicating these themes, I turn to theorists Mark Anthony Neal's work in *What the Music Said* and Geneva Smitherson's *Talkin that Talk.* Their research articulates the significance of these songs within black life and culture and examines why music is an effective means of communication and activism within black communities. Neal notes that within such extremely depraved contexts, music may actually provide the caveat for physical and emotional transcendence. He writes:

> The public articulation of pain and the ultimate transcendence of pain would provide the foundation of the black modernist project of naming and visibility. Thus tonal semantics can be referenced among efforts on the part of enslaved blacks to give name and, with it, meaning to their oppression and oppressors, as a precursor to emotional and psychic transcendence of their condition-forms of transcendence that themselves foreground efforts of physical transcendence.[170]

[169] (Gray 2013, 165)
[170] (Neal 1999, 39)

Tonal semantics within this context draws upon the work of Geneva Smitherson in *Talkin and Testifyin,* where she argues that the tonal quality of speech within black culture adds both value and meaning to words and phrases. Deployed primarily by black artists and black preachers, in order to feel and understanding the significance and such rhythms and inflections, Smitherson suggests that the listener must also be a part of the black cultural tradition.[171]

Expounding upon Smitherson's theory, Neal suggests that black music is best understood as a polytonal expression. He argues that having been denied access to instruments, blacks began to mimic the diversity of tones and colors inherent in the African polyrhythms of the past. The practice of polytonal expression and polytonality thus represents a unique process emblematic of the African American experience. Neal writes:

> I would further suggest that the practice of polytonal expression, particularly within the context of field labor or other social formations in which blacks were communally constructed, represented the reconstitution of community within the parameters of aurally defined social space, that is in and of itself circumscribed by aural expression. It is within this framework that the black musical tradition – in particular the vocal tradition – came to serve as a primary instigator, if not conduit, of black liberatory expression.[172]

For Neal, the culmination of which is found in soul music.

Soul music was ideally suited to build an aural community within black culture because of its unique fusion of rhythm and blues and gospel, which is able to reach blacks within the church as well as blacks from other facets of the black

[171] (Smitherson 1977, 135)
[172] (Neal 1999, 40)

community. Soul music also developed during the 50s and 60s, a time of social upheaval and black anxiety. Neal notes:

> Soul music represented the construction of 'hypercommunity' in that both physical and metaphysical notions of space and community, and all the political and social meaning that underlie such formations, converge within its aesthetic sensibilities. Thus soul music became the ideal artistic medium to foreground the largest mass social movement to emerge from with the African American experience.[173]

In many ways Marvin Gaye, Sam Cooke, Aretha Franklin and others came to define the economic, political, and spiritual strivings of the black community during the Civil Rights Movement. Feminist Patricia Hill Collins writes of Aretha Franklin's hit single "Respect": "Even though the lyrics can be sung by anyone, they take on special meaning when sung by Aretha in the way that she sings them. On one level the song functions as a metaphor for the conditions of African Americans in a racist society."[174] "Respect" is significant therefore, not only because Aretha Franklin demands respect at a time when it was rarely afforded to blacks, but also because she demands it through a soulful and stirring musical deliverance, one that the black community would uniquely understand and identify with.

This was also the case with Marvin Gaye's hit song and subsequent album *What Going On.* Recorded and released in 1971, *What's Going On* captured the thoughts and ethos of the country, topped record charts, and sold millions.[175] However, with tracks like "Inner City Blues," "Save the Children," and "Mercy, Mercy, Me," *What's Going On* was a definitively black aesthetic production. Neal writes: "With *What's Going On,* Gaye, with the assistance of modern recording technology and bevy of cowriters, crafted

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[173] (Neal 1999, 40)
[174] (Collins 2000, 115)
[175] (Ryan 2012, 36)

a musical tone which synthesized the acute issues within black urban life, with the prophetic and existential vision of the African American church."

Neal is correct in pointing out the significance of tonal semantics on the power and appeal of soul music, especially at a time when people needed to be encouraged, empowered, and uplifted. Smitherson, however, also articulates three additional modes of black discourse, one being call-response. She writes: "The African-derived communication process of call-response may be briefly defined as follows: spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speakers statements ('calls') are punctuated by expressions ('responses') from the listener."[176]

The call-response nature of black discourse is most apparent in the black churches but as Smitherson points out, it is a basic organizing principle of Black American culture and can be found in the streets as well. Call-response joins the listener with the speaker and emphasizes the communal over the individual. Smitherson even notes how this pattern has been employed within black music, and not simply the lyrics. She writes:

> Call-response is present not only in the singing style of black music, but also in the music itself…. Listening to Stevie Wonder, one hears a 'one-man band. He plays a multiplicity of instruments, calling and responding to himself, the instruments, and the listener. He may begin with a plaintive wail on the piano and respond with his harmonica, building until he achieves a plateau of exaltation, that is, balance and harmony.[177]

In addition to tonal semantics then, soul music, and specifically eco-protest songs by black artists, draws upon the call-response aspect of black culture in order to build community and inspire activism. As previously stated, eco-protest songs demonstrate that

[176] (Smitherson 1977, 104)
[177] (Smitherson 1977, 113)

blacks were both aware and engaged with current environmental issues but they also engage listeners emotionally. In many ways, this is the genius of these compositions, there ability to communicate ecological concerns in a way that resonates with the pathos of listeners. To this point, I discuss these songs in tandem with the environmental concerns they are addressing. This serves to connect these songs to the tradition of black musicology from which they emerge and also to the U.S. Environmental Movement of which they are a part.

II. Eco-Protest Songs and Black Musicology

Specifically, eco-protest songs align with the standard expression of black musicology. Consequently, the themes lament, resistance, and hope are not new concepts. In 1903 when W.E.B. Dubois encounters spirituals for the first time, he refers to them as Sorrow Songs. In *The* S*ouls of Black Folk* he writes: "They that walked in darkness sang songs in the olden days – Sorrow Songs – for they were weary at heart."[178] Indeed these songs did and still do maintain a very real presence of sorrow.

Professor James Cone, the father of black liberation theology, points out that: "The spirituals are historical songs which speak about the rupture of black lives; they tell us about a people in the land of bondage, and what they did to hold themselves together and to fight back."[179] It is no surprise then that spirituals lamented over the absence of God. Like Psalm 137, which depicts the agony of the Israelites during their exile to

[178] (DuBois 1903, 185)
[179] (J. Cone, The Spiritual and the Blues 1972, 30)

Babylon, spirituals also depicted the pain and agony of slavery by captured Africans. David Emmanuel Goatley writes:

> Slave life was a life filled with trouble. This trouble came from the disruption of life, which causes uneasiness about one's death. The troublesome nature of life also provoked overwhelming grief manifested in weeping. Beyond the tears, however, the troublesome quality of life in slavery was sometimes so intense and over-whelming that the resultant emotion was one of numbness. Sometimes slaves had cried so long that they had no more tears left to shed.[180]

We hear a first hand account of this agony in Frederick Douglas' narrative as he recounts his time in slavery. Douglas writes: "Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relived by its tears." [181] It is not surprising therefore to hear the language of lament and suffering in eco-protest music. Listening to *Mercy, Mercy, Me* it should not escape one's mind for a moment that Marvin Gaye is the son of a preacher. His appeal to mercy is thus clearly theological as he channels the spirituals of the past and articulates the sorrow songs of his day. It is therefore here within black musicology that one encounters the greatest theological accounts of black ecological engagement.

Just as spirituals were songs of lament, they also functioned as means of resistance. Douglas writes: "…they were tones, loud, long and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains."[182] Contrary to the myth that blacks were complacent in slavery, spirituals were actually subversive forms of resistance. As Neal suggests, these songs constituted an aural culture where

[180] (Goatley 2003, 140)
[181] (Douglas 1995, 9)
[182] (Douglas 1995, 57)

blacks were able to enter but white slave masters were restricted. Ricky K. Green also points out that black people began to develop music as a methodology of political discourse, a method that had deep roots within the African experience.[183]

Lawrence Levine in his critique of spirituals takes care to note the multiplicity of purposes these songs held. As oppose to a clear distinction between sacred and secular, Levine points out that the term sacred was not antithetical to the secular world. He writes concerning spirituals: "They were not sung solely or even primarily in churches or praise houses but were used as rowing songs, field songs, work songs, and social songs."[184] I evoke Levine here to make the comparison that although eco-protest songs are not "sacred" in a contemporary use of the term, they do function within the genealogical pattern of black musicology. Their message and usage thus blurs lines of demarcation that would relegate them to a secular or sacred function. Levine goes on to say:

> These songs state as clearly as anything can the manner in which the sacred world of the slaves was able to fuse the precedents of the past, the conditions of the present, and the promise of the future into one connected reality. In this respect there was always a latent and symbolic element of protest in the slave's religious songs which frequently became overt or explicit. Frederick Douglas asserted that for him and many of his fellow slaves the song, 'O Canaan, swet Canaan, /I am bound for the land of Canaan,' symbolized 'something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the North, and the North was our Canaan.'[185]

Ultimately, these songs speak to the real lived experiences of black life, communicating resistance to the harsh realities of slavery.

