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Preface

Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come. (Victor Hugo)

You can't get to wonderful without passing through alright.

(Bill Withers, *Wisdom: The Greatest Gift One Generation Can Give to Another*)

In March of 2007, I was invited to the University of Vermont to speak to the academic community about the intersection of race and the environment. I had given versions of this talk at other universities where, with the exception of a few historically black colleges in the South (HBCUs), my audience was largely white. While the content of my talks did not change, I always found it interesting the way in which different audiences collectively responded to my assertions about the “black experience” and the mainstream environmental movement in the United States. Whether the audience was predominately white, black, or a mix of diverse individuals, responses were often a combination of surprise, anger, curiosity, and hope. To a lesser extent (and perhaps this is because people were less likely to reveal these feelings in a public setting), I could also sense doubt, denial, and even dismissal. In any case, there was always much back and forth between myself and audience members as we navigated the sometimes emotionally tumultuous waters of race.

Along with sharing some facts and findings from my empirical research, I luxuriated in sharing stories about some of the people I was privileged to have

interviewed. I found that personalizing the discussion about race and environment—either with my own stories or the stories of others—was a great way to invite people into the conversation by reminding them that this wasn't just a black, white or brown experience; it was a *human* experience. At the University of Vermont, I began with one such story. I was especially fond of speaking about John Francis, a man who had spent twenty-two years walking across the United States to raise environmental awareness. On this particular day, I paused after saying “twenty-two years”, waiting for the audience to murmur and look simultaneously surprised and impressed. Then, as I usually did, I added the punch line, “And for seventeen of those years, he did it WITHOUT TALKING.” A collective gasp ran through the audience: “How is that possible? How did he communicate? Why did he do it? I loved this part—talking to people about how John earned his Ph.D. during this period (without talking), became a representative for the United Nations, and was one of the original architects of our oil spill policy that was instituted after Exxon Valdez infiltrated our seas and our environmental conversations.

Pleased with myself, I ended this story by sharing how Hollywood was preparing to make a movie about his life. Won't it be amazing, even revolutionary, to see a mainstream movie about a black man walking across America to raise environmental awareness? As I continued talking amidst laughs and nods of agreement, a young white woman timidly raised her hand. “Yes?” I smiled. “Well—uh—I'm not sure how to say this, but I have to tell you that as you were telling the story about John Francis, I just assumed he was WHITE.” Now, this was one of those moments a speaker loves, her declaration was completely unplanned and unscripted, but it underscored the point I was trying to make in my talk: that we have collectively come to understand/see/envision the

environmental debate as shaped and inhabited primarily by white people. And our ability to imagine Others is *colored* by the narratives, images and meanings we've come to hold as truths in relation to the environment. It is not unlike that old joke that challenged gender stereotypes: A boy gets into a bad car accident. The doctor at the hospital says, "I can't operate on this boy, he's my son." When the joke teller asks, "who is the doctor?" we figure the doctor must be the boy's father. Then we find out that he's the boy's mother.

In the case of race and the environment, it's not just who we imagine has something valuable to say. These assumptions, beliefs, and perceptions can be found in the very foundation of our environmental thinking, how we define the "environment" and how we think of ourselves in relationship with the environment. Who do we see, what do we see? In *Outside* magazine, Eddy Harris, a black writer and self-described outdoorsman says that we see black people on television as lawyers or doctors, but we balk at imagining African Americans in the great outdoors. Sid Wilson, president of the hiking organization, "A Private Guide, Inc." in Colorado, agrees, "When we do [see black people in the natural environment in the media], bears start rappin..."

Television and magazines aren't the only areas where stories about the African American environmental experience reflect our visionally challenged perspective. During the 1980s, the environmental justice movement emerged as a vehicle for addressing social justice concerns and taking on the question of racism (Gelobter et al. 2005). But twenty years later, the mainstream environmental movement is accused of falling short of addressing certain concerns, such as managing to, "racially integrate their senior staff" (Gelobter et al. 2005). In every other sector of society, African Americans

have made significant strides in becoming visible. No longer necessary to be stealth-like, we've thrown off the cloak of invisibility in education, music, law, medicine and politics.ⁱ For the first time in history, a self-identified African American man has become president. What is happening in the environmental movement? Are African Americans not interested, not involved, too busy with other issues? Is it really, as one black student told me at Tennessee State University, "A white thing?" Are there "exclusionary practices" in place that inhibit greater involvement by black folks? Are we limited in our role as victims in larger narratives (i.e., Hurricane Katrina)? And what of our agency? In the 1960s, two black psychiatrists, William Grier and Price Cobbs, wrote a book called *Black Rage* that explained how black pride and a positive sense of self grew in response to negative depictions and physical limitations imposed on black people by the majority culture. At the same time these psychiatrists contend that we "shrunk our ledge" in imagining who we were and who we could be. Have we shrunk our ledge? Are we content to freefall in the narratives written by others where political correctness and sympathy are meant to substitute for true engagement and relationship?

On Living Color

Here I must pause and intervene. My training as a social scientist, and more specifically as a geographer, has provided me with the skills to challenge traditional thinking about the production of knowledge, and how to think about the relationship between people and the world we live in. I've developed the tools to frame and name processes and phenomena, and taken advantage of opportunities to put my claims in the intellectual mix. However, I cannot in good conscience write this book about

interrogating and challenging who gets to define and legitimate the African American environmental relationship in the media and in environmental organizations without first providing you with my intellectual viewpoint and revealing a piece of my own story.ⁱⁱ

Conceptualizations of the environment, the legitimization of certain definitions, and the shaping of debates, are created and constructed by people who in turn, are informed by their own identity, their life experience, and the context in which they live. In addition, there is power and privilege at work, mediating the process of naming and claiming experiences in the world, setting the tone and the norm by which others are expected to measure themselves. I am offering another interpretation, another way of understanding African Americans and the environment and the power I have to do this is largely because of my academic experience—the skills I’ve learned which help me think, analyze, and write what I come to know. But the privilege is two-fold: the access I have to opportunities to get my work out there and the privilege of being born black in what seemed a largely white world that had already decided who I was and where my place is before I even learned to walk. I can tell the story with some authority (as a white colleague rightly pointed out) because I have been given the chance to see the world in *living* color on a daily basis.

The questions I ask in this book were informed by academia, cultural studies, geography, and the public discourse. But the primary motivation was personal. I was born in New York City during the Civil Rights era and was adopted by a black couple who had recently migrated North on the well-worn path of black movement from South to North. I grew up on a large estate right outside of New York City with twelve acres of scenic naturally wooded footage, a large pond, and an abundance of trees including oak,

beech, apple, and peach trees. My parents were the caretakers: gardener, chauffer, housekeeper, and permanent residents. Material wealth was all around us; there were other large tracts of land, big houses, and famous people that lived in the area (including Harry Winston, the diamond king). Since the owners of our home only came up from the city on weekends and holidays, my brothers and I had our own playground five days a week. And like any family, we grew stories about ourselves in that place. While I came to love what was “natural,” I also discovered that for some folks it wasn’t “natural” for my family or me to be there. We were the only “colored” family living in this area (and this remained true until the 1990s).

