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Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature

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Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice

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Introduction

"SHEILA, I THINK THEY'RE TRYING TO KILL US!" THIS WAS THE ONLY LOGICAL conclusion that Robin Cannon, a resident of South Central Los Angeles, could imagine, as she attempted to convey to her sister in a late-night phone call the ominous contents of the environmental impact report (EIR) she had just spent the entire evening poring over. Earlier that day Cannon had attended a public hearing sponsored by the Los Angeles City Council, where she first learned of the proposed 1,600-ton-per-day solid-waste incinerator known as LANCER (Los Angeles City Energy Recovery Project), which was planned to be sited in the center of her neighborhood. City officials who advocated the waste incinerator facility intended to allay "unfounded" fears and misconceptions about what an incinerator would mean for the community. The residents who attended the meeting were treated to splendid images of the waste incinerator site encircled by beautifully landscaped picnic areas that, according to LANCER's proponents, would offer an attractive place to host wedding receptions and outdoor parties. These city officials could not have suspected that this ordinary woman who was asking so many questions about the health effects of burning tons of waste in her community would actually read the entire three-inch-thick EIR that documented the project's scientifically based standards of safety. As Cannon's phone call to her sister suggests, the layers of

information embedded in the technical document actually conveyed a very different message. Highly toxic dioxins and fluorons were only some of the chemicals that would most likely contaminate the air, water, and land of the people who lived in South Central Los Angeles.

Cannon, her sister Sheila, and her friend Charlotte Bullock, all residents of this predominantly African American, low-income community, formed Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles in response to the distressing implications of the EIR. These three women's immediate actions toward building an organized response to the perceived threat to the welfare of their community dispelled the stereotypes of low-income and poor neighborhoods as "unaware," "unconcerned," and "compliant."[1] Through Concerned Citizens they mobilized a citywide network of community organizations and local political and business leaders, which successfully blocked the construction of LANCER by defeating the city-sponsored $535 million bond issue. Not only did this grassroots organization thwart the city's plans to build the incinerator; it forced the city to reevaluate the long prioritization of incineration in its waste management policy and to pursue instead a commitment to recycling. The fight against the LANCER facility also initiated a host of other community actions on issues such as housing, schools, drugs, and neighborhood security. These issues were seen by the activists to be as "environmental" as those of hazardous waste, air quality, and land use.

I met Robin Cannon in 1993 and was surprised to learn that these issues were *not* deemed adequately "environmental" by local environmental groups such as the Sierra Club or the Environmental Defense Fund. When members of Concerned Citizens first approached these organizations in the mid-1980s for support to fight LANCER, they were informed that the poisoning of an urban community by an incineration facility was a "community health issue," not an environmental one.[2] Addressing this question of the discrepancy between what does and does not not count as "environmental" is, I believe, crucial to the effort to produce a broadly based environmental movement that really works. Part of this effort requires a close analysis and historical reading of how different groups of people have understood their relationship to "nature" and the environments in which they live. What, for example, are the diverse and sometimes contradictory meanings and metaphors that different people deal with when negotiating the multiple environments they encounter in their

everyday lives? What does it mean to talk about nature as a "benevolent mother," as "wild places unspoiled by human hands," or as the "place where family and community convene and share life experiences"? We can also learn a lot about how people understand, live in, and change their environments, not only by studying diverse *ideas* about "nature" or human/environment interconnections, but by examining social practice. What are the complex forms and structures of social and cultural organization that emerge in diverse locales to resist the destruction of particular human/environment relationships and to support specific ways of life? In other words, how do people mobilize through action in order to sustain or transform certain relationships with "nature" and their environment? In this essay, I examine the emergence of the environmental justice movement, a social movement strongest in low-income communities of color that, like Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles, conceive of "nature" and "environment" as those places and sets of relationships that sustain a local community's way of life. The grassroots organizations that make up the movement identify such issues as social justice, local economic sustainability, health, and community governance as falling under the purview of "environment."

