

(African American Students and the Environment: A Narrative Autoethnography)

by

Ja'Qor Goodwin

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Ja'Qor O. Goodwin

University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA

Abstract

Purpose — The purpose of this study was to investigate how personal experiences shaped environmental views of African American students.

Design, methodology & approach — this narrative autoethnography was conducted at the University of South Carolina and Clemson University. Conceptual theory was guided by critical race theory and narrative analysis.

Findings — Findings suggested that participants frame environmental issues with inclusive terms and focus on issues that affect them personally.

Research limitations & implications — This study and studies like it can be expanded by including other marginalized populations and ages.

Keywords — African American, environment, critical race theory, narrative

*Carbon pollution is heating up the air
Do we really know? Do we really care?
Acid rain drips on our trees and in our hair
Are you there?*

“Till It’s Done (TUTU), D’Angelo and the Vanguard, *Black Messiah* (2014)

Introduction

This study sought to contextualize and investigate the personal experiences that shape African American college students’ views of the environment and environmental issues. African Americans are invisible in contemporary national and international environmental movements, and the absence of African Americans in these movements has generated certain assumptions about the African American community (and other marginalized groups) that generally claim that African Americans (and, more broadly, people of color) don’t care about the environment, or that they are too busy trying to make a living to care about environmental issues. Popular media representations of environmental activism are dominated by the image of an archetypal white male in the pristine

wilderness, while African American models are restricted to urban environments.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how African American college students in the southern United States perceived environmentalism and the place of African Americans in environmental debate. As a result of conducting this study I ultimately hoped to better understand and contextualize African American college students' attitudes towards, and ideas about environmentalism, and also better comprehend why there is a lack — perceived or real — of African American presence in contemporary environmental movements. The design of this qualitative study was a narrative autoethnography. There are several definitions of narrative as a methodology (e.g., Chase, 2005; Frost, 2010; Glesne, 2011; Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007; Connor, 2006; Adams, 2008; Schwandt, 2007). Tony Adams (2008) states that

Narratives help us make sense of life, and in the telling of stories, we abide by storying conventions such as those of common storylines, linear or chaotic temporal sequences, and writing within/against genres (176).

My research goals were oriented towards the telling of personal experiences of members of a minority population. Narrative autoethnography as a methodology gave me, as a researcher and author, the ability to understand personal experiences and how they are told in story form.

Researchers from several disciplines have looked at African American environmentalism (e.g., Finney, 2014; Blanton, 2011; Baugh, 1991, Gantt-Wright, Ringo, & Mohai, 2003; Glave & Stoll, 2006; Smith, 2007). The African slave trade forcibly brought slaves to the New World as a free labor source, and the main work done by slaves was in the fields tending to various raw materials. Carolyn Finney (2014) argues in her book *Black Faces, White Spaces* that,

Working the land under the threat of the whip and the sun was an integral part of the environmental experience of enslaved Africans. Through backbreaking labor and general day-to-day interactions, enslaved Africans became more knowledgeable about their surrounding environment than their white slave owners (57).

The underlying racism, prejudice and violence of the slavery system created an atmosphere in which later, in the Jim Crow south, lynching became a powerful symbol of the environment: as Finney puts it, “a tree became a painful symbol for many black people, reminding them that the color of their skin could mean death” (60). This sentiment is echoed in today’s African American media. The ABC television show *Black-ish* and its majority African American cast took only four episodes to mention this issue. The wife, suggesting a program for the children to participate in emphatically shows the husband a brochure and says, “Look, black people gardening. When was the last time you saw that?” The husband answers, pointedly, “you mean besides our nation’s 400 years of nonconsensual gardening?” The point here is that slavery still lurks in the memories of African Americans.

Slaves were firsthand environmental workers – planting, reaping, and harvesting crops which depended on the environment. However, in contemporary environmentalist movements, African American presence is lacking and sometimes even nonexistent. This is particularly interesting given the context on several scales: nationally, the Keystone XL Pipeline was just vetoed by President Obama; at the state level, South Carolina recently experienced a devastating flood, and the EPA released guidelines to have South Carolina produce 2% of its energy by solar power; and locally, NGOs like Conservation Voters of South Carolina have very little African American presence in their organizational workings.

Two overarching research questions guided and informed my study. The first: in what ways do the personal experiences of African American students at USC and Clemson affect or shape their views of and attitudes towards environmentalism? And second: what does environmental concern outside of mainstream movements look like?

Conceptual Framework

Review of Related Research

Research on African American environmental attitudes in the United States has been both qualitative (Finney, 2014; Blanton, 2011; Baugh, 1991; Smith, 2004; Smith, 2007; Gantt-Wright, Ringo, & Mohai, 2003; Glave & Stoll, 2006) and quantitative (Charley & Durham, 2010; Lee, 2008). Carolyn Finney's (2014) book *Black Faces, White Spaces* takes aim at the "dominant environmental narrative in the United States," arguing that it shapes how

we see the natural environment and our national identity, and that what missing is a “nonessentialized black environmental identity that is grounded in the legacy of African American experiences in the United States” (3). Her research focused on what she calls the “collective memory” of race relations in the United States and how that memory informs environmental interactions. After delving into the major historical and legal happenings that continue to shape the African American experience (e.g., the Homestead Act of 1862, the Civil War, the Jim Crow South, and religious movements), Finney offers three important points: first, that “there is no monolithic African American environmental experience” (98); second, that:

while there is arguably a collective experience of living in a country where racism is part of the nation’s fabric, the *personal experience* [emphasis added] for each African American is shaped by economic, generational, and gender differences, the place where you live, your social and educational background, and ultimately, the choices you make (98);

And third, 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” (66).

Ryan Blanton’s (2011) work involved members of an African American community who solicited local and federal government support for their efforts to address environmental justice. As a linguistic anthropologist, Blanton’s focus was how the members of the community used language to contextualize their present struggles using local-historical understandings of space. Blanton argued that the members of the community “developed a

discourse that stressed the role of race and racism in the historical formation of the environment around them,” and that the discourse functioned to describe the landscape they found themselves in — which he refers to as a “chronotope, a fusion of time and space in which space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (E78). Through analyzing interactions of racializing discourses between members of the community, a local councilwoman and an EPA worker, Blanton ultimately finds that while the residents of the community contextualize their present struggles using local-historical understanding of space, their claims are countered by neoconservative city officials who use color-blind discourse to dehistoricize and deracialize their problems, often claiming reverse-racism. Blanton’s larger critique is that the neoconservative ideology of the councilwoman and her color-blind discourse “was not unique to her; it reflected larger local, national, and even international pattern of race relations, both historical and contemporary” (E84). This larger critique points back to the hegemonic power of dominant groups and movements.

Where Finney focused on historical underpinnings, Blanton focused on contemporary peoples’ use of history to make their case to government officials. Joyce Baugh’s (1991) review essay focuses on the invisibility of African Americans in mainstream environmental movements by presenting counternarratives through environmental justice struggles, arguing that mainstream environmental movements show “a lack of attention to issues

affecting the quality of life for African Americans, and racism” (182). Furthermore, Baugh explains that the main evidence for what Guha and Alier (1997) called “empty-belly environmentalism”, in the context of the African American community came from survey data (182). Baugh does, however, concede that “for whatever reasons, it is true that people of color, especially African-Americans, did not participate in the mainstream environmental movement at first” (183). She later says that “the long-held perception that African Americans are not interested in or concerned about the environment is inaccurate,” because “mainstream environmental organizations have demonstrated little interest in the racial dimensions of environmental issues” (190). The takeaway point from Baugh’s article is that African Americans haven’t participated in mainstream movements precisely because those movements “fail to recognize how [racial] problems both differently and disproportionately affect them” (190).

