

## CHAPTER FOUR

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# Blood in the Soil: The Racial, Racist, and Religious Dimensions of Environmentalism

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Several years ago while volunteering for an after-school gardening club, one of the students whom I was trying to recruit to join the club asked a question that has lingered in my conscious ever since. The Garden Club was one of only a few after-school activities that took place at the “continuation school” (e.g. a school for students who are not on track to graduate high school in four years). As a person of color, I wanted to try and recruit as many students of color to join. After explaining to a young black student what we would be doing—gardening, learning about food justice issues in California, and cooking—he looked at me and said “What? Are you trying to make me a slave or something?”

To be sure, the agricultural soil of America is covered in the blood, sweat, and tears of many forced laborers, among them African and African American slaves. The depth of psychological trauma embodied within black people with respect to their enslavement and forced agricultural labor is deep. I use the word “embodied” here because the student has no personal experience of enslavement. Yet, through oral histories and perhaps some academic exposure, his reflexive response was to equate the practice of gardening to slavery. Unfortunately, I do not believe that his story is unique within the black community. My experience of becoming more ecologically conscious caused me to question my “authenticity” as an African American man and as a social activist. “Shouldn’t I be working on important issues that are relevant to my community, rather than expending my creative energy working with (almost exclusively) white people on environmentalism, food justice, and animal rights?” so I thought.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore some of the reasons why black people have been reluctant to participate in the environmental movement writ large and to what extent Christian theology, particularly theological anthropology, may influence their reluctance. As such I’m particularly interested in exploring the impact slavery and segregation has had on black people with respect to ecological care, the role whiteness has played in reinforcing problematic notions of humanness as it relates to black bodies, and how these beliefs have contributed to the overwhelming whiteness of the environmental

movement. I will argue that our definitions of nature and environmentalism have been framed through the lens of whiteness and white supremacy and that Christian theological anthropology has played a critical role providing ideological support in the construction of these definitions. In short, a primary cause of the dysfunctional relationship between human beings and non-human nature lies in a broken theological anthropology that has framed black and other people of color as subhuman and white people as ideally human. This framing has inhibited both groups from being able to value nonhuman nature in life-affirming ways. Ultimately Christians who are committed to caring for Creation we are going to offer a sustainable and inclusive solution to our current ecological crisis will have to redefine what it means to *be* human if we are to cultivate a holistic environmentalism.

### THE WHITE RACIAL FRAME, ECOLOGICAL BURDEN & BEAUTY

I define environmentalism as the social movement(s) that seeks to protect, preserve, and improve the quality of nonhuman nature. Environmentalism is a political and ethical movement grounded in the moral claim that nonhuman nature deserves consideration when human beings are making decisions that may harm the environment. In this way, environmentalism as I am discussing it in this chapter refers to organizations and individuals who are particularly concerned with environmental conservation and preservation.

For over a century environmentalism in the U.S. has been tied to ideological narratives that have shaped the way human beings seek to understand and experience nature. To be sure, the stories, myths, and ideologies that have shaped the modern environmentalist movement have been interpreted and retold through the lens of what sociologist Joe Feagin calls the white racial frame. The white racial frame is a worldview that interprets everything through the lens of the white experience. Indeed, it is the dominant worldview of Western society, and it encompasses a “broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate.”<sup>1</sup> In this way, the white racial frame explains how stories of settler pilgrims, frontier explorers, and cowboys portrayed as heroes and exhibiting an idealized relationship with nature were written alongside narratives of savage natives and simple-minded blacks; when viewed through the frame of whiteness it’s hard to “see” Native Americans and blacks as being anything else during the US colonial period. The dominant framing of whiteness as such as positive and people of color (particularly black people) as negative, has fostered a hegemonic superiority of a particular kind of white social values: political, economic, religious, and environmental, to name a few. As we will see below, the white racial frame is the dominant frame of the early American environmentalists and continues to be foundational to the environmental movement today.

Given the framing of environmentalism through the lens of whiteness, it is no surprise that blacks and other people of color have experienced what environmentalist and English professor Kimberly Ruffin calls “environmental othering.” Othering in this sense refers to the myriad of ways that people of color have been denied access to the privileges of the environment (i.e. ownership of land, freedom to choose where one lives, access to National Parks, etc.) and disproportionately bear the burdens of pollution and environmental waste. Over a sustained period, environmental othering leads to what Ruffin has termed the “ecological burden-and-beauty-paradox.”<sup>2</sup> This paradox helpfully illustrates the dynamic influence of our social order on how people experience the natural world.

While Ruffin limits her use of the paradox as descriptive of African American experiences with the natural world, I find that it is also useful in examining the relationship between white people and non-human nature. As will be discussed below, the environmentalist movement, a movement that is predominantly white, has historically portrayed nature as something to be enjoyed at one's leisure and thus it is *primarily* for the purposes of leisure that we must protect the environment. I will argue that this worldview ought to be understood as an ecological burden since it overlooks or minimizes human dependence upon the natural world for our survival. As illustrated at the beginning of this chapter, the ecological burden for black people emerges out of their racialization as a people particularly suited for agricultural work and the psychological trauma of chattel slavery.

In this way, while African Americans have struggled with the ecological burden of forced agricultural work and segregation which has led to environmental racism, white Americans struggle to move beyond their ideological construction of the environment as something that can only truly be enjoyed by doing specific "outdoor" activities that have evolved from their re-telling of colonial narratives of Western expansion. The challenge for both whites and people of color will be to develop an understanding of environmentalism outside of the white racial frame, one that fosters a holistic sense of self, understands human dependence upon the natural world, and can enjoy the beauty and awe of nature.