Yet, it would be inaccurate to assume that these songs were only about lament and resistance. DuBois writes:

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[183] (Green 2005, 54)
[184] (Levine 2007, 31)
[185] (Levine 2007,51)

> Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in dead, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whatever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins.[186]

Consequently, we find that spirituals speak about an eschatological hope. Songs like *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, *When the Saints Go Marching In,* and *Going to Shout All Over God's Heaven* all conveyed African American slave's hope for a better place. Of course death was not a novelty for slaves. Frequently they experienced fellow slaves being beat to death and killed for attempted escapes. In order to make sense of it all they rationalized that with all the injustice in the present world, there must be justice in the afterlife. Songs about heaven therefore offered slaves a way of coping with the harsh realities of the present while maintaining hope in the future, rather physical or metaphysical.

Professor James Cones writes:

> With reference to black eschatology, four concluding assertions can be made. (1) Black eschatology was based on historical possibilities. According to the black spirituals, belief in God's future meant accepting the burden and the risk of escape to the North and later Canada. (2) When black slaves realized that their historical possibilities were limited, they began to create structures of black affirmation which protected their humanity even though they could not escape the chains of slavery. (3) Black eschatology also meant an affirmation of life after death. The concept of heaven meant that God's righteousness, as revealed in the liberation of the oppressed, was sovereign. God alone was the ultimate Lord of history. The wicked will be punished and the victim will be vindicated. (4) The most crucial ingredient of black eschatology was its historicity. Even when it was no longer feasible to expect radical historical evidence of God's liberation of the oppressed, black slaves' image of God's future righteousness was always related to their present existence on earth. Eschatology then was primarily a religious perspective on the

[186] (DuBois 1903, 186)

> present which enabled oppressed blacks to realize that their existence transcends historical limitations.[187]

Understanding this history of spirituals as one listens to eco-protest music is vital. It becomes clear that eco-protest songs are operating within a trajectory of black musicology, which deploys music for a variety of aesthetic as well as socio-political reasons. Utilizing the three tropes: lament, resistance, and hope, I now turn to a reading of the three eco-protest songs *Mercy Mercy Me, Pollution* and *Saturn*. I argue that these songs depict the three themes found in spirituals and thus offers a theological understanding of the way environmental issues were viewed within black culture but also a theological account of the way in which black musicology engaged environmental concerns.

Eco-Protest Music as a Source of Lament

Perhaps the quintessential example of an eco-protest song is *Mercy, Mercy, Me: The Ecology* by Marvin Gaye. This song, written and performed by Marvin Gaye, articulates the frustration and lament experienced by communities as a result of environmental destruction and environmental racism. Gaye addresses these concerns as he responds to issues like radiation, over-population and oil spills. As Neal points out: "Ultimately Gaye offered no solution, but presented a stunning portrait of urban bleakness."[188] Nevertheless, Gaye's account highlighted critical environmental challenges and concerns faced by the U.S. during the late 60s and early 70s.

For instance, in January 1971, the Arizona Standard and the Oregon Standard oil tankers collided in the mouth of San Francisco Bay spilling 840,000 gallons of oil into

[187] (J. Cone, The Spiritual and the Blues 1972, 95)
[188] (Neal 1999, 66)

the Pacific and destroying miles of the shoreline. A year prior 100 scientists and professionals conducted the month-long study entitled, "The Williamstown Study of Critical Environmental Problems." They found that up to 1.5 million tons of oil were being introduced into oceans annually through ocean shipping, offshore drilling, and accidents. The potential effects of these disasters included direct killing of ocean life through coating, asphyxiation, and poisoning as well as destruction of food sources. Only two years earlier, an oil platform explosion off the coast of Santa Barbara spewed three million gallons of crude oil into the Pacific, destroying the ecosystems and killing thousands of dolphins and birds.

It was no surprise, therefore, when Marvin Gaye released "Mercy, Mercy, Me: The Ecology" asking where did all the blue skies go. Repeatedly the song expresses anguish over the current state of the environment and how things are no longer what they used to be. Gaye sings: "Woo mercy, mercy, me / Oh, things and what they used to be, no, no / Oil wasted on the oceans and upon our seas / Fish full of mercury / Oh, mercy, mercy, me / Oh, things ain't what they used to be, no, no." These lyrics tapped into the ecological concerns of the country and became one of Gaye's best selling single from the politically charged album *What Going On*. Neal writes of the album: "Within the context of a musical suite consisting of six tracks including the title track, Gaye juxtaposed American imperialism, political repression, environmental exploitation, child neglect, and a crisis in spirituality. The suite as a whole offers a profound critical statement regarding the modern American condition."[189]

[189] (Neal 1999, 65)

According to Katherine O'Brien, managing editor of *American Printer*, the song "Mercy, Mercy, Me" made Gaye the "Father of the EPA."[190] Given recent events, the image of an oil spill was one that society was all too familiar with and as O'Brien points out, during the 70s music helped people to remember things and served as a means of communication. A testament to the vitality and transmutability of this song, O'Brien notes that nearly three decades later: "Many printers are joining voluntary pollution prevention programs - and it all goes back to a tune by Marvin Gaye."[191] Gaye himself at one point stated: "I realized that I had to put my own fantasies behind me if I wanted to write songs that would reach the souls of people. I wanted them to take a look at what was happening in the world."[192] Consequently, we also hear Gaye addressing the mercury crisis.

In 1969 the Ontario Water Resource Commission discovered elevated levels of mercury in the sediment of the St. Clair River. A subsequent study of mercury levels in the river's fish resulted in the "Mercury Crisis of 1970." An investigation revealed that the industrial company Dow Chemical Chlor-Alkali had been discharging mercury into the river for over twenty years. Although safe in small quantities, in large amounts mercury causes speech, hearing and walking impairments, mental disturbances, or even death. Consequently, fishing from the river was banned and the FDA officially set regulations for mercury levels in fish and shellfish moving in interstate commerce. This also led to the development of the Canada-U.S. Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (GLWQA) in 1972 whose purpose was to restore and maintain the chemical, physical,

[190] (O'Brien 1994)
[191] (O'Brien 1994)
[192] (Ryan 2012, 35)

and biological integrity of the Great Lakes basin ecosystem. When Gaye sang, "Fish full of mercy," it is quite possible he was alluding to this very incident.

Consequently, listening to "Mercy, Mercy, Me," one is immediately made aware that the environmental is in poor condition. However, it is not only the lyrics of the song, which convey this understanding. The song's slow and somber tempo could easily be the background music for a memorial service and far from being inspiring, the melancholy composition sounds like it was written out of the spirit of hopelessness and depression. Given the drug issues and family problems in Gaye's personal life, this is not a far-fetched possibility. When Gaye sings: "What about this overcrowded land / How much more abuse from man can she stand / Oh na / My sweet Lord, no, no, no," it is as if he can literally feel the weight of environmental destruction. This line is followed by a saxophone solo by Wild Bill Moore that lasts over a minute before the song fades out.

This ending of vocals before the ending of the song seemingly conveys a resignation to the cause of environmental progress. As if to say that he has done all that could be done and that there is no more left to be said, Gaye stops singing yet, the song continues. Symbolically, Gaye reminisces and mourns the lost of previous times as he laments over the current condition of environmental destruction. However, all eco-protest music is as bleak. Other songs serve to encourage listeners to take part in environmental activism and to make environmental conscientious decisions; these songs are focused on resistance.

Eco-Protest Music as a Source of Resistance

Historian Lindsay Michie writes concerning the role of music in activism:

> The intersection of activism and music in the United States is evident throughout its history. In 1640, New York governor William Cosby burned disrespectful ballads on the steps of the City Hall in frustration at not being able to discover their authors. Abolitionists during the slave trade and plantation era adapted hymns to their cause, changing the lyrics to protest against slavery; the rise of labor movement in reaction to the ill effects of the industrial revolution in the late 19th and 20th century was accompanied by musical resistance.[193]

Michie goes on to note that music often bares a strange connection with politics and that often protest music awakens emotions as strong as those that drive political movements. This emotional aspect of music in the role of protest cannot be understated. Sociologist James M. Jasper notes that affective and reactive emotions enter into protest activities at every stage and are an integral part of movements.[194] He notes, "Much political activity, no doubt, involves the reference to or creation of positive and negative affects towards groups, policies, and activities."

At its core then, eco-protest music helps to evoke and insight passion around actions, which are beneficial to the environment. Occasionally these actions may be politically inclined but they also may simply involve the support and affirmation of an environmentally conscious cause. For instance, following the second Earth Day celebration in 1971 "Keep America Beautiful" launched its "People Start Pollution, People can stop it" campaign focused on minimizing litter. At its height, it's reported that "Keep American Beautiful" received more than 2,000 letters a month from people wanting to join their local team. That same year, Bo Diddley released "Pollution", an up-tempo bombastic musical piece admonishing listeners to stop polluting and to dispose of their trash properly. The selection begins with a call-response refrain as Diddley sings: "Polluuuuuttttttion," followed by background singers who respond quickly, "Pollution."

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193 (Michie 2013, xi)
194 (Jasper 1998)

Again Diddley sings “Polluuuuuutttion,” and the background singers respond, “Pollution.” After four refrains Diddley sings: “Now jet planes flying up in the sky / Pretty soon we all gonna die / Some of you people don’t understand / Stop throwing your garbage in the streets and use your can.” Beyond lament then, we see that eco-protest songs also engaged in the politics of resistance.

