"When Black Men Go into the Forest, They Don't Come Back Out":
Employing Critical Race and Whiteness Studies in Understanding Ecological Identity Development for Environmental Education Outreach

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Do racialization and racism in the USA affect perceptions of nature? Can this influence certain people to view "nature" as either safe/freeing and others as dangerous/hostile? Furthermore, how does being racialized in the USA influence how one perceives nature (versus formal classroom) as a site for environmental education? These questions have been sparked by several things: First, my emphasis in my PhD program in Geography is in Critical Race Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Critical Whiteness studies, therefore, I seek to understand veganism through these lenses. Second, I have noticed a stark contrast between several black male's perceptions of nature in comparison to those who have been racialized[1] as white males. For example, my twin brother, a black identified male, has always been fearful when going out alone into the remote wilderness in New England. He associates this space with violent acts of racism towards black male bodies. Another example, last year, after going on an excursion to Yosemite National park with my husband, and sharing the pictures of the adventure with my friend Jermaine (a black male from and living in Jackson, MS) he made the comment, "When black men go into the forest, they don't come back out." My father has warned my brother numerous times to be careful in rural Vermont, where my brother lived for two years, while walking around in remote and forested areas with his white girlfriend. My father perceives Vermont wildernerss as a hostile place towards black people who are in romantic relationships with white women; he was certain that in the forest there were racist "rednecks" and "Neo-Nazis" hiding, waiting to hurt my brother for his acts of "miscegenation". When I myself started going on hiking excursions with my husband, a white German male, my father warned us to be careful in forested areas for similar reasons (though I already had this slight paranoia in my consciousness, his concern reinforced it).

In contrast, I have yet to hear fears of violent racism being enacted upon by the bodies of those who have been racialized as white. Not once have I heard this fear of racialized violence from people such as my husband, my close friend Josh (white male who does graduates studies in Forestry out in Arizona), or the plethora of white identified people that I attended Dartmouth College with- a college in which hiking, canoeing and camping are central to the "Dartmouth Experience".

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1 **Racialization**: the process in which human bodies are socially constructed into the category of race, with whiteness being at the top of the hierarchy or power and privilege. See Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. Racial Formation in the United States : From the 1960s to the 1990s. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 1994. for more information.

A "universal" and "colorblind[2]" approach to environmental education in the USA, though with underlying good intentions, is not beneficial for many black people with my brother, Jermaine, and father's unique relationship to the meaning of wilderness. Furthermore, I find it curious that despite that all three were born and raised in rural areas, they are still not comfortable with being a sole black man in wilderness spaces that are predominantly white. This is particularly important to point out since much of the literature in environmental education, focused on black Americans, associates "lack of willing engagement with nature" due to being born and raised in urban areas. If one is not careful, one may assume that being born and raised in a rural nature area means that all people of color will be, by default, comfortable with that landscape.

I theorize that that one's ecological identity in the USA is significantly influenced by the USA's very long history of racism, the racialization process, and "whiteness as the norm." Furthermore, it is absolutely critical that if environmental education is to be successful with engaging more black-identified people (as educators and learners), an understanding and awareness around racialized ecological identity must be incorporated into mainstream environmental education discourses.

First, I would like to explain that the concept of racialized identity, in general, is not new to the collective consciousness of black Americans in the USA. Collectively we have known, since the institution of chattel slavery, that being racialized as negro/colored/black means our sense of place (socially and physically) and consciousness development will be epistemologically/ontologically different from white racialized human beings, due to the freedom, mobility, easier access to optimal resources, and sense of humanity that has been afforded to most white identified people in the USA (Armour 1997; Du Bois 1990; hooks 1992; Leary 2005; Yancy 2004). This paper is focused more towards an audience of environmental educators who do not have this collective black American embodied experience and black socio-spatial epistemological grid; an audience that may simply be unaware of how deeply one's consciousness and relationship with "nature" and environmental sustainability cannot be separated from the politics of racial formation and racialized identity in the USA; an audience who may think that the low numbers of African Americans not involved in their

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2 **"Colorblind"**: refers to a perception in which one supposedly does not see "race" and simply views everyone as "raceless". However, such a perception is understood to be problematic, as "colorblind" (1)assumes that everyone has the embodied experience of whiteness and/or is white by default; i.e. "I don't see you as black," does not translate into "racelessness" but in fact translates into, "I see you as white"; and (2) ignores that the material consequences of the social construction of race on non-white racialized bodies cannot be erased through "colorblind" lens. See Ansell, Amy E. "Casting a Blind Eye: The Ironic Consequences of Color-Blindness in South Africa and the United States." Critical Sociology 32.2-3 (2006): 333-56; and Simpson, Jennifer Lyn. "The Color-Blind Double Blind: Whiteness and the (Im)Possibility of Dialogue." Communication Theory 18 (2008): 139-59. for more information.