### ECOLOGICAL BURDEN OF WHITE ENVIRONMENTALIST LOGIC

In her examination of former U.S. Vice President Al Gore's book and documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, Ruffin argues that Gore's work is reflective "of a strain of environmentalism informed by a limited triumvirate of W's: wilderness, the West, and whiteness."<sup>3</sup> She notes that Gore's narrative of traversing across the country with his wife in their fossil-fueled car to camp, hike, and visit national parks to experience and appreciate the physical beauty of nature "enact one of America's celebrated environmental activities: white families journeying westward through America's grand wilderness."<sup>4</sup> Most importantly, the latent message of this narrative is that recreation and leisure heighten our appreciation and value of nature, and this value outweighs the pollution one causes by taking such a trip. Lastly, Gore's narrative also reflects the role that white privilege has played in framing our ecological narratives given that the people of color would not have been legally allowed the privilege of taking such trips until the passage of civil rights legislation in the late 1960's.

The three W's that Ruffin identifies are parts of a larger whole that I describe as the white environmentalist frame. The white environmentalist frame is a sub-frame of the white racial frame mentioned above. While the white racial frame is foundational to the way most white people (and people of color who have uncritically adopted this dominant worldview) make meaning out of the world, Feagin notes that people are multi-framers: "They have numerous frames for understanding and interpretation in their minds, and their frames vary in complexity from the particular micro-level framing of situations to a broad framing of society."<sup>5</sup> In this sense, while it is reasonable to assert that the current incarnation of the environmentalist movement is populated by predominantly liberal whites, the white racial frame is so comprehensive that they can reject certain elements of the traditional frame (e.g. stereotype that black people are inherently lazy) while consciously or unconsciously accepting other subframes (e.g. blacks don't enjoy the

outdoors). Thus the white environmentalist frame limits their capacity to see people of color as being able to offer critical insight of or to act as necessary contributors to their cause. And yet, because many white environmentalists could be considered socially and perhaps politically liberal, these same people would not see their bias as racist. Rather they would understand them as mere matters of fact, born out of years of their experience in the environmental movement. Their framing enables them to either overlook the historical experiences of people of color as agricultural laborers or to interpret those experiences through a whitewashed history.

The ecological worldview of whiteness is the ecological burden carried by white environmentalists. The white environmentalist frame readily identifies the ideal human/nature interaction as one of leisure and recreation (i.e. camping, hiking, fishing, hunting, etc.) and downplays the role of agricultural work and alternative experiences of nature. As I will argue below, this way of framing the environment finds its roots in, among other things, the narratives that have been constructed about the first white male “explorers” to travel to the North American West and the Christian Creation narratives.

“Are you an environmentalist or do you work for a living?”<sup>6</sup> The previous sentence is the title of an essay by environmentalist Richard White which explores the relationship between work and the environmentalist movement. White argues that most environmentalists equate productive work *in* nature with the destruction *of* nature, ignoring “the ways that work itself is a means of knowing nature while celebrating the virtues of play and recreation in nature.”<sup>7</sup> As such, environmentalists (again, most of whom are white) tend to believe that blue-collar work, whether it is in the woods, a refinery, on the sea, or in another type of factory, usually results in the destruction of nature in some sense. For them, nature is at its safest when it is protected from work as I have described it.

However, the distrust of blue collar work creates a human/nature dualism that most environmentalists would find problematic. One of the post-modern foils of the environmentalist has been the human/nature dualism that permeated enlightenment philosophy and thought. Enlightenment human/nature dualism argued that people existed above nature and that it was their destiny to control nature as such for our benefit. Much work has been done to deconstruct the aforementioned dualistic understanding of the relationship between humans and nature. Generally speaking, modern environmentalists have argued that rather than existing above nature, we ought to see ourselves as living within the earth’s ecology. To be sure, they also argued that spending time in nature for the sake of recreation was critical in order to cultivate the view that nature has value beyond its usefulness in producing goods for human consumption. This approach, however, has created a similar dualism. The distrust of work, of humanity’s ability to live within nature without destroying it, contributes to the larger Enlightenment tendency to define human beings outside of nature. In this way, for the environmentalist, an appropriate relationship with nature becomes one of leisure and play because these activities are understood to be the only ones that do not contribute to its degradation. “Saving an old-growth forest or creating a wilderness area is certainly a victory for some of the creatures that live in these places, but it is just as certainly a victory for backpackers and a defeat for loggers.”<sup>8</sup>

We can link the emergence of the nature-as-leisure worldview to the contemporary interpretation of the narratives of the some of the founding figures of the three W’s: Lewis and Clark, and Daniel Boone among others. For environmentalists such as Bill McKibben and Wendell Berry, these figures play an important educational role in

understanding how human beings ought to view and interact with nature.<sup>9</sup> In this way, the pioneer figures are among those who have been chosen to play the role of the mythical “first white man whose arrival marks not just specific changes but the beginning of change itself.”<sup>10</sup> The stories of the first white men are big-picture historical narratives laced with moral teachings that have been understood, interpreted, and transmitted through the white racial frame.<sup>11</sup> These emotion-laden scenarios include stories about white conquest, superiority, hard work, and achievement. As such they are deeply meaningful to white Americans because they are consistent with the American mythology that if one works hard enough, one can succeed despite the limitations of race, gender, religion, or class.

By selectively retelling these histories such that the pioneer figures of Lewis, Clark, and Boone are believed to be journeying across an unspoiled and untouched paradise, environmentalists craft an image of nature as being ideally separated from human activity.<sup>12</sup> In this way, the actual challenging and dangerous work of traversing across lands unknown to them is altered to appear more like an extended backpack journey across the country to the American West. The stories of those early pioneers become stories of leisure and recreation personified; thus only by recreating their “adventure” are we truly able to have an authentic and transformative encounter with nature. In holding on to these narratives, white environmentalists have alienated people of color who do not find the same encounters with nature as meaningful or have been denied access to the natural spaces that allow hiking for such an extended period that they recognize these areas as hostile to their very presence.