Finney and Baugh both commented on the white male-dominated imagery of mainstream environmental movements. Gantt-Wright, Ringo, and Mohai (2003), in their commentary piece, write about the effects of this imagery. Gantt-Wrights asks, “How many times have we seen a commercial with a white actor at the top of the Grand Canyon or some other location selling the exact same product?” (41). Mohai adds on, claiming that African American models are tied to urban settings while whites represent natural landscapes and that in and of itself renders African American environmental concerns invisible and even nonexistent (44).

The gap in the literature that my research study fills is stated best by Mohai (2003), in the same article, where he asks: “But how often have African Americans and other people of color been asked about their concerns for the environment? And how often have their contributions been written about?” (44). This is why my research matters. Baugh (1991) stated that the main evidence behind the argument that African Americans don’t care about the environment was survey responses, and even then, the metric was involvement in mainstream environment movements. The research gap my study fills involves understanding how African American college students in the southern U.S. express their concern for the environment, and how their experiences inform their environmental concerns.

Definitions

For clarity I offer definitions for common terms in this paper. For the purposes of my study, environment is defined as the natural world that we live in, including physical and chemical factors, climate and living things. Definitions of environmentalism, environmental attitude and environmental concern come from Parker and McDonough (1999). Environmentalism is “a composite of environmental attitudes and environmental behaviors” (155). Environmental attitudes are “a person’s general positive or negative feeling toward the natural surroundings of humankind, including air, water, land, wildlife, and the systems existing between the natural environment and human society” (155). Furthermore, I take Parker and McDonough’s

definition of environmental behavior as my operational definition for environmental *concern*, which is “an action that can occur as a result of a person’s environmental attitudes” (1999: 155). Mainstream movements, for the purpose of this paper, are understood as any non-grassroots movements, typically at large scales (e.g., state-wide, national or international) that do not typically include marginalized or disadvantaged populations.

For this paper, the main terms I use from the critical race theory (CRT) framework are: counterstorytelling, racism, resistance/resilience, and racial micro-aggressions. Counterstorytelling addresses a major tenet of CRT – challenging the dominant ideology. DeCuir and Dixson (2004) define counterstorytelling as a method that “aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (27). DeCuir and Dixson continue to point out that counterstorytelling addresses “dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes,” and can be found in “various forms, including personal stories/narratives, other people’s stories/narratives, and composite stories/narratives” (2004: 27).

The definition for racism used in this paper is an amalgam of the definitions given to me by my research participants. Racism is: (1) taught, instilled, and passed down behavior and ideas that express, (2) a blatant dislike for another race for either invalid or miscellaneous reasons, by (3) grouping everyone of a race into categories that (4) belittle or discriminate against the group. Combining my participants’ definitions into one universal

definition allows for a more complicated understanding of what racism is to them.

Carter-Andrews (2012), writing from a CRT perspective defined resistance as “the ability to bounce back in the face of racism...and have strategies for recognizing and naming racism and opposing it in healthy ways” (6). Going a step further, Carter-Andrews claims that “resilience is best understood as an individual’s positive response to situations of stress and adversity; it is an individual’s ability to translate a stressful or adverse situation into a source of motivation” (2012: 7). This becomes an invaluable tool for analysis later when my participants mention negative experiences of racial identity in school.

Racial Micro-aggressions

A common manifestation of racism in our so-called colorblind, post-racial society is the micro-aggression. Racial micro-aggressions have been the subject of literature concerning communities of color and other disadvantaged populations (Sue et al. 2007; Sue et al., 2009; Huber & Solórzano, 2014; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Garcia et al., 2011; Carter-Andrews, 2012). The common thread between all definitions of racial micro-aggressions is that they are normally unconscious, and not considered offensive to the person saying them. For clarity, I use Huber & Solórzano’s (2014) definition of racial micro-aggressions – they are:

- (1) Verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward People of Color, often carried out in subtle, automatic or unconscious

forms; (2) layered assaults, based on race and its intersections with gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname; and (3) cumulative assaults that take a psychological, physiological, and academic toll on People of Color (2).

These commonplace slights of hand may not seem especially harmful on the surface, but, as Garcia et al. (2011) point out, they can “manifest in painful psychological stress responses and feelings of anger, disgust, distress, and a diminished sense of belonging” (12). They also function to maintain racial status quo (Huber & Solórzano, 2014). However, Sue et al., (2007) take the concept further, defining micro-assaults, micro-insults, and micro-invalidations. A micro-assault is “an explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory practices” (274). A micro-insult is “characterized by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity” (274). Micro-invalidations are “characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color (274). Taken together, the micro-aggression/assault/insult/invalidation as an analytical tool highlights the centrality of race in everyday life, but also provides a framework for understanding how personal experiences are shaped over time. One last addition to the micro-aggression typology given by the scholars above offers a shift in scope. Huber and Solórzano (2014) expand the idea to define racial macro-aggressions as

“the set of beliefs and/or ideologies that justify actual or potential social arrangements that legitimate the interests and/or positions of a dominant group over non-dominant groups, that in turn lead to related structures and acts of subordination” (303).

In other words, Huber and Solórzano (2014) argue for a broader conception of the micro-aggression that allows the connecting of individual-level racial micro-aggressions to society-level macro-aggressions – essentially institutional racism.

For the purposes of this study, narrative is:

Both phenomenon and method... A way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researchers and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix... reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that made up people’s lives, both individual and social (Clandinin, 2006: 45-6).

Autoethnography, for the study, is:

An approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience of one’s own group (Ellis et al., 2011; Taber, 2010).

Story is defined as “a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful” (Clandinin et al., 2007: 22). The central focus of this paper is to understand how personal experiences of African American college students – my group – affect their views towards environmentalism, a larger sociocultural institution. Thus narrative autoethnography methodology is uniquely suited to privilege personal experience while reconnecting those experiences to the larger sociocultural picture.

Conceptual & Theoretical Perspectives

Conceptual and theoretical perspectives for this study came from several different disciplines. Critical race theory (CRT) informed the search to present counternarratives to the main environmental movements. According to Price (2010), critical race theory “often, and consciously, employs counterstorytelling, which invokes an oppositional narrative practice” (159). The broader implications of counternarratives are twofold: on the one hand, counternarratives will be in direct contrast to the main assumptions I have already highlighted; on the other hand, my research will likely have negative cases that will contrast others in my study. This allowed me hone how I presented my data so that the full diversity of my participants was represented. After all, as Finney claimed earlier, there is no single, monolithic African American environmental experience.

Race is understood in this paper as an essential component of one’s identity. In order to more fully comprehend how African American college students’ personal experiences shape or affect their attitudes towards environmentalism, race must be at the forefront of data analysis. CRT provides a conceptual orientation that highlights the role of race in interactions and broader society.