Like the “People Start Pollution, People Stop It” campaign “Pollution,” addressed the need for individuals to become more conscientious about the dangers of pollution. Implicit within this song is also the assertion that people are either unaware or unconcerned about environmental devastation. In the second stanza Diddley sings, “Some of you people don’t understand / Stop throwing your garbage in the street and use your can.” This stanza is preceded by almost two minutes of purely instrumental composition. This instrumental segment is significant given Smitherson’s reference to the ways in which instruments also participate in the call-response aspect of black musicology. Within this portion of the song one hears back and forth riffs between trumpets, saxophones, trombones, and tubas. The implication is that the very instruments are responding to the call for environmental consciousness. The greater implication however is perhaps in the fact that vocals are completely absent during this entire duration of time. This suggests that while the instruments are participating in environmental activism, people are actually absent. As individuals are going about their way and polluting streets with no regard, the environment is suffering.

Diddley is not subtle in communicating this message as he continues to sings: “Pollution in the home / Pollution in the street / Pollution everywhere / Gonna get you and me.” In this appeal, Diddley reminds listeners that pollution in not something that can

be avoided. It is ubiquitous and it's affects are harmful. He then ends by returning to the call-response motif with which the song began. This time however, Diddley talks to listeners while in the background singers repeat the refrain: "We gotta stop pollution, We gotta stop pollution." Diddley comments: "Say it chump, watch that paper bag / Put a top on that garbage can baby / The wind is blowing awfully hard / Watch that cigarette pack baby / Me and you baby / We gotta keep American clean honey / You and me."

Not only does Diddley admonish listeners but he also invites them into community. By not simply pointing the finger but rather including himself in the equation, Diddley exemplifies what Neal notes as the communal nature of soul music. "Pollution" therefore stands as a quintessential example of eco-protest music being utilized as a means of resistance. Although not overtly political, "Pollution" encourages listeners to join together by engaging in activities that resist environmental destruction.

Eco-Protest Music as a Source of Hope

In addition to lament and resistance however, we also find that eco-protest music was often utilized as a source of hope. In 1976 on his album *Songs In the Key of Life,* Stevie Wonder recorded the soulful ballad "Saturn." No stranger to environmental consciousness, only three years earlier Stevie Wonder recorded "Living for the City," an upbeat song narrating a young man's journey from the south to the urban North. In this song Stevie Wonder sings, "His hair is long, his feet are hard and gritty / He spends his life walking the streets of New York City / He's almost dead from breathing in air pollution / He tried to vote but to him there's no solution." Neal writes, "Living for the City provided a glimpse into a not-so-distant future for black inhabitants of the

postindustrial city."[195] Three years later with "Saturn" Stevie Wonder offers a look into what can be deemed an eschatological future.

In the face of frustration and despair, Stevie Wonder offers the hope for a better place. In this place the air is clean, people are caring, and there is no crime or war. On Saturn, Stevie Wonder notes that the people: "Don't need cars cause we've learned to fly." Given his critique of air pollution in "Living for the City" it is safe to assume that Wonder is envisioning a planet with no pollution. Although one could easily assume that this appeal to Saturn reflects some type of nihilism as oppose to hope, that is not the case.

Wonder's reference here fits squarely within the trajectory of black musicology and the role of spirituals during the time of slavery. Blacks who were experiencing feelings of alienation and longing for existential relief often sang about the eschatological hope for a heavenly home in songs like *O Canaan* and *Swing Low Sweet Chariot.* These songs conveyed the desire for a sense of belonging and for a place called home. Frederick Douglas observes that while others heard "O Canaan, sweet Canaan / I am bound for the land of Canaan,"[196] that he actually understood Canaan as referring to the North where blacks were free. The South, conversely, was often referred to as Egypt, the land of captivity. Douglas' account depicts the type of inscribed meaning the land often held for blacks and the reason they longed for a place of escape and freedom.

We can also see this theme in songs like "Saturn." Stevie Wonder sings: "Packing my bags, going away / To a place where the air is clean on Saturn / There's no sense to sit and watch people die / We don't fight out wars the way you do / We put back all the

[195] (Neal 1999, 112)
[196] (Smith 2007)

things we use on Saturn." Although a critique of dirty air and the concern regarding war are condemnations of pollution, Stevie Wonder also expresses the desire to find a place of belonging in his appeal to the planet Saturn. In the second verse he sings: "We can't trust you when you take a stand / With a gun and Bible in your hand / And the cold expression on your face / Saying give us what we want or we'll destroy." Such imagery of one holding a Bible and a gun simultaneously is reminiscent of the spiritual *I Got a Robe,* which indicates: "Everybody talkin' 'bout Heaven ain't going there." Arthur Jones notes that slaveholders often took these songs to be frivolous and jovial, yet, slave composers were intentionally calling out the hypocrisy of slave masters who claimed to be Christians while treating blacks inhumanely.[197] "Saturn" expresses these similar concerns of racism and hypocrisy and the desire for a sense of belonging.

I refer to this as an eschatological hope because just as spirituals spoke of a heavenly home that blacks could not see and often had no justifiable reason to believe in, eco-protest songs that offer hope often do so in the midst of lost legal battles, rising rates of lung cancer and asthma, and little economic or political power. Hope therefore exists in their appeal to another time and place. In "Saturn" Wonder sings: "Rainbow, moonbeams, and orange snow on Saturn / People live to be two hundred and five." Such extraordinary accounts and unimaginable possibilities reflect the otherworldly faith necessary for blacks to experience hope in the midst of hopelessness.

It is also worth noting that "Saturn" and other environmentally conscious songs such as "Village Ghetto Land" are include on Wonder's album with love songs like "Isn't She Lovely" and "Knocks Me Off My Feet." This is interesting when one notes that

[197] (Jones 1993, 7)

Gaye's album *Let's Get It On* after *What's Going On* was taken as a departure from the black protest movement. What Wonder demonstrates therefore is the diversity of black humanity. *Songs in the Key of Life* addressed social, economic, political, and spiritual longings within the black community. "Saturn" demonstrates that environmental devastation was within the sphere of black concerns and that in spite of their condition, blacks were still hopeful for change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, musicology has consistently played a vital and significant role in the black community and within black culture. In this chapter, I show that this is evident in the black expressive music during the U.S. Environmental Movement. Just as there has never been a monolithic environmentalism,[198] there has also never been a monolithic medium of environmental consciousness. Eco-protest songs therefore, are an important contribution to the study of America's environmental history. By examining musicology within the black community specifically during the U.S. Environmental Movement, I show that blacks were both ecologically aware and conscientiously engaged with environmental concerns.

The three songs I critique within this chapter are helpful at observing the depth of environmental consciousness in the black community displayed through lament, resistance, and hope. These song display the range of engagement as well as perspectives black had towards environmental issues. These songs also demonstrate that blacks were concerned about both mainstream environmental issues like over-population and war as well as local concerns such as urbanization and pollution.

[198] (Schlosberg, Environmental Justice and the New Pluralism 1999)

As environmentalists are searching for ways to engage black communities with environmental concerns in the twenty-first century, research on eco-protest music in black history and culture is helpful for understanding the ways in which blacks have previously engaged many of these concerns both individually and collectively. Symbols of the intricate fusion of ecological awareness, environmental activism, and provocative artistry hitherto, eco-protest songs have largely gone unacknowledged.

Chapter 5
Avatar and the Representation of Black Religion and Environmental Justice in Film

Introduction

Within the realm of visual politics, film is one of the most pervasive and prolific forms. This is because, as Valarie Smith points out: "…despite their constructedness, media representations of members of historically disenfranchised communities reflect and, in turn, affect the lived circumstances of real people."[199] That is to say that often times positive and negative perceptions regarding race, class, and gender are informed by cinematic representations. Smith notes that this has led to scrutiny regarding the negative portrayal of African Americans by Hollywood filmmakers and the rise of black filmmakers who have, more often than not, sought to replace these images with more positive "authentic" ones.

bell hooks notes: "Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people….Movies not only provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex, and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues."[200] Consequently, it is important that we take seriously the role of cinema in its portrayal of black environmental consciousness. In exploring this genre of popular culture, I have chosen to analyze the film *Avatar* and its portrayal of the "other," environmental justice, sustainability, and religion. I believe *Avatar* provides a profound framework from which to critique

[199] (Smith 1997, 3)
[200] (hooks 1996, 2)

ecological burdens and challenges many of society's values by exposing their subsequent environmental ramifications.

A significant deviation this chapter makes from the previous three is in terms of perspective. Previous chapters have engaged blacks environmental consciousness from the perspective of black artists and their cultural productions. This chapter, however, moves from the perspective of the artist to that of the spectators. In doing so, I shift from critiquing works by black artists to that of a film produced by James Cameron, a "white" filmmaker. In making this shift I rely on Tommy Lott's argument for Third Cinema in "A No-Theory Theory of Black Cinema." Lott writes:

> What makes Third Cinema third (i.e. a viable alternative to Western Cinema) in not exclusively the racial makeup of a film maker, a film's aesthetic character, or a film's intended audience, but rather a film's political orientation within the hegemonic structures of postcolonialism. When a film contributes ideologically to the advancement of Black people, within a context of systematic denial, the achievements of this political objective ought to count as a criterion of evaluation on a par with any essentialist criterion.[201]

Consequently, I read *Avatar* as black cinema, not in an essentialist sense, i.e. that it has a black director or a black cast, but rather in the ideological sense. Although directed by a "white" filmmaker, *Avatar* provides a poignant depiction of anti-racism, anti-imperialism, and anti-environmental degradation. In my opinion it stands in opposition to environmental racism and offers a thought-provoking representation of the exchange between religion and environmental consciousness in black communities. Ultimately, I believe that *Avatar* seeks to further the cause of environmental justice through greater awareness and consciousness-raising.