It should come as no surprise then that the environmentalist movement is overwhelmingly white. Indeed, the whiteness of the environmental movement is the second burden of white environmentalist frame. This burden exists, in part, due to the racist views embedded in the foundation of the movement by some of its principle figures. The origins of the “movement” began in the late 1800s with environmentalists such as Gifford Pinchot, John Muir, Henry Thoreau, Madison Grant, and President Theodore Roosevelt. Muir and Pinchot are especially relevant because of their roles in creating the Sierra Club and several U.S. National Parks respectively.

Gifford Pinchot served as the Chief of the Forest Service during the Roosevelt presidency and oversaw a significant expansion in conserving lands that would be designated as National Parks. For Pinchot and Roosevelt, the conservation of land was inextricably tied to conserving particular kinds of American qualities such as strength and ingenuity, qualities that they believed evolved among whites in the frontier. Here too we can see how the narratives of the first white men, understood through the white racial frame, play a role in this ecological burden as well.

Pinchot was a graduate of Yale University and advocated a nationalist political platform similar to many progressives today—a strong national government to curtail increasing corporate economic and political power. However, his political beliefs were grounded in the notion that a particular type of American way of life needed to be conserved. For Pinchot, conservation applied not only to preserving beautiful landscapes from development, but also to the human species. During his time in the Roosevelt administration, Pinchot became a strong advocate of the eugenics movement: “As gardeners and foresters would thin weak genetic strains and nurture the strong, so eugenic campaigners called for planned racial improvement through sterilization of people deemed inferior, beginning with anyone with a disability, and encouraged breeding by the racially superior.”<sup>13</sup> In 1909 he submitted a three-volume National Conservation Commission (NCC) report to the president, who subsequently presented it to Congress.

The NCC reports volume on “National Vitality, Its Waste and Conservation” includes ten recommendations for “national vitality” and “conservation.” Recommendation ten argues for eugenics, forced sterilization, and marriage prohibition for groups deemed unfit.<sup>14</sup> The report called for the creation and promotion of policies that favored eugenically fit marriages and framed marriages between the fit and unfit as taboo and akin to incest. The report concludes saying that:

The problem of the conservation of our natural resources is therefore not a series of independent problems, but a coherent, all-embracing whole. . . If our nation cares to make any provision for its grandchildren and its grandchildren’s grandchildren, this provision must include conservation in all its branches—but above all, the conservation of the racial stock itself.<sup>15</sup>

In the following decades, multiple states passed laws influenced by eugenics that outlawed various types of marriages and authorized forced sterilization among the mentally disabled, the poor, and people of color.<sup>16</sup> Conservation, it seems, was not a movement intent on persuading people of color to adopt its principles. Rather one of its purposes was to show that some blacks were not quite “American” enough to understand its importance. American in this sense must be understood through the white racial frame and connotes the adoption of a way of being in the world that supports the superiority of whiteness among various races and white framing of social and political issues.

As noted, John Muir was founding member and first president of the Sierra Club. After suffering an accident while working that nearly blinded him, Muir set out on his famed “Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf.” He reached California’s San Joaquin Valley in 1868, and the evocative landscapes of the Sierra Nevada moved him such that he made his home in Yosemite. He authored over 300 essays and ten books, and his notion of conservation and environmentalism evoked the language of spirituality.<sup>17</sup> His effort to portray Yosemite as a sacred place akin to the cathedrals of Europe reveal that he believed that a Divine beauty was present within creation. And yet, black people and other people of color did not fit into his vision of beauty, conservation, or his environmental ethic. During his walk through lands devastated by the Civil War, he “spoke of Negroes as largely lazy and easy-going and unable to pick as much cotton as a white man.”<sup>18</sup> Muir was quick to adopt the post-war ideology regarding the laziness of black people, an ideology created to ensure the poor and working class whites would maintain a sense of superiority over the newly freed African Americans. To be sure, with an attitude such as this, black people and other people of color would not be welcome within his new environmental conservation club.

The Sierra Club is not unique in respect to its lack of diversity. As environmental groups began to emerge, they were mostly segregated based on race and class. Moreover, the majority of people who joined environmental groups were largely white and middle class, and this has remained a characteristic of these groups ever since. In 1969 a survey of the Sierra Club revealed that its members were mostly white and middle class and a study in 1975 showed that the majority of volunteers were white.<sup>19</sup> The most recent data available on the subject of diversity in environmental organizations comes from Green 2.0 (formerly the Green Diversity Initiative). Green 2.0’s 2014 report, “The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations,” was written by Dorceta Taylor, an African American female professor at the University of Michigan’s School of Natural Resources and Environment.<sup>20</sup> The report details the lack of diversity among conservation/preservation agencies, government agencies, and grant-making organizations. Perhaps the most disappointing statistic is that while initially 350 organizations agreed to complete a survey



on diversity within their organizations, 150 surveys had to be dropped from the sample size because they answered too few questions. In fact, some respondents after beginning the survey stopped answering questions once they were asked about diversity within their own organization's leadership. In this way, the survey reminds us yet again that inability to confront the truth of one's racial bias is one of the primary hurdles of the white racial frame. Of 191 conservation and preservation organizations, their leadership and paid staff were 88.7 percent and 88 percent white respectively.<sup>21</sup> Between 2010–2013, 77 percent of their interns were white, as were 87 percent of their new hires; this is despite that fact that many of these organizations profess diversity as an important issue for their organization. In fact, "in many instances, organizational representatives were significantly more likely to say diversity activities should be undertaken in their region than they were to say that their organization was likely or very likely to support the activities once they were put in place." In short, merely believing (or conveying belief) that people of color should be more involved in the environmental movement is not enough to compel its leadership to actively change how they do their work to recruit more people of color into their organizations.