CRT grew out of legal studies (Brown et al. forthcoming; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Giles & Hughes, 2009; Leonardo, 2013; Malagon, Huber, Velez, 2009;) and has been steadily adopted in other disciplines. Scholars have delineated five core tenets of CRT: (1) the centrality of race and

racism, (2) challenge to the dominant ideology, (3) commitment to social justice, (4) centrality of experiential knowledge, and (5) historical context and interdisciplinary perspective (Huber & Solórzano, 2014; Garcia et al., 2011; Brown et al., forthcoming; Giles & Hughes, 2009; Malagon, Huber, Velez, 2009;). Other work has also broadened the scope of analysis to include: counterstorytelling, which provides a framework for the fourth tenet mentioned above; and the critique of liberalism, which provides a framework for counteracting colorblind racism and post-racial discourse (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Giles & Hughes, 2009; Malagon, Huber, Velez, 2009;).

CRT, with race at its forefront, acknowledges that race and racism are not behind us, as Giles & Hughes (2009) put it, “CRT recognizes that racism, both structural and personal, is alive and well” (691). Recognizing the reality that race and racism still play a huge role in everyday life allows for a more complex, honest understanding of how personal experiences are shaped through interaction and identity. With its focus on race and racism, and privileging of personal and experiential knowledge, CRT provides a conceptual framework that addresses and challenges dominant ideology.

Narrative is an expansive methodology that still has several competing definitions in various disciplines. But narrative is not a new phenomenon, according to Bresler (2006), “historical research in the 19th century and sociological research of the 1920s and 1930s took narrative forms” (22). Chase (2005) adds that approaches to narrative are often

dependent on the “interests and assumptions embedded in researchers’ disciplines” (658); and Fraser (2004), coming from a critical social work perspective, argued that as “an approach that draws ideas from feminism, critical theory, post-modernism, and/or post-colonialism – narratives may be used to reinforce but also contest dominant social practices” (180). Where Chase (2005) pointed out that narrative has different meanings in different disciplines, Frost et al. (2010) argue that early narrative accounts used “traditional story structure to identify the narrative contained in accounts” and provided “the starting point for the ‘narrative turn’ across the social sciences” (445). This “narrative turn,” is the result of challenges to epistemology and ontology. Polkinghorne (2007) details reform movements within qualitative research “posit that evidence, such as personal descriptions of life experiences, can serve to issue knowledge about neglected, but significant areas, of the human realm” (472). Expanding on the “narrative turn”, Spector-Mersel (2010) claims that as a result, narrative inquiry can be seen as a “package deal, embracing ontology, epistemology, and methodology” (172). Wodak et al. (2011) also argue that narrative is still a complicated term: “[narrative] remains particularly elusive, contested and indeterminate in meaning. It is variously used not only as an epistemology, a quintessentially qualitative method, but also as a fundamental communication mode, an archetypal or supra-genre” (396).

Clandinin and Murphy (2009) address the problem of the infinite definitions of narrative, arguing that “there is some consensus on

definitions of *narrative research* [emphasis in original]", but that "without a definition of narrative research that addresses more than narrative analysis, it is impossible to address epistemological and ontological questions" (598). Most studies in narrative literature offer multiple popular definitions – illustrating the variety of definitions (Adams, 2008; Schwandt, 2007; Clandinin, 2006; Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000; Chase, 2005; Clandinin and Murphy, 2009; Clandinin et al., 2007; Schiffrin 2009), and some simply refer to narrative as the study of stories (Frost, 2010; Polkinghorne, 2007; Keats, 2009; Bresler, 2006). Schiffrin (2009) even challenges the narrow definition of narrative as stories: "even more fundamental are questions of ontology: must a narrative be verbalized, entextualized, or realized through a semiotic process, either language or other media?" (422). Thus, while some simplify the definition, others offer more complex ideas, while some question how we know if a narrative is a narrative. The advantages of narrative inquiry, especially for this study, come from the variety of possible forms, and its ability to work in tandem with other conceptual frameworks (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000; Taber, 2010).

Criticism from narrative often comes from positivistic-leaning epistemology and ontology, but significant criticism comes from those in the social sciences as well. Polkinghorne (2007), argues that validity threats in narrative come from "the disjunction between a person's actual experienced meaning and his or her storied description" (480). Bresler (2006) claims that it is because narrative exists within language, and Polkinghorne points

to “the limits of language to capture the complexity and depth of experienced meaning” (2007: 480). The disconnect between language and meaning can never completely be resolved, but as a narrative researcher it is possible to at least mitigate the threats to validity by justifying interpretations, pointing out implications and “focusing on the relationships internal to a storied text by drawing out its themes and focusing on the social and cultural environment that shaped the story’s events and meanings attached to them (Polkinghorne, 2007: 483).

For this paper, narrative inquiry was combined with autoethnography. Taber (2010) also combined narrative inquiry and autoethnography, finding that “narrative helped to ‘do’ autoethnography, autoethnography assisted in the production of data” (16). Autoethnography also grew out of reform movements in the social sciences, including 1980s post-modernism and the “crisis of confidence,” that recognized that reality is subjective, and that the intersectionality of peoples’ experience produces a world in which “different kinds of people possess different assumptions about the world” (Ellis et al., 2011: 2). Autoethnography also focuses on the realities of peoples’ everyday lives and represents an “exploration of the self and social, with different emphases on self and social” (Taber, 2010: 14). Taken together, narrative, with its emphasis on people’s representations of the world through words and story, and autoethnography, with its focus on everyday life and reality, work together to create a methodology that privileges personal experience – which is the primary analytical focus of this study.

Critical human geography and anthropology provided understanding of what “race,” is as a sociocultural construction, as well as understanding about concepts of place, space, scale, inclusion and exclusion. Price (2010) posits that the critical human geography concepts of inclusion and exclusion “contend that what, and who, is socially valued enjoys a presence in the landscape, while that and those who are devalued are kept out of sight” (153). In everyday life, this looks like racial segregation, ghettos, incarceration and other extreme forms of isolation.

Situated Knowledge & Related Assumptions

I myself am an African American college student. I have lived in Columbia, SC my entire life and I consider my experiences with the environment to be somewhat defining to my childhood and broader personality. I hold the assumption that African Americans in Columbia, SC do not involve themselves with environmental organizations. I hold the assumption that these environmental organizations do not reach out to African Americans and other people of color to understand their environmental attitudes, issues or ethics; these organizations are typically concerned more with fundraising and engaging discourse about nonracial issues like energy, efficiency, and climate change instead of issues like environmental justice that have immediate impact for disadvantaged or marginalized populations. These assumptions are informed by literature that has at times argued that African Americans don’t care about the environment and has at times argued that environmental concern looks

different for mainstream movements and people of color. I agree to some extent that African Americans don't care, but my personal experiences and the broader literature point to the fact that *what* African Americans don't care about is not the general environment – they don't care about mainstream movements that do not focus on the same tangible problems.

Design & Methodology

This study was conducted using a combination of narrative and autoethnographic methodology. Narrative is a comprehensive genre that does not have one definitive definition (e.g., Chase, 2005; Frost, 2010; Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007; Adams, 2008; Schwandt, 2007). Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr's (2007) definition of narrative comes from the idea that life is education, and "lived experience" is the phenomenon to be studied. My overarching research questions focus particularly on personal experiences, so narrative inquiry is a logical choice that has advantages for understanding personal experiences because of the nature of storytelling. Specifically, my participants' stories will enable me to understand how they have come to understand the environment around them and how their experiences have led to their understanding of environmental issues. Narrative inquiry views narratives as social products that are produced by people in the context of specific social, historical and cultural locations.

Site Selection, Criteria, and Justification

South Carolina sits in the heart of the Bible Belt and has a contested history with racism, prejudice, the Civil War, and the civil rights movement.