[201] (Lott 1997, 92)

Julian Agyeman, Robert Bullard and Bob Evans write in their book *Just Sustainability*: "Wherever in the world environmental despoliation and degradation is happening, it is almost always linked to questions of social justice, equity, rights and people's quality of life in the widest sense."[202] Consequently, one must ask who is affected and why? Who has the power within the situation? What forms of agency are available to those socially, economically and politically disenfranchised? And what would justice look like? This chapter addresses these questions by looking at the role of cinema in its representation of black religion and environmental consciousness.

I. Representing Blacks in Film

The portrayal of blacks in film has frequently been critiqued in regards to its role in representation and objectification. From Professor Herman Gray's essay, "Television and the Politics of Difference," to Professor Stuart Hall's essay, "New Ethnicities;" attention has often been focused on the ways in which representation does more than merely reflect what is present but, as Hall argues, plays a formative role in the constitution of social and political life.[203]

Hall notes that the marginalization of the black experience in British culture led not only to an absence of black cultural representations but to simplification and stereotyping of black characters. This resulted in two issues, the first being the struggle over the relations of representation and the second being the politics of representation. He notes, "…how things are represented and the 'machineries and regimes of representation

[202] (Agyeman, Bullard and Evans 2003, 1)
[203] (Hall 1996, 443)

in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role."[204] This becomes complex following the dismantling of the essential black subject because one has to take into consideration the variety of black images and representations that exist. Which ones are displayed and promoted becomes social and political because of its power to shape future representations.

Gray builds on Hall's argument and notes the role of media, specifically television, in shaping America's national image. He argues that when television was created it was frequently used to as a tool to encourage hard work and to promote the nuclear family. Society was present as white and homogenous as Asian, Latinos, and Blacks had no relevant place. Following Civil Right once blacks begun being acknowledged as citizens, television was presented with a problem, which has continued to this day, that is the politics of difference. He therefore agrees with Hall that blacks are to be portrayed as members of the national image becomes both a social and political site of contestation. He writes, "…as a political strategy and galvanizing force of media activism, the integrative promise of network television as an expression of the social and cultural national imagery continues to have appeal."[205] Of course the issue at stake here is whose concept of social and cultural national imagery is being deployed?

Kenneth Cameron notes in *Africa on Film* that this has typically been dictated by white. He writes, "Africa is a very old site for European projection, a location of myths and fantasies for which the North seemed not to have the uncharted space."[206] Cameron describes how as filmmaking and cinema developed, the portrayal of Africa shifted from heroic and beautiful to a conventional "Africa" that was void of informed representation

[204] (Hall 1996, 443)
[205] (Gray 2005, 113)
[206] (Cameron 1994)

and more often a reification of dehumanizing assumptions about Africa and Africans as "savage" and "uncivilized." This portrayal perpetuated a myth of Africa as a continent with one culture and one language and supported the nineteenth century theories of racial superiority that provided pseudo-scientific justification to the expansion of colonialism and imperialism.

Professor Charles Long notes in *Significations*, such acts were most often undergird by the notion of the "empirical other," the cultural phenomenon in which the extraordinariness and uniqueness of a person or culture is first recognized negatively. Within Western society this was closely tied to the notions of being primitive and uncivilized. During the eighteenth century these terms came to define not only the "empirical other," those that lie outside the culture and history of Western civilization, but also the symbolic other, imagined and mythological figures, such as the wild man. Long notes that as with Enkidu in the Gilgamesh epic and Tarzan from cinema:

> The wild man is a child of nature, his natural habitat is the forest. His great strength is matched by his appetite for carnal connections with human female and the flesh of human beings. Nothing about the wild man prepares him for participation in civil society. When confronted with human beings, he may take to flight or, conversely, offer steadfast resistance to the death.[207]

Long states, the wild man was closely linked to the idea of a person suffering from hysteria and was defined by his biological difference and his location in the forest. The wild man became an archetype within Western mythology, which, although imagined, was significant in shaping the perception of non-Western "others." This projection of "others" as primitive operated as a negative structure of concreteness that allowed civilization to define itself as a structure superior to those inferior. This is what

[207] (Long 1995, 91)

Cameron later alludes to in his analysis of the character Tarzan. Cameron writes, Tarzan not only represented the "wild man" of European mythology, but he also undergird the idea of European nobility.

In this story, Tarzan, who has British aristocrats as parents, is stolen as an infant by a female ape and raised among the apes. Yet, in spite of these circumstances he teaches himself to read and write, and is the Lord of the Jungle. Cameron argues that this is not intended to present Tarzan as a noble savage; but to the contrary, he is a savage noble, an example of the idea that even under such hostile conditions, noble blood will always prevail. This twist in the figure of the "wild man" reflects the evolution of the term "civilization" from merely cultural to that which defines one's essence. Cameron also notes that although Tarzan encounters many African women in his life in the jungle, Jane, a white woman he saves from a black African, becomes the first woman he is intimate with. This suggests that the black women are somehow unsuitable companions or perhaps even another species when compared with his European ancestry.

The problem that Bobo, Hall, Cameron, and Long all point to with portrayals such as *Tarzan* is that, although imagined, the way a group of people is represented in cinema often plays a determining role in how those people are treated socially and politically in real life. As Cameron notes, considering that most films about Africa were made by whites and for whites, archetypes and stereotypes of the primitive and savage "other" abounded. While civilization became synonymous with Western culture and European decent, Africa was frequently portrayed as marooned and barbaric. This was likewise the

case with the nineteenth century portrayal of Africans as Piccaninnies, Sambos, Mammies, and Bucks.[208]

II. Avatar as a Case Study

Set in the year 2154 on Pandora, a fictitious moon in the Alpha Centauri star system, the inhabitants live in harmony with nature and their environment. *Avatar* presents the Na'vi, a race of indigenous humanoids, who stand nine feet tall and whose bodies are deep blue. The Na'vi are strong and proud and live in unity with nature, worshipping their deity Eywa. But of course no movie would be complete without conflict, and it quickly becomes apparent that the human population on Pandora has not chosen to occupy the moon in order to build peaceful intergalactic relations with the Na'vi. Instead, they are there to mine Unobtainium, a rare mineral, which sells for $20 million a kilo back on Earth. The protagonist, Jake Sully, is a paraplegic former marine who has been recruited by the Avatar program to win over the trust of the Na'vi and convince them to relocate from Hometree (or failing at that, to learn how to defeat them militarily). Hometree happens to be located on top of the largest single deposit of Unobtainium.

In an ideal world, negotiations between the Na'vi and humans would have reached a diplomatic solution, but this was not the case. As the humans deployed their advanced military against the Na'vi and destroyed Hometree, killing the clan leader in the process, Sully realized the hypocrisy of justifying the destruction of these individual's home and the desolation of their land for the sake of greed. Sully, who at this point in the

[208] Piccaninnies, Sambos, Mammies, and Bucks were stereotypical and disparaging racial slurs used to describe blacks primarily during the 18th and 19th centuries.

movie had fallen in love with the Na'vi princess Neytiri, decided to aid the Omaticaya in mounting a counterattack against the humans. At a rather climactic point within the movie Sully prayed to Eywa: "I need your help, the world we come from, there is no green there, they killed their mother, and they're going to do the same here."

Unobtainium within the movie is a valuable source of energy and in many ways stands as a metaphor for America's dependence on oil and the greed associated with it. Furthermore, the socio-political structure within the movie parallels that of those marginalized and disenfranchised. For instance, every leading Na'vi character within *Avatar* is played by a person who, in the U.S. at least, is an ethnic minority. Eytukan, the supreme leader of the Omaticaya clan is played by American Cherokee actor Wes Studi. Mo'at, the clan's matriarch is played by Guyanese-America actress C.C.H. Pounder. The clan's princess, Neytiri, is played by Dominican/Puerto Rican actress Zoe Saldana and Tsu'tey, a clan warrior and the direct successor to Eytukan, is played by Afro-Cuban actor Laz Alonso. Conversely, the leading human roles are played by an all-white cast. Sully is played by Sam Worthington, an English-born Australian actor. Dr. Grace Augustine is played by Sigourney Weaver, an American actress from New York. Parker Selfridge is played by Giovanni Ribisi, an Italian-American actor from Los Angeles. And the military leader, Colonel Miles Quaritch is played by Stephen Lang, an American actor from New York.

