Ecoracism and Antiracism in the Environmental Justice Movement and Their Place in Literature

By Jill Amari
Prof. Kilgallen
ENG-390-A
14 Dec. 2022
Revised 30 Mar. 2023

Abstract

The term “ecoracism” has recently entered the fields of environmental activism, ecocriticism, and Critical Race Theory, though not much research on ecoracism has yet been done in the latter two fields. Antiracism, another modern concept, refers to the acknowledgment of racism and the promotion of racial equality. This paper explores how ecoracism and antiracism are important within the environmental justice movement, just as they are significant in literature. But how can looking at nature literature through an ecoracist and antiracist lens help future studies of these subjects, as well as future environmental and literary scholars? Scholars, like activists, have a responsibility to accurately research and present their areas of expertise in the hopes of improving a certain field. As an English major and environmental activist, I feel the weight of this responsibility and am determined to answer this question through interviews, research, and analyses of poems and stories from both Black and white nature writers. Using both historical and modern examples, this paper will delve into what it means to be antiracist in the environmental justice movement and how ecoracist and antiracist studies of literature can help us become better advocates for environmental justice.

I. Introduction

What would you do if people called you crazy for wanting to learn more about plants?

That was the response of the parents of Ayasha Cantey, a sophomore English major with minors in Women's Studies, Writing, and Social Work, when she expressed her interest in learning more about plants. Cantey makes her own skincare products using plants and other natural materials, such as aloe. As a Black woman, Cantey has been told to avoid certain areas of nature and has grown up in a community where many people simply "don't care" about the environment (Cantey). However, in taking inspiration from her grandmother and her Native American side, she has found comfort in nature when many Black people have been conditioned to avoid it.

This conditioning is an important aspect in Carolyn Finney's *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*, a nonfiction account of the history of ecoracism and Black environmentalism in America. Within the book, Finney discusses the traumatic history of slavery which has affected Black views on nature; the effects of ecoracism on Black communities; and environmental efforts by both Black and white people which have either mitigated or supported ecoracism. Ecoracism, a relatively modern concept that is also known as environmental racism, is generally understood as a means of excluding people from environmental activities or making judgments about people and their relationships to the environment based on their race. As explained by Finney, ecoracism is not a lack of interest in the environment on the part of BIPOC communities. Rather, ecoracism is the action of ignoring the BIPOC community's involvement in the environment due to the whitewashed nature of modern (and historical) environmentalism. BIPOC have been at the forefront of environmental issues for decades, but American society, racism, and classism have rendered them invisible.

Finney, who has written for years on topics of race and the environment and who has served on the U.S. National Parks Advisory Board, draws from history, interviews, and personal experiences as she weaves the true story of environmental prejudice in America.

Wanjiku "Wawa" Gatheru, a Black environmentalist and the founder of Black Girl Environmentalist, recommended Finney's book during a virtual presentation I attended in December 2020. Her presentation and associated *Glamour* article "Want to Be an Environmentalist? Start with Antiracism" have been both inspiring and valuable resources throughout my research and my own journey as an environmental activist. In particular, she explains what the environmental justice movement is and how race cannot be ignored in relationship to the environment. Antiracism, another relatively new concept, is the recognition of race, racism, and racial issues while practicing the rejection of racist ideals and promoting racial equality. Gatheru also discusses the concept of intersectional environmentalism, which was developed by ecofeminist Leah Thomas, who introduced the term in an Instagram post. In paraphrasing the post, Gatheru explains that "intersectional environmentalism is an inclusive version of environmentalism that advocates for people and the planet" (Gatheru). Because people in the environmental movement tend "to see existential threats like climate change and racism as contending and unrelated," Gatheru argues that we must become antiracist, intersectional environmentalists in order to be truly effective fighters for all types of justice, including climate justice (Gatheru). After all, environmental justice is justice for all.

This research paper explores ecoracism and antiracism in the environmental justice movement and their relationship to literature. The goal of my research is to learn more about ecoracism and antiracism in the environmental justice movement, as well as explore the relationship between the environment and literature through the lens of race. There is a

correlation between race, environment, and place, but there has not been much previous research on how studies of ecoracism benefit literary analyses of place. While ecocriticism and Critical Race Theory have examined these facets by analyzing literature through an environmental lens and how literature portrays and shapes our conceptions of race, ecoracism is a modern concept that has not yet had much time to find its place among ecocriticism studies. One example of where ecocriticism studies have connected literature and the environment can be seen in ecofeminist and literary theorist Stacy Alaimo's work on her theory of "transcorporeality," a term she coined which refers to the "body as environmental construct" and the connection between nature, social structures, and humans (Buell 97). There have also been some studies of postcolonial environmentalism, which argues that there is a connection between ecocriticism and studies of postcolonial literature (98). To expand research in these burgeoning fields and to connect ecoracism, antiracism, and the environment with literature, I explore and analyze contemporary poems from Black authors Lucille Clifton and Nikki Giovanni. Clifton's "the river between us" and Giovanni's "For Saundra" each illustrate the ongoing struggle of the environmental justice movement and how this movement is related to racial justice as well. While these authors wrote during the 1960s and 70s at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, their poems are hauntingly applicable today. In addition, I examine older environmental works written by white males—who have historically been seen as "environmentalists"—such as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman, in order to compare their works and views of nature to those of Black authors and activists. Through literature and historical research, I argue that environmental activism and antiracism are truly compatible, and that literature of the land must be viewed in conjunction with race.