Why is this the case? How can environmental organizations make the contradictory claim that people of color should be more involved in the movement but that they were not likely to support actions to diversify their organizations if they were put in place? I contend that this contradictory thought process is a consequence of their adoption and application of the white environmentalist frame. By this, I mean that the leadership of the environmentalist movement, both consciously and unconsciously, believe that black and other people of color do not "care" about the environment in ways that they think they ought to—the *white way*, i.e. to preserve an outdoor leisure lifestyle. This belief has been fostered by both social Darwin ideology (e.g. eugenics and arguments that certain humans are more "fit" than others) and an undercurrent of Christian theological anthropology that justified human domination of nature, more specifically white male dominance of all Creation, which I will address after my description of the ecological burden of black embodiment.

## ECOLOGICAL BURDEN OF BLACK EMBODIMENT

[A]"You can't know where you are going until you know where you have been." This is a popular colloquial saying within black communities and one that speaks to the importance placed upon keeping alive the memory of the millions who died in the purchase, transportation, and exploitation of black labor. Through familial, communal, and literary narratives black people have tried to make sense of their current burdens in light of the legacy of their most painful, if not their heaviest, burden—slavery. Without a doubt, the most significant ecological burden that Africans and African Americans have endured within the U.S. was chattel slavery.

Some may question the importance of keeping such narratives alive given the obvious pain holding these memories may cause. To those who hold such positions, I argue that maintaining the collective memory of slavery, forced agricultural work, and the legal discrimination of people of color is essential for environmentalist meaning-making. The embodied experience of both slave and slave master, oppressor and oppressed, must be included in whatever new definition of environmentalist we develop. The suppression of this history enables the white environmentalist frame specifically, and the white racial frame in general, to believe fictional memories and "alternative facts" about the colonial

and racial history of the U.S. Postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon understood this well when he argued that one of the colonists' goals is to alienate the colonized from their past by distorting, disfiguring, and destroying all alternative historical narratives *except* the one that presents the colonized as dependent creatures.<sup>22</sup> In this way, the preservation of the narratives of the colonized have historically served as a counter-frame to the white racial frame, and thus are a critical counter-frame in my constructive conclusion.

The retelling of their ancestral narratives enables black people to exert a degree of agency over their history and, in a sense, the history of their ancestors. In the 1930s, the Federal Writers' Project, a program instituted as part of the Works Progress Administration, began recording the historical narratives of former slaves. These stories allow us to capture a glimpse of what the experience of slavery was like for millions of black people. Mary Reynolds was one such person. During her interview, she described slavery as:

. . . the worst days was ever seed in the world. They was things past tellin', but I got the scars on my old body to show to this day. I seed worse than what happened to me. I seed them put men and women in the stock with their hands screwed down through holes in the board and they feets tied together and they naked behinds to the world. Solomon . . . the overseer beat them with a big whip and massa look on. The niggers better not stop in the fields when they year them yellin' . . . The times I hated most was pickin' cotton when the frost was on the bolls. My hands git sore and crack open and bleed. We'd have a li'l fire in the fields and iffen the ones with tender hands couldn't stand it no longer, we'd run and warm out hands a li'l bit.<sup>23</sup>

Mary's story captures the physical and psychological trauma of black enslavement and dehumanization. The psychological message Mary and the other slaves were being taught was that the pain of the victim does not matter, indeed the victim herself and her black life did not matter. All that mattered was the slave's ability to generate income for their master. Mary and the other slaves were discouraged from paying attention to the torture of one of their family members as if the life of the tortured soul is not worth caring for; their lives were to be understood as "other." In this way, ecological othering can be understood as an extension of othering as it relates to ones' humanity. In an effort to make sense of the way they were being treated the enslaved were taught to see themselves not as human, but as other. And yet the cries of the beaten one could be heard by everyone. These were not the cries of an "other," but rather the painful screams from a likely friend.

One can hardly imagine the pain and hurt flowing through the spirit of someone working all the while hearing the cries of someone you know being tortured. It is an enduring pain because, as Mary notes, she has the scars on her body to remind her. These scars would be a visual reminder of her pain, her suffering, her journey, and her resiliency. In this way, while Mary may have never been able to (or desired to) articulate the fullness of her experience of enslavement, she carried an embodied knowledge of the peculiar institution that she and countless others passed down to subsequent generations of black people to protect them from a similar fate. These stories were some of the ways in which elders were able to teach their communities to have a "healthy" fear of situational contexts that have historically lead to the harm or death of black people. Black theologian Howard Thurman argues that in cases such as this, for people of color fear "becomes a form of life assurance, making possible the continuation of physical existence with a minimum of active violence."<sup>24</sup> To be clear, I am not arguing that the narratives of abuse connected to the enslavement of black bodies and agriculture are used to instill a fear of nature or



agriculture within the black community. *Rather I am arguing that they have been used as a means by which black people can be aware of the ways in which our labor (and our lives) can be abused.* As such, one might instantly question if the instructor has an ulterior motive when they express the desire to have you join a gardening club.