Given the racial makeup of *Avatar's* cast, one could make the argument that the silencing of the Na'vi's voices, the negation of their humanity, and the dismissal of their culture functions paradigmatically as a cinematic reenactment of colonization, the Trail of Tears, American slavery and present day environmental racism. Furthermore, the

disenfranchisement they suffer, their homelessness, their poverty, and their marginalization can all function as critiques of modern day hegemony, imperialism, racism, and classism. The politics of Other-ing is therefore not only historical but it is at the very foundation of these prejudices and serves as a conduit for their continued advancement in new forms. As long as individuals are categorized by their difference, and subsequently viewed as inferior, justification will be garnered for why they deserve to be exploited.

Avatar, therefore, portrays a reality that is often unknown and even more often disregarded. The portrayal of these issues via cinema, however, has spurned numerous conversations, commentaries, and critiques. Gould, Ardoin and Hashimoto point out; this is not uncommon among films that convey real-world issues. Just as with *Schindler's List*, *Dances with Wolves* and *Medicine Man*, provocative art forms and social commentaries can serve to generate constructive public discourse.[209] Not all commentaries, however, have been as positive.

New York Times columnist David Brooks in, 'The Messiah Complex' as well as Ezili Danto in, 'The Movie Avatar from a Black Perspective', argued that *Avatar* was merely a reiteration of the white savior complex. Danto went on to say that Sully's act of mating with the Omaticaya princess, Neytiri, and then expecting Tsu'tey, the warrior prince and heir to the chieftainship of the Omaticayas, to follow him as he led them into battle parallels the emasculation of the black male image. Annalee Newitz argued similarly in 'When Will White People Stop Making Movies Like Avatar', that *Avatar* is no more than an attempt on behalf of white people to assuage their white guilt. In this regard she compared it to movies like *Dances with Wolves* and *District 9*.

[209] (Gould, Ardoin and Kamakanipakolonahe'okekai 2010, 426)

A review by Lewinski in *Popular Science* took another approach, criticizing what it took to be the film's anti-technological message:

> *Avatar* is every militant global warming supporter's dream come true as the invading, technology-worshiping, environment-ravaging humans are set upon by an angry planet and its noble inhabitants. But the film's message suffers mightily under the weight of mind-boggling hypocrisy. Cameron's story clearly curses the proliferation of human technology. In *Avatar*, the science and machinery of humankind leads to soulless violence and destruction. It only serves to pollute the primitive but pristine paradise of Pandora. Of course, without centuries of development in science and technology, the film putting forth this simple-minded, self-loathing worldview wouldn't exist. You'd imagine Cameron himself would be bored to tears on the planet he created.[210]

Even the Vatican's newspapers and radio stations weighed in, railing against *Avatar* as anti-Christian and for promoting pantheism. *L'Osservatore Romano-,* for example, contended that the movie, 'gets bogged down by a spiritualism linked to the worship of nature.'[211]

These perspectives on *Avatar's* plot and message, however, overlook the film's many subtleties. For instance, in *Dances with Wolves*, John Dunbar never became one of the Sioux. Although he lived with them for a period of time and even took on a Sioux name, the last scene in the movie showed him leaving the Sioux camp only to find out that the Sioux were later captured and subjugated to the U.S. Government. And in *District 9,* while Wilkus Van De Merwe became an alien, it was against his will; Newitz is correct that Van De Merwe only aided his alien friend's escape in hopes that he would return with a cure for his alien-condition.

The typical critiques of *Avatar* ignore this critical fact: while Sully was instrumental in saving the Na'vi, they saved him as well. When he arrived on Pandora, he

[210] (Lewinski 2009)
[211] (Brooks 2010)

had no purpose in life; his brother had recently died, he had lost his ability to walk, and he was confined to a wheelchair. Through his interaction with the Omaticaya Sully found love, respect, courage, and faith. The most transformative moment within the film occurred when Sully sacrificed his life as a human, not to save the Omaticaya, but rather, to become one of them. Ultimately, Sully abandoned and repudiated everything that he once was in order to embrace a more holistic way, the way of the Na'vi. If this film can be considered a reenactment of the white savior complex then, it is an exceptionally odd example. The more obvious conclusion is that Sully was the one who was saved in the most profound sense, from his own racist and imperialist culture.

In response to *Popular Science* it is true that *Avatar* does not present technology in a positive light; however, it is far from anti-technology. As Cameron states:

> Essentially what Avatar is, it's the most high tech film in terms of its execution dealing with essentially a very low tech subject which is our relationship with nature and in fact the irony is that the film is about our relationship with nature and how our technological civilization has taken us several removes away from a truly natural existence and the consequences of that to us.[212]

Cameron's comment implies that he is more concerned with human's relationship to nature than with rejecting modern technology. Through the character Sully, viewers are essentially challenged to examine their own views, values, and philosophies. When brought face to face with the consequences of his actions Sully choose not only to fight against the status quo and the powers that be, but also to abandon his own human body and to take on the body of a Na'vi. As viewers identify with Sully, they too are encouraged to engage in acts of resistance, empathy, and transformation.

[212] Cameron Avatar: Disc 3

As for the Vatican's claim that *Avatar* promotes the "worship of nature," this ignores the aspects of *Avatar* that has affinity with at least some forms of Christian religion, including Catholicism. The late, influential, Catholic theologian Thomas Berry, for example, wrote late in his life: "This difficulty [the perceived threat of naturalism, paganism and pantheism] could be mitigated if we were to recall that in earlier Christian ages the tradition considered that there were two revelatory sources, one the manifestation of the divine in the natural world and the other the manifestation of the divine in the biblical world. In this context, to save the Earth is an essential part of saving the pristine divine presence."[213]

Berry traced the modern day disregard for the environment in Christianity to the view that the divine is transcendent and divorced from all phenomenal existence, as well as to the tradition's emphasis on redemption from a flawed world. To be a Christian then is to live in the world but not to be of the world and to constantly long for deliverance from the world to one's heavenly home. But Berry argued that what is most necessary now is a new religious sensibility which draws upon primordial religions as well as an understanding of the cosmological story of the universe and the biological/evolutionary unfolding of life on earth, which in his view connects all existence.

Cameron is doing more than merely retelling a well-known story, condemning all technology, or launching an anti-Christian campaign. Rather, through *Avatar,* he is opening up space for dialog about the politics of "Other-ing," sustainability, environmental justice, and the role of religion in ecological awareness and activism. Most importantly, *Avatar* depicts the relevance of film in continuing to shape social and

[213] (Berry, The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth 2009, 38)

political perspectives, and exhibits just why society should take seriously the role of cinema as a viable medium of ecological engagement.

Avatar and Environmental Justice

The reason *Avatar* is ideal for a critique of black engagement with ecology is because *Avatar* addresses issues of human rights and environmental justice. Of course such a comparison may seem strange given that the Navi on Pandora are not human. However, although these extraterrestrial beings are indeed different from humans in very obvious ways -- their bodies are larger, their skin is blue and they speak a different language -- they are also very similar. They live within organized communities with rules and laws. They are intelligent and have the ability to learn English. They marry, mourn the death of loved ones, pray to a higher power, and demonstrate respect for each other and nature. With the exception of their physical attributes then, the Na'vi are actually more like humans than not. However, as opposed to focusing on these similarities, they are viewed as inferior "others." This designation is ultimately used to justify denying them any mutual respect and basic "human" rights.

Shortly after Parker Selfridge, the leader of the Unobtainium mining operation, authorized the destruction of Hometree, Dr. Grace Augustine pleads with him, "Parker…these are people you are about to…" Selfridge interrupts, "No, they're fly-bitten savages that live in a tree". As "savages," the Navi are regarded as primitive and uncivilized. They not only fall outside of Western culture and the European bloodline, but they are not even human. Essentially, the Navi are no Tarzan. Just as Tarzan remains a British noble regardless of his circumstances, the Navi remain "uncivilized," regardless of their human similarities.

Of course the history of "other-ing" within the U.S. is evidence of the very arbitrary nature of this tactic when fueled by social and political motives. In "Constructing Whiteness" Judy Helfand notes that during colonization European culture produced a people who needed an "other," a class of people who were inferior and incorporated qualities rejected or even demonized by European culture. She attributed this to the need of the Virginia colony to not only establish economic stability but also a class of ruling elites. According to Hefland, whiteness does not function primarily as a term to define whites but rather, as a term to marginalize non-whites as inferior others. This effectively minimized the rebellion of white bond laborers whose only privilege existed in their being a class above the black bond laborers. For the most part then, the construction of whiteness had less to do with race and more to do with laws and politics towards advancing an economic agenda. She wrote:

> The early history of Virginia Colony provides the foundational example, illustrating through laws passed by the colonial assemblies how the knowledge, ideology, norms, and practices that comprise whiteness evolved in response to the social, economic, and political situation in that colony and ultimately resulted in the creation of a white race.[214]

With this background in mind it is understandable how the framers of the Constitution failed to perceive the internal contradiction in drafting a document that advocated liberty, justice, and equality for all while simultaneously excluding blacks. Laws like those defining blacks as three-fifths human and denying blacks the right to vote had already functioned to substantiate the theory of a White Race and the concept of the uncivilized Other. Such rhetoric ran so deep that even when the question of salvation arose it was often argued that even the regeneration of slave's souls was ineffective in

[214] (Helfand 2002)

altering their nature and thus, their status in society as brutes in need of white masters for domestication remained the same even after conversion.