I watched my parents take care of this land everyday; they tended the garden, mowed the grass, and chased the geese. I watched my parents care for somebody else’s land for fifty years but not be able to claim ownership in any real way. I saw how my parents, with their 12th grade education, knew more about that land than the actual owners. But I also realized how this knowledge and commitment did not result in legal ownership of the land. Before the original owners passed away, they tried to arrange it so that my parents could stay on the land. However, the concerns of their adult children and the reality that my parents could never afford the property taxes (amounting to approximately \$125,000 a year) meant they could not stay. In looking to my parents and their story, I began to think about land and ownership. Whose land is this, anyway? And is ownership only about a piece of paper, or can it mean something more? Where do my parents fit in the mainstream environmental conversation?

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

For the past few years, I have been privileged to speak with black, white, and brown Americans across the country about race, racism, the media, and all matters deemed “environmental.” In particular, African Americans have shared with me their childhood stories from the woods and the ‘hood, the North and the South, and from the 1930s to the 1980s. Whether working on a farm or hanging out on a stoop, their experiences of nature were usually welcomed by them, sometimes challenged by others, and were always bumping up against social, economic, and historical processes that served to remind them that their map of the world, while fluid, demanded a particularly fine-tuned compass that allowed them to navigate a landscape that was not always hospitable.

What I discovered/uncovered/recovered is the many ways in which—be it physical, artistic or spiritual—black people have laid it all down in order to feed their children, plant their dreams, and share their experience and history with the environment. People like MaVynee Betsch who, in her middle years, gave away all her wealth to environmental causes and fought hard until her death in 2005 to conserve and protect both the natural resources of her home place, American Beach on Amelia Island in Florida, and the African American history that she believed was an intricate part of that landscape. Or Eddy Harris, who at the age of thirty during the 1980s, canoed the length of the Mississippi River to understand both the material and spiritual meaning of the river in American life and to explore what it meant to be a black man in contemporary society. Or Shelton Johnson, a black park ranger in Yosemite National Park who revived the story of the Buffalo soldiers and their role in protecting the park by incorporating the story into

the larger park narrative through interpretation, film, and the written word. Or people like my parents who simply wanted to feed their families and provide new opportunities and a better life for their children.

From Wynton Marsalis to Toni Morrison to Will Allen to Majora Carter to a man named Pearl, African Americans toiled, sang songs, wrote stories and transformed the landscape with hard work, big dreams, and a belief that African Americans have and have always had an intimate, ever-changing and significant relationship with the natural environment. In the following pages, I hope to highlight some of those experiences and the way in which African Americans, both individually and collectively, continue to nurture that connection.

The audience I hope to engage includes academics in a variety of disciplines, practitioners, environmentalists broadly defined, and “just folks” who, like my parents, are working and living in relation to the natural environment every day. As such, I understand that everyone brings different expectations to the table about my approach to writing this book. So I would like to offer some explanation and if I may be so bold, some guidance and points of reference to my method. In this book, I am attempting to do two things: lay out a rendering of the African American/environmental relationship that reveals some of the contradictions and synergies, and 2) equally attribute the knowledge that comes from non-academic sites of learning as central to our understanding of the African American environmental relationship, not simply anecdotal to our comprehension. For me, this requires that I be willing to “sit” in the ambiguity and complexity of the African American/environment relationship by engaging multiple sites where Black voicings reside. In particular, I draw on popular culture, critical race

studies, art, African American studies, memoirs and even music, along with more “traditional” areas of knowledge production such as geography and environmental history. Sometimes I do this quite directly by referencing a well-known film or popular artwork in relation to an idea that I am exploring. Other times, I take a “sideways” approach where I invite the reader to engage a little creative improvisation by considering a phrase or example or reference that doesn’t necessarily explain itself so explicitly. For instance, the titles to some of my chapters are references to Spike Lee films. As a kind of cultural Jedi who uses film to address African American life, his films offer whole worlds of living and knowing that could fill volumes, but which is too substantial to include in these pages. So I take a bit of a shortcut – in my first chapter, titled “Bamboozled” I am referencing his film where he highlights the hypocrisies, contradictions, and misrepresentations concerning African Americans in the media. He points to the cultural narratives that have bamboozled us into believing stereotypes and other cultural concoctions that limit and diminish African Americans in multiple ways. By choosing this title, I aim to offer another way to access understanding about how cultural narratives get constructed and the power they have to dismiss and make invisible Others; that even though Lee is talking about Black people in the media and I am talking about Black people and the environment, there is a common thread where power and privilege by design can diminish our ability to see people’s historical and contemporary experiences more fully and in relation to our own experiences. Bringing together cultural studies, (in particular, popular culture), critical race theory and environment allows me to create a framework that is expansive and flexible enough to engage the complexities and contradictions of the African American environmental relationship. That complexity –

layered, messy, informed by power dynamics (who gets to produce, disseminate and represent information) – reveals the need to draw on diverse sources of material to begin to address the nuances and richness of a relationship that is not necessarily served by a linear distillation using traditional frameworks. As mentioned earlier, I also engage and value popular material and other knowledge gleaned from non-academic sources in the exact same way that I engage scholarship. This is particularly true concerning knowledge about, by and for African Americans as historically, African American have not always had access to traditional spaces of learning and knowledge production and have used other sites of production, such as music, art, and popular culture to have their/our voices heard. As Bernice Johnson Reagan, scholar and founding member of the singing group Sweet Honey and the Rock said in a keynote speech on Black Environmental Thought at the University of Minnesota in 2012, “go below the intellectual paper record to get those black stories”.ⁱⁱⁱ And so, I go.

Finally, as a geographer, I’ve chosen to cast my intellectual net more widely in hopes of engaging in a dynamic conversation that emerges from diverse ideological, disciplinary and creative perspectives. So I do not necessarily privilege geography as my primary approach to this book. But, let me clear: geographical concepts of and approaches to place, scale and identity have certainly influenced my thinking on this project and continue to be integral to my intellectual growth. And I am interested in understanding how geography might be in relationship to the framework that I am employing in this manuscript.

The thoughts I share with you in this book have largely been informed by my past research and public debate in the media. Regardless of the part of the country that I have been privileged to visit, I've observed how certain patterns and relationships, while different in their specificity, are similar in their ability to shape a debate and a movement. My hope is to lay bare the existing narrative and to develop an alternative set of narratives. Writing about African Americans is both a personal and professional project. And yes, there are pitfalls. The most significant being that no collective of people stays the same; I cannot tap into every nuance, difference, and complexity that exists or is yet to come. I can surrender to the idea that seeing differently yields greater possibilities than any finite set of assertions stating a groups motivations and limitations. This book is a starting point, a distillation of empirical research, personal reflection, and a "leaning hard" into a yet unseen future. It is but a small example of what is possible for anyone willing to challenge their assumptions, "embrace their complexities," and transcend our limited views of each other and our relationship with the environment.^{iv}

Introduction

Surely i am able to write poems
celebrating grass and how the blue
in the sky can flow green or red
and the waters lean against the
chesapeake shore like a familiar,
poems about nature and landscape
surely but whenever i begin
“the trees wave their knotted branches
and...why
is there under that poem always
an other poem?