perception of environmentalism, "Must simply not care about the environment." Lastly, the majority of environmental educators in the USA are white; being racialized as white generally means this demographic has been socialized to believe that their epistemologies are disconnected from historical and present day racializing/racist processes (Mills 1997; Tuana and Sullivan 2007). White socio-spatial epistemologies has become so invisible to this collective demographic, that when the invisibility of their racialized knowledge is made visible as a driving force in educational praxis, it is usually received as new, shocking, difficult to conceptualize, and even with resistance and animosity (Farr 2004; Mills 1997; Sullivan and Tuana 2007; Yancy 2004).

I have no intention of creating "white guilt" or "white shame" around this phenomenon, as I am aware as a Critical Race and Critical Whiteness theorist, these are the consequences of what it means to be racialized as white in the USA. Hence, I think it is important to compassionately help people engage critically with this new information and integrate it into their environmental education praxis. Using Philip Payne's ecological identity framework, with particular focus on Critical Race theory4 and Critical Whiteness studies, I will propose a culturally sensitive environmental education strategy to address a model for not only people with my brother, father, and Jermaine's experience, but also a model for those white identified environmental educators who are unfamiliar with the implications of their own white racialized consciousness and epistemologies.

Published in Environmental Education Research in the year 2000, Phillip Payne offers a critical analysis of what identity politics means for environmental education in the article, "Identity and Environmental Education." He draws particular attention to the concept of ecological identity and how the site of the body needs to be given more centrality within environmental education. Ecological identity, or how one identifies with and relates to the ecology and environmental phenomenon, cannot be separated from one's own embodied experiences of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, etc (Payne 2000). Payne, as well as Julian Agyeman, note that while fields such as cultural studies, anthropology, and sociology address these embodied experiences as sites for understanding humans and their relationship with the world, environmental education literature lacks this interrogation (Agyeman 2003 ; Payne 2000). He writes:

> Clearly, questioning one's own (embodied) `being' in everyday experiences is a point in the right direction of understanding one's identification with the environment, nature, or its `crisis'…But first, some environmental educators have been assertive about environmental or ecological identities learners should have. For a long time, environmental educators have theoretically embraced 'end-goals' like 'environmentally-responsible' behavior and 'citizenship' action-skills. This type of premeditated 'ought' assumes a great deal about what 'already is' the identities of those who are to be educated[intentionally emphasized]. (Payne 2000, 70-21)

In returning to the embodied experiences of my father, Jermaine, and brother, I ask, *What could one's ecological identity possibly develop into if you were a black bodied USA male whose relation to the forest/woods/wilderness is connected to the history of racism and the cultural trauma around the black collective memory of lynching, and other acts of racial violence?* Furthermore, What happens if, by default, a person with the above experience is expected to 'ought' to have the same racialized relationship with nature and environmentalism as the racial status quo, a demographic who were not recipients of white racism?

I ask these questions because my literature review of this subject reveals that USA mainstream environmental education assumes that one ought to, wants to, and will have a white middle class cultural memory of wilderness/nature that will persuade them to connect to and engage with environmentalism from this specific racialized orientation; and if they do not want to begin at this orientation, it is assumed that black Americans have no interest in the environment (Starkey 2005). There seems to be an overall lack of awareness, from the collectivity of white environmentalists/environmental educators, that this "ought" and assumed orientation are even influenced by "whiteness as the norm" and collective white cultural memories of the wilderness as freeing (Vanderbeck 2008), easily accessible, and emotionally comfortable. These collective memories differ drastically from the cultural memories of racialized minorities who were subjected to genocide, slavery, rape, colonization, terrorism, and torture for white people to have access to wilderness as both a source of economic resources, as well as recreational and preservation uses (Deming 2002; Starkey 2005; Solnit 2007).