South Carolina was the first state to secede from the Union, leading to the Civil War. After the war, Jim Crow dominated the political system and most African Americans were left disenfranchised (Finney, 2014). The confederate flag, a symbol that to many represented prejudice and slavery, was only recently removed from SC State House grounds after the tragic shooting of a Black church in North Charleston by a white terrorist. The situating of my study in South Carolina represents intensity sampling (Patton, 1990). Intensity sampling involves “information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely,” and “seeks excellent or rich examples of the phenomenon of interest, but not unusual cases” (Patton, 1990: 171).

A variation of the intensity sampling – politically-important case sampling – also informed my strategy for choosing the research site. Politically-important case sampling involves “selecting a politically sensitive site,” that can “increase the usefulness and utilization of information” (Patton, 1990: 180). My research locale is both South Carolina and, more broadly, the southern United States. Specifically, my research site will be located in South Carolina, have accessible African American students, and reflect the broader culture of South Carolina.

My prospective research site includes the University of South Carolina (USC) and Clemson University. There were events at both universities during the Spring 2015 semester that brought attention to the racism still present on campus. At Clemson, a fraternity was placed on

probation for throwing a racially insensitive party (Svokos, 2015). At USC, a white female student was suspended for writing the word “niggers,” in a list of reasons why the school’s Wi-Fi didn’t work (Holley, 2015). Political history is a major factor in my choice to use USC and Clemson as the research site.

USC has taken an environmentally-conscious stance – the university composts and recycles material campus-wide, offers gardening plots for students on campus, has a residence hall dedicated to environmentally-minded students, and operates greenhouses on campus. Both USC and Clemson offer academic programs in the environmental sciences; Clemson offers a program in environmental engineering and earth sciences. Given the perceived absence of people of color in the environmental debate, and the political-racial history of the southern United States, the two largest universities in South Carolina provide an interesting research site. Furthermore, South Carolina and other parts of the southeastern United States experienced historic flooding in October 2015.

Participant Selection, Criteria, and Justification

Two sampling methods were used for the selection of research participants: homogenous sampling and snowball sampling. The purpose of homogenous sampling is “to describe some particular subgroup in depth” (Patton, 1990: 173). This sampling strategy focused and particularized my research questions towards the African American college community and allowed the differences and similarities in the experiences of my

participants to be clearly visible. Snowball sampling “is an approach for locating information-rich key informants or critical cases” (Patton, 1990: 176; Bernard, 2002; Glesne, 2011). As I collected data, my participants revealed others who could be information-rich cases. Research participants self-identified as African American and were enrolled at USC or Clemson. In this way, I was sure that my research questions were particularized to African American college students.

Methods

The data collection methods used for this study were in-depth, open-ended interviews, and participant-observation (Bernard, 2002; Glesne, 2011; Schwant, 2007). Data collection included four separate in-depth, open-ended interviews, and several hours of participant observation. The one-on-one interviews lasted on average approximately one hour. Participant-observation was used throughout the research process to narrow my research focus as well as hone my interview protocol. Observations took place at USC’s student union and library.

Data Analysis

Making sense of the data required several processes under the umbrella of narrative analysis, including transcription, coding and textual analysis (Bernard, 2002; Schwandt 2007; Bodgan & Biklen, 2006). After, transcription, interview data was coded, which, according to Schwant (2007), is “a procedure that disaggregates that data, breaks them down into manageable segments, and identifies or names those segments” (32). Data

was then analyzed “for how they are told as well as for what they say about the social life and culture of which the narrators are a part” (Glesne, 2011: 20).

My conceptual and theoretical orientations informed data coding and analysis. I used an open coding process that created codes for commonalities across the data and grouped codes into themes for a more fluid analysis process.

Role of the Researcher

My participants and I are African American college students at one of the two major universities in South Carolina. We are likely of the same socioeconomic status. And we shared broad cultures on multiple scales: Millennial culture, college culture, southern culture and African American culture. I am a fully socialized insider of the community I was researching. However, my insider status may also be a weakness to the study. My participants may have made assumptions about what information I was seeking, and my interview protocols were extensively peer-reviewed to account for this.

Findings - Critical Race Theory

Over the course of data analysis, it became apparent that this study addressed more than just the environmental research questions I asked. Race and education were prominent features of the participants’ stories. I present here the stories of my participants that highlighted their

experiences in K-12 and college education, and how their race impacts their life experiences.

“Weird”, “strange”, and “not that bad,”: Going to School in the South

All four of my participants went through the public school system in South Carolina – three of them, in large suburban districts, and one in a smaller rural district. The three participants in the suburban districts – Vivian, Will, and Phil, explained varying degrees of diversity in their schools. Phil even explained the unique experience of going to a mostly Black school while being in a mostly white magnet program.

Vivian: My school district was pretty diverse. I think that in a lot of ways, the diversity in the school district was good because I never really faced a lot of the racism that some of my friends who also went to school in the South speak of.

Will: My friend group was pretty diverse, and my high school for the most part was pretty diverse. I didn’t hang out with just one type of people, person.

Phil: My elementary schools were mostly white. And then middle school, E.L. Wright was mostly Black but, you know, within the LAW magnet, it was mostly white. So that was kind of a unique situation. And definitely a different one for me.

However, Carlton, who went to school in a rural district explained different experiences, or what can be called a discrepant or negative case (Maxwell, 1996; Schwandt, 2007).

Carlton: My school district was predominantly Black. But the only thing that I disliked about being educated in the South is the [lack of] professionalism. A lot of my teachers were so comfortable with us and our families that they didn’t really teach us everything we needed.

When asked about going to school in the South, participants explained different experiences with racism in school, ranging from profiling to identity issues to micro-aggressions. On the other hand, Carlton again proved to be a discrepant case.

Vivian: Growing up, I always got questioned about my ethnicity. My biological mother is white, so I am technically mixed Black and white, but I never really talk about her because I didn't grow up with her and I wasn't supposed to talk about it. Therefore, I always identified as Black because that's who I grew up with and that's what I was supposed to identify as. But I would still always get a lot of questions, especially from Black people. They never believed I was fully black and always questioned it. They were like, "you can't be fully black, you have long "mixed girl" hair and you're almost white colored," even though I'm not.

Will: I used to get picked up at McAllister's, it was a restaurant across the street from my high school. Um, and for some reason one day when I went in, the manager said I couldn't walk in or whatever and was like, "you can't be in here, you're banned from McAllister's," and I was like, kind of confused. I never did anything but get picked up at McAllister's. I'd even sometimes buy something. Come to find out there was someone else who had dreads who looked like me and had gotten in a fight like two days prior and they thought it was me. So I wouldn't say it was blatantly racist, it was moreso like discrimination.

Phil: It was interesting. I found myself trying to figure out what my racial identity was. Because, it was weird, like, I felt like kids could kinda tell what my background was just by looking at me. It might have been because of how I was dress, or the way I look – most people think I'm mixed, they can see that and they would kinda treat me differently because of that. Which is weird because I'm *Black*. And I've always identified as Black. I've always known I was Black ... It was weird like, most of the white people I've dealt with in school were—most of them weren't too blatantly racist, but they were super ignorant. They had a certain view of me, they saw me as Black, but not like their perception of Black. And its because of me not dressing a certain way, having a certain way of speaking. That was always the frustrating thing because everything they associate with Black is so negative and instead of saying, "this is a black person that doesn't do those things," it was, "this is not a black person," which is crazy, but that's how people in the South think.

Carlton: No, not at all.