(From *Mercy* by Lucille Clifton)

In May 2006, *Vanity Fair*, a monthly magazine with national distribution, published a special issue focusing on environmental issues. Labeled the “Green Issue,” celebrities such as Julia Roberts and George Clooney, resplendent in green, graced their cover alongside politicians Al Gore and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. Inside the issue, Al Gore outlined the global warming “crisis” and then shared the “good news” that “we can solve this crisis, and as we finally do accept the truth of our situation and turn to boldly face

down the danger that is stalking us, we will find that it is also bringing us a unprecedented opportunity” (Gore 2006, 171). Following his optimistic proclamation were twenty-eight pages of photos and text reflecting the voices of well-known eco-activists, environmental organizations, and celebrities who are considered proactive in combating the world’s environmental crisis. Among the sixty-three pictures and profiles, however, only two pictures of African Americans (and one African, Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai) could be found.

It might be tempting to dismiss this striking imbalance because of the issue’s celebrity-driven feel (even if Gore lent some gravitas). For a gossip-driven, advertisement-heavy magazine, allocating an entire issue to environmental concerns could also be construed as a bold move. But there was nothing groundbreaking about whom the magazine decided was the face of the environmental movement and who was seemingly at the center of the environmental debates. Sadly, although the environmental movement’s expressed desire is to engage a broad and diverse constituency, this special issue reinforced for its thousands of readers that few environmentalists or media executives seems to recognize the significant role of race in the movement and its aims. In light of Hurricane Katrina (2005), where the complexity of race and environment have been highlighted in the media, scholars and practitioners are presented with an “unprecedented opportunity” as Gore put it, to address the connections linking race, identity, representation, history, and the environment in order to awaken from our “historical amnesia” and move forward to create a more inclusive, expansive environmental movement devoid of denial and rich in possibility.

Vanity Fair's "oversight" in highlighting hardly any African Americans or other people of color in their "Green Issue" speaks volumes about how Americans think, see, and talk about the "environment" in the United States. The representation of environmental issues and the narrative supporting the visual images provides insight into *who* Americans actually imagine cares about and actively participates in environmental concerns. In addition, how the environmental narrative is portrayed is an indicator to who is actually being engaged in the larger conversation.

If popular media is one effective way in which to transfer, inform, reinforce, and legitimate ideas about the environment (Braun 2003; Bloom 1993), *Vanity Fair* is not alone in creating a racialized perception that when it comes to concern for the great outdoors, participation in outdoor recreation in our forests and parks, and the environmental movement in general, African Americans and other non-dominant groups are on the outside looking in. Other magazines such as *National Geographic* and its subsidiaries, *Outside*, and *Backpacker*, continue the tradition, lending authenticity to "original" stories of the American wilderness as fundamental American truth through photographic and discursive representations of places and Other peoples (Bloom 1993). This racialization feeds stereotypes and ideologies that become entrenched in our national psyche (Elder, Wolch, and Emel 1998). This process can lead to exclusion from places and processes thought to be inclusive and sensitive to the cultural and social diversity that is unique to the United States (Sibley 1995). A "white wilderness" is socially constructed and is grounded in race, class, gender, and culture ideologies (DeLuca and Demo 2001). Whiteness, as a way of knowing, becomes *the* way of understanding our environment, and through representation and rhetoric, becomes part of our educational systems,

institutions, and personal belief systems (Sundberg 2002; DeLuca and Demo 2001; Smedley 1993).

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; what voices are heard in environmental debates and what voices are not. The power of representation lies in its ability to shape today's reality through the reality of the past (Duveen and Moscovici 2001). Along with visual images, textual representation—the stories we tell about ourselves, others, and the places we live—“provides a framework for experiencing the material world” and for understanding “how local stories intersect with larger social, historical, and political processes” (Cruikshank 1998, xii).

Stories, or narratives, about our “natural environment” work in much the same way, informing our environmental interactions and shaping the institutions concerned with environmental issues (thereby shaping how we represent, perceive, and construct the identities of racial “others” within our society). The dominant environmental narrative in the United States is primarily constructed and informed by white, European, western voices (DeLuca and Demo 2001; Jacoby 1997; Taylor 1997). This narrative not only shapes the way the natural environment is represented, constructed, and perceived in our everyday lives, but informs our national identity as well. Missing from the narrative is an African American perspective, a non-essentialized black environmental identity that is grounded in the legacy of African American experiences in the United States, mediated by privilege (both intellectual and material, influenced by race, gender, class and other aspects of difference that can determine one's ability to access spaces of power and

decision-making), and informed by resistance to and/or acceptance of the dominant narrative.

This book argues from the assumption that environmentalism and the meanings we attribute to the environment are grounded in history, race, gender, and culture. Let me clarify what I mean by “environmentalism” and other related terms. More than any other term, I use the words “environment” (and as an extension, “environmentalism”) and “outdoors” interchangeably throughout this book. In addition, “wilderness,” “parks,” and “forests” are also employed to describe particular outdoor spaces. While each word has a specific meaning, their meanings also overlap. Many of the texts cited use the terms interchangeably. More noticeably, most of the interviewees I spoke with used the terms interchangeably, too. This suggests that for African Americans, specificity is less important than the implied meaning underneath and how these terms have come to mean one and the same thing for the black community. Therefore, I use the term “environment” in this book to describe any outdoor green space, whether natural or constructed, and relates to environmental issues such as air quality, climate change, and species protection. “Environmentalism” is used to connote an active form of “environment”, usually lending itself to activism and practice related to engaging environmental issues.

While the dominant mainstream culture has played a significant role in constraining (and making invisible) African American engagement with environmental concerns/participation in environmental and nature “activities,” there are also other perceived obstacles that need to be acknowledged. For African Americans, to varying degrees, the everyday practices associated with environmental interactions are directly

related to issues of African American identity and American history (Dominy 1997). This ideology can be at odds with thinking about and honoring the environment in the way that the dominant narrative of conservation and preservation is constructed (Agyeman 1989). On the other hand, this way of thinking does not preclude a desire to care for, enjoy, and utilize the environment in a sustainable fashion. The ideas, thoughts, and solutions that arise from an African American experience of the environment are mediated by differential access, needs, privilege, and history.^v They are no less valuable, visionary, or controversial. Some feel that if African Americans reclaimed their past they would “acquire a sense of agency to shape dominant narratives” (Finley 2001, 3). But others argue that economic disparity and limited access to resources keeps African Americans from being able to express their environmental views and attitudes, thereby influencing how the environment is constituted and understood in the United States (Johnson et al. 1997; Bullard 1995). Other explanations for the perceived lack of responses to environmental issues have been apathy, disengagement, and/or fear (Blum 2002; Virden and Walker 1999; Grandison 1996; Smith 1996).^{vi} These responses are further complicated by “resistance” to ideas seen as “white,” in an effort to construct a black identity (hooks 1992).

Representations and racialization inform the way we approach the “business,” the “science,” and the “conservation” of the natural world.^{vii} They affect the way these spaces and places are constructed and the institutions that maintain these constructions. By excluding the African American environmental experience (implicitly or explicitly), corporate, academic, and environmental institutions legitimate the invisibility of the

African American in the Great Outdoors and in all spaces that inform, shape, and control the way we know and interact with the environment in the United States.