II. Personal Statement

My story as an environmental activist began before I even knew what an environmental activist was. If I had to pinpoint a moment in my life that was the turning point in my activist journey, it would be middle school. As a sixth grader who moved up to the second floor of my private elementary/middle school, I gained a form of seniority and responsibility that involved volunteering to help around the school. Many of my friends and I volunteered to collect the paper recycling bins outside each classroom once a week and dump them into the recycling dumpster. I have always recycled at home, but this was my first time doing it in a larger institution—and I loved it.

Recycling once a week isn't difficult and by no means makes someone an environmental activist. But my passion for protecting the planet, doing my part, and learning more about what exactly I *could* do didn't stop after middle school. When I entered high school, I joined the Recycling Club, which was not as glamorous as the middle school recycling collection but was just as fun. For whichever lunch period we attended each day, we were in charge of collecting students' plastic bottles, cans, and glass. Once a week, we rolled the recycling bins outside and placed them on the curb for pickup, then took them back inside. We also cleaned the bins outside in a small gated area with a hose and soap every once in a while, a task that was both disgusting and fun.

When I came to Sacred Heart University, I expected recycling to be a given. A university was simply too large not to have a professional company take care of all the waste, including recyclables, and for goodness' sake, this was higher education! Of course people knew how to recycle! Alas, this was not—and remains not—the case. One of my freshman-year roommates told me her town back home didn't recycle, so she wasn't used to recycling. I balked at the fact that some dorms and buildings didn't have a single recycling bin. And when my First Year

Seminar group did our final project on improving recycling at SHU, I was shocked and disappointed to find out that SHU does not, in fact, properly recycle at all—a situation which may have changed since 2019 but needs to be investigated further. There are many solutions to this problem, such as signing with a different waste company, installing more recycling bins, taking out the trash bags in the current recycling bins, and installing reverse vending machines in main buildings on campus to encourage students to return their bottles and cans for money back on their SHU cards. When I heard of the Environmental Club, then called the Green SHUs, I made it a priority to join. I sent the executive board my FYS project per their request in the hopes that they would be able to take it to someone in administration. As of this writing, the club's concerns still have yet to be resolved.

Most people who know me at SHU know I served as the President of the Environmental Club before I graduated in December 2022, and they sometimes tease me for my passion for the environment. But particularly after my time working at La REcyclerie, a sustainable restaurant and urban farm in Paris, I don't find it funny. And if I need to be made fun of in order to help people learn about recycling, composting, or solar panels, then so be it. However, this is a serious issue, and being an environmental activist has felt like a lonely battle, even with friends and an entire club at my side. To explore my feelings about this issue and to connect it with my passion for literature, I decided to write my Capstone on the environment and literature, but in the context of ecoracism and antiracism in the environmental justice movement.

III. Examining *Black Faces, White Spaces*

In the Preface and Introduction of *Black Faces, White Spaces,* Finney provides her own view and examples of ecoracism. Although "in every other sector of society, African Americans have made significant strides in becoming visible," the environmental movement is visibly

lacking in diversity (Finney xiii). But why? Is it because the environmental movement feels too much like a "white thing"? Is it because Black people are uninterested in the environment? On the contrary, BIPOC communities have been at the forefront of environmental issues for decades, even if they have remained "invisible" and ignored due to the whitewashed nature of modern environmentalism. My friend Ayasha Cantey, whom I interviewed, described her experience living in Norwalk, a city in Connecticut that is a perfect example of how location affects involvement in environmental issues. Because the city dump is in South Norwalk, it is not considered the cleanest or safest part of town and is what people would call the "ghetto." According to Cantey, people there litter and don't think they need to clean up after themselves; because no one cleans up, people accept that that is how life is in South Norwalk. Location also affects how safe people—women and Black women in particular—feel simply walking around. Women are often urged not to go out at night, and never alone. Cantey expressed that she needs to be aware of her surroundings at all times and avoid anything that could turn into a dangerous situation. In addition, she does not wear dark clothing at night, and some people have told her that she should play off looking like a lighter race if she can. However, Cantey never does this because it is not who she is, and she won't use someone else's race to secure her safety. Safety is something everyone should have, no matter their race, but safety is not guaranteed. Many people have been taught to avoid nature because of its traumatic ties to slavery—being forced to labor in nature—and then the subsequent Jim Crow laws, which effectively took Black people out of nature and forcibly moved them to the ghetto. As Finney explains, land, location, and ownership are three issues which have historically affected Black people and other communities of color far more than white people. Cantey points out that she feels safer in large, familiar crowds, as well as on the Sacred Heart University campus during the day. These places are well-known and, in