Will's story illustrates an extreme case, a time when he was profiled and wasn't allowed to enter a restaurant across the street from his high school. The profiling represents an example of a micro-assault given the store manager's purposeful discriminatory practice without bothering to make sure Will was the right person. Phil and Vivian both explained issues of identity, coming from within and without their race. In Phil's case, the fact that he didn't fit into the stereotypes of blackness caused a disjunction for his white counterparts – instead of accepting that Phil didn't fit into the stereotypes, he was simply excluded from the race completely. Phil later mentioned examples of micro-aggressions he faced in school around the election of President Barack Obama. Vivian's story illustrates the importance of the intersectionality of experience. Although she gets put into the social category of "mixed", she identifies as Black and is excluded by other Black people because of her phenotype – an intra-racial micro-invalidating. Taken together, these stories show the sheer complexity of racism and how it manifests itself (or doesn't, in Carlton's case) in everyday life.

"When I got to college": Transitions to a PWI

Participants generally didn't feel overwhelming racism in their K-12 educations. However, they did acknowledge changes in the transition to

PWIs at University of South Carolina and Clemson University. Participants felt that racism was more overt in higher education settings.

Vivian: College on the other hand, became much more overtly and subtly racist. There was much less diversity and there were many times when people would say racially insensitive things or post racist and sexist things on YikYak. Yeah, so for example, I knew people that would blatantly say things about people of other races like calling Hip Hop Wednesday a “niggerfest” and just making comments like that. Or saying that Hispanics needed to stop taking all the jobs and getting a free pass. Those were very overt. But then there was more subtle things like people would assume that minority students were there from minority scholarships, which wasn’t really racist in itself, but was based on stereotypes. There were times where I would witness students walking to class who would literally stop and look scared or move far over when a black male was walking by, but do nothing when a white male walked past. Just subtle things like that. Or sometimes little comments. I don’t know why. I think it’s a lot more accepted in college. There’s no authority figures like teachers or parents sitting there telling students no to act that way or hanging out detentions or write ups. It’s literally students mostly holding other students accountable, which most people don’t. They accept it and laugh about it, which makes it seem more acceptable to students.

Will: It kind of affected me more than I thought it would, when I got to college – yea I didn’t really see the effects of me being in the South until I got to college. So from middle school and high school I didn’t really– I wasn’t very conscious about it, but then when I got to college I sort of noticed that, hey, um, the South is kind of ... backwards (*laughs*). Like, I met a lot of different people who were deep rooted in Southern heritage, and uh, I met some racist people and it was just different ... I would have preferred to go to a more diverse school, even probably would’ve uh, gone to an HBCU. Yea. Well, there was the Cripmas thing, and well, in college for sure, especially with recent events, you kinda find out how your friends really think about things. Um, I don’t know if you’ve ever heard about YikYak, but its an anonymous app where everybody on campus can see what gets upvoted. Anyway, so there was a lot of racist stuff being posted and the special thing about YikYak is that its only within a certain area, so these racist posts were coming from the Clemson area. Yea, like you know that these are Clemson students or people who live in the Clemson area posting these things.

Phil: It’s like, all of a sudden everybody is talking about race. Everybody’s talking about the Confederate flag. Um, and of course,

you know, like growing up in South Carolina, and seeing all the racism and whatnot, and knowing these white kids that support the Confederate flag and whatnot, um, I was actually— part of me was happy we were even having these discussions on a nationwide level. And happy that, you know, this might've been the push that we needed to *finally* get the flag taken down. Which was absolutely necessary. I guess the whole argument was um, I guess from people who support the flag, is that it's part of the culture, whatever, you know (*laughs*). But um, even if you honestly think that, you know, you have to understand what all you're talking about. Like what is your culture? And if your culture involves the enslavement of another race and the, you know, you gotta keep in mind its not just people with the flags on their trucks, the KKK flies that flag. And you have to take responsibility for that.

This time Will contrasts his diverse high school with the less-diverse college setting he found at Clemson. He describes meeting people “deep-rooted in Southern heritage”, presumably the same people whose ideological arguments are challenged by Phil. Although he doesn't explicitly say it, I think the lack of diversity he experienced at a PWI is what made him think retrospectively about possibly attending an HBCU instead of Clemson. Will also mentions the infamous Cripmas party, a racially-insensitive party thrown by the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity at Clemson University that got the fraternity placed on indefinite suspension. Will and Vivian both note how YikYak enables anonymous, overt racism to be seen by anyone within a certain geographic area. Phil contextualizes his transition into a PWI within the Confederate flag debate that happened after the tragic shooting of nine Black parishioners in their church in North Charleston. Instead of giving examples of personal experience, he instead challenges a dominant ideology in the South about the Confederate flag. Vivian and Will both clearly explained a difference in experience

transitioning to PWIs. She mentions that there was “much less diversity” in college, and that racism, both overt and subtle, is uninhibited. Students won’t hold others accountable and there are no “authority figures” in place to do so either. I cannot say whether the experiences my participants highlight in college are less or more stressful than experiences from their K-12 educations; however, I can say that racism is present at every step of the way, it simply manifests itself in different ways.

“They can make you feel bad about being black!”: Resistance in the Face of Racism

Carter-Andrews (2012) outlined resistance and resilience as way to combat racism in healthy, productive manner. My participants all told me what it meant to them to be black. And in doing so, they showed their own unique styles of resiliency. An example from above is when Will mentioned that if he had the choice he might have elected to attend an HBCU instead of a PWI, or at least a “somewhat more diverse school”. Will eventually followed up on that thought and explained his reasoning.

Will: Being black, it means always having something else to think about— always having to worry about something else because you’re black. Um, for some reason people always like to mention the fact that I talk white. Or whatever. And this is like the most insulting thing you can ever say to me, it irks me to no end. For some reason, because I am black and I talk this way it is very important. And they must bring it up. It’s like something that’s always a burden. I always have to worry about, I don’t know, how I am around people because I don’t want them to get the wrong impression. Certain things I say, what I wear, like, I just— its just, its stressful. It’s like you always have something to worry about.

He continues:

Will: I've met some people who go to HBCUs and they're all very close, like they're all really tight, they all study together, do homework together, the black community there, um, its very, uh, close. I just like meeting other smart black people. Like, I don't know, it feels good.

Carlton, had different ideas about being Black:

Carlton: Being black to me means power. Being Black has so much power being it. We are people who can master our culture and also master different aspects of others. Being Black means I have a job to do. I have to represent and carry on that power and effectiveness that leaders before my time did.

Phil, who explained earlier that he was often excluded from being "Black" because he didn't fit into tidy stereotypes explained his views on being Black:

Phil: I guess that's changed the more I learn about history. I guess what it means kinda goes from person to person, background to background, especially growing up in the South. And with public school the way it is, they can give you a negative connotation towards being black in America - they can make you feel bad about being black! But, I mean, personally I don't. I mean we have such a rich culture and there's so much to be proud of, so much to be happy about. I try to think of myself as black but, um, I try not to let certain — you know, those limitations that we have stop you from doing what I want to do.

Vivian, on the other hand, explained one of my theoretical frameworks to me:

Vivian: Hmm I think that depends on the person. Although black is a group that may have similar experiences, my black is not your black which isn't your neighbor's black if you get what I'm saying. I think there's similar trends that people go though like racism and discrimination and maybe cultural similarities, but I don't think there's one set definition of what it means to be black because there's too many other factors that come into play. There's a term in sociology for that called intersectionality.

