

Gonzalez: BIPOC Communities and Environmental Humanities

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BIPOC Communities and Environmental Humanities
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Imagine a world where you, your family, and your friends are horribly mistreated and continuously exploited. Imagine a world where your land is made capital of and the world turns the other cheek when you are drowning in hopelessness, screaming in hopes of somebody's empathy and assistance. Imagine having your home disruptively invaded and watching your community change in what seems to be overnight, but you are treated as powerless by foreign white men. Sadly, this dystopian world has been and continues to be the reality for many black, indigenous, peoples of color (BIPOC). Through the European Expansion, BIPOC communities have been drastically hurt in a multitude of ways; however, the focus of this paper will be on environmental humanity. Decisions Europeans made when invading BIPOC communities centuries ago had lethal effects that have become embedded in structures of power.

Before diving into the environmental damages dating back to the colonial era, it is of vital importance to understand the differences in relationships with nature between white people and BIPOC. In 1933, Luther Standing Bear, a Native American author, wrote about notable differences between white men and the native Lakota people. He focused on Euro-Americans when referring to "the white mind" and believed that both groups had a different relationship with nature because of their different upbringings and values. The Lakota people had a "kinship with all creatures of

the earth, sky, and water” because it was a “real and active principle” in their cultural lives (Standing Bear, 328). Lakota people valued their connection with nature to the extent where they prioritized the rights of animals-- a concept which white men did not value. The valued relationship the Lakota people had with nature is what kept environment harm at a minimum. On the other hand, Euro-Americans did not care for a close-knit relationship with nature because they were not fully aware of their surroundings. Standing Bear uses the example of white boys’ reckless behavior towards one another to highlight the idea that their “natural faculties” do not sense the variety of life surrounding them (329). He believed that white people had a narrowed focus where they only cared for themselves and failed to see a bigger picture outside of the human world.

Binary thinking that divides the human from nature is at the root of worldwide environmental decline. During and following the European Expansion, Euro-Americans saw themselves not only separate from nature, superior to it. This mindset allowed for destruction of nature for resources because in the mind of Euro-Americans, if there was an incentive for themselves, their actions seemed justified. On the contrary, most indigenous groups had a relationship with nature that focused on cyclical thinking and reciprocal relations. Reciprocal relations set rules and responsibilities in place for relations between humans and the ecosystem (LaDuke, 128). With reciprocal relations as a root value “one could not take life without a reciprocal offering” (LaDuke. 128). Indigenous groups value nature because it is part of their cultural values. In the English language alone, there is a notable disparity in the way we value humans versus nature. Robin Kimmerer believes that “Grammar... is the way we chart relationships in language and... how we relate to each other and to the natural world” (1). It is important to understand that living things apart of our ecosystem deserve just as much value as human life: “a human alone has distinction while all other living beings are lumped with the nonliving ‘its’” (Kimmerer, 3). In English, even dead people are referred to as *he* or *she*, but animals and plants are referred to as *it*, as if they were inanimate. Due to this large disconnect, Euro-Americans had violently taken advantage over the ecosystem which caused everlasting damages.

There is already an established understanding that white people have mistreated nature due to undervaluing the ecosystem, but *whose land was being mistreated?* Presently, there is a global public health crisis that impacts BIPOC disproportionately more than white people. For instance, there is an 85-mile stretch of oil refineries which lies between New Orleans and Baton

Rouge along the Mississippi River, named *Cancer Alley* (Colarossi, 1). The people who are living within this area are 50 times more likely to develop cancer than the average American, and if one assumed the demographics of this group to be BIPOC, they would be correct. This is a prime example of BIPOC communities being actively targeted and displays what environmental racism looks like today. However, these damages began long ago with the environmental harm initiated by Europeans and colonists during the 16th century. Rob Nixon introduces the idea of slow violence and describes it as “a violence that occurs naturally and out of sight, ... of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (Nixon, 2). Slow violence includes pollution, deforestation, overfishing, and more. We are used to identifying violence with specific incidents and we tend to forget that violence can be stretched – further prolonging its effects. Slow violence has targeted BIPOC communities because they are more vulnerable due to years of oppression, and white people take full advantage of that vulnerability. They have done the most harm and taken the most land from BIPOC communities to benefit themselves physically and economically.