In his article, "Inner-city children, country summer: narrating American childhood and the geographies of whiteness," Robert Vanderbeck takes a critical look at the Fresh Air Fund in New York City. Using a Critical Whiteness studies lens, he engages in a discourse analysis of the interviews of white host families in Vermont who invite children of color from inner-city New York to stay with them for the summer. He employs Critical Whiteness studies because "the purpose of an engagement with whiteness is not to determine who is racist or not, but to uncover what whites think about being white and what effects it has on a racial system" (Gutham 2008, 390). He does not judge or criticize the intent of the program, which exposes these children to rural life in New England. Under critique, however, are the assumptions the interviewed families make about their own childhood experiences as the necessary norm that all children should experience; to not have these experiences means a child does not have a normal childhood but "ought to." There is a covert sense in the interviews that being a black or brown youth, born and raised in a low income urban area is, by default, deficient on all levels (family life, sense of community, loving parents, etc). Vanderbeck argues that interviewed Vermont host families envision that the cure to this deficiency

is exposure to not necessarily wilderness education, but to white middle-class value system that the Vermont host families believe is "universal" and the objective "given." We see this in the article when interviewees make negative assumptions about the family life and living spaces of the inner-city youths. Though having never seen the neighborhoods or homes of the children they are hosting, and even never having deeply engaged with the children's parents, the interviewed host families assume that the children get a better family experience through the Vermont summer host family. Some even go as far to assume that the children in the inner city do not get the type of hugs and love that their host family can offer (Vanderbeck 2008). In fact the collective ecological identity of these host families is absolutely rooted in an invisible white racially class privileged identification that is masked as normal and unraced, serving as a benchmark for how all families in the USA should raise their children   (Vanderbeck 2008).

Such a white ontological perspective of black and brown inner-city existence, I propose, creates an environmental education situation that would make a lot of brown and black inner city children feel self-conscious, inferior, and shame for not having that normal [white middle class] ecological identity and upbringing. If the host families aren't even aware of such an offensive perception, I cannot imagine how it doesn't come through when host parents are talking to the children they are hosting. One has to wonder why, too, as Vanderbeck notes, 60% of the invited children do not return to the program for the second time. Why wouldn't these children want to experience a free normal childhood in a rural Vermont setting?

These questions and points that I draw attention to are not to take away from the wonderful work that Fresh Air Fund is doing. My questions and observations, I think, focuses on potential reasons for why the program may not be retaining more than 40% of their host children. In asking, "How can we get more inner city youths of color to stay in the program?" maybe the host family could also ask:

> How do my ecological identity and lack of awareness around my white racialized epistemology shape what I think a child 'ought' to experience?
> How, even though I thought I had good intentions, does this lack of awareness actually cause uncomfortable and hurtful communication towards the host child?
> Instead of focusing on the site of Vermont wilderness as a remedy, perhaps I should first be focusing on the site of the racialized embodied experience of these children and accept that their ecological identity will be unique- but not necessarily wrong- from my own?

As I focus back onto the original narratives of my brother, friend Jermaine, and father's ecological identities rooted in violent white-black wilderness interactions, I'm also wondering how much the cultural memory of black and brown men being threatened in "the woods" affects the comfort level of some of the Fresh Air fund children. One cannot forget that the power of cultural memory around

racialized violence is that children of this current generation need not to experience it viscerally; stories and images of these events are handed down from parents and other family members that help form black racialized identity at an early age (Eyerman 2001; Markovitz 2004) while white racialized children are handed down cultural amnesia around this violent history toward non-white peoples (Tuana and Sullivan 2007). Is there a possibility that despite being with a "safe" host family, some of the black and brown children simply cannot "shake off" that Vermont is demographically the most white-bodied state in the USA, and that some kids may still not feel safe in these rural and wilderness locations because of cultural memory of trauma associated with white-bodied dominated rural spaces as historical sites of violence towards non-white bodied peoples?

Similar questions around whiteness and awareness also needed to be asked by white middle class eco-sustainable food activists in Julie Gutham's, "'If They Only Knew': Color Blindness and Universalism in California Alternative Food Institutions." In interviewing this demographic on why they think more people of color are not seen as customers at local farmer's markets and community supported agricultural spaces, I interpreted the consensus in Gutham's interviews as, "Since everyone has my [white middle class] ecological identity and embodied experience, then all they need is to be environmentally educated about how important local foods are to eco-sustainable existence and then they'll want to participate. That's all it took for me." Gutham writes that there is absolutely no reflection on how history of racial and class inequalities, as well as current situations of environmental racism and "whiteness as the norm," could actually be connected to the low numbers of people of color involved in these practices. As a matter of fact, several white identified people who she interviewed who were asked to reflect on issues of race and ethnicity found her interrogation problematic. They thought it was racist to even ask questions about the connections race has access to eco-sustainable food, agricultural practices and environmental education around alternative food lifestyles. She writes:

> When asked how to improve diversity at the market, one manager responded, "We always hope for more people and do not focus on ethnic—what we present attracts all!" Likewise, a CSA manager said,

> *"Targeting those in our communities that are ethnic or low income would show a prejudice we don't work within. We do outreach programs to reach everyone interested in eating locally, healthily, and organically."*

> Some managers explicitly invoked the language of color blindness. Aversion to questions regarding the ethnicity of customers was founded on the presumption that the questions themselves were racist. As one farmers' market manager put it,

> *"Some of your questions are pretty intrusive— I also found some to be racist. I left these questions blank. This was intentional, not accidental."*

Echoed the CSA respondent mentioned earlier,

"Difference is wrong; it is better to try to become color blind in how we do things. . . . Your questioning has a slant of political correctness.. . .We are set up for our community."