After the abolition of slavery in the late nineteenth century, black people in the United States did experience a brief measure of self-determination during the reconstruction era. But ultimately the post-slavery black experience afforded former slaves and their decedents a muted freedom at best. This muted freedom would come to be defined by Jim and Jane Crow segregation, and a different set of ecological burdens. For instance, at the end of the Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman granted forty acres of land and an army mule to former slaves along the southeastern coast. This program would be temporary, as President Andrew Johnson would revoke Sherman's orders and return the land to the former white plantation owners. Additionally, black codes were created, first in Mississippi and then in practically every southern state in order to maintain political, economic, and social control over the newly freed people. Black codes restricted the civil and economic rights of blacks and thus guaranteed a low wage working class for the white middle class and elite business owners. Vagrancy laws were especially harmful in restricting the movement of black bodies. A black man without a signed labor contract would likely be arrested as a vagrant and sentenced to jail or more likely re-enslaved to a white employer to work off their punishment.<sup>25</sup>

The black codes contained laws designating when, where, and how black people could congregate and refusing to abide by these rules could result in lethal violence in the form of lynching. In nearly every state, but particularly in the South, black people were subject to the terrorism of lynching, often by being hanged from a tree. Indeed the tree, as James Cone rightfully expresses, is the symbol of lynching for many black people.<sup>26</sup> "Between 1882–1968 approximately 4,742 black people were illegally lynched by white mobs," and about the same number of individuals were *legally lynched* (according to court records), fell victim to "private white violence," or were murdered and discarded in a creek or river.<sup>27</sup> In truth, we don't know how many lynchings took place during this period, but the history of the US would lead us to believe that it was much more than the 9,500 for which we have records. Given this history, it becomes apparent that lynching succeeded in narrowing the environmental imagination of black people. Moreover, we also can begin to see that black people often interpret their experiences in nature through the white racial frame. By this, I mean that nature is understood to be dangerous because it has been racialized as such. The notion that a walk through the woods could more likely conjure a sense of fear rather than awe and serve as a painful reminder of the limitations placed upon black mobility makes sense in light of the embodied experiences of black people and the way in which nature has been framed.

Jim and Jane Crow segregation played a similar, albeit less physically violent, role in restricting the movement and occupations of black people. The National Parks were not immune to segregation laws and adopted an informal policy of segregation based upon the local customs in the communities that surrounded the park.<sup>28</sup> Despite these restrictions and the aforementioned psychological trauma noted above, there were some black people who visited or desired to visit National Parks. For instance, Shenandoah National Park (established in 1935) was hugely popular when it opened and was the first park to have over a million visitors, just two years after it opened. Shenandoah was particularly popular among blacks, so much so that park officials expedited the construction of a separate area on Lewis Mountain to avoid the challenges they were experiencing in segregating the

white campsites.<sup>29</sup> When the Lewis Mountain campsite opened, it was decidedly smaller than the white campsites and only 75 percent complete. With only forty campsites, the parks leadership ensured that the total number of black visitors would always be limited, even if the demand increased.

At the same time, the notion that black people do not belong in these spaces or do not enjoy nature was present within some of the initial leadership of the National Parks. Unfortunately, these ideas have not completely faded away. In 2015 eight female professors were invited to Yosemite National Park to attend an event for academics; four were white or Hispanic, and four were black. The eight women were told to inform the gate agents that they were guests of the research station and that they were not supposed to pay entrance fees. The four women who were not black were admitted without a problem, while the four black women (who arrived at separate gates at different times) were questioned, made to fill out extraneous forms, and had to check in with the research center staff.<sup>30</sup> To be sure, these women were not just the victim of the ecological burden of being black. They were also the victims of the implicit bias of the white environmentalist frame of the gate agents who were unable to imagine black women doing environmental research, especially black women PhDs. My experience at Yellowstone National Park in May of 2017 was not altogether that different from the aforementioned black women. I was the subject of many stares and exaggerated looks because I was often the only black person in a given area of the park. It seems as though my presence was as surprising to many of the other visitors as the flora, fauna, and nonhuman animals that surrounded us.<sup>31</sup>

The white environmentalist frame is one among many reasons black people have been reluctant to join environmental organizations and participate in the environmentalist movement writ large. With the notable exception of environmental justice organizations, black people have avoided participating in the environmental movement because their experience of ecological burdens outweighed their experience of ecological beauty and their input has not been desired. As already noted, many of the green spaces and National Parks that are being preserved and protected were at one time hostile to the presence of black and brown bodies. Moreover, the psychological residue of slavery and forced agricultural work on soil that they could not own and use for the benefit of their families created a disconnect between themselves and the land; urbanization has only served to further that divide.

## THE ROLE OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

In Lynn White's infamous 1967 article "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," he argues that Christian theology's assertion that human beings were supposed to have "dominion" over nature normalized the ecological exploitation of the Industrial Revolution. While White's later work recognizes that multiple factors encouraged the exploitation of the environment, the article nonetheless awakened Christian theologians to the fact that they had not taken issues of environmental concern seriously. In short order they began to address issues of ecology and environmentalism within the framework of Christian thought. To be sure, Christian eco-theologians and ethicists did not explicitly espouse the racist views of many of the founders of the environmentalist movement. However, by not assessing the foundational principles and assumptions of the movement they were inheriting, one could argue that theologians created Christian versions of racialized environmental thought. Or perhaps it was the other way around? Perhaps it was, in fact, the environmentalists who inherited a racialized Christian theology

that informed their various ecological beliefs. Indeed, even the stories of the “first white men” that the patriarchs of the environmentalist movement evoked have a decidedly Christian hue.

To borrow from Lynn White, I contend that the “roots” of the ecological burdens that I have outlined can be traced back to modern interpretations of Christian theological anthropology. By theological anthropology, I mean the normative claims (i.e. the roots) that influence the way in which we understand and embody the God-human encounter, and how we have come to know ourselves as fully human. Our interpretation of this encounter situates how we understand ourselves in relation to others: God-human, human-human, and human-nonhuman nature.