Through the mistreatment of black, indigenous, peoples of color, they have struggled to build their connection with nature. BIPOC communities struggle to feel safe, knowing they are actively being attacked by people who want to exploit their resources. Many people have felt stripped of their desires to connect with nature. For example, Evelyn White writes about her struggle connecting with nature in 1954. She did not feel safe in nature as a black woman because she felt that her life was at risk. White people have instilled fear onto minority groups which have affected them in all aspects of life. BIPOC are put at an economic, physical, and emotional disadvantage. Slow violence is occurring in all aspects of these people’s lives. There are times when BIPOC groups avoid experiencing nature because activities such as hiking, or canoeing are perceived as activities for only white people. An example of this exclusion, specifically to black people in the United States, is the story of Christian Cooper the bird watcher (see figure 1). Cooper is a black man who was going bird watching in Central Park, when a white woman called the police to tell them “an African-American man is threatening my life”. To be a black person enjoying nature is still seen as abnormal today. This adds



Figure 1

on to the exclusion of representation within the environment for BIPOC communities.

Presently, there are numerous activist groups who are fighting against the lethal damages of environmental harm. However, there continues to be a lack of representation for BIPOC communities regarding environmental activism. It is important to build better representation because without any leaders advocating for the lives of BIPOC in environmental policies all that is seen is neglect. BIPOC have been neglected in terms of the environment they live in, their public health and occupation of their areas.

In the United States for example, it is evident that there are areas that are occupied by predominately white communities. However, BIPOC communities are overly represented in the heart of cities. The areas that are occupied by BIPOC are not only disregarded but also exploited. The lack of BIPOC representation in leadership roles, specifically for new environmental policies, perpetuates the racist ideologies and practices that have been inflicted for hundreds of years, "...I have to become Martin Luther King, just because I want to say that we should care about Black people in our policies" (Jones, 2). Even when there is a BIPOC in a position of leadership, it is as though asking for basic humanity for their people is taboo.

Although there is a lack of representation for BIPOC in environmental activist groups, some representation does exist. However, their voices must be amplified, and their groups need a stronger platform. In 2016, the Mirror Shield project was adopted to combat the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline on the Standing Rock Reservation which is inhabited by the indigenous Sioux Tribe. The path of the pipeline would desecrate indigenous sacred burial sites and would contaminate water supplies that the Sioux Tribe depends on. After becoming aware of the dangers to the environment and health risks that come with such a project, Cannupa Hanska Luger, an artist



Figure 2

and activist, adopted the Mirror Shield project (see figure 2) to protect his homeland and make the voices of the Sioux, Lakota and Mandan people heard. "The intention is to create a reflective mirror to use as not only for a shield of protection, so that an oppressor may cause less harm, but to also utilize the oppressors image to

reflect their own oppressive violent force back to them, to remind them that we are all human, regardless of the side of the line we are on” (Hanska, 7). Although there were protests and efforts made to prevent the Dakota Access pipeline, the pipeline was still built on the reservation and the voices were left unheard. We need activism for BIPOC to be heard, acknowledged, and acted upon the same way that we do when the voices are white. There are many BIPOC activist groups fighting for environmental justice today, and they need all the attention they can get. Such groups are: Green for All, Center on Race Poverty and the Environment, Latino Outdoors, Native Renewables and many more. By having these activist groups heard and their voices amplified, real change can come and the following in their groups will rise. There is power in numbers, and these groups need power to effectively fight against the environmental harm which continues to happen today.

European invasion impacted BIPOC communities, producing a lasting disconnect between nature and black, indigenous, and people of color. Decisions made in the past have led to slow violence, further damaging these communities. Focusing mainly on white dominated groups has resulted in superiority over nature, signaling their neglect towards different lands and environments. Environmental groups remain fighting for nature, yet lack a representation of BIPOC, who all in all have dealt with the massive disunity with nature left by white people. Remnants of environmental mistreatment remain in communities today.

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