We can broaden our understanding of African Americans and environment interactions by exploring how the attitudes and perceptions of African Americans are influenced by racialized constructions and representations, informing how African Americans participate in the use of national forests and parks as well as other open spaces. While there is a growing interest on the part of some environmental institutions to understand and support greater participation by African Americans in natural resource management, I have found few empirical studies that specifically address African American attitudes in relation to environmental issues in the United States.

My goal in this book is to draw together key concepts and frameworks from several theoretical perspectives in order to understand and explain the intersections of racialization, representation, identity, and their subsequent impacts on African American environment relationships. I draw on frameworks from feminist geography, environmental history, and work on race and identity to examine these themes. In particular, I use feminist theories of identity, positionality, and relationality to highlight the mutual construction of place, identity, and subjectivity (Collins 2000; Nagar 1998; Pulido 1997; Friedman 1995; Haraway 1991). Where we are situated in our lives informs the narratives that we construct about place and who we are in relation to self and Others (Staeheli and Martin 2000; Haraway 1991). Such a framework takes into consideration how contemporary constructions of black identity are informed by “shifting class positionality” and can provide insight into how the African American identity is

negotiated (individually and collectively) in the production of an environmental narrative in the United States (hooks 1994b, 147).

I also draw on environmental history methods to show how ideas of the environment have been constructed, disseminated, commodified, and understood in the United States over time. As a geographer, I find particular value in the work of historians such as Donald Worster (1990) and Carolyn Merchant (1990), who have worked to reveal the ways that people attribute meaning to the environment based on their ideologies, beliefs, myths, and experiences. By placing ideas of wilderness in a historical context and deconstructing their implicit and explicit racial connotations, scholars can push mainstream environmental institutions and the society at large to consider alternate understandings and experiences of the outdoors (DeLuca and Demo 2001). By investigating the shifting “cognitive maps” of the spaces we think of in terms of the “natural environment,” we have an opportunity to rethink how African Americans in the United States have engaged in that space.

In addition to feminist geography and environmental history frameworks, scholars exploring race and identity provide insights into the linkages between identity and representation. I focus particularly on the ways in which media and formal education promote some ways of knowing, explaining, and understanding over others. Who has representational authority can determine how our stories get told, and how we think about ourselves in relation to others (Behar 1995; hooks 1992). Theorists investigating race, and in particular, the construction of an African American identity, suggest that we interrogate the forms, themes, and regimes of representation in order to problematize and politicize the representation process (Hall 1996). Stories can shape self-understanding;

for African-Americans, theorization of black culture within an environmental context can illuminate historical elements that inform environment interactions today (Dyson 1999). For that reason, this book not only critiques the historical absences of African Americans from mainstream environmental narratives; it also focuses on foregrounding the narratives of African Americans who have shown leadership, creativity and commitment to engaging environmental concerns within and in relation to their communities.

Finally, in an effort to build a bridge between cultural studies, critical race studies, and environmental studies, I have expanded my conceptual framework to include representations of the black experience found in cultural productions such as art, music, poetry and literature. While more traditional and/or formal theories of knowing can provide powerful information supported by accepted methods of research and analysis, cultural sites that express ways of knowing and seeing the world offer an opportunity to “draw outside the lines” of traditional frameworks that don’t always capture the nuance of lived experience of non-dominant cultural groups, such as African Americans. In constructing a narrative or story about the African American environmental relationship, these forms of creative expression not only reveal the many ways that African Americans are “having fun, getting serious, establishing credibility and consensus, securing identity, negotiating survival, keeping hope alive, suffering and celebrating” (Wideman 2001, xx). But they also give credence to practices and cultural spaces that are often devalued and/or dismissed in more formal sites of knowledge production.

What are some of the stories arising from the “African American experience” in the United States that inform the attitudes and beliefs African-Americans hold about the environment? Academics have explored various issues related to people, nature, and

representation (textual and visual). Scholarly work on representation has highlighted how power, personal interests, and unchallenged historical accounts of the past, influence how places and peoples are represented (Day 1999; Duncan 1993). In addition, geographers have addressed issues of exclusion, marginality, and space, particularly how images of groups and places can combine to create “landscapes of exclusion” (Agyeman and Spooner 1997; Cloke and Little. 1997; Sibley 1995). In particular, Sibley discusses how “key sites of nationalistic sentiment” such as the countryside implicitly excluded black people (Sibley 1995, 108). Racial discourse within geography has explored how race, space, and place are mutually constituted, the construction of the Other, and the power of racialization processes to shape environmental interactions (Kosek 2006; Braun 2003; Gilmore 2002; Pulido 2002; Sundberg 2002; Wilson 2000; Day 1999; Nast 1999; Gilbert 1998; Jackson 1998; Woods 1998; Kobayashi and Peake 1994; Radcliff and Westwood 1993; Anderson 1988). More recently, there have been a number of books that explore the relationship between race and food (Aiken and Agyeman 2011, Guthman 2011). However while geographers are exploring new frontiers with work on race, there has been a reduction in research on African Americans themselves (Mitchell and Smith 1999; Dwyer 1997). Some have charged that there has to be “social relevancy” for a subject to be pursued. Others contend that if race is “central to the contemporary human condition,” then race is central to geography (Shein 2002, 1). I have undertaken this research to expand the conversation on race and environment broadly by highlighting the experiences, perceptions and beliefs of African Americans as informed by history, memory, media representation and dominant environmental narratives. In particular, by engaging cultural sites of production where African American knowledge continues to

inform/define black identity and cultural practices in the U.S., I want to change the way we think about African Americans in relation to all things environmental.

Within the field of environmental history in the United States, some scholars have begun to explore how race, class, and gender differences are significant to our understandings of ecological history (Glave and Stoll 2006; Krech 1999; White 1996; Anthony 1993; Worster 1993; Merchant 1989; Nash 1982). The growing literature around environmental justice, with its particular focus on environmental racism and equity, has been one site of such work (Sze 2006; Cole and Foster 2001; Pulido 2000; Bryant 1995; Bullard 1995; Camacho 1998; Miller, Hallstein, and Quass 1996; Mohai 1992). While this literature highlights how African Americans and low-income communities are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards, it also suggests that focus on environmental racism can lead to greater involvement in environmental issues by African Americans (Sheppard 1995).^{viii}

There is more recent work on race and the environment, including an examination of “whiteness,” challenges underlying assumptions about place, nature, and race (Smith 2007; Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003; Braun 2003; Sundberg 2002; Bonnet 2000 DeLuca 1999). For example, Braun (2003) explores the absence of the African American adventurer in popular media and how this is apparent in representations of risk-taking in the natural environment. Encounters with nature in publications that address outdoor sports are portrayed differently depending on whether the magazines target middle-class white readers or African American or Hispanic reader. In particular, when magazines targeting black or Hispanic readers portray activities in the

outdoors, the focus is largely on recreational sports or relaxation, not adventure or risk-taking (Braun 2003).