Within America there is no doubt that how we understand ourselves is profoundly connected to how we are racialized. In *Being Human*, black liberation theologian Dwight Hopkins writes that “theological anthropology grows out of *culture*; culture arises from particular *selves* and the *self*, and selves/self (at least in the US landscape) automatically involve the *race* of the selves/self who create cultures out of which we construct contemporary theological anthropology.”<sup>32</sup> Modern and contemporary interpretations of what it means to be human were constructed around racial representation given that race was the signifying and dehumanizing factor that justified black enslavement and the genocide of Native Americans.

In describing the invention of “man” as such as a theological problem of the Christian imagination of early modernity/colonialism, theologian J. Kameron Carter notes:

This was an imagination in which the Word or “rationality” of God . . . was ideologically collapsed into or became wholly identified with the Word of (Western) man in his so-called rational superiority over his inadequate (because less than rational) Others whom he “discovered” in other parts of the planet.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, the Age of Discovery produced the image of the European man as an imperial God-man, which ultimately led to the production of white supremacy in relationship to non-white “others” and human domination over the earth and the other created beings.<sup>34</sup> The theological anthropology that elevated Euro-American men above other human and nonhuman nature is the understanding of the human self that was the foundation of the environmentalist movement. Unfortunately, this theological anthropology also justified the exploitation of black and other non-white bodies and contributed to the rationalization of the black ecological burdens described above.

When interpreted through the lens of theological anthropology, we can readily see how the idealized human-nature relationship of environmentalists strikingly mirrors the Genesis creation narrative’s prelapsarian human-nature relationship. To counter the narrative of the industrial age that an ideal relationship with nature was one in which human beings were capable of controlling and manipulating the earth’s resources, environmentalists argued that the ideal human-nature relationship was one of reverence and conservation, where people could enjoy the fullness and beauty of our planet. “In the beginning,” so to speak, there was no labor or toil; rather humanity existed in a state of perpetual enjoyment of their environment—a state of perpetual leisure. No longer would humanity’s relationship to nature be purely instrumental, rather they argued that human beings should value nature for its ability to give “us” (i.e. white people) a taste of what the creation narratives present as an idealized human relationship with nature. By this I mean that for many environmentalists, the value of nature lies in its ability to connect us to a deeper sense of our true human Self. Moreover, this connection is at its most powerful

when we experience nature through outdoor activities which have been lost to modernity, activities that allow us to reconnect to the Self.

Environmentalists have created a relational structure with nature wherein only those who can cultivate a relationship with and experience of the environment as one of leisure can be full human beings in the way in which God intended humans to be. In this way, the ecological burden of the white environmentalist frame goes unquestioned because it is consistent with the idealized human–nature relationship. The ecological burdens experienced by black people remain untended wounds because the dominant narratives of environmentalism and humanness were constructed to disregard and counter their personal ecological experiences.

This is the foundational theological problem that flows beneath the surface of white environmentalist logic and is made known in the ecological burdens suffered by both black and white people. The above described theological anthropology limits the ability of all created beings to flourish by prioritizing the needs of a particular type of human (those who are white and male) over the needs of the rest of Creation. As it relates to African Americans, this theological anthropology is particularly burdensome because it reinforces theological and anthropological (e.g. eugenic) claims about black bodies that have historically justified their ecological burden as normative. For white people, the theological anthropology is burdensome because it encourages viewing nature through the white environmentalist frame which idealizes leisure and doesn't take seriously alternative experiences with nonhuman nature. In order to experience the beauty of nonhuman nature in ways that are life-affirming for all people, white people and people of color must liberate themselves from a theological anthropology that justifies these problematic human–nature and human–human relationships.

## FROM ECOLOGICAL BURDEN TO ECOLOGICAL BEAUTY

While a fully constructed theological anthropology is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will conclude by beginning to fashion the structure of what a liberative theological anthropology would entail. I will also describe the consciousness shifting that both black and white people need in order to experience the beauty of nature in non-oppressive ways. At its most basic level a theological anthropology “interrogates what people are called and created to be and do.”<sup>35</sup> I believe it is safe for us to work with the assumption that an important task that human beings ought to *do* is exercise care of Creation. However, who we understand ourselves to be has a direct influence in how we go about doing the work of care. Given this, for the purpose of this chapter, I would like to explore being rather than doing given that the ecological burdens I have identified connect us to existential ways of being in the world. As mentioned earlier the Creation narratives have played a vital role in shaping how we understand ourselves in relation to nature. Despite their baggage, I believe that they can be helpful in our reconstruction of the human self.

Theological and secular philosophers alike have accused the first creation narrative of encouraging an anthropocentric view of nature. If read literally and through the lens of the oppressive theological anthropology described in the previous section, Genesis 1:28 appears to show God blessing and encouraging humanity to “subdue” and have “dominion” over the earth and other animals. However, practical theologian and Hebrew Bible scholar Ellen Davis has a dramatically different view of the text. Following Walter Brueggemann, Davis argues that Genesis 1 should be read as a *liturgical poem* that invites

the reader to see Creation through divine perception and encourages a healthy imagination to think and feel in a certain way.<sup>36</sup> I believe that this is the most fruitful approach to this text. Indeed, viewing it as a poem allows us to take every word seriously since, in good poetry, every word is deliberately chosen. Furthermore, this perspective acknowledges that poems contain a surplus of meaning, and therefore have the potential to say something new and meaningful to different audiences at different times.

A fresh look at Genesis 1:26 (Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, NRSV) from the poetic perspective offers us the opportunity to reimagine what it means to *be* created in the image of God. What does it mean for black people to be described as imaging God? How does a being created in the image of God reshape African American Christian attitudes towards other humans, the earth, and themselves? I contend that by embracing the biblical claim that they are created in the image of God, African American Christians can break free from the U.S. theological and anthropological norm that designated them as less than human, or “Other.” In this way accepting that they, like Jesus, were created in the image of God becomes the liberatory response to the dehumanization of enslavement and forced agricultural work. Indeed, being created in the image of God means that they must accept that they are already fully human despite the continued dehumanization experienced by black people.