I asked my participants what it meant to them to be black so that when the interviews shifted toward environmentalism, they would have race in the back of their minds. What I got were extremely complex,

nuanced responses that combine personal experience with explanations of history, sociological theory, educational issues, and, perhaps most important, resilience. Will gave perhaps the most depressing account of what it means to be black, using phrases like “something else to think about”, “always having to worry about something”, “insulting”, “burden”, and “stressful”. However, he displays resilience in every sense of Carter-Andrews’ (2012) definition by (1) recognizing and naming racism and bouncing back, and (2) responding positively and turning a *stressful* situation into a source of motivation. Instead of stopping after explaining the downfalls of being Black, he identifies a positive – meeting other smart black people, and explains that his counterparts at HBCUs seem to have a strong bond, one he presumably admires. Carlton gave the most inspiring answer, indicating that being Black is a source of cultural and personal power as well as a calling to continue the “work” of those who came before him. I did not follow up on that assertion, but I think it is fair to assume Carlton was referring to civil rights leaders. Phil and Vivian both pointed out quickly that “Black” is a social category and neither gave a definitive answer – they grounded their answers in an intersectional context, Phil implicitly, and Vivian explicitly. In sum, while yes, racism has been present either in subtle or overt forms at all levels of education for my participants, they recognize the broader social and political contexts and remain positive. Will, Carlton, Phil, and Vivian are all very much aware of the intersectionality of their experience.

Findings - Environmental Narratives

Vivian: "As someone with asthma, I think it does affect me personally"

Vivian is a senior psychology major at the University of South Carolina. She plans on continuing to graduate school in Seattle to get a degree in school psychology. Like the other participants, Vivian didn't know what the Keystone XL pipeline system was. She defined the environment as:

Vivian: The world around us and how we are so connected to it in terms of how our actions affect it.

Although her definition is succinct, it is interesting because of the indexicalities she uses to position it. Her use of "us", "we", and "our," indicate her inclusion of all people into a group, and defines the environment as the world that encompasses "us". For Vivian, environmental friendliness means:

Vivian: Recycling, using "green" products when you can, and not littering. Vivian also had a list of environmental issues that were important to her:

Vivian: I would say pollution, overfishing and killing of animals, and cutting down so many forested areas to make neighborhoods, malls, et cetera. But really I think all of those come down to realizing our effect on the environment and having respect for the other living being around us, if that make sense.

Vivian's list of concerns is more extensive than the other participants and she highlights the societal issues behind commercial deforestation. When I asked if she believed in the concept of climate change, she said:

Vivian: Somewhat. I'm no expert in the environment, but there's so much mixed information out there. I think it's alarming that

the ice caps are melting and the temperate climates seem to be shifting, but at the same time I question if a lot of that natural. For example, I think about the ice age and how the temperatures on earth have naturally shifted throughout the years. Therefore, I'm not really too sure.

She continued to explain how climate change affects her personally:

Vivian: As someone with asthma, I think it does affect me personally when there's pollution in the air. I know that's not necessarily climate change, but it's a cause of climate change, I think. Also, with rising cancer rates, it makes me wonder what that has to do with cancer and other illnesses.

Although Vivian didn't mention pollution or air quality in her list of environmental concerns, she connects her personal experience of having asthma to increased air pollution and rising rates of illness due to poor air quality. Like the other participants, Vivian also enjoyed visiting parks, and even worked at one during the summer before this research was conducted.

Vivian: I actually worked at a park this summer for the City of Columbia so August was the last time I went.

Me: What did you do there?

Vivian: I was a summer aide. Basically a camp counselor.

Me: Do you feel like the racial representation was equal while you worked there?

Vivian: Through the camp, a majority of black people visited the camp. On the other hand, parents who came and brought their children to the park were mostly white.

Here Vivian, says that a majority of children who attended the camp were African American, but most of the non-camp park visitors were white. When I asked if there was a connection between African American people and environmental movements, she answered:

Vivian: Overall, I don't see as many black people advocating for the environment, myself included. That's not to say— maybe that's because I don't pay attention to it much, admittedly. I'm not sure, it doesn't seem to go together to be honest.

Vivian argues that she doesn't see many African American people advocating for the environment. But a larger point here is that she is referencing what she thinks advocacy is – any by her own stories, I would argue that she already is an environmental advocate.

Will: "Like I said, I don't really know any black environmentalists"

Will is a junior mechanical engineering major at Clemson University. I began our interview by telling him about my research questions and my reasons for doing this research. He caught on quickly and before I had the chance to ask a question, and he told me about his childhood:

Will: Um, I know growing up the environment wasn't— I never really knew, or I just wasn't very informed about it. I didn't really— not that I'm passion about it now, but I'm more— like I recycle and I try not to be as wasteful, um, but yea I was gonna say growing up, I guess *black*, it just kinda wasn't a thing. They just didn't talk about it, like none of my family are super into the environment and all that stuff, and its very important.

Will frames his story by talking about how non-important the environment was during his childhood. After explaining the lack of talk about the environment growing up, he shifts to talking about how he sees the environment now. When I asked him what came to mind about the environment, he responded, some abiotic environmental features:

Will: Atmosphere. Um, the air that we breathe, ozone. Just kinda things like that.

I probed further, asking him to define the environment and we ran into a bit of back-and-forth before I cleared it up enough for him to answer the question.

Me: The first thing that came to your mind was atmosphere, air and ozone. If you had to define the environment, how would you define it?

Will: Like the current state of the environment?

Me: Sure, or just in general.

Will: Or just define what the environment is?

Me: Yes, what the environment is.

Will: What that environment is. It is something that *to himself* oh that's an interesting question. Um, something that affects how we breathe, how we, how different plants survive, how— just kind of like our wellbeing. I even think— I might wrong on this, it affects like how good or bad viruses and stuff travel through the air and stuff. Just something that affects our wellbeing. I guess, that's how I would define it. Biologically. Our biological wellbeing.

Earlier Will mentioned abiotic factors like the atmosphere, but when pressed further, he broadened his definition to include “we,” as a group — including the interaction of breathing; as well as plants and viruses, and concludes that it affects our “biological wellbeing.” Now that he had defined the environment, Will talked about what being environmentally friendly meant to him.

Will: Um, recycling and, how wasteful you are? So one thing— I don't make New Years resolutions, but I wanted to become less wasteful so just kinda what you do with food, even, can become troublesome to get rid of. Um, plastic, like I said, I recycle. Things are hard to break down and I didn't that's something I wasn't aware of. I just kinda threw stuff in the trash. And um, I guess kinda what I do, I guess.

I asked Will to explain more about his New Years resolutions and he went into more detail about what it means to him to be environmentally friendly, and explained what inspired him to be more environmentally conscious:

Will: Um, well I think it has to do with two things. Uh, a girl I used to date was an environmental engineer and she was kinda passionate about this kind of stuff. And also just being an engineer in general, I felt like I was obligated almost to be more efficient and less wasteful. Um, and just care more about the environment and how we use stuff. You could say there's no point in caring about that stuff because it doesn't affect you personally in the here and now, but there's also a benefit of being able to reuse stuff. It does affect you personally if you can save stuff. It's kind of neat being able to reuse stuff, I think its kind of neat.

Will continued about his past relationship after he told me that water was the most important environmental issue to him.

Will: Um, honestly, like I said I dated a chick and she was an environmental engineer and I had no idea how hard it is to simply get clean water. And its kind of important that we have clean water and I didn't realize how hard it is to simply create clean water. She's like— that's kind of what she wants to do, she wants to provide clean water to people.