In the leisure/outdoor recreation literature, there are a number of studies on the participation of African Americans in open-air activities, highlighting the degree of participation in certain outdoor venues (Holland 2002; Johnson et al. 1997; Roberts and Drogin 1996; Philipp 1995; Sheppard 1995; Baugh 1991; Agyeman 1989). Empirical studies have found that African Americans are less likely than Anglo-Americans to participate in or visit outdoor recreation areas (Johnson et al. 1997; Sheppard 1995). Reasons cited include socio-economic factors such as education and income, and subcultural values informed by discrimination, slavery, and African heritage (Johnson et al. 1997; Meeker 1984). Scholars addressing environmental attitudes of African Americans have found that compared with Whites, African Americans are fearful of forest environments because of threats from wildlife and other humans (Virden and Walker 1999). Specifically, researchers have suggested that racism plays a significant role in limiting black participation with the “Great Outdoors.” For example, Patrick West (1993) describes how in the 1970s, a city park in Chicago had signs that read “whites only; niggers keep out.” Dorceta Taylor describes how African Americans pre-World War II were attacked when visiting recreation areas designated as “White” (Taylor 1989). Travel to and from recreation sites has also been cited as a barrier to African American visitation to outdoor sites since they may fear to travel through terrain considered white and hostile (West 1993). Still others suggest that because African Americans today are largely an urban population “removed from the land,” they may be less affected by the negative images of the forests and other wildlands that plagued their ancestors (Johnson

et al. 1997, 75). Finally, studies have challenged the perception that African Americans are not concerned with environmental issues (Mohai 2003; Baugh 1991). A recent study that queried African American parents in Texas, while acknowledging how a history of slavery may influence black attitudes towards nature, revealed a heightened awareness of environmental issues as a result of direct experience (pollution and sewage) and a belief that environmental education was important for their children (Kahn 2001). Additional studies have explored the role of race and class in American environmentalism highlighting how mainstream environmental agendas marginalize and exclude people of color (Taylor 1997). Most fall short in systematically investigating the impact of visual and textual representations, attitudes and beliefs, and collective memories on African Americans interactions with the environment. There are general accounts of African American experiences in wild lands and other green spaces, but these are usually personal narratives found in travel literature, race and identity literature, or memoirs rather than comparative and quantified empirical accounts (Deming and Savoy 2011; Griffen and Fish 1998; McElroy 1997; White 1996; Harris 1988). While not providing social scientific or fully documented data, they do present important valuable insights for considering how African Americans negotiate collective memories of their underrepresented history in relation to an environmental narrative that largely denies or marginalizes their experience.^{ix}

Finally, some studies have challenged the perception that African Americans are not concerned with environmental issues (Mohai 2003; Baugh 1991). One such study queried African American parents in Texas and found that while acknowledging how a history of slavery may influence black attitudes towards nature, direct experience with

environmental problems such as pollution and sewage created a heightened awareness of environmental issues and a belief that environmental education was important for their children (Kahn 2001). Additional studies have explored the role of race and class in American environmentalism, highlighting how mainstream environmental agendas marginalize and exclude people of color (Taylor 1997). But these studies have fallen short in systematically investigating the impact of visual and textual representations, attitudes and beliefs, and collective memories on African Americans' interactions with the environment.^x

Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive studies addressing the nature of a black environmental imaginary in the present hinders our understanding of how African American environmental interactions have developed and changed over time (Blum 2002). We know little about the meanings African Americans attribute to the natural environment (Virden and Walker 1999; Johnson et al. 1997). It is not enough to “recapture the spirit of the past” (some romantic ideal of peoples relationship with the environment historically) in order to assure ecological respect in the present (Runte 1997, xxii). Our efforts to engender respect and inspire active participation in the care and management of our forests and parks means embracing the cultural experiences and environmental values of all segments of American society.

Those in representation-making positions of power keep reproducing the same statements and ideas. At the same time, African Americans are weighted down by a conflicted environmental history and a contemporary environmental experience that appears to ignore them (Kahn 2001; Meeker 1984).^{xi} Both processes contribute, in varying degrees, to perpetuating the myth of an environmental narrative in the United

States that is all-inclusive, meaning the same thing to all peoples, despite historical and cultural differences that inform people's experiences (I explore this further in Chapter 1).

Research Questions, Methodology and Sites

In order to broaden our understanding, I began this research with the following over-arching question: What are the linkages among how the Great Outdoors is represented, the “African American experience” in the United States, and African American attitudes, beliefs, and interactions pertaining to the environment? I wanted to understand the relationship between various processes that define and inform how we engage what we call “environment” (be they issues or aspects of the natural world) and African Americans. Since there are many dimensions to this question, I specifically look at four areas that I address in detail in the following chapters.

First, I look at the role of collective memory of race-relations in the United States and how this “memory” informs environmental interactions. For many African Americans, the ability to name, frame and claim a green space is partially grounded in collective and individual memories that inform how they navigate and understand such spaces. These memories, be they simply shared familial experiences, or referencing particular historical moments (like Jim Crow) prove to be powerful incentives in determining the characteristics of an African American's relationship to the environment.

Second, I wanted to explore how representations of the Great Outdoors are racialized within environmental institutions and organizations. As mentioned earlier on in this chapter, representations of the Great Outdoors can intentionally or unintentionally feed stereotypes of who is engaged with the environment and who is not. A narrative

is constructed about the environment that is deemed at once authentic and universal which denies the complexity of experiences that non-dominant groups have encountered historically. This in turn, inhibits the ability of environmental organizations to develop opportunities and practices that recognize, attract and support African Americans engaging in environmental participation.

Related to this issue, I also want to understand how representations and the perceptions of African Americans in relation to the environment affect that relationship through work, leisure, literature, education and activism. Images, words and stories about the African American environmental relationship have powerful roots in a history that has not always been kind or fair when considering African Americans as citizens capable of participating in the nation-building process. These negative stereotypes, often grounded in racist practices from our past, have bled into present-day narratives (i.e. Hurricane Katrina) perpetuating old wounds and creating roadblocks to more expansive engagement and consideration of African American's contribution to our on-going environmental challenges.

Finally, I needed to take a closer look at how African American participation is perceived by environmental organizations as well as consider how African Americans actually experience the natural environment and the organizations that manage these environments. Even within the same environmental organization there can be a disparity in the perceptions of white staff and their African American colleagues. This disparity can lead to frustration, anger and general fatigue on the part of all parties and inhibit their ability to collectively address underlying issues related to race and develop the capacity within the organization to engage diverse constituencies.

While these issues formed the basis of my original research, further reading and reflection enticed me to expand my original framework and questions to include cultural studies and black voicings from multiple sites, not as pawns and proxies, but as important insights into the depth of complexity that exists in the African American environment relationship. Along with addressing the issues noted above, I also explore how popular culture and other sites of non-formal knowledge production change the way in which we understand the African American environmental relationship. In a way, this is an attempt on my part to read between the lines of a history and a present that does not always recognize or acknowledge other ways of seeing and engaging the world. In addition, film, art, music, poetry and literature created and produced by African Americans tell us something about the African American environmental relationship in the first person, so to speak.