In this regard one understands how the humans on Pandora are able to justify destroying the Navi's home and treating them with little concern. In several ways *Avatar* mirrors the treatment of blacks in America. Othered and regarded as primitive and uncivilized, both are victims of environmental injustice. Of course, as the environmental justice literature reveals, the concept of environmental injustice is not a well-defined concept and requires greater treatment before I continue. In *The Promise and Peril of Environmental Justice* Christopher H. Foreman Jr. notes: "There exists no clear and universally accepted definition of environmental justice, but some notion of effective citizen participation and empowerment underlies everyone's conception of it."[215] He asserts that when asked: "What do you want?" The environmental justice movement answers: "Whatever we can get, wherever we can get it."[216]

Foreman exaggerates the case here; yet, his perspective cannot be dismissed. In *Defining Environmental Justice,* David Schlosberg echoes this sentiment when he writes: "Throughout this [environmental justice] literature, there is very little agreement on exactly what environmental justice means. Or, more accurately, there are a variety of notions put forward, with very little disagreement; environmental justice becomes what its documenters and examiners have put forward, en masse."[217] In an effort to provide a systematic definition of environmental justice, Schlosberg examines four recurring

[215] (C. H. Jr. 1998, 34)
[216] (C. H. Jr. 1998, 8)
[217] (Schlosberg, Defining Environmental Justice 2007, 50)

theories of justice drawn from environmental justice literature: distribution, recognition, participation, and capabilities.[218] Here, I briefly address them individually.

Environmental Justice and Distribution

The most often cited, and most obvious, evidence of environmental injustice is in the realm of distribution, specifically as it pertains to the inequitable share of environmental risks and burdens that poor communities and communities of color often live with.[219] This is visible from a cursory glance at the first documented instances of environmental injustice, i.e., *Bean v. Southwestern Waste Management Corp*[220], Warren County, North Carolina, and *Toxic Waste and Race.* As Schlosberg points out: "the distributional approach, which makes up the vast majority of environmental justice research, illustrates that communities of color and poor communities are simply inequitably burdened by environmental hazards and risks, and argues against this injustice."[221]

Because distribution was a leading concern during the environmental justice movement's inception: "the environmental equity movement" was actually the first term adopted by advocates. Bullard wrote in 1990: "The new environmental equity movement also is centered in the South…."[222] Additionally, the EPA taskforce created in 1990 as a response to the *Toxic Waste and Race* report was named the Environmental "Equity"

[218] (Schlosberg, Defining Environmental Justice 2007, 5)
[219] (Schlosberg, Defining Environmental Justice 2007, 55)
[220] This case took place in 1979 when a group of African American homeowners in Houston, TX opposed a sanitary landfill in their suburban middle-income neighborhood. This was the first case to use civil rights law to challenge the sitting of a waste facility.
[221] (Schlosberg, Defining Environmental Justice 2007, 56)
[222] (R. Bullard, Dumping in Dixie 2000, 14)

Workgroup.[223] Equity, however, only deals with the distribution, or redistribution, of risks and harms.

As Schlosberg notes:

> Even within the movement, there is an understanding of the limitation of the equity approach. Between the early movement activities in the 1980s and the beginning of reflection on the movement in the 1990s, both activists within, and scholars writing about, the environmental justice movement replaced the term equity with that of justice. Both practitioners and researchers began to understand that justice was broader than the singular question of equity.[224]

Advocates also feared the term implied a desire to redistribute waste from victimized communities to more affluent ones. At the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit Rev. Benjamin Chavis pointed out: "We are not saying, 'Take the poisons out of our community and put them in a white community.' We are saying that no community should have these poisons."[225]

A broad overview of environmental justice advocate's scholarship reflects this move towards broader language so as to incorporate concern for quality of life, recognition, participation, prevention, redress, and protection. In 2003 Bullard wrote: "In recent years it has become increasingly apparent that the issue of environmental quality is inextricably linked to that of human equality."[226] The concern for environmental equity is still a viable concern within the realm of environmental justice but is most often presented as a desire for equal treatment and respect.

Environmental Justice and Recognition

[223] (C. H. Jr. 1998, 10)
[224] (Schlosberg, Defining Environmental Justice 2007, 58)
[225] (C. H. Jr. 1998, 10)
[226] (Agyeman, Bullard and Evans 2003, 1)

In addition to equity, Schlosberg points out the important of recognition for environmental justice activists. Individuals who are the victims of environmental inequity are so, often because they are poor persons of color and have been rendered unworthy of recognition. Thus, siting of a landfill, toxic facility, or chemical plant in their community is a reflection of their value, or lack thereof. This act of "personal degradation" in which individuals are physically abused via toxic exposure is both disrespectful and insulting.[227]

Cora Tucker, an African American activist, tells the story of attending a town board meeting where all the white women were addressed as "Mrs. So and So", yet, when it was her turn to speak, the all-male, all-white board referred to her simply as 'Cora'. "My name is Mrs. Tucker," she replied.[228] Such instances may appear trite on the surface, but the misrecognition of individuals often mirrors the misrecognition of communities. A more egregious offence is the means in which EPA sets toxin standards for fish in rivers and streams. Levels are most often based on average fish consumption without taking into consideration that many Native Americans live off subsistence fishing and consume a higher quantity of fish than the average American.[229] This felt sense of disregard for ones culture and humanity illustrates why advocates often seek recognition as an additional aspect of environmental justice.

Environmental Justice and Participation

The third theory Schlosberg addresses is that of participation. He writes: "These two aspects of participation – information and inclusion in decision-making – are easily found within the demands of the vast majority of environmental justice organizations."[230]

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[227] (Schlosberg, Defining Environmental Justice 2007, 60)
[228] (Schlosberg, Defining Environmental Justice 2007, 61)
[229] (Schlosberg, Defining Environmental Justice 2007, 60)
[230] (Schlosberg, Defining Environmental Justice 2007, 69)

This is evident as one of the earliest political victories for environmental justice advocates was the development of a subcommittee on Public Participation established by the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC).[231] As Foreman noted, whatever environmental justice is, some notion of effective citizen participation underlies everyone's conception of it.[232]

Of course activists have consistently addressed the need for communities of color to be given a seat at the table where environmental decisions are made. Patricia Hill Collins articulates this as a 'coming to voice' by these communities.[233] Given the history of excluding minorities from zoning decisions, the insistence of victims being able to speak for themselves validate their investment in the democratic process and affirms their humanity. Participation, therefore, is an absolutely essential part of the environmental justice movement.

However, as Schlosberg points out, participation is two-fold. Residents also desire the ability to make informed decisions and that requires information. Contrary to Foreman's insinuation that these communities are uneducated, overly emotional, and incapable of intelligently thinking through the complexities of environmental concerns; many of them have demonstrated the desire to work with scientists and researchers and to entertain alternate solutions to their challenges and concerns. This type of agency is essential to the movement and is why the Seventh Principle of Environmental Justice is the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement, and evaluation.[234]

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[231] (Schlosberg, Defining Environmental Justice 2007, 66-67)
[232] (C. H. Jr. 1998, 34)
[233] (Schlosberg, Defining Environmental Justice 2007, 65)
[234] (First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit 1991)

Environmental Justice and Capabilities

Schlosberg's final observation is the demand for capabilities referenced by environmental justice proponent Dr. Bunyan Bryant. He wrote that environmental justice refers to places, "where people can interact with confidence that the environment is safe, nurturing, and productive."[235] He goes on to say: "Environmental justice is served when people can realize there highest potential."[236] This, of course, goes far beyond foundational concerns for equity and distribution and into concerns for health care, quality schools, safe jobs, recreation, and the potential of flourishing. Such a demand requires both the protection from harms as well as the promotion of benefits.

For example, asthma is the number one reason for childhood emergency room visits in most major cities in the county.[237] Statistics also indicate that rates are three to four times higher in communities of color than among whites.[238] As incidents rise, the cost (estimated to range from $10 billion to $200 billion) exacted upon these communities via health care, transportation, and housing affects will every aspect of community life. Changes in pollution control, transportation policies, and health policies are necessary, not merely to relieve suffering, but to reestablishing the capacity for these communities to be healthy and vibrant.

Schlosberg's treatment of the environmental justice movement is significant in understanding *Avatar* in that he offers a multilayered understanding of environmental justice, which incorporates theories of distribution, recognition, participation, and capabilities. I have taken the time to include his perspective for two reasons: 1) to

[235] (Schlosberg, Defining Environmental Justice 2007, 71)
[236] (Schlosberg, Defining Environmental Justice 2007, 71)
[237] (Bul0535)
[238] (Bul0535)

highlight the leading concerns among EJ advocates and how these concerns affect minority communities even though there is no consensus among environmentalists as to what qualifies as environmental justice, and 2) as it pertains to *Avatar,* to expose parallels that exist between the Na'vi on Pandora and black communities in the U.S.