Sacred Heart's case, have gated entrances and security guards. The setup of these locations and the time of day makes her feel comfortable. In some of the poorer locations in Connecticut and in the U.S. in general, people of color suffer more due to their unsafe surroundings. Because poverty and race are often connected, many Black people are also poor and therefore forced to live in crowded and unsafe conditions. According to historian and environmental scholar Dolores Greenberg in her article on race and protest, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s brought with it an awareness of "ecological resistance movements" and "public anxieties about inadequate protection from toxins" in some of the poorest places in the States (Greenberg 239). In addition, "as recently as 1994, people of color [have] remained absent" from many cities' environmental histories (228). Despite the work of organizations like the NAACP and the National Urban League, both of which promote black advocacy across several fields, white-led groups still overshadowed—and in many ways continue to overshadow—Black-led groups.

Because of these issues, BIPOC communities have been fighting for their land for centuries—but this isn't something we always view as mainstream environmentalism. In fact, some Black Americans are practically forced to become environmentalists due to their living conditions. To stand up for their health and safety, they must become environmentalists who protest against the pollution, toxicity, and unsanitary conditions which ravage their homes. Therefore, the "ideas, thoughts, and solutions that arise from an African American experience of the environment are mediated by differential access, needs, and history" compared to white Americans (Finney 4). In addition, the media and people in general often do not recognize the "significant role of race in the [environmental] movement and its aims," which creates a "white wilderness" that determines "who actually participates in environment-related activities and who does not; which voices are heard in environmental debates and which voices are not" (2-3). In

particular, media such as magazine advertisements and movies sometimes promote this "white wilderness" because if Black people do not physically see themselves in these fictional scenarios, they may find it difficult to imagine themselves participating in environmental activities in real life. In addition, some of these activities may be perceived as too "white," and in order to preserve Black identity, some people do not want to be "perceived as trying to be white by doing 'white' activities" like recycling and composting (87). Scholar Vivian G. Shinall in "Expendable Bodies" adds that "issues of ecoracism and embodied toxicity are often underrepresented in the media" and that artists and activists should work to shape the rhetoric surrounding ecoracism in order to continue the fight for representation (Shinall 2, 7). Representation is something we are still fighting for in nearly all, if not all, aspects of society, and the environmental movement is not excluded from this fight. When environmental groups such as the Sierra Club (founded in 1892 by white environmentalist John Muir) were formed, they often excluded—whether implicitly or explicitly—minority groups. For the Sierra Club specifically, it wasn't until 100 years later that the executive director made a point to address race and class as priorities in the fight for environmental justice (Greenberg 223). But why has it taken major environmental groups in general so long to acknowledge this?

Exclusion is often due to the prejudices white people have toward Black people and the belief some white people still have in slavery. During the height of Jim Crow laws, which were created after the Emancipation Proclamation in order to continue to oppress people of color, many white people still argued in support of slavery and segregation because they viewed Black people as "less-than" and "wild" or "savage." All of these terms compare Black people to animals and were supposed to reinforce the racist idea that there were "natural" differences between white and Black people, and that these differences justified slavery, segregation, and

any other means by which white society made Black people feel inferior. This "emerging narrative that defined" the Black person's place in nature "managed to […] place Black people at the bottom of the evolutionary rung while reifying whiteness as closest to God, thereby morally justifying any act of exclusion" (Finney 39). In protest to these segregated groups and racist ideas, the environmental justice movement was born, gaining much of its traction in the 1990s even though it began around the same time the Civil Rights Movement ended.

However, this movement has not been without challenges, especially since it is relatively new. In particular, the trauma of slavery still prevents many Black people from actively engaging in the environmental justice movement and protesting against white ideals of environmentalism—ideals which can be detrimental to the movement as a whole. Another challenge has been facing the reality of racism within the environmental movement, in addition to "the memory of slavery and segregation" which "has manifested in many ways, including in the form of an emotional residue that has the capacity to be a roadblock in the pursuit of healthy human/environment relationships" (50). These memories were further negatively influenced by the Jim Crow era, the effects of which can still be felt today, especially in certain areas of the country which continue to apply some Jim Crow laws. Slavery and the Jim Crow era are "two key periods of American history that highlight the complexity and contentiousness of African American environmental experience" (52). For example, Black people were forced to create their own spaces—usually while fearing being caught or stopped—and taught to avoid others. One example of Black people creating and influencing their own natural space is Virginia Key Beach, the only beach in Miami where Black people were allowed in the 1940s; an example of where Black people avoid going is the woods or certain parks, including National Parks. From the people Finney interviewed for her book, many cited slavery and the fears associated with it as "a