Redefining Environmentalism: The Struggle for a "Green" Justice

THE EXTENSIVE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF COMMUNITY/environmental organizations referred to as the environmental justice movement challenges dominant meanings of environmentalism and produces new forms of environmental theory and action. The term "environmental justice," which appeared in the United States sometime in the mid-1980s, questions popular notions of "environment" and "nature" and attempts to produce something different. In this essay I explore some of those differences as they are articulated through the voices of activists in the movement. The vast majority of activists in the environmental justice movement are low-income women and predominantly women of color, including Dana Alston, Pam Tau Lee, Penny Newman, Esperanza Maya, Juana Guttierrez, Vernice Miller, Marta Salinas, Valerie Taliman, Marina Ortega,

Lois Gibbs, Rose Augustine, and Janice Dickerson.[3] From the start, the gender, race, and class composition of the movement distinguishes it from that of the mainstream environmental movement, whose constituents have historically been white and middle class and whose leadership has been predominantly male.[4]

The history of mainstream environmentalism locates its adherents in an ideological position that constructs a separation between humans and the "natural" world. Environmentalists are therefore often said to be obsessed with preserving and protecting those "wild and natural" areas defined as places where humans are not and *should* not be in large numbers. Social movement historians have occasionally referred to environmental justice activists as the "new environmentalists," a term that I find misleading.[5] Many of the grassroots activists with whom I have spoken are reluctant to call themselves environmentalists at all, much less newly converted ones. In part, this is due to the dominance of the mainly white, middle-class, and uncritically "preservationist" political culture from which much mainstream environmental thinking has developed.[6] Again, in these mainstream terms, what counts as environment is limited to issues such as wildland preservation and endangered species protection. Issues pertaining to human health and survival, community and workplace poisoning, and economic sustainability are generally not considered to be part of the environmental agenda. Additionally, many activists perceive much of mainstream environmentalism to be either fixated on anti-urban development campaigns (read as "no jobs for city-dwelling people") or utterly indifferent to the concerns of urban communities. Many of the community organizations that make up the environmental justice movement are located in low-income and working-class communities in and around industrialized urban centers throughout the country. Crucial issues in these communities, as we saw in the case of Robin Cannon and Concerned Citizens, include lead and asbestos poisoning in substandard housing, toxic waste incineration and dumping, and widespread unemployment. Until relatively recently, these were problems that the mainstream organizations located outside the domain of the "environment."[7]

Environmental justice activists define the environment as "the place you work, the place you live, the place you play." Many mainstream environmentalists would find this formulation incomprehensible, even ethically

indefensible, because of its apparent anthropocentrism. Putting humans at the center of environmental discourse is a grave error, they argue, because humans are the perpetrators of environmental problems in the first place. Environmental justice activists maintain that some humans, especially the poor, are also the victims of environmental destruction and pollution and that, furthermore, some human cultures live in ways that are relatively sound ecologically. They therefore contend that the mainstream environmentalists' invention of a universal division between humans and nature is deceptive, theoretically incoherent, and strategically ineffective in its political aim to promote widespread environmental awareness. Pam Tau Lee, the labor coordinator for the Labor and Occupational Health Program at the University of California at Berkeley and a board member of the National Toxics Campaign Fund and the Southwest Organizing Network, describes environmental justice as being

> able to bring together different issues that used to be separate. If you're talking about lead and where people live, it used to be a housing struggle; if you're talking about poisoning on the job, it used to be a labor struggle; people being sick from TB or occupational exposures used to be separate health issues, so environmental justice is able to bring together all of these different issues to create one movement that can really address what actually causes all of these phenomena to happen and gets to the root of the problems.[8]

The merging of social justice and environmental interests therefore assumes that people are an integral part of what should be understood as the environment. The daily realities and conditions of people's lives have not been at the center of mainstream environmental discourse. Traditional environmental arguments have commonly constructed "society" and "nature," and urban versus wild/natural, as hostile dichotomies. The essays by William Cronon and Candace Slater in this book argue persuasively that traditional Euro-American conceptions of "the natural" as "Edenic" or "sublime" posit nature as a place or state of original purity, uncontaminated by human intervention and avarice. As these authors have demonstrated in their writing on the history of ideas of wilderness and on Western imaginings of Amazonia, this type of Edenic thinking, which locates nature outside of human culture, separates humans from nature while constructing nature as in need of human control and domination. Cronon and Slater describe how the human populations that Euro-American colonists considered to be closer to nature and part of the "wilderness"

landscape (for example, the native Indians in the Americas or the enslaved Africans brought to the New World, who were both classified as savages and likened to animals) are people who were also seen to be a part of a wild, untamed nature that had to be exploited and controlled.