Just as the Na'vi's community is destroyed so that the valuable mineral Unobtainium can be harvested, black communities are destroyed for similar economic gains, as evidenced in sociologist Beverly Wright's essay about 'Living and Dying in Louisiana's "Cancer Alley".' As she noted, Louisiana is rich in natural resources and its location on the mouth of the Mississippi River makes it a valuable location for domestic exporters and international trade.[239] Consequently, some 135 petrochemical plants line the eighty-five-mile stretch of river from Baton Rouge to New Orleans also known as "cancer alley". A 2002 study of the relationship between race and facility siting within nine parishes along 'cancer alley' conducted by David Pellow revealed that all nine parishes have clusters of air-pollution facilities located in areas with high concentrations of blacks. Wright also noted that, "Approximately 80 percent of the total African American communities in the nine parishes live within three miles of a polluting facility."[240] Similar studies have been published concerning Chicago's "toxic donut,"[241] and the predominately black neighborhood of Camden, New Jersey.[242]

In *Avatar,* following the decision to destroy Hometree, Dr. Augustine told Sully: "They never wanted us to succeed. They bulldozed a sacred site on purpose to trigger a response. They're fabricating this war to get what they want." To which Sully replied,

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[239] (Bul0589)
[240] (Wright, Living and Dying in Louisiana's "Cancer Alley" 2005, 95)
[241] (Pellow 2002, 89)
[242] (Pomar 2005, 125)

"So this is how it's done, when people are sitting on shit that you want you make them your enemy and then you justify taking it." The Na'vi, of course, were no more enemies to the humans on Pandora than black communities are enemies to toxic facilities. Rather, these individuals are perceived as obstacles to economic gain. In viewing a site filled with landfills and colossal power lines, environmental economist Mark Sagoff noted: "Where some people see only environmental devastation "others" perceive efficiency, utility, and maximization of wealth. They see the satisfaction of wants. They envision the good life."[243] Here, Sagoff accurately states the economic dilemma facing those pursuing ecological sustainability: those at the top are continuously attempting to accumulate wealth even in the face of environmental destruction. They often fail to understand or care about how their vision of the "good life" comes at the expense of, and detriment to, those at the bottom. Sully's statement can easily be reversed within the realm of environmental justice: "When you're dumping shit that you don't want, you make a group of people your enemy in order to justify dumping it in their backyard."

III. Black Religion and Ecological Consciousness

As Long notes: "Once an issue has been raised as problematic or pathological within our culture….primitivism or the primitives appear as a methodological tool or stratagem that enables one to analyze the problem or pathology in a culture and history where it appears nonpathological or problematical and fully expressive."[244] In this regard, *Avatar* presents primitive culture and religion in juxtaposition with Western civilization and technology. Although it can be argued that Cameron's portrayal is stereotypical in

[243] (Sagoff 2008, 620)
[244] (Long 1995, 102)

regards to its nostalgic portrayal of primitive cultures, it provides a model of minority environmental engagement counter to the common narrative within society; one that is worthy of inclusion within the broader conversation concerning the role of aesthetics in the formation of black environmental consciousness.

Although unconcerned with the political and the economic motives that have brought the humans to Pandora, the Na'vi's exhibit a spiritual connection to the land, which motivates their environmental perspective. This depiction provides as apt representation of environmental awareness and activism by blacks vis-à-vis black religion. Just as black religion has historically served as a means of resistance for black communities,[245] the Na'vi's religion inspires their resistance against the exploitation of Pandora. When approaching soldiers corner Neytiri, Sully commands her to stand down, yet for Neytiri surrender is not an option. Outnumbered, and armed only with a bow and arrow, she readies herself for battle just as a stampeding herd of Hammerheads arrive. In an iconic depiction of holy intervention, all the fauna of Pandora begin fighting against the human invaders and on the side of Eywa. Neytiri lowers her bow and exclaims to Sully: "Eywa has heard you!"

Eywa, the Na'vi deity, is described as the essence of all living things and the Na'vi express belief that all energy is borrowed and that upon death all energy returns to Eywa. Essentially they exhibit what Bron Taylor describes as *spiritual animism*, which holds that spiritual intelligences or life-forces animate natural objects or living things. It is the belief that beings or entities in nature have their own soul, integrity, personhood, and even intelligence.[246]

[245] (Lin9015, Reed 2005, W. T. Walker 1979, Weissman 2010)
[246] (Taylor, Dark Green Religions 2010, 15)

One observes this among the Omaticaya when Neytiri kills the palulukans, a group of panther-like animals that are attacking Sully and then says a prayer over their bodies to return their souls to Eywa. When the Na'vi ride on the horse-like creatures known as Direhorse or fly on the Ikran, they form a bond known as a shahaylu with the fleshy tips of their hair and the animal's antennae; this connection to the animals seemingly exceeds its utilitarian purpose and mirrors that of the connection the Na'vi share with each other when mating. The Na'vi also possess the ability to communicate with their ancestors through the Tree of Souls, a web of connections between adjacent trees where they are able to share and access sacred memories.

These beliefs and practices are in many ways similar to those in traditional African religions. Religion scholar Harvey Sindima in 'Community of Life,' explains the African concept of the "bondedness of life." He writes: "All life—that of people, plants and animals, and the earth—originates from and therefore shares an intimate relationship of bondedness with divine life; all life is divine life."[247] This awareness explains why African concepts of community and justice often extended beyond people to include animals, plants, and the Earth.

Another significant parallel is that many African religions also believe in the veneration of ancestors. As theologian Laurenti Magesa explains, Africans believe that their ancestors are in constant contact with both God and humanity. He writes: "Spirits are active being who are either disincarnate human persons or powers residing in natural phenomena such as trees, rocks, rivers, or lakes."[248] As a result, "reverence of Africans toward nature and natural places was a religious attitude and practice which…indirectly

[247] (Sindima 2007, 144)
[248] (Magesa 1997, 36)

served other social functions in the whole community. The forests, certain kinds of trees, animals, and sources of water were preserved in the name of religion."[249]

Yet, it was during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when Africans were forcibly enslaved and transported to America that they encountered new ideas i.e. Christianity, folk beliefs, western literary traditions, and scientific theories. Not only was their religion affected but so too was their relationship with nature. As Chapter One depicts, the experience of slavery created a complex relationship between Africans and the landscape forcing them into an intimacy with the immediate natural world but also alienating them from it. Still, Africans retained many Africanisms in cuisine, marriage, family values, and expressive culture.[250]

Kimberly Smith notes that the bondage to the land and the social hierarchy established between house slaves and field slaves left an indelible mark on the way blacks subsequently perceived land, landscape, and nature.[251] As theologian James Cone points out, it hasn't merely been a disconnection from the land, which has limited black involvement in the mainstream environmental movement. Many blacks often assume that environmentalism is at odds with or unconnected to primary social justice issues within the black church and the black community such as racial equality. He writes: "The leaders in the African American community are leery to talk about anything with whites that will distract from the menacing reality of racism."[252] According to Cone:

> Until recently, the ecological crisis has not been a major theme in the liberation movements in the African American community. "Blacks don't care about the environment" is a typical comment by white ecologists. Racial and economic justice has been at best only a marginal concern in

[249] (Omari 2003, 99)
[250] (Glave, Rooted in Earth 2010, 45)
[251] (Smith 2007, 25)
[252] (J. H. Cone 1999, 139)

> the mainstream environmental movement. "White people care more about the endangered whale and the spotted owl than they do about the survival of young blacks in our nation's cities" is a well-founded belief in the African American community. Justice fighters for blacks and the defenders of the earth have tended to ignore each other in their public discourse and practice.[253]

Consequently, stereotypes and assumptions have led to faulty and ill-informed characterizations; as Cone points out, the lack of dialogue between whites and blacks only serves to further polarize them. Collectively this has contributed to the lack of a black presence within the mainstream environmental movement over the last fifty years. Yet, this has never blinded minorities to the ways environmental burdens affect their well-being and has not hindered them from fighting back, and in similar fashion to the Na'vi, these acts of resistance have often been inspired by religious and spiritual values.

English professor Kimberly Ruffin provided an example of the role religion is playing in environmental activism for Charlotte Keys in *Black on Earth*:

> In addition to the cosmic, quotidian, apocalyptic, and the mundane, African Americans have also used religion to confront the unjust. So for African Americans such as Keys, religion and environmental justice work inform one another rather than stand apart. Devout in her belief and determined in her actions, Keys is an example of how people use their religion to address ecological crisis. Key's began the organization Jesus People Against Pollution after her community in Columbia, Mississippi, surrounded by a Superfund site, was devastated by chemical waste and a subsequent rise in disease. Although she fights for the recovery of her community, she believes firmly that the twin sins of pollution and hoarding of wealth will be punished upon the second coming of Jesus Christ.[254]

Key's faced a similar plight as Neytiri, the destruction of her community and likewise she employed a similar strategy. Armed with what could be considered a bow and arrow against corporate and chemical giants, Keys waged battle through her non-profit

[253] (J. H. Cone 1999, 138)
[254] (Ruffin 2010, 89)

organization *Jesus People Against Pollution*. This type of integration of faith and social justice is not uncommon for blacks. As Ruffin points out: "African Americans in general have repeatedly positioned the Bible and Christianity at the crossroads of faith and progressive social change."[255]

In addition to Keys, many black churches are also demonstrating a similar reality. Within the last few years Providence Baptist Church, a historical black church in Atlanta, Georgia, has taken a leading role in community environmental education and facilitating interreligious ecological dialog. In the southwest, Green Jobs Interfaith Coalition composed of black church leaders, artist and educators, is striving to motivate African American congregations to affirm and embrace the connection between theology and environmental care while tying these concerns to jobs. And recently in New York City, Faith Leaders for Environmental Justice has teamed up with the Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change in an effort to produce more policy-advocating research regarding public health and climate change.