potential factor influencing African American environmental participation" (59). In addition, "nearly all interviewees spoke about the power of the past and their belief that slavery has some influence on people's attitude toward the natural environment" (59). For instance, many Black people view the woods as a dangerous place because a tree has become a painful symbol that reminds them "that the color of their skin could mean death" (60). Similarly, other areas of nature are associated with death and pain and remind Black people of a collectively traumatic history which happened not so long ago.

As Cantey points out, trying to understand these Black points of view encourages a level of acceptance—one which we can hope encourages more antiracist ideals and mitigates ecoracism. Finney suggests that including more historic sites which show an authentic Black experience in nature would be a step in the right direction because they would provide an opportunity for Black people to better understand their identities, as well as offer a "chance for healing and reconciliation" (62). This step would also help eliminate views on the environment which largely draw from the experiences of a privileged few (54). For the Environmental Club at Sacred Heart, promoting authenticity and acceptance can be as simple as hanging up flyers in the Multicultural Center (which I did following my interview with Cantey) or giving out free pots of aloe and other plants. For people in general, it can involve more targeted approaches, such as signing petitions urging major companies not to build plants in minority communities or working directly with frontline communities.

IV. Environmentalist Highlight: Wawa Gatheru and Her Work on Antiracism

As a young, female, Black environmentalist, Wawa Gatheru is not only an inspiration for environmentalists around the world—especially young BIPOC—but she inspired me to delve deeper into the environmental justice movement. Her article "Want to Be an Environmentalist?

Start with Antiracism" emphasizes that in order to solve the environmental crisis, we must first become antiracist, which is a view of environmentalism I'd never heard before. Only by being antiracist can we then tackle these crises from all angles and ensure that environmental efforts are equitable for all people, everywhere. This argument is otherwise known as the theory of intersectional environmentalism: the idea that we must be inclusive of all people and view all issues of justice, including climate justice, as related, not separate.

Similarly to Finney and Cantey, Gatheru discusses her own personal experiences in relation to ecoracism and environmental injustice. While she "grew up caring about the environment and issues like plastic pollution, [she] simply did not see [herself] as an 'environmentalist.' For the majority of [her] life, the term sat in an ivory tower of power, privilege, and whiteness and felt inaccessible and unrelated to [her] well-being" (Gatheru). She also cites examples of places like "Cancer Alley" in Louisiana—a predominantly Black community where the risk of developing cancer is the highest in the country—and Warren County, North Carolina—another mostly Black community which was a catalyst for the environmental justice movement in response to the dumping of toxic materials in their community in 1982. In conclusion, "various communities of color experience similar power dynamics that reinforce environmental racism across the country" and these communities "are the hardest hit" by environmental concerns like climate change and our dependence on single-use plastics (Gatheru). These examples of real places and people highlight the relationship between place/location and help me begin to answer two questions: How does a study of ecoracism benefit a literary analysis of place? and What is the correlation between race, environment, and location?

The correlation between race, environment, and location can be seen most clearly as the following: BIPOC communities generally live in the most polluted areas (whether these are urban areas or areas which have a lower cost of living, which is the most many BIPOC can afford, again due to racism and power dynamics). Through no fault of their own, BIPOC are forced to live in unsafe environments, and the pollution and contamination in these areas do nothing to help the larger environment. Shinall refers to these types of living conditions as forms of embodied toxicity, a concept introduced by author Julie Sze, which refers to the contamination of land, water, and air with toxic waste and the adverse health effects this contamination has on certain populations (Shinall 2-3). As Shinall points out, ecoracism "creates expendable bodies that are either invisible or negligible to the public" and "ignored by lawmakers" (2). Another question arises: if BIPOC communities experience the brunt of these environmental and public health issues in these locations, why are they "expendable" and not included in environmental conversations? People of color "make up 36% of the U.S. population" but "account for only 12% to 16% of the staff of environmental organizations" (Gatheru). This statistic does not, however, indicate a lack of interest in environmental issues. In fact, "Black people are significantly more concerned about climate change than white people" and Latinx and Indigenous communities are more concerned as well (Gatheru). However, because of the way America's society was built, BIPOC are often excluded—or feel unwelcomed—in the mostly-white environmental movement (note that I specified *environmental* movement, not *environmental justice* movement. The environmental movement is, I believe, still more well-known and understood than the environmental justice movement—at least in the areas I've lived in and the communities I've been a part of.) Instead of inviting the people we should be including in these conversations, our "same throwaway culture that disposes our planet disposes of people too—especially people of

color" (Gatheru). This view can even be seen in many contemporary Black stories and poems, two of which I will analyze later.