For African American Christians, embracing the implications of the *imago Dei* is crucial because it allows black communities to begin to heal the psychological scars of forced enslavement and the dehumanization of their black bodies. Emilie Townes argues that communal lament can be formative for the black community because lament “names problems, seeks justice, and hopes for God’s deliverance.”<sup>37</sup> In this way, communal lament enables the African American Christian community to acknowledge the suffering and pain caused by othering so that it can be addressed. Therefore, communal lament helps the “community to see the crisis as bearable and manageable—in community.”<sup>38</sup> This is why the stories of African enslavement and forced agricultural work need to be told and re-told to our children. Telling these stories, sharing our pains and our triumphs is a part of the healing process. Because all African Americans must contend with the consequences of theological and anthropological dehumanization, communal lament can help them best address those complex psychological consequences. Townes notes that when we grieve and lament “we acknowledge and live the experience rather than try to hold it away from us out of some misguided notion of being objective or strong.”<sup>39</sup> Consequently, a liberative theological anthropology for African American Christians requires that they name their ancestral experience of slavery as demonic in order to loosen its grasp on their consciousness so that they can begin to heal.

Jesus’ embodiment as a human being created in the image of God is significant for African American Christian theological anthropology when we consider his embodiment in light of Jesus’ teaching of the greatest commandment—to love God with all one’s heart, soul, and strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Womanist theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher contends that to see Jesus as fully human and fully God is to see Jesus as “a manifestation of Spirit in Creation working in harmony with itself.”<sup>40</sup> Building upon the Nicene Creed, which states that Jesus is fully God and fully human, Baker-Fletcher contends that Jesus is both fully Spirit and fully dust—fully God and fully connected to all elements that comprise the earth.<sup>41</sup> If we follow Baker-Fletcher’s depiction of Jesus as both fully human and fully God, then loving Jesus requires that one must love both God and human beings, including ourselves. In this way, the unconditional love of Jesus requires an unconditional love of self. Moreover, the ability of African American

Christians to love themselves also requires the capacity to define themselves outside of the frame of whiteness.

The theological anthropology of white Christian culture has framed blackness as being inherently less human and therefore closer to nature. The natural reaction from black people has been to recoil and avoid the natural world for reasons of safety and to distance themselves from these false ideological impositions. I argue that a love of self creates the necessary space for black people to define themselves and their relationship with the natural world outside of the white racial frame. Doing so enables African Americans to explore the rich agricultural heritage that they possess.

Chattel slavery ensured an indelible connection between African Americans and the American soil. However, if we reframe the stories of those who worked in the fields to privilege the history of African farmers, we discover that the African American connection to agriculture is not rooted in plantations, but in the highly regarded agricultural skills of the West African cultures of their ancestral past. Indeed, we must remember that one of the many reasons that West Africans were enslaved was because of their agricultural prowess. Furthermore, slaves carried different values in certain parts of the U.S. and the Caribbean depending on where they originated because each region had varied but prized agricultural acumen. For instance, slaves who were from the coastal area of the Niger River region were especially prized in South Carolina because they had intimate knowledge of Carolina's cash crop, rice. The variety of rice grown in South Carolina originated in the area that is known today as Senegambia, and it was cultivated by utilizing a uniquely African system of agriculture.<sup>42</sup> In this way loving themselves enables them to embrace an agricultural history that finds its roots in their ancestral homeland. To be sure, the move to view nature and agriculture through the lens of Africa does not mean that one should overlook the tragedy of slavery and the following decades of meagerly compensated agricultural labor. However, it does mean that their agricultural history does not start or end with slavery, and this is important if black people are going to develop a holistic appreciation of the natural world.

Loving themselves and seeing God in themselves is a crucial move for black people but the purpose here is not to solely identify the image of God with African Americans. To do so would be to replicate the oppressive theological anthropology which I seek to dismantle. A liberative theological anthropology acknowledges that all human beings image God and must equip people to see God in themselves and to see God in others. Solidarity then becomes the second component of a liberative theological anthropology for African Americans that informs who we ought to be and what we might do in light of our being. Solidarity begins with the cultivation of a critical consciousness wherein our personal experiences or the narratives of our particular group (i.e. gender, race, class, etc.) are not universalized as Truth. Seeing the other as a full human being means honoring the truth of multiple experiences and collectively discerning what action ought to be taken in light of those experiences.

Catholic theologian Shawn Copeland writes that "through the praxis of solidarity, we not only apprehend and are moved by the suffering of the other, we confront and address its oppressive cause and shoulder the other's suffering."<sup>43</sup> In this way, solidarity cultivates an openness that enables human beings to engage one another authentically. Within a liberative theological anthropology solidarity becomes a task, a praxis where responsible relationships between and among persons, between and among groups, and between and among humans and nonhuman animals and nature may be created and expressed, mended and renewed.<sup>44</sup> Through the cultivation of responsible relationships within the black



community and between themselves and nonhuman nature, African Americans will be able to unload their ecological burdens and tend to their ecological fears.