So far, Will had explained how we grew up in a situation where the environment wasn't a big deal, how he thinks about the environment, and why he decided to be more conscious about his waste and recycling habits. When I asked Will if he had heard about the Keystone XL Pipeline system, he simply said: "No, I haven't." I asked Will to if there was a connection between African American people and environmental movements, to which he replied:

Will: Um, no. Straight up no. I don't know a single black person who's super passionate about this. For whatever reason that is. I

just don't know anyone... No. I never actually thought about that but that is interesting. I've never thought about how there are way more white people interested in this kind of stuff. I can see why too, though because it's kind of an abstract concept. It doesn't directly affect you. Like I said, I don't really know any black environmentalists.

Will's adamancy about the lack of black environmental activism is interesting because he shifts from thinking about his own personal network to thinking more broadly and claiming that there are more white people interested in environmental activism.

Carlton: "For example, when it rains I become very sad or depressed"

Carlton is a junior elementary education major at Clemson University. He is a member of the *Call Me Mister* program, which seeks to diversify the pool of available teachers, especially those in under-served communities. Carlton comes from a family that values spending time together, especially fishing, singing gospel music, and cooking. He grew up in rural Elloree, South Carolina and takes pride being a part of the Clemson gospel choir. Carlton grew up around a small Walmart plant and a cotton factory that had closed down over the course of his childhood. He also recalled a water shortage a lake people used for fishing, swimming, family picnics dried out.

Carlton, like Will, had never heard of the Keystone XL pipeline system, and gave a three-part definition for the environment:

Carlton: The environment is the surrounding areas. Meaning people, places, and weather.

Here, Carlton separates the environment into social and physical categories. Following up, I asked Carlton if he thought people in the same

places and climate experienced it the same, and he pointed to the intersectionality of experience just like Vivian:

Carlton: No not at all. First we as people are not the same. The way that I perceive something will be totally different than you or anyone else. Its just based on the person and their life.

Now that he had defined the environment, Carlton moved to explain what environmental friendliness meant and what environmental concern looked like:

Carlton: Being environmentally friendly means to take care of what was here before me, and what's probably going to be here when I die. Making sure to pick up trash, recycle, and other things that involve sustainability.

Continuing on the sustainability issue Carlton explained:

Carlton: Sustainability is the idea of being educated about taking care of the world that we live in.

So in this exchange, Carlton not only puts forth his ideas of environmental friendliness, but also indicates that being educated about the environment is just as important. Now that he had defined the environment and explained behavior, he told me that the most important environmental issues to him were deforestation and global warming. Later, Carlton conflated global warming and climate change in response to me asking whether or not he believed climate change to be a real phenomenon.

Carlton: I do believe in climate change. For example, when it rains I become very sad or depressed. When its sunny for two days then turns cold on the next day I get upset.

Here, Carlton indicates that weather uncertainty affects his personal moods. I asked Carlton if he thought there was any connection between

African American people and environmentalism, he talked about the importance of education and learning early:

Carlton: To be honest, not that much. Because a lot of black are not as educated about the issues.

Me: Where do you think that education should come from if it isn't there now?

Carlton: It should come from the schools. If we teach our kids now they will know. Also it should come from the community as well.

Phil: "I think it's definitely a fair statement that black people don't discuss these things"

Phil grew up Columbia, SC and is a senior music major at the University of South Carolina. Phil grew up in church, and called his upbringing "financially stable," and "fortunate." Like Will and Carlton, Phil couldn't tell me anything about the Keystone XL Pipeline system. He also challenged me to define the boundaries of what the environment is when I asked him to define it:

Me: When I say "the environment," what does that mean to you?

Phil: Like as far as the social environment?

Me: Uh, not social, I mean this physical *thing* that we live in.

Phil: Oh, okay.

Me: So when I say that, what comes to mind?

Phil: Um, in terms of how I should think about it?

Me: Well, how *do* you think about it?

Phil: Probably, um, we're talking about as far as protecting the environment?

Me: If that's how you think about it, then yes.

Instead of saying the first thing that came to mind, Phil questioned my question to pin down exactly what "environment" we were talking about. I did not include "physical," as a qualifier in my initial question, and that may

have been the cause of our back-and-forth to narrow down the topic. Phil's finally gives an answer, touching on a variety of topics:

Phil: I guess I could say that's something I probably don't think about *enough*. I can admit that. Of course, I definitely realize that there is a need for us to protect our environment. Our resources are limited. I think about that a lot. Um, Resources are so limited and you have to wonder, like, what we're gonna do like 50 years from now. Run out of oil, run out of water, so much. And destroying it. You know **laughs** pretty much destroying ourselves because we need the environment. We need it to survive. And that's a weird thing about humans, about mankind. We— I feel like we think too highly of ourselves. You know, and being a Christian, like you know, I see the world as created by God, um, and its just God is always gonna be up here (motioning upwards with his hand) and man's always gonna be down here (motioning downward) no matter how many things we build, no matter how many discoveries we make, you know, all these breakthroughs in science, its only so much we can really do. And the Earth is still not ours. I think its something we need to realize, because I think that's something that's messing us up. Like we have so much faith in technology and science that we forget about things like the environment.

Phil first says the environment is something he could think about more. He recognizes the need for environmental protection and points to resource conservation as a main concern. In his monologue, Phil points to larger questions of human capacity and knowledge. Questioning what we will do in 50 years, he laughs at the irony of destroying the environment that we need to survive, saying that we are destroying ourselves in the process. Phil continued later, defining the environment:

Phil: The ecosystem we live in, plants, air, water, um the sky, all of which can— are directly affected by us.

And environmentally friendly behavior:

Phil: I think— making conscious decisions about what you do, about what you put to waste, or um, what you buy, what you put in the air. And just knowing the effects that it has. And making

good decisions so that you're not a danger to the environment. It's the world that we live in. It's not gonna last forever. Every time you get in a car, every time you throw something away and take out your trash. Has an effect. Has a lasting effect.

Lastly, he named his most important environmental issues:

Phil: Pollution I guess I would have to be number one. Because that's a huge problem. And we throw away so much stuff. And recycling is very, very important. I would definitely put those first. Um, definitely the water – water is so essential. Air— because that's another thing that like directly affects us that we don't think about.

For Phil, the environment is more a network including humans than a separate entity that surrounds humans, and taking care of the environment involves conscious decision-making. His main concerns seem to be the duality between human action and environmental problems. Early in his narrative, he focused on human impact on the environment, but as he goes through the issues most important to him, he moves to focus on the effect that the environment has on humans – for example, he lists pollution because of its impact on our ability to breathe.

Like Will and Carlton, Phil also enjoyed spending time in parks. I asked him to tell me about his experience going to parks:

Phil: parks. Um, I went not long ago. Um, I mean definitely within the last— I go to Sesqui Park a lot. Um, usually I go with my girl. Um, and we just chill by the water.

Phil concluded his story by explaining his views of African American people's relationship to environmental movements:

Phil: I don't know if its they don't speak to black people, I mean I think it's definitely a fair statement that black people don't discuss these things as much as white people do, I never really stopped to think about it, but that's definitely true. I definitely

hear less people- less black people talk about the environment. It seems like its mostly a young, white people thing. Um, its not as big of an issue amongst black people.