How can these historical analyses inform us about the contemporary environmental conditions of human groups situated differently in the society, and about their different responses to the environmental problems that confront them? Numerous studies have demonstrated that it is primarily low-income communities of color that are often targeted for industrial and toxic waste disposal sites.[9] Many environmental justice activists argue that this reality is nothing less than history repeating itself, this time in relation to who suffers the consequences of modern-day environmental pollution. Dana Alston, a longtime activist, discusses how the environmental justice movement's redefinition of "environment" to account for the presence of people reflects one of the primary differences between it and the mainstream movement.

> The Nature Conservancy defines itself as the "real estate" arm of the environmental movement and as being about saving nature, pristine areas, sensitive ecosystems, endangered species, and rain forests. But the reality of the situation is that there is hardly anywhere in the world where there aren't people living, no matter how remote you get, and the most vulnerable cultures are in the areas that are most remote, whether you are talking about here in the U.S. or in Latin America or wherever, so immediately it puts us in confrontation with the Nature Conservancy. We continue to raise these issues not only in the international arena but here as the Nature Conservancy goes to buy large tracts of land in New Mexico or out west where indigenous and Chicano people have lived for decades and have sovereignty or land-grant rights … with total disregard for how these real estate dealings affect the social, political, and economic life of our communities. We feel that many of these communities are just as much endangered species as any animal species.[10]

Consequently, activists in the environmental justice movement are unlikely to identify themselves as the "new environmentalists," because they do not view themselves as an outgrowth of the "old" environmental movement, with its "Save the whales and rain forests" slogans. It would be more accurate to regard environmental justice activists as the "new" civil rights or "new" social justice activists, since many of the prominent organizers affirm their roots in and political continuities with the social justice movements of the sixties, including the civil rights, welfare rights, and labor and farmworker movements. Moreover, the term "new environmentalists" suggests that the members of these emerging grassroots organizations, who come from

predominantly African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian American communities, have only recently become aware of the importance of "environmental" concerns. Numerous histories of activism by people of color on environmental issues exist but often are not classified by mainstream groups as authentic "environmental history," because of these crucial questions of definition.[11]

What is new about the environmental justice movement is not the "elevated environmental consciousness" of its members but the ways it is transforming the possibilities for fundamental social and environmental change through processes of redefinition, reinvention, and construction of innovative political and cultural discourses and practices. This includes, among other things, the articulation of the concepts of environmental justice and environmental racism and the forging of new forms of grassroots political organization. I will illustrate some of these conceptual inventions by examining a few key historical moments that have defined the environmental justice movement.

Revisioning Environmental History: Whose Stories Are Told?

SOME MOVEMENT HISTORIANS IDENTIFY THE LARGE-SCALE CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE that occurred in Warren County, North Carolina, in 1982 as the first active demonstration of an emerging environmental justice movement.[12] At this demonstration, hundreds of predominantly African American women and children, but also local white residents, used their bodies to block trucks from dumping poisonous PCB-laced dirt into a landfill near their community. The mainly African American, working-class, rural communities of Warren County had been targeted as the dumping site for a toxic waste landfill that would serve industries throughout North Carolina. This demonstration of nonviolent civil disobedience opened the gates for a series of subsequent actions by people of color and poor people throughout the country. Unlike social activism against toxic contamination that predated this event, such as the struggle against Hooker Chemical Company at Love Canal, New York, in the late 1970s, this action began to forge the connections between race, poverty, and the environmental consequences of the production of industrial waste.[13]

The Warren County episode succeeded in racializing the antitoxics agenda

and catalyzed a number of studies that would document the historical pattern of disproportionately targeting racial minority communities for toxic waste contamination. One such study, which represents another key moment in the history of the environmental justice movement, was a report sponsored by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice (UCC-CRJ) and published in 1987. Although people living near toxic waste facilities have known for many years about industrial pollution's detrimental effects on their health and their environments, it was not until this report that an awareness of widespread environmental racism entered mainstream political consciousness.