What is potentially revealed by forms of creative expression that allow for African Americans to more fully express perspectives, visions, and understandings of their collective and individual relationship to the environment uncensored by accepted dominant narratives, definitions and representations of who they are? I believe we get a glimpse of something beyond the fear, contestation and invisibility that can be part of the African American experience. We begin to see how, despite the challenges, resilience can emerge on the landscape and within our communities, revealing new practices of environmental engagement.

My research methodology and the research sites I spent time in followed a unique pathway. My choice of research design, that is how to do it “rightly,” was reflective of

both my skills and my politics and as such, calls for transparency and explanation. But first I want to talk a bit about my primary research site.

My primary research was conducted in Miami-Dade and Broward Counties, which have proximity to the Everglades National Park, Biscayne National Park, and Big Cypress National Preserve in Southern Florida. Southern Florida was chosen for specific reasons. In 1934, the Everglades National Park became the first major park without mountains and waterfalls to become committed to total preservation (Runte 1997). Today, intense pressure from residential development and agricultural needs threatens to destroy this unique, wetland environment. Some charge that it is the most endangered park within the national park system (Boucher 1991). As a result, numerous constituencies in southern Florida have made it their task to restore the health of the Everglades while striking a balance between the needs of that environment and the needs of local people (Douglas 1997). In addition, both Biscayne National Park and Big Cypress National Preserve are steeped in histories that include African American interaction with the land (farming and logging) that has informed present-day environmental practices. Southern Florida is also home to one of the most ethnically diverse spots in the United States. African Americans have “consistently formed an important and sizeable component of the South Florida population” (Mohl 1991, 112). Race-relations in this southern state have always been a visible and sensitive issue (Mohl 1991).

Southern Florida is rich in African American history that is directly related to environmental activities. For example, Virginia Key Beach, the only beach in Miami during the 1940s where African Americans could go, has recently been restored. In

Biscayne National Park, rangers discovered that Parson Jones, a black man born in the 1800s, had owned three of the islands in the park. His family had 250 acres where they farmed, fished, and went sponging.^{xii} In addition, a network of local, state, and national organizations is directly concerned with increasing African American user participation in environmental issues related to national parks and forests in the area. Along with Earthwise Productions, these organizations include the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Council, which focuses on educating communities of color and getting them involved in the Everglades Restoration, the Virginia Key Beach Trust, and the South Florida African-American Leadership Council organized by the director of community outreach for Audubon, South Florida.

Once ensconced in South Florida, I used multiple approaches to get at the issues I've outlined earlier in this chapter. I did this because at the core, I want to understand three main issues: 1) how African American participation is perceived by environmental organizations; 2) how African Americans actually experience the natural environment; and 3) get some insight into the organizations that manage these environments. Each of these points are informed by the ideas outlined in this chapter and will be explored in more detail throughout the book: dominant narratives, history and memory, media representation, race and racism, and resilience. Since these are complex issues that overlap with each other, I engaged different methods that would ultimately, allow me greater insight into the linkages between African American identity, attitudes and values, representation and environmental interactions with forests and parks, and the natural environment more generally, in the United States.

Data collection involved five specific activities that addressed the three primary issues noted above. I wanted to get a sense of how African Americans in the environment are portrayed in popular outdoor magazines and other media materials. So I used something called Content Analysis where I examined particular magazines and brochures with an environmental bent and literally counted how many times we see African Americans and in what context are they pictured (please see Chapter 4).

I also interviewed African Americans with specialized environmental knowledge, as well as African Americans who may or may not access or use forests and parks. I met with African Americans from all around the nation, many of whom have expertise and specialized knowledge related to forest and park activities. I traveled to or met with individuals from many states including California, New Mexico, Alabama, Missouri, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., Colorado, Washington state, and Florida.

Along these same lines, I provided surveys to white staff at three National Parks in South Florida. The interviews and the surveys with all individuals allowed me to document the values and motivations of a group that is emerging as an organized constituency of African Americans engaged in forest and park use. In addition, I could begin to track the perceptions of those working for the National Park Service (NPS) and get a sense of where the realities experienced by African Americans and white park staff were different.

But I also wanted to understand more than what I could glean from the answers that everyone gave me in the interviews and surveys. So I used Participatory Research, and Participant Observation, two techniques that allowed me to access multiple layers of experience not always observed when using conventional data-collection methods.

Basically, I found other opportunities outside of the interviewing process that provided additional insight into the issues I was exploring. This ranged from an impromptu content analysis of the popular media coverage of the August 2005 Hurricane Katrina^{xiii} and the aftermath which occurred during the analysis and writing of my research, to the inclusion of observations, discussions, behavior, and even confrontations in the context of conferences and workshops that I attended. The immersion in everyday life of the Miami-Dade County area for one year also provided a rich source and constant stream of encounters and observations related to African Americans and the environment, and in the material and representational landscapes of my study area.^{xiv}

Keeping It Real

As an African American doing research on race in the United States, I was mostly seen as an insider. For the majority of the study participants, my race “membership” was enough to establish trust and share with me their thoughts on race and environment. Other studies have shown that there is a correlation between black informants feeling more comfortable in sharing sensitive thoughts on race with a black interviewer and feeling that having black skin in common creates a space of trust (Twine 2000). But in other cases, particularly when I tried to establish relationships with African American non-park and forest users, it was different. For example, accessing the black church proved nearly impossible for me as I am not a member of any church, and while some African Americans I spoke with belonged to churches, they were hesitant to introduce me to their congregation. While I was temporarily living in the community, I was still only a visitor and having no formal relationship with such an important institution as the church

in this community, hindered my ability to interview a broader constituency. In addition, in some of my less structured conversations with African Americans, there was some suspicion about blacks that lived in their community and those who did not. There was some minor concern that the information they might share with me would be used to further my purposes, but not necessarily theirs.^{xv}

Additionally, as a black researcher specifically addressing issues on race, I struggle against any pretension to “represent my race.” As a professor of African American history at Harvard, Henry Louis Gates discusses the existence of this paradox in his work on African Americans—balancing the competing demands of a researcher using acknowledged skills, methods, and explanatory frameworks to address a research question and the “requirement to represent” as a black person in the United States—Gates finds himself continually struggling “against the dread requirement to represent” (Klotman and Cutler 1999, xxii).

Finally, it has been important for me to explicitly situate myself in this work on black experience with the environment in order to avoid any romanticizing or exoticizing of “the Other.” Instead, particularly when presenting this work at conferences and workshops, I attempt to highlight the “communal values and subjectivities” of us all (Klotman and Cutler 1999, xix). Also, as a scholar, I focus on providing support for “traditionally ignored or discredited sources of what might be called black voicings” and converting “such implicit declarations of freedom into disciplinary capital” (Klotman and Cutler 1999, 214).