Even before looking at literature, Gatheru's article explains perfectly why, in order to solve the environmental crisis, we must become antiracist and eradicate ecoracism. Ecoracism is detrimental to the environmental justice movement and to the people involved, and the only way forward is to acknowledge this fact, resolve it, and work together in harmony and acceptance to protect the planet. Gatheru also emphasizes these points in an Instagram Live with Mark Ruffalo that took place on February 2, 2021. During the livestream, Ruffalo interviews Gatheru on a campaign her organization, Black Girl Environmentalist, is running called "Reclaim Our Time." From my understanding, "Reclaim Our Time" celebrates the work of those who have died without recognition, especially those from marginalized communities. Black work is rarely highlighted or celebrated, and "Reclaim Our Time" places Black voices as the center of attention. Gatheru, therefore, would agree with Finney that "racialization and representation are not passive processes; they also have the power to determine who actually participates in environment-related activities and who does not; which voices are heard in environmental debates and which voices are not" (Finney 3). Both Gatheru and Finney continuously highlight the ignorance which exists in the larger environmental movement, an ignorance we continue to see as many environmental organizations still focus on global, rather than local, environmental issues and are also mostly led by and comprised of white people. For example, two organizations I have previously worked with and/or attended webinars for, Beyond Plastics and the Connecticut League of Conservation Voters, attract a largely white crowd. I hardly ever see people of color attending their presentations or participating in their activities, which again is not due to a lack of interest but rather, I would argue, is the fault of the organizations themselves.

Are they reaching out to local Black communities and addressing specific issues there? Are they looking for ways to include people of color when so many BIPOC simply can't afford to join larger organizations because they are busy fighting daily to survive in toxic environments?

This issue of Black invisibility, underrepresentation, and underappreciation extends back to slavery in America, global colonization, and other means of oppression which "perpetuate power imbalances" (Gatheru). In fact, Gatheru points out that colonization is not a thing of the past because the consequences are still present, and "the past always informs the present" (Gatheru). In order to achieve environmental justice, we must first decolonize environmentalism. Part of this involves educating ourselves on the history of ecoracism and working toward antiracism, as well as taking a more holistic approach which involves not only environmental concerns but also "social, political, and economic justice," according to scholar Emma T. Lucas-Darby (Lucas-Darby 95). Lucas-Darby provides a perfect example of intersectional environmentalism by drawing upon her work examining environmental injustices in various poor and polluted communities where residents have long fought for their environmental and human rights. However, she does not delve into the issue of education. As Gatheru mentions, there simply aren't enough students of color in the environmental science classroom, and she describes her own experience being one of the only, if not the only, Black female in many of her classes at Oxford. Due to other systemic educational problems, such as the general disparity between white students and Black students in higher education, it is very difficult for a Black person to have similar opportunities as Gatheru has had. On the other hand, Ruffalo, being a white male, has found it exponentially easier to be a part of the environmental movement for over a decade. Granted, he is older and more famous than Gatheru, but his experiences in the movement have clearly been different from hers. While the environmental movement was once separate from

other movements, such as Black Lives Matter or the feminist movement (which, like the environmental movement, has left out people of color for so long), both Ruffalo and Gatheru emphasize that intersectionality is the only way to achieve success; the environmental movement and others can no longer be separate but must work together to reach justice. As Gatheru points out, we need a collective movement that protects "both people and planet" (Gatheru). In order to reach environmental justice and be successful environmentalists, we must dismantle systems which allow racism, misogyny, and transphobia—because all these movements are, at their cores, fighting for the same thing.

To begin—or continue—this fight, we must put our resources into frontline communities, instead of keeping them reserved only for the privileged few who do not live in polluted cities or hazardous suburbs. Frontline communities are already fighting for the environment because that is the reality of their daily lives. These communities often include members of the BIPOC community, but also undoubtedly include white people of all social classes and backgrounds, an oft-forgotten fact. Even people from rural areas—areas which are not usually thought of as unsafe due to the environment—can be part of these frontline communities, as companies build toxic plants and sites in the empty land, and people living in rural areas may feel too far removed from the climate conversation to believe they can effectively take part in the movement. But "justice is for all," no matter the race or location (Ruffalo). Ruffalo tells a moving story about one of his first meetings with members of a frontline community when he had recently joined the environmental movement. He felt so scared and helpless when listening to their issues that his first instinct was to run away. Later, however, he called up the leader of the group and asked how he could help. The key is not to ask "What can I do?" but "What can I do in collaboration with the work that is already being done?" (Gatheru). Thanks in part to Ruffalo's collaborative

actions, that community came one step closer to creating a safer, more sustainable home environment. Ruffalo's story offers a perfect example of how we begin to achieve justice of all kinds, but especially environmental justice, through sharing the weight of responsibility for both planet and people and focusing on collective, rather than individual, action.