Discussion & Implications

Discussion

Vivian's concerns match those of the others, as she considers recycling and littering to be chief behavioral environmental concerns. The use of "green" products ties to Carlton's belief in sustainability and Phil's worries about considering the effects of what you buy. Vivian also ties her concerns to human consciousness of our impact on the environment and the lack of a sense of respect for the living beings that share the planet with us. Vivian tended to portray herself as someone with minimal knowledge of environmental issues, and repeatedly claimed she "didn't know a lot about the environment". This, in my opinion, is a linguistic move to soften her statements. However, when she actually explains her thoughts, she shows that she has an understanding of the general mechanics of climate change and the cyclical nature of natural global warming and cooling over time. Vivian argued that she didn't see many African American people advocating for the environment. But, by her stories, she worked in an outdoor space that encouraged more African American people and their children to engage in outdoor activities as a camp counselor. And she demonstrated understanding of how environmental problems affect us as much as other living beings that share the planet with us. Through her own stories she claimed to not be an environmental expert or advocate, but her action as a

camp counselor and her consciousness of environmental problems could very well mean she already is an environmental advocate.

Like Vivian, Will defined the environment with inclusive terms like “we”, and “our.” Will named two reasons for raising his awareness about environmental issues: (1) an ex-girlfriend whose passion rubbed off on him, and (2) an obligation he felt as an engineer to be more efficient. Will’s consciousness of environmental problems, along with his habits of recycling and limiting his waste all paint the picture of an environmental activist. However, it also illustrates the disconnect between everyday environmental awareness and mainstream environmental movement awareness. Will’s story illustrates the influence of childhood discussion (or the lack thereof) on his level of environmental awareness before he met someone who was passionate about clean water. Will, as an aspiring engineer, felt an obligation to be less wasteful and more efficient with his resources. Will showed that he is aware of environmental problems and has changed his behavior as he learned more. However, his story again highlights the disconnect between everyday environmental awareness/concern and the concerns of mainstream environmental movements — he did not know about the Keystone XL Pipeline system, and by environmental movement standards, that may reduce his story down to an environmentally-unaware person.

Carlton’s story focuses on education. As an elementary education major in a program that focuses on diversity, Carlton highlights that

education is supremely important in raising awareness of environmental issues in future generations of the black community. Like Will and Vivian, Carlton hadn't heard of the Keystone XL Pipeline system, but felt it was his duty to take care of the environment since it was here before him and will be here after he's gone. Carlton's story also resembles Vivian and Will's story in that he consistently used inclusive terms like "we," "our," and "us." For the participants, acknowledging a sense of unity was an important part of talking about the environmental issues.

Phil's story was similar to Will's in that they both pushed me to give more clarity when I asked them to define "the environment." Phil regularly indicated that he could stand to think more about environmental issues. Phil's was unique in that he frequently talked about how his religion shaped how he thought about the environment, human capacity, and knowledge. Phil's story is similar to Carlton and Will in that he recognizes that African American people generally seem to not talk about environmental issues as much as white people, especially throughout childhood. But by his own definition - making conscious decisions about waste habits, recycling, and understanding how issues affect us - he is aware and conscious of the issues now, and in a position to enlighten others.

All four participants recalled relatively recent times in which they visited a public park. This is significant because it implies access to a public park, and by extension, access to open green spaces. Parks, in this study, are spaces that foster social relationships. Vivian worked in a park as a

camp counselor for a program that brought more minority children to the park; Will and Phil both used the space for romantic relationships; and Carlton used the space to bond with his family and members of his educational program at school.

The first research question going into this study asked: in what ways do the personal experiences of African American students at USC and Clemson affect or shape their views of and attitudes towards environmental issues?

The views of participants in this study were shaped by their upbringing, their social relationships, and their understanding of how issues affect them. None of the participants grew up talking about environmental issues and they became aware of how environmental issues affected them at different times throughout their lives. All four participants demonstrated knowledge of how environmental issues affect them, and the scope of the problems. However, none of the four knew about the Keystone XL pipeline system recently vetoed by President Obama. Knowledge of the Keystone pipeline system may not be an accurate proxy for determining environmental knowledge, nevertheless, it is at the forefront of US environmental politics and cannot be ignored.

The second research question asked: what does environmental concern outside of mainstream movements look like?

For my participants, environmental concern looks like a combination of several activities: recycling, using “green” products when available, not

littering and picking up trash, recognizing that the environment affects future generations, and making conscious decisions about waste. Whereas mainstream movements tend to focus on lofty issues like energy and global warming, my participants acknowledged the importance of those issues but concentrated on issues they felt had higher impacts on their lives.

Expanding critical race theory to the environmental narratives of my participants may also provide a framework for understanding the lack of visibility of African Americans in mainstream environmental movements. Revisiting Finney's *Black Faces, White Spaces* proves that the dominant environmental narrative disregards environmental narrative of minority populations –

Along with a lack of visible African American participation in mainstream environmental activities, visual representations of wildlands and other green spaces remain largely focused on a Euro-American experience of the environment...there is a racialized outdoor leisure identity that views outdoor enthusiasts as generally strong, young, and white (2014: 27).

It is my opinion that applying a micro-aggression CRT framework to this social problem determines that the exclusion of communities of color from mainstream environmental discourse is an example of a micro-invalidation. The stories of those outside hegemony are silenced. Will's story of becoming environmentally conscious is silenced. Vivian's story of being aware of how environmental problems personally affect her is silenced. Phil's blending of environmental protection with religious conviction is ignored. And Carlton's story of how weather affect his moods is ignored.

Trustworthiness & Validity

In order to safeguard the trustworthiness and rigor of my data, I used triangulation of methods, member checks, peer review, kept comprehensive and reflexive researcher notes, and collected data until I felt I achieved data saturation (Lather, 1996; Schwandt, 2007; Maxwell, 1996; Tracy, 2010). I did not finalize any data until my participants had seen and agreed with my representations of their words. (Schwant, 2007: 222). Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, I conducted research until I achieved data saturation.

Ethical Issues

In the process of doing member checks, my participants saw how I analyzed and represented the data constructed in interviews. My participants didn't disagree with how I represented their words other than a few transcription spelling errors.

Risks & Benefits

A risk of participation any research is breach of confidentiality. To ensure anonymity, I used pseudonyms in all phases of data collection and analysis. Participating in my research study may have benefitted my participants by encouraging them to seek out new knowledge about African American history and other theory that informs my study. Participating in my research study may have also benefitted my research participants by encouraging them to conduct their own research studies in topics that interest them. Most of all, though, I consider generating new knowledge to be the greatest benefit to my research participants.

Limitations/Considerations

My research study focuses on the Millennial African American community. Race is still very often talked about in terms of black vs. white, however this is limiting and ignores other populations. The major limitation of my study is that since they are outside my scope, my paper ignores other communities (e.g., Latino Americans, Asian Americans, differently-abled persons, etc.) who may also have contested relationships with environmentalism and environmental discourse. Furthermore, African Americans are taken as a homogenous unit in my study. While intersectionality theory allows for a discussion of how multiple realities exists with peoples' different identities, I am not conducting separate studies for male and female college students. Along the same lines, Millennial experiences were privileged in this paper. Future research should incorporate a wider range of ages within communities.

Significance/Contributions

This study is significant because it illuminates the voices of a segment of the population that is excluded from hegemonic discourse about the environment. This study is significant because it answers Paul Mohai's call for constructing a new narrative from those left out of the dominant narrative. My research study might contribute insights to useful to policy makers and nongovernmental staffs concerned with African Americans and/or environmental issues. My study might change the local or (hopefully)

broader discourse about the environment and African Americans'
relationship to it.

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