Responsible relationship must also be extended to those within the white environmentalist community. For white Christians who are committed to environmentalism, embracing the implications of solidarity and the *imago Dei* requires a different focus. For white Americans, solidarity ought to begin with anamnesis, the intentional remembering of the exploited, marginalized, and minoritized victims of their historical legacy of oppression. As I have noted previously, the practice of recalling the past and naming the victims of history already takes place within most black communities. And while white communities may share narratives of their ancestral past, those narratives have been interpreted through the white racial frame and likely gloss over the pain and suffering of others who they believed did not matter. I agree with liberation theologian Dwight Hopkins that one aspect of America's implicit yet dominant theological anthropology is historical amnesia.<sup>45</sup> It is more convenient to forget (or never ask oneself) questions such as: what happened to those peoples who held claim to the land we currently call our own, why did the end of slavery bring about the black codes, when did women become legal adults, why did the federal government begin to give entitlement (welfare) payments to corporations? Historical amnesia prevents Americans and particularly white Americans from developing a realistic understanding of themselves.

Conversely, the solidaristic practice of anamnesis requires a truthful engagement with history. A historical analysis that does not romanticize the past but is intentional about recovering the stories of those who have been oppressed and marginalized is requisite. Moreover, the stories of those whose voices have been silenced become prioritized because through the praxis of solidarity one apprehends and is moved by the suffering of another—you feel their suffering as though it is your own. Once these stories are accepted as true and meaningful, white environmentalists can begin to break free from the lens of the white environmentalist frame because the experiences of the oppressed can become the counter-frame that enables them to see the world anew.

Jesus presents Christians with a perfect example of what solidarity ought to look like. In his first sermon, Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah and his hearers that he has been anointed by God to liberate those who are oppressed and to usher in the year of the Lord's favor.<sup>46</sup> The solidaristic life praxis of Jesus, who was willing to empty himself and sacrifice his life for those who were oppressed, is an ideal model for how white environmentalists might practice imaging God. Because of the power of the white racial frame to center the white experience as normative, white Christians should focus on emptying of the self, rather than loving the self. This is not to say that white people do not need to love themselves in the ways in which black people ought to. Rather, I believe their focus needs to be on self-emptying because the dominant culture of the U.S. is intent on making white domination normative. As such the move to self-emptying is a means to ensure that white people can cultivate a sense of self outside of the white racial frame.

Paul's writings about Jesus offer a helpful example of the way in which white Christians can seek to be in the world. In Philippians 2: 5–11, the Apostle Paul describes his understanding of what it means to have the mind of Christ, to be Christ-like. Paul writes that Jesus emptied himself of his power, took the form of a slave, and was willing to be crucified. The white racial frame and the white environmentalist subframe can be a totalizing way to experience the world. The primary means with which white people can heal from this burden is to empty themselves of their white world view. As Feagin and countless other sociologists have noted, this will be challenging because whiteness has a

way of rearticulating itself in ways that appear innocent. However, I believe a critical first step is to adopt the fundamental assumptions of critical race theorists and those of sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant.

While there are several relatively universal critical race theory assumptions, the most important for our purposes are: 1) racism is ordinary and not aberrational, it is the usual way society does business and the way most people of color experience the American culture; 2) the critique of liberalism and fundamental aspects of it, such as color blindness and equal rights.<sup>47</sup> If white Christians and white environmentalists began to view the world through these assumptions, it would disrupt the worldview presented by the white racial frame. This disruption creates an opportunity for white Christians and environmentalists take the environmental experiences of blacks and other people of color seriously. Given that the opportunity to experience nature as leisure was dependent upon maintaining racist agricultural practices that exploited black and brown labor, nature as leisure can be exposed as a myth rooted in racist racial framing.

To be sure, the disruption of the white racial frame worldview requires the development of authentic relationships across racial difference where environmentalism is deemed important to all parties. As I wrote above, environmental organizations struggle in this area. However, I believe that emptying themselves of their white world view and adopting the two critical race theory assumptions should inspire some critical self-reflection among white Christians. Indeed, white people generally assume that racism is abnormal and liberal whites often believe that social structures are relatively successful at preventing racism. Adopting these two assumptions as the normative way to frame the world, so to speak, would cause them to reevaluate not only how they view the way they interact in the world, but most especially the way their organizations and corporations can be complicit in racism by operating under a business as usual mentality.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant's theory of racial formation can be helpful for white Christians because it builds upon the two assumptions mentioned above of critical race theory and reveals how the environmentalist movement could become an anti-racist racial project: "Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive or ideological practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning."<sup>48</sup> Given the role and import of colonialism, slavery, and genocide in the development of what is now the United States, we can rightfully describe the U.S. as a racist racial project because America has been structured to distribute goods unevenly along racial lines. Indeed, the founding fathers of the environmentalist movement built into their understanding of environmentalism the desire to distribute the "good" of environmental protection in ways that would benefit whites and protect the environment in a manner that was meaningful to white people.

One way white Christians and white environmentalists can empty themselves of their whiteness is to interpret their work such that they become anti-racist racial projects. An anti-racist racial project is one that undoes and resists "structures of domination based on racial significations and identities."<sup>49</sup> This requires environmental agencies and organizations working with the assumption that the status quo, what we understand to be racist, is normative. As such it is not enough to claim that diversity is an important goal, rather by encouraging their organization to become anti-racist racial project they will actively assume racism is at play in their hiring and their advocacy work. This understanding should promote critical self-reflection in ways where the white environmentalist frame would no longer be the way in which they would go about doing the work of environmentalism.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the current framing of environmentalism as something white people do, the desire to enjoy and protect the natural world transcends race. While I have articulated how both black and white people have different environmental burdens, we share a common burden in that the planet that we share is currently suffering because of our collective inaction. The consequences of climate change do not know color, faith tradition, or class. And while poor people and people of color are suffering the most as a consequence of our current ecological policies, it is but a matter of time before predominantly white communities begin to feel the effects—Hurricane Sandy was but a prelude of things to come. By confronting the racial, racist, and religious dimensions of environmentalism we can begin to combine our efforts in order to care for and heal our planet.