V. Ecoracism in Literature and the Black Voice in Nature Writing

Lucille Clifton's poem "the river between us" was excerpted in *Black Faces, White Spaces*, emphasizing the fact that Clifton was a Black female poet who often wrote of struggles during the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the form of nature metaphors. Specifically, this poem represents the racial and class boundaries as a river separating people from each other. While one side of the river holds people who can "feed" themselves—in other words, succeed with little help—the other side holds those who need help and support in order to survive because American society is not set up for their success (Clifton 5). As shown by my research, American society as it exists today and has in the past often sets minorities up for failure. But "this is about more than color" because success is related to more than just skin color; it is related to identity, a person's relationship with nature, family, the place where someone grows up, and memory (7). Many Black people have a negative collective memory of nature due to a history of lynchings in woods and slaves being forced to endure severe conditions in nature while enslaved or escaping. In the end, however, Clifton's poem is about everyone, not just members of one race or another. We are all connected, particularly through nature and the fact that we all live on Earth, yet there remains a "river"—a boundary—between us which we must cross in order to achieve justice.

Still, not everyone has the opportunity or time to cross this boundary. Activism is often a privileged person's hobby, something to be done on the side voluntarily. Not everyone can afford

to be an activist in the traditional sense of the word. Yet many poor people and minorities have been activists in their communities where conditions are unsafe and unlivable. Nikki Giovanni's poem "For Saundra" delves into this complicated relationship between survival and activism. In her eyes, it would be nice to write poems about nature and being a protector of the environment, but in truth, "these are not poetic / times / at all" (Giovanni 881). The reality for many BIPOC is that they are safer inside than outside, so nature once again projects an unsafe atmosphere brought about from decades of collective traumatic memories. The image of someone peeking from their window to write a poem and noticing nothing but the "school yard […] covered / with asphalt / no green" provides a stark glimpse into the reality of urban life (880). Even the sky is gray with fog and low clouds, likely a result of pollution. As previously explained, most cities are disproportionately made up of poor people and people of color and are disproportionately polluted, thus providing a prime instance of ecoracism. Giovanni's poem provides a strong image of these facts, and the struggle to survive versus stand up for what's right—even through a poem—is a constant question for many people living in similar situations.

In comparison to these two poems, authors Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman reveal the white male perspective of the environment and surviving in nature. My analysis of these works is not intended to diminish Black voices; rather, I aim to compare the differing experiences of Black and white people in order to further show how present ecoracism is in literature and how it affects studies of nature and setting. I also feel a responsibility to acknowledge in both a literary and historical sense what white nature writers and environmentalists have published and how they shape our views of nature today. Evidently, these three authors are privileged to write from their perspectives and have a much different view of nature, race, and sex than Clifton and Giovanni. They also write from a different time period

during the Romantic period, which included the idea of transcendentalism. Much literature of this period focuses on imagination, spirituality, and emotion instead of logic, and independence, solitude, and the natural world are all important values. In Emerson's essay "Nature," he views nature in a privileged way, calling it something that "refers to essences unchanged by man," a view that I find hard to relate to today (Emerson 591). We are living in what some scholars, including Stacy Alaimo, call the "Anthropocene," or in other words, an unofficial epoch during which humans have such a significant impact on the Earth that we are effectively changing the planet. Emerson also emphasizes how nature heals through a harmony of environment and spirit and how nature can lead to a divine or spiritual experience (591). However, this is often not the experience of BIPOC in nature, as they often feel unsafe in forests or parks. As a young white woman, I also feel unsafe walking alone in more remote areas of nature and never go alone into places like the woods at night. Thus, the solitude which Emerson also writes of does not relate much to me. More often than not, I am scared when I am alone in nature, rather than feeling in a reflective mood.

Similarly, Thoreau's "Walden" discusses his personal experiences alone in nature, specifically at Walden Pond in Massachusetts. Not only is he known as an early environmentalist and America's original nature writer, he was also a strong advocate for abolition. While some of this call to social action appears in "Walden," this essay is more a lived experience of Emerson's "Nature." Throughout his time at Walden Pond, Thoreau lives in solitude in order to experience transcendentalism and describes bathing in the pond as a "religious exercise" that is renewing and purifying (Thoreau 747). Like some Black people during his time, Thoreau sees nature as a means of escape, similar to how many slaves escaped under cover of forests and used nature to their advantage. However, this was also a dangerous gamble. Nature was not necessarily a