The UCC-CRJ report, *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socioeconomic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites*, compiled the results of a national study that found race to be the leading factor in the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities. The study, presented to the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., that same year, determined that people of color suffered a "disproportionate risk" to the health of their families and their environments, with 60 percent of African American and Latino communities and over 50 percent of Asian / Pacific Islanders and Native Americans living in areas with one or more uncontrolled toxic waste sites. The report also disclosed that 40 percent of the nation's toxic landfill capacity is concentrated in three communities—Emelle, Alabama, with a 78.9 percent African American population; Scotlandville, Louisiana, with 93 percent African Americans; and Kettleman City, California, which is 78.4 percent Latino.[14]

The term "environmental racism" entered into political discussion on the environment in 1987 when the Reverend Benjamin Chavis, the commission's executive director who was most recently the head of the NAACP, coined it. According to Chavis, environmental racism is "racial discrimination in environmental policy-making and the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of people of color communities for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and history of excluding people of color from leadership in the environmental movement."[15] In the mid to late 1980s, this process of naming and researching the material realities of environmental racism made possible a significant transformation in what would count as properly environmental concerns. This new political concept also provided an

organizing tool for galvanizing into action the multiple and diverse communities and constituencies for whom environmental racism was a painful reality.

How did the appearance of the UCC-CRJ report on toxics and race and the public naming of environmental racism affect the national environmental agenda? By 1990 a variety of coalitions of people of color environmental justice organizations had emerged, including the extremely dynamic Southwest Network for Economic and Environmental Justice (SNEEJ). In January and March of that year, representatives from many of these grassroots coalitions sent two recriminating letters to the Group of Ten[16] national environmental organizations, "calling on them to dialogue on the environmental crisis impacting communities of color, and to hire people of color on their staffs and boards of directors."[17] The letters presented an analysis of environmental racism and defined the ways that the primarily white, mainstream organizations have complicitly supported it:

> There is a clear lack of accountability by the Group of Ten environmental organizations towards Third World communities in the Southwest, in the U.S. as a whole and internationally. Your organizations continue to support and promote policies which emphasize the clean-up and preservation of the environment on the backs of working people in general and people of color in particular. In the name of eliminating environmental hazards at any cost, across the country industrial and other economic activities which employ us are being shut down, curtailed or prevented while our survival needs and cultures are ignored. We suffer from the results of these actions, but are never full participants in the decision-making which leads to them.[18]

According to the activists with whom I have spoken, responses to these challenges have varied. At worst, some of the Group of Ten have expressed outrage and denial and all but ignored the invitation to "come to the table as equals." On the other hand, some have begun to enter into discussions about building "multicultural and multi-racial organizations," to share resources such as technical expertise, legal assistance, and funding, and to seriously modify their organizations' structure and mission. The Earth Island Institute, Greenpeace, and the now defunct National Toxics Campaign are often cited as the environmental groups that have responded to these challenges by expanding the scope of their projects to include environmental justice issues and by diversifying their staff and leadership.

In October of 1991 the First National People of Color Environmental

Leadership Summit convened in Washington, D.C., signifying a watershed moment in the history of the movement. According to conference participants, this event foregrounded the importance of people of color environmental groups' insistence on self-representation and speaking for themselves.[19] It also marked an unequivocal rejection of a "partnership based on paternalism" with the mainstream environmental movement.

The summit brought together three hundred African, Native, Latino, and Asian American delegates from the United States and a number from Canada, Central and South America, Puerto Rico, and the Marshall Islands to shape the contours of a "multi-racial movement for change" founded on the political ideology of working from the grassroots. Conference participants heard testimonies and reports on the local effects of environmental racism, including the extensive poisoning of air, water, and land that disproportionately devastates their environments and health. These discussions also provided a supportive context for people of color to "reaffirm their traditional connection to and respect for the natural world," which was collectively understood as "including all aspects of daily life." Environment so defined expands the definition of environmental problems and so includes issues such as "militarism and defense, religious freedom and cultural survival, energy and sustainable development, transportation and housing, land and sovereignty rights, self-determination and employment."[20] Dana Alston describes how the leadership summit helped to bring people of color together in a spirit of political solidarity.