But there is also something else. It would be disingenuous of me to ignore that I am part of a small, but growing cadre of Black scholars who are actively engaging the

race and environment nexus from a variety of perspectives. While this work continues to influence the way we think about and engage environmental issues, the larger environmental debate has been historically dominated by European American voices. What does it mean for me to write about the environment, not only as a scholar or a geographer, but as a black woman, born and raised in a nation where difference, and specifically race, informs relationships, shapes debates, determines access, and constitutes meaning? Toni Morrison, in her book *What Moves at the Margins*, puts it this way:

For me—a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth-century, not much more than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman—the exercise is different. My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate.” The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for historically, we are seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic. (Morrison 2008, 70)

Writing this book is an opportunity for me, to paraphrase Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins, to “reclaim black [*peoples*] subjugated knowledge [*italics mine*]” while intentionally engaging my own standpoint as a place to begin this work (Collins 2000, 13). In her book, *Black Feminist Thought, 2nd Edition*, Collins talks about the “exclusion of Black women’s ideas from mainstream academic discourse” and challenges the idea that there is such a thing as a scholar/activist dichotomy (Collins 2000, 12). So here I stand—situated,

positioned, transparent (and yes, a little defiant)—in hopes that I can offer something Morrison calls “a gesture towards possibility.” That we recognize that the differences we bring to any discussion about the environment can only expand what we know and how we choose to stand in relation to each other. That what becomes “possible” in our efforts to create and sustain the human-environment relationship is continually replenished by the diversity of ideas that is the domain of all of us.

Chapter Outline

I begin this exploration by situating the environmental experience of African Americans in relation to the dominant narrative about the environment in order to consider the linkages between how the Great Outdoors is represented and the “African American experience” in the U.S. In Chapter 1, entitled “Bamboozled,” I start by examining the challenge of relying on a one-size-fits-all narrative that marginalizes or makes invisible the environmental experiences of non-white peoples on the American landscape. Using film references and Patricia Limerick’s argument that more complex narratives might engage a more diverse public, I consider the legacy of an environmental narrative that denies the complex history of various cultural groups whose access to and use of natural resources were mediated by policies and laws that limited their possibilities. What are the cultural artifacts that are left over from the implementation of “master narratives” that obscure more complex and dynamic interactions between African Americans and the environment? In the section entitled *Black Faces, White Spaces*, I review the history of African American engagement with the mainstream environmental movement from the

early 1900s to the present (including the National Park Service, the Forest Service and the environmental justice movement). I also take a closer look at the creation of National parks and forests, as spaces and places that reflect national identity, environmental values, and American history that are not immune to processes of representation and racialization. By referencing the work of classic environmental history scholars such as Alfred Runte, Donald Worchester and Carolyn Merchant along with insights from Dorceta Taylor, Paul Mohai and Kevin DeLuca we can begin to see how the environmental experiences of African Americans have been marginalized, whitewashed and/or simply left out of the dominant narrative. More importantly, we begin to understand the challenges that mainstream environmental organizations like the National Park Service face when actively trying to build relationships of reciprocity with diverse communities across the United States. What results is that African Americans are at the back of the proverbial bus in terms of being visible and instrumental in developing strategies within mainstream environmental circles to deal with environmental change. Yet there are individual and collective efforts by African Americans that challenge traditional approaches, policies and assumptions about African Americans and create new opportunities to expand our existing environmental narratives in order to address contemporary environmental issues.

But before we can begin to consider some of those responses/approaches/new ideas, we've got to delve a little deeper into the roots of that American story, exposing the linkages to Euro centrism, the individual perspectives of a privileged few (i.e. John Muir), and the historical need for natural and cultural resource protection. In Chapter 2, entitled "Jungle Fever" (with another nod to Spike Lee), I explore the history of how the

environment has been constructed in the United States (academically, politically and through organizations) and popular culture, highlighting how African Americans have been constructed in relation to nature. Specifically, I start off with an analysis of the 2010 Vogue cover shot of basketball star LeBron James and supermodel Giselle Bündchen that illustrates how African Americans have been negatively depicted in relationship to nature while reinforcing the idea that the environment is a “white” space and a white concern. I examine the historical trajectory of how conceptualizations of African Americans and Nature (such as being called “savage”, “wild” or the “missing link”) have bumped up against European American ideas of Nature that have taken precedence in the collective American environmental imaginary, mediated by federal agencies, legislation, and mainstream environmental organizations. The work of Donna Haraway and Paul Outka reminds us of how African Americans have historically undergone repeated cultural interrogations regarding their status as humans within the larger society. The legacy of these cultural constructions reveals a thinly veiled contempt for black people that continues to be expressed in intellectual, political and cultural sites (as evidenced by the Vogue cover shot of LeBron James). This historical and contemporary denigration of African Americans not only explains some reticence on the part of African Americans to engage mainstream environmentalism; it historically shows how black people were marginalized in the ongoing nation-building project during the 19th and 20th centuries.

While processes at the national scale conspired to keep African Americans on the sidelines in the dominant conversation about American identity, this does not mean that African Americans did not construct their own set of stories and understandings about the environment. By drawing on experience and memory, both collective and individual,

African Americans used their own set of knowledge to inform their relationship to the environment. In Chapter 3, “Forty Acres and a Mule,” I consider the ways in which African Americans have negotiated dominant environmental narratives by inserting their stories into the mix. David Delaney uses “geographies of experience” to signify how life experiences are connected to spatial organization. For African Americans, constructing geographies of experience demands a drawing on of both collective and individual memories, many of which are indicative of a painful and contested American history. These memories, particularly those collective memories that are linked to key historical moments such as slavery and Jim Crow segregation, can have significant impact on African American environmental interactions in the present. So I lay out my argument detailing the connection between environment, memory, and race and how this relationship influences African American participation in environmental management. In particular, I discuss key historical periods of African American history with a specific focus on slavery and Jim Crow segregation and how these moments shaped African American connections to place. Using data I’ve collected, particularly interviews with African Americans actively engaged in environmental work, I explore the many ways that collective memory expresses itself either in the preservation of African American history in a designated park or historical site (such as Cane River Creole National Park in Louisiana or American Beach on Amelia Island, Florida) or in the ways it can restrain or motivate individual agency and participation in environmental activities, such as forest and park management and use. Ultimately, I conclude that memory, both collective and individual, plays a key role in shaping African American attitudes about the environment primarily because of the connection between personal memory and a collective history

that has defined the black experience as one of struggle, exclusion, and pain, particularly in relation to place.

While history plays a significant role in understanding the African American experience in relation to the environment in the U.S., our contemporary practices concerning the way African Americans are represented in the media and in educational circles also informs present-day environmental interactions. In Chapter 4, entitled “Black Faces,” I explore more closely how the paucity of visual and textual representation of African Americans in popular media, the National Parks, and environmental education perpetuates the invisibility of African Americans in conversations about environmental management. Using Hurricane Katrina as an entry point into the conversation, I point to the power representational processes have to set into place stereotypes and viewpoints about African Americans in the present that continue to impact not only African American environmental participation, but also African American identity as well. Representation effectively shapes those perceptions and beliefs at multiple scales, both public and personal. Specifically, I review background literature and provide the conceptual frameworks I employ on black identity and representation (engaging the work of Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West, Manning Marable and bell hooks), highlighting representation as a key site of struggle for African Americans. What follows is a brief look at the history of black representation in the popular media including television, magazines and film (with a particular focus on *Outside Magazine*). I examine the National Park Service with an eye towards exploring how African Americans have been represented in park brochures and interpretive exhibits. In addition, I present evidence that African American concerns and interests in relation to the environment have not

been articulated, invited, or understood in the accepted context of the environmental movement and natural resource management. Finally, I address how, within the context of the “environment,” black identity is narrowly defined or poorly articulated and often results in limited interest and participation by African Americans in projects/work having to do with the environment.