peaceful place for escaped slaves, as it was for Thoreau; Black people were not guaranteed the same opportunities Thoreau was, such as being able to choose where he wanted to live and his career. When speaking of farmers, Thoreau asks why they should "begin digging their graves as soon as they are born," or in other words, why they should continue with the path that has been set out for them based on where they were born (704). While Thoreau acknowledges the plight of slaves and indentured servants—and condemns all forms of slavery—he does not explicitly acknowledge that some people do not have the opportunity to escape from their current living or working conditions. As shown by my research, poverty and racism are two parts of American society which are extremely difficult to escape. Due to racism, classism, and sexism, among others, some people are not able to choose their own futures. In the real world, there is often not any time or opportunity to do what Emerson and Thoreau insist we must: finding solitude and divinity in nature in order to better discover our individuality and appreciate the idealistic, transcendental experience. These are just a few of the white ideals of environmentalism, which have been modernized to include things like hiking, composting, and fighting climate change. While these ideals are not just limited to white activists, Black people, poor people, and other marginalized groups are more commonly forced to become activists and advocates for their own survival, often seeing nature as an enemy that keeps them trapped inside where the chance of survival is higher. This is a fact that major environmental groups often overlook, focusing instead on global initiatives over long periods of time instead of immediate, domestic issues.

In "Song of Myself," Walt Whitman addresses Emerson's call to create a new aspect of American literature which is grounded in nature. Whitman essentially compares himself to all different types of people in different environments, from a farmer to a slave to a master of the house. In doing so, he attempts to relate to all people; in other words, he is trying to be

empathetic and identify with the oppressed, an ideal which is a large part of the transcendentalist movement. While there is certainly a praise and appreciation of nature throughout the poem, Whitman's connection to minority groups begs a few questions. As someone who has never been enslaved or marginalized, what does he really know about a Black person's relationship with nature? How can he relate to someone from a minority group? While it is admirable to try to put yourself in another's shoes to better understand their experiences and reveal a universal, human truth, Whitman's poem is a prime example of someone who is not using antiracism to inform their decisions. Instead of acknowledging racism, sexism, or classism, Whitman glosses over these differences and, in an attempt to connect himself with all people, calls himself "of every hue and caste […], of every rank and religion" (Whitman). He also calls himself diverse and claims that "in all people [he] see[s] [himself]," so that "whoever degrades another degrades [him]" (Whitman). Regarding minority groups, he claims that "voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves" live though him and that he is "the hounded slave" who has experienced abuse, which can be viewed as a racist assumption considering he has never actually experienced imprisonment or slavery (Whitman). At the same time, Whitman is rather paradoxical because he writes that he would rather live with animals because they respect each other and treat each other as equals; in other words, he would prefer to live in a world in which all people are treated equally. However, his work largely overlooks the true Black experience in nature and seems a bit presumptuous in its ideas, so he himself does not seem to be treating everyone equally. I would be curious to know if Whitman conducted interviews with each of the people he mentioned before writing this poem, because the person I interviewed and the Black authors I have read would seem to disagree with many of Whitman's comparisons and attempts at empathy.

VI. Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

Within this Capstone, I have answered a few questions, including: How does a study of race, antiracism, and ecoracism benefit literary analyses of place? What is the correlation between race and environment? How can we use this knowledge to become better advocates for justice? As Clifton, Giovanni, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman have shown, there is a correlation between literature and the environment, and further explorations of this relationship can benefit literary analyses of place and inform scholars and activists as they continue their work. In the modern age, ecoracism has become a more common term, something which Clifton and Giovanni show in their poems on nature and race. As such, further research on literature and the environment can also positively impact the environmental justice movement by raising awareness on ecoracism and revealing its effects on BIPOC communities. Ecoracism and environmental justice are complex subjects and by no means are meant to define the entire Black experience or identity in America; many other issues—such as sexism, disproportionate poverty, and a lack of representation in government positions—also contribute to the experiences of people of color and racism in general. There have been many obstacles in overcoming all types of racism, but the antiracist movement is one initiative moving in the right direction. Mitigating ecoracism through learning about racism in the environmental movement is one way to combat it, as knowledge and activism together are powerful tools. As Gatheru and Finney have argued, a willingness to learn, inclusivity, and a focus on minority communities are truly effective ways to be both antiracist and environmental justice activists. Nature is an intrinsic part of our lives, and we are interminably connected to it. It is up to us not only to take care of nature, but more importantly each other.