It is also worth noting that not all black religious environmental activism has been anthropocentric. According to sociologist Eileen Smith-Cavros, who conducted a study on black churchgoers, environmental activism in Miami, Florida, "demonstrated concern included neighborhood cleanups, nature camps, integrating environment into church sermons and discussion, beach dunes restoration, tree planting, youth mentoring, and preservation of Black rural history."[256] Smith-Cavros also recorded that members discussed and revealed concern about issues such as the rainforest and the depletion of native species. She came to the conclusion that: "there is indeed a link between

[255] (Ruffin 2010, 91)
[256] (Smith-Cavros 2006, 41)

churchgoing Blacks in Miami, their history, spirituality, and the natural environment."[257] Notably, Smith-Cavros' study included individuals with ancestry in Cuba, the Bahamas, Haiti, Jamaica and the U.S. South; this study therefore provides an example of environmental awareness among blacks with roots that are both domestic as well as international.

Perhaps it would be a stretch to view these efforts as a reclaiming of the African eco-spiritual heritage, which was lost during slavery when traditional African values were replaced with post-colonial ideals. Yet, at the very least, this is a reminder of the African eco-consciousness embedded in black history as far back as Africa. *Avatar* therefore serves as a depiction of these environmental sensibilities and challenges the notion that environmentalism is a white issue by presenting this narrative where the environmental message is not advanced by whites but by "people of color," the Na'vi. Additionally, *Avatar* demonstrates the potential of religion as a means of environmental awareness and as a catalyst for environmental activism for those who are marginalized and oppressed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is significant to recall Professor Stuart Hall's assertion that film not only operates at the level of expression, but that it is also formative in the construction of social and political life. Given the role of films such as *Birth of a Nation, Uncle Tom's Cabin, Gone With the Wind* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* in shaping ideals and perspectives within society; one should not underestimate the role of *Avatar* in motivating black environmental consciousness and in challenging the stereotype that blacks don't care about the environment.

[257] (Smith-Cavros 2006, 41)

Although presently the realm of environmentalism is still an exclusive one dominated by scientists, lawyers, and academics with underrepresentation from poor, minorities, and the global south. To take *Avatar* seriously is to take seriously the potential of aesthetics as a means of environmental education and as an impetus for environmental activism. John Dewey, one of the leading thinkers in philosophical pragmatism addresses this reality in *The Public and its Problems*. If individuals are expected to be voting, decision-making members of society, then they must have proper access to knowledge. It is insufficient to assume that a thing is known merely because it is found out. Information bound within legal, scientific, and scholarly journals must become socially accessible if it is to influence public life. As Dewey indicated: "Dissemination is something other than scattering at large. Seeds are sown, not by virtue of being thrown out at random, but by being so distributed as to take root and have a chance of growth."[258]

Consequently, it is necessary now more than ever for environmentalists to enlist innovative ways of educating people about environmental issues and concerns. Dewey wrote: "A technical high-brow presentation would appeal only to those technically high-brow; it would not be news to the masses."[259] The environmental movement is in crisis for this very reason. Many of the issues surrounding climate change, global warming, and biodiversity are only being advanced through scientific and technical means. These are not means that promote mass dissemination, nor ones that have a high probability of taking root within the general population.[260] Dewey went on to write: "Artists have

[258] (Dewey, The Public and Its Problems 1927, 176)
[259] (Dewey, The Public and Its Problems 1927, 183)
[260] (Dewey, The Public and Its Problems 1927, 123)

always been the real purveyors of news."[261] And nowhere is this more evident than in movies like *Avatar*.

As *Avatar* begins, the Na'vi seem strange because they look different; yet, as the movie progresses, the audience is led to appreciate their value system and their respect for nature. As Sully stated during a video log, the real world seems to be the one held by the Na'vi and the humans begin to appear as the Other. During the climactic scene where Hometree is destroyed, it is difficult for anyone to watch and not feel rage at the humans who have destroyed the home and civilization of these individuals over greed. This is of course the conundrum, for although the audience is led to feel sympathy for the Na'vi, within this movie we are not the Na'vi but the humans. We are essentially tricked into committing what Bron Taylor calls, "emotional treason".[262] That is, we side with nature and against our own civilization. If nothing else then, *Avatar* forces us to look at who we really are. We see through this narrative how our own greed and felt sense of entitlement has so often harmed other people and done violence to nature herself. Ultimately, like Sully, we are called to leave the former ways of thinking and to adopt an ecological sensibility; one that is attentive to the voices of minorities, the poor, developing countries, and Nature.

What makes *Avatar* even more exceptional, however, is its use of the arts in issuing this call. After *Avatar's* release, Cameron created the Home Tree Initiative, a project to plant one million trees and has brought mass attention to the Belo Monte Dam project in the Amazon in an effort to preserve the homelands of the indigenous

[261] (Dewey, The Public and Its Problems 1927, 184)
[262] (Taylor, War of the Worldviews: Why Avatar Lost 2010)

population.[263] Each of these projects reflects the way in which *Avatar* is continuing to bring about environmental awareness and activism.

[263] http://www.avatarmovie.com/hometree

Chapter 6
Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation project began with a series of questions. Did blacks exhibited environmental consciousness and ecological concern prior to the Environmental Justice Movement in the 80s? How did blacks communicate this environmental concern and why is it excluded from mainstream historical accounts of the U.S. Environmental Movement? And what was the nature of black religion in facilitating and encouraging environmental consciousness?

What this dissertation showed, however, went far beyond these initial concerns. Although this dissertation proved that blacks were both engaged and concerned with ecological issues as far back as slavery, by critiquing the aesthetic productions of black culture this dissertation argued that black expressive culture provides an emotive encounter with the grotesque nature of environmental activism. By turning to these aesthetic productions, this dissertation provided a framework from which to understand and experience U.S. black environmental history.

Each chapter of the dissertation offered support to this central thesis by highlighting the way in which literature, photography, music, and film function to take the spectator on an emotive journey that extends beyond mere cognition. Within each chapter the reader observed that these productions are more than forms of entertainment but that they are also sources of education, awareness, protest, hope, lament and resistance.

Chapter two is significant because *Sula* offers a depiction of the grotesque nature of black environmental experiences. By disrupting the standard narrative of the U.S.

Environmental Movement along with the myth that blacks don't care about the environment, this chapter opened the door for a more accurate articulation of U.S. environmental history and black environmental engagement.

Chapter three then provided the theory used for understanding black environmental experiences and their artistic expressions. By turning to Alain Locke and Kimberly Smith, this chapter showed, through the Locke-Smith thesis, how aesthetics functions within black communities as a conduit for environmental activism and ecological appreciation. The Locke-Smith thesis argued that although slavery and segregation forced blacks into a position of alienation from nature, blacks have consistently expressed environmental intimacy and ecological concern visible vis-à-vis their cultural artifacts. Additionally, chapter three provided a critical reading of the role of photography during the U.S. Environmental Justice Movement.

As the most prominent period of black environmental political expression, this chapter demonstrated the ways in which photography served as a catalyst undergirding and advancing this movement not only within the U.S. but among minority communities internationally who are also disproportionately affected by environmental risks and burdens. Additionally, it is shown that blacks exhibited environmental concerns beyond simply those for environmental justice but for a wide variety of ecological concerns including wildlife.

Next, chapter four addressed the apparent silence of blacks during the U.S. Modern Environmental Movement. As opposed to being silent, this chapter reveals the role of black musicology during this period as a source of lament, a source of resistance, and a source of hope. Focusing specifically on the three songs *Mercy, Mercy, Me* by

Marvin Gaye, *Pollution* by Bo Diddley, and *Saturn* by Stevie, it is shown that these musical expressions served as means of education and awareness. These songs and other black environmental music during this era are referred to as "eco-protest songs" and this chapter analyzed the way in which they advance environmental resistance within black communities.

Finally, Chapter five addressed the public perception of environmental justice and black religion within the realm of cinema. Critiquing the movie *Avatar,* this chapter explored the potential of cinema as a viable means of communicating black environmental concerns. As it is shown, *Avatar* has not only become the highest grossing film of all time but has incited several conversations around the issues of ecology, race, class, and religion. These conversations are essential for future sustainability and thus this chapter took seriously the role and potential of film in evoking future collaboration between environmental scholars and film producers in the service of public environmental consciousness.

Ultimately, *Mercy, Mercy, Me (The Ecology): Black Culture, Aesthetics, and the Search for a Green Community* takes readers on a journey of black expressive culture and black environmental engagement. Novels such as *Sula* provided the background and context, pictures from the Environmental Justice Movement displayed the challenges and concerns, songs like *Mercy, Mercy, Me* provided the sound of lament and protest, and movies like *Avatar* portrayed the resilience and hope derived from black spirituality. From songs like "Saturn" to the poetry of former slaves, this dissertation showed that black environmental engagement is ubiquitous within black expressive culture. It is embedded in the music and in the photography, it is depicted in black cinema and it is

expressed in black literature. However, as Dewey's aesthetics argued, the power in these displays was in their ability to emotively engage their readers, listeners, and viewers.

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