This brings us to the ongoing debates within mainstream environmental organizations interested in engaging African American communities and individuals in their environmental work. In Chapter 5, “It’s Not Easy Being Green,” I discuss racism and diversity, two hot-button topics that people seem to embrace or reject, but which arise either implicitly or explicitly in the “environment” conversation.^{xvi} Many environmental organizations, while actively looking to diversify their staff and increase engagement with diverse communities, are often hamstrung by blinders that keep them from fully understanding how racism, perceived or real, impacts African American participation. Furthermore, there is a difference in the way many organizations perceive African American participation and how African Americans actually experience the natural environment and the organizations that manage these environments. So I discuss the challenges that racism and diversity present to African Americans and mainstream environmental organizations that are interested in creating more inclusive contexts in which diverse individuals and communities can enter into environmental management. In addition, I discuss some of the primary debates on racism and diversity and present findings that highlight the frustrations and concerns of African American professionals and leaders who struggle to develop strategies that effectively deal with racism in practical ways within decision-making contexts. What is revealed is that there is a

general disconnect between African American environmental professionals and their white counterparts regarding the perception of exclusion and racism within an environmental context. This lack of agreement and understanding of how race and racism have infiltrated our work and our lives continues to provide roadblocks to building strong relationships between mainstream environmental organizations and African Americans.

But despite these roadblocks and the historical spaces that African Americans have had to contend with, African Americans have survived and thrived in the face of adversity. Zora Neale Hurston, in her book, *The Sanctified Church*, honors the “unique spiritual character” of the Southern Black Christian Church through folklore, legend and popular mythology. Taking her lead, I consider the “sanctified” character of the black environmental experience in the U.S. that is also revealed in story, music, and history. In Chapter 6, “The Sanctified Church: How Sweet It Is,” I consider the role of fear in shaping the environmental perspectives and practices of African Americans. In particular, I employ the work of Joy DeGruy Leary to examine how the legacy of oppression and violence against black people in forests and other greens spaces can translate into contemporary understandings that constrain African American environmental interactions. I also consider the role of resilience and agency by exploring some of the ways that African Americans are engaging “green” in their communities (i.e., the green economy) and the ways in which creativity is being leveraged by individuals and communities in service of livelihood needs. I then consider implications for our future—engaging or *not* engaging a broader constituency in the climate change debate and the role of the “new” voices in the regeneration of our communities. Finally, I conclude this book by briefly reviewing the primary points of each chapter and offering

ideas to how we might, depending on our interests, move forward. I invite the reader to consider the chapters as a series of layers that can be considered separately, but together create a “nested but not neat” scenario that, depending on your vantage point, reveals some of the contradictions and synergies of the African American environmental relationship.

ⁱ This is not to imply that African Americans no longer need to be strategic. In a recent *New York Times* article (December 5, 2009), African Americans admitted to “whitening” their resumes by downplaying or concealing African American affiliations and in some cases, even their names in order to have a better chance of getting a good job.

ⁱⁱ In her article entitled, “The Personal is Political, But is it Academic?”, Mary Patrice Erdmans explores the role of personal narrative in “scholarly” texts. In particular, she underscores how narrative methods reveal that all stories are constructed and that reflexivity helps to articulate power differences and reveals how “the narrative is influenced by the author’s relation to the ethnic group” (p. 9).

ⁱⁱⁱ I had the privilege of hearing Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagan speak at the Black Environmental Thought II conference in September 2012. Amongst her many accomplishments as a social activist, scholar and artist, Dr. Reagan was a distinguished professor of history at American University and was named curator emeritus at the Smithsonian Institute in 1994 where she had worked for nearly twenty years.

^{iv} As writer and friend, Valerie Boyd so aptly put it.

^{vi} It is primarily mainstream environmental practitioners that perceive a lack of response by African Americans to environmental issues. A more recent study by Paul

Mohai (2003) counters that belief by revealing results from the General Social Surveys that suggest that African Americans “are as likely as whites to take actions on behalf of the environment” (Mohai 2003, 21). African Americans are just finding alternate avenues to express their concerns, not necessarily through mainstream environmental organizations.

vii While outside the parameters of this book, it is important to note that my focus on race is not to deny the significance of gender as an integral component to understanding African American identity and the African American relationship to nature and outdoor spaces. My choice to limit my analysis to race as a defining characteristic of the African American environmental relationship is a direct response to the empirical data I collected which revealed that race, more than any other kind of “difference” was the aspect of identity that consistently presented common themes/connections regardless of gender, class and geographical particularities. Having said that, there are a number of scholars who look at various permutations related to gender, race, blackness and nature/environment including Donna Haraway, bell hooks, Laura Pulido and Angela Davis.

viii Environmental justice advocates contend that by focusing on issues that African Americans find are central to their lives (such as exposure to environmental hazards), then African Americans are more likely to become involved in addressing environmental issues at the local level.

ix One reason for that “marginalization” has to do with what qualifies as being “environmental” within the dominant environmental narrative. The dominant narrative has not considered subsistence fishing and gardening (including urban gardens) as

environmental, even though many people, particularly African Americans engage in these practices. In addition, by carving out spaces that are at once familiar and less visible to the outside world, African Americans can undertake these environmental pursuits in places that are more accessible without having to deal with feelings of exclusion.

^x Having said that, there is excellent work coming out of the humanities that does explore how African Americans have historically thought about nature. These works include *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* by Camille Dungy and *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliteracy Traditions* by Kimberly N. Ruffin.

^{xi} Conflicted environmental history refers to how African-Americans bear the legacy of slavery, “American land was a place of punishment and imprisonment for slaves...” in conjunction with recognition of the wilderness as a place of power and knowledge (Blum 2002).

^{xii} The Jones story was recently highlighted in Ken Burns six-part series, “The National Parks: America’s Best Idea.”

^{xiii} While my initial analysis was opportunistic, I strengthened and enriched my initial observations and interpretations through reference to secondary sources in academic and popular publications. This set of events, the coverage by the popular media, and the subsequent reactions are already an icon of race relations in America, and specifically race and environment.

^{xiv} My approach to participant observation follows that of Rocheleau (1995) in that it is embedded in a suite of mixed methods and involves a constant iteration with more formal data collection methods for mutual enrichment and maximum effect.

^{xv} I explore this issue, which some call the problem of the “black gatekeeper,” in Chapter 5.

^{xvi} Throughout this chapter, I discuss diversity in a fairly straightforward and arguably simplistic manner. Quite to the contrary, I am aware of the debates over the merits of diversity. One in particular suggests that “diversity” is just another form of assimilation, and assimilation would mean the loss of African American identity. While I acknowledge the complexity of the diversity question, I have focused this chapter on diversity as a means of inclusion because that is how the NPS and other environmental organizations that I engaged with framed the race and environment discussion.