While writings on the environment can be found in many American and European "classics," these narratives are usually written by white males. It has been exceedingly difficult for me to find a non-academic article or book that has been written by a person of color. I anticipate that more people who identify as Black will write about nature in the future, but for now, it's rare to read such a piece as part of a high school or college curriculum. I would recommend further studies of nature poems and stories written by both white and Black authors, as well as authors of other minorities. For example, it would be interesting to explore the use of words like "primitive," "savage," and "civilized" in the works of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, as well as how authors of color may view these words in a different context from white authors. Literature can certainly play a larger role in ecoracism studies and provide a larger context in the fields of ecocriticism and Critical Race Theory. I would also suggest further studies of what environmental groups are like today. For example, I'd be curious to know more about the Sierra Club's role in supporting or mitigating ecoracism and what other global groups are doing to combat ecoracism today. By bringing attention to these issues, I hope I have raised awareness on an ongoing issue in America and in the global environmental movement, informed people about ecoracism of both the past and present, and emphasized the importance of being antiracist in order to achieve environmental justice. Through my research, I have gained knowledge on a subject which I knew relatively little about and (I hope) have become a better environmental activist. While my time at Sacred Heart University has ended, I feel that my journey as an activist has just begun.

Included Poems by Lucille Clifton and Nikki Giovanni

For Saundra
By Nikki Giovanni

I wanted to write
a poem
that rhymes
but revolution doesn't lend
itself to be-bopping

then my neighbor
who thinks i hate
asked - do you ever write
tree poems - i like trees
so i thought
i'll write a beautiful green tree poem
peeked from my window
to check the image
noticed that the school yard was covered
with asphalt
no green - no trees grow
in manhattan

then, well, i thought the sky
i'll do a big blue sky poem
but all the clouds have winged
low since no-Dick was elected

so i thought again
and it occurred to me
maybe i shouldn't write
at all
but clean my gun
and check my kerosene supply

perhaps these are not poetic
times
at all

the river between us
By Lucille Clifton

in the river that your father fished
my father was baptized. it was
their hunger that defined them,

one, a man who knew he could
feed himself if it all came down,
the other a man who knew he needed help.

this is about more than color. it is
about how we learn to see ourselves.
it is about geography and memory.

it is about being poor people
in america. it is about my father
and yours and you and me and
the river that is between us.

Works Cited

Buell, Lawrence. "Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends." *Qui Parle,* vol. 19, no. 2, Duke University Press, pp. 87-115, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/quiparle.19.2.0087. Accessed 17 Nov. 2022.

Cantey, Ayasha. Personal interview. 25 Oct. 2022.

Clifton, Lucille. "the river between us." https://teachingheartfirepoetry.com/week-of-lucille-clifton-the-river-between-us/.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Nature." *The American Tradition in Literature,* edited by George Perkins and Barbara Perkins, 12th ed., McGraw Hill, 2009, pp. 587-617.

Finney, Carolyn. https://www.carolynfinney.com/about. Accessed 20 Sept. 2022.

Finney, Carolyn. *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors.* The University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

Gatheru, Wanjiku. "Want to Be an Environmentalist? Start with Antiracism." *Glamour,* 30 July 2020, https://www.glamour.com/story/want-to-be-an-environmentalist-start-with-anti-racism. Accessed 20 Sept. 2022.

Gatheru, Wawa [@wawa_gatheru]. "Untitled." *Instagram,* 2 Feb. 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CLIOBpfn4nH/.

Giovanni, Nikki. "For Saundra." *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature,* edited by Henry Louis Gates and Valerie Smith, 3rd ed., vol. 2, W. W. Norton & Company, 2014, pp. 880-1.

Greenberg, Dolores. "Reconstructing Race and Protest: Environmental Justice in New York City." *Environmental History,* vol. 5, no. 2, Oxford University Press, Apr. 2000, pp. 223-50, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3985636. Accessed 9 Sept. 2022.

Lucas-Darby, Emma T. "Community Benefits Agreements: A Case Study in Addressing Environmental and Economic Injustices." *The Journal of African American History,* vol. 97, no. 1–2, Special Issue: "African Americans and Movements for Reparations: Past, Present, and Future" (Winter–Spring 2012), The University of Chicago Press, pp. 92-109, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5323/jafriamerhist.97.1-2.0092. Accessed 6 Nov. 2022.

Melosi, Martin V. "Environmental Justice, Ecoracism, and Environmental History." *To Love the Wind and Rain,* edited by Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll, University of Pittsburgh Press, pp. 120-132, , http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt5hjs5p.13. Accessed 9 Sept. 2022.

Shinall, Vivian G. "Expendable Bodies: Examining the Connection Between Ecoracism and

Embodied Toxicity to Advance Eco-Social Justice Activism." *Consilience*, Columbia University, 2021, no. 23, pp. 15-21, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26979903.

Sze, Julie. "Denormalizing Embodied Toxicity: The Case of Kettleman City." *Racial Ecologies*, edited by Leilani Nishime and Kim D. Hester Williams, University of Washington Press, 2018, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvcwnm95.12. Accessed 25 Oct. 2022.

Thoreau, Henry David. "Walden." *The American Tradition in Literature*, edited by George Perkins and Barbara Perkins, 12th ed., McGraw Hill, 2009, pp. 701-67.

Whitman, Walt. "Song of Myself." 1892, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version.