> The most important thing that came out of the summit was the bonding. Many people might think that because they're nonwhite, that they're going to come together, but the society is built on keeping people divided, and we all know about the tensions between African Americans and Asian Americans and Latinos and Native Americans, but it's the history, the culture, the society that's keeping us divided … because that's how the power structure stays in power, by keeping us separate, so we had to from the very beginning put together a set of principles from which we were going to relate to each other.[21]

The composition and program of the second day of the leadership summit shifted with the arrival of another 250 participants from a variety of environmental and social change organizations, together with a sampling of "professionals" like lawyers, academics, and policymakers. Engaging in critical discussions and debates, the conferees articulated key issues of the

building of the environmental justice movement, including the definition of environment and environmental problems, leadership and organizational strategy, and the formation of coalitions and partnerships. Working by consensus, the leadership summit drew up a set of seventeen organizational principles that would guide the emergent political process. These "Principles of Environmental Justice" profile a broad and deep political project to pursue environmental justice in order to "secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples."

All of the activists with whom I have spoken maintain that the most promising achievement of the leadership summit was its commitment to the construction of diverse, egalitarian, and nonhierarchical leadership and organizational processes and structures. The participants wanted something different from the technocratic rationality and top-down managerialism that the mainstream environmental organizations have adopted by mimicking the decision-making approaches of the very corporations they are opposing. As grassroots activists working in direct response to the threats of pollution, resource exploitation, and land-use decisions in their communities, they contend that the decision-making process is itself a primary issue in the debate over environmental problems. They reject the top-down approach as disempowering, paternalistic, and exclusive and instead are committed to developing a more democratic, locally and regionally based, decentralized organizational culture. A commitment to such values, they argue, will build an environmental movement that truly works.

Principles of Environmental Justice

PREAMBLE

WE, THE PEOPLE OF COLOR, gathered together at the multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to insure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice:

1. Environmental justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.

2. Environmental justice demands that public policy be based on mutual respect and justice, for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination or bias.

3. Environmental justice mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interests of a sustainable planet for humans and other living things.

4. Environmental justice calls for universal protection from nuclear testing, extraction, production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes and poisons that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water and food.

5. Environmental justice affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples.

6. Environmental justice demands the cessation of the production of all toxins, hazardous wastes and radioactive materials; and that all past and current producers be held strictly accountable to the people for detoxification and the containment at the point of production.

7. Environmental justice demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation.

8. Environmental justice affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards.

9. Environmental justice protects the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality health care.

10. Environmental justice considers governmental acts of environmental injustice a violation of international law, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on Genocide.

11. Environmental justice must recognize a special legal and natural relationship of Native Peoples to the U.S. Government through treaties, agreements, compacts and covenants which impose upon the U.S. Government a paramount obligation and responsibility to affirm the

sovereignty and self-determination of the indigenous peoples whose land it occupies and holds in trust.

12. Environmental justice affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honoring the cultural integrity of all our communities and providing fair access for all to the full range of resources.

13. Environmental justice calls for the strict enforcement of principles of informed consent and a halt to the testing of experimental reproductive and medical procedures and vaccinations on people of color.

14. Environmental justice opposes the destructive operations of multinational corporations.

15. Environmental justice opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, people and cultures, and other life forms.

16. Environmental justice calls for the education of present and future generations which emphasizes social and environmental issues based on our experience and an appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives.

17. Environmental justice requires that we, as individuals, make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth's resources and to produce as little waste as possible and make the conscious decision to challenge and re-prioritize our lifestyles to insure the health of the natural world for present and future generations.

"Principles of Environmental Justice." *(*Toxic-Free Neighborhoods: Community Planning Guide, *San Diego: Environmental Health Coalition, 1993)*

Reinventing Nature through Community Action

TO FORGE A VIGOROUS, EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT, THE EMERGENT grassroots coalition of environmental justice organizations in the United States is producing a coherent analysis of the causes and consequences of

environmental problems and a political culture based on community-governed and network-oriented social organization. In large part, these analyses and social practices are based on diverse interpretations of and experiences with nature and with social injustice. In response to different cultural histories and to different experiences of environmental injustice, these low-income communities construct distinct meanings and definitions of "nature" and of what constitutes proper human/environment interrelations and practices. These divergent definitions and practices, and their implications in the world, indicate the core discrepancies between the environmental justice and the mainstream environmental movements. They also represent approaches to understanding nature, and to *reinventing* it, that are very different from those that appear in many of the essays of this book.

In the final section of this essay, I want to focus on aspects of environmental justice that illustrate the ways that activists in the movement are "reinventing nature." As I mentioned earlier, environmental justice activists explicitly undertake