Yet, another CSA manager responded:

"I think it is an admirable goal to try to get our customers to be more diverse, but I feel a bit troubled by all of this. I sometimes feel pressure to be perfectly politically correct. . . . I wish we could elevate the farmers first, then it might be easier to bring the rest of the world along." (Gutham 2008, 392-393)

Colorblind approach? It's racist to ask questions about the obvious lack of people of color at CSAs and local farmers markets? Gutham concludes that her interviewees were so confident that their own ontology of eco-sustainable agriculture are so "obviously" universal (and of course not marked by white middle class privileged identity development) that they don't need to deeply engage with understanding why non-white people are not involved; this engagement conveniently goes against their colorblind politics. I can't imagine how people with this environmental education perception could ever emotionally connect to the non-colorblind experiences that my father, brother, and friend Jermaine have had, and that so deeply impact their ecological identities. To tell a brown or black person one is a "colorblind" environmental educational outreach person, is to tell them that their unique and real experiences with various forms of racism has no material consequences; has no connections to the fact that they don't have the same access to feeling "safe" or to healthier spaces and agricultural products as white middle class people.

I introduced Gutham and Vanderbeck's two articles because I believe it's a foundational backdrop to understanding the challenges African American people in the USA face as both environmental educators and learners in a predominantly white middle class field. One cannot understand the supposedly low numbers of African Americans in environmentalism without understanding this connection to the lack of understanding and awareness around racialized ecological identity, middle class "whiteness as the invisible norm," and the problematic of colorblind rhetoric within mainstream environmental education literature and research in the USA. Is it that African Americans have not historically been interested in participating in environmentalism, or is it that they have simply been erased from a white male historiography of environmentalism/ecological identity in the USA? Michael Starkey, in his Masters Thesis work at UC Berkeley, argues that he has seen a constant exclusion of black people in his literature review on the topic of wilderness and American identity. Once again, the space of the wilderness is relegated to white European experiences (Starkey 2005).

I would also argue that it's not that African Americans don't participate in environmentalism; the

participation may not be the type of environmentalism seen in mainstream media. Yes, environmental activism and educational outreach can be focused on John Muir, Sierra Club, wilderness preservation types of activism, but it's not the only type of environmental education and activist focus in the USA. Furthermore, how are black American's interest in environment even being measured? Is the benchmark for participation and interest more Sierra Club types of activity, an audience who is largely white middle class and an organization that, "celebrates wilderness ethics and 'green' consumerism while avoiding the tensions of race, class, urbanization, and global economic development" (Furman and Gruenewald 2004)? D.E. Taylor writes that mainstream metric indicators for environmental interests do not fit with the collective epistemologies and ecological identities of most African Americans (Taylor 1989).

However, and unfortunately, it's the Sierra Club type of environmental educational focus that has been constructed and depicted as what one 'ought to do' in mainstream environmental outreach and media. I wonder why the college kids working for Greenpeace out on the streets of Berkeley, CA (where I live) are educated to educate passerbys about polar bears but never about people of color and low income peoples as victims of environmental injustice (Hurricane Katrina is a great example that could be use). As a matter of fact, during my entire K-12 education experience as a student, I never learned that environmentalism also involved environmental justice activism, lead largely by people of color in the USA who were constantly struggling against environmental racism and classism. Most of us during K-12 education in the USA learned that the "great" environmentalist pioneers were all white males that focused on everything but the non-white human victims of environmental injustice (Solnit 2008; Starkey 2008). I personally would have engaged in environmentalism sooner, had I been exposed to these other types of environmentalist focuses that connected to my unique experience of being black and experiencing racism and classism as a youth in my 97% white rural New England town. This is one of the central points to Dr. Carolyn Finney's work. In Black Faces, White Space: African Americans and the Great Outdoors, Finney writes:

> Regardless of where African-Americans live geographically, our common history of slavery, segregation and racism appears to inform our perceptions and attitudes about the environment. Issues of fear, exclusion, little sense of ownership and lack of awareness all come into play. Initial findings suggest that for African-Americans, creating a deep-seated sense of feeling and responsibility regarding the environment may NOT come primarily from telling them they need to save the trees for their children's future (this isn't meant to imply that they don't care about their children's future)…Why not use the same framework for understanding African-American interaction with the environment? (Finney 2004)

If I were to begin to create an environmental education strategy for my father, brother, and friend Jermaine, this is what my focus would be. And instead of employing environmental education models that have successfully worked for white middle class demographic, I would re-orientate my

model to begin with and ecojustice perspective that aligns itself more with the ecological identity of human beings with my family and friend's experiences. Such a model is explored in Furman and Gruenewald's, "Expanding the Landscape of Social Justice: A Critical Ecological Analysis." It literally speaks directly to embodied experiences of racial and class minorities, centering this experience as the necessary site to develop environmental education programs.

> Ecojustice aims to synthesize four educational and political goals: (a) understanding the relationships between ecological and cultural systems, specifically, between the domination of nature and the domination of oppressed groups; (b) addressing environmental racism, including the geographical dimension of social injustice and environmental pollution; (c) revitalizing the noncommodified traditions of different racial and ethnic groups and communities, especially those traditions that support ecological sustainability; and (d) reconceiving and adapting our lifestyles in ways that will not jeopardize the environment for future generations. (Furman and Gruenewald 2004, 55).

Such a perspective, I believe, is appealing and very empowering for certain black people who feel their ecological identities represent a stripping of power and agency within natural spaces in the USA. On the contrary, the approach that the people Julie Gutham interviewed in CSA and local farmer's markets, were diametrically opposed to even engaging in educational outreach with issues around racial, class, and ethnic inequalities. This may very well be why they are unable to attract more people of color.

Solutions to the Challenges and Conclusion

I'd like to return to the initial questions that I posed earlier in the paper, What could one's ecological identity possibly develop into if you were a black bodied USA male whose relation to the forest/woods/wilderness is connected to the history of racism and the cultural trauma around the black collective memory of lynching, and other acts of racial violence? Furthermore, What happens if, by default, a person with the above experience is expected to 'ought' to have the same racialized relationship with nature and environmentalism as the racial status quo, a demographic who were collectively not recipients of white racism?

Creating an environmental educational model around my family and friend's ecological identity should incorporate, as Julian Agyeman writes, "culturally sensitive research approaches" (Agyeman 2003, 90). However, I would argue that this may need to start with an environmental educational model that uses both a Critical Race and Critical Whiteness theoretical lens, as its important not only to have African Americans incorporate their critical reflexivity around their political identity and its connection to environmentalism, it is important for white middle class demographic to engage in how their racial identity, and how "whiteness as the invisibilized norm" affects their ecological identity and environmental education praxis. Colorblind approaches simply will not

work. Environmental education researchers of African descent, such as Julian Agyeman, Carolyn Finney and Michael Starkey, are already focusing on how to better engage African Americans in environmentalism. What I would like to propose is a reading list to incorporate awareness around engaging environmental educators about "whiteness" and ongoing systemic problems with racism that many may not be aware of, simply because, as stated earlier, being racialized and socialized into whiteness generally means one is taught that they are raceless and need not to reflect on how being racialized as white influences their consciousness, epistemologies, and ontologies:

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updated ed. Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2008.

I propose that after engaging with the above literature, to revisit Phillip Payne's paper, "Identity and
Environmental Education," and map out one's ecological identity from a racialized body-politic.
Themes from the Payne article, in the form of the questions below, could prove useful:

What assumptions do I have about environmental education and does this have
connection to me being racialized as white?
What do I think learners 'ought to' embrace in environmental education and does this
have any connection to being racialized as white?
What assumptions have I had or do I have about the environmental interests of my
learners, and does this have connection to being racialized as white?
If I am just becoming aware of white privilege, how has this lack of awareness inform
my ecological identity, and therefore influenced my environmental education praxis?
Do I have resistance to engaging in critical reflexivity about whiteness and white
privilege? If so, why, even though the scholarly literature I have read indicates that it is
a necessary transformative process to engage in if I want to create more encompassing
environmental education experiences?

These are just a few questions that one could begin to ask themselves. The point of this exercise is
not to create "blame" or "guilt"; it is simply to open up a door of awareness so that both African
American and white Americans can reconcile this lack of awareness and challenges that Finney,
Starkey, Payne, Agyeman, Vanderbeck and Gutham have highlighted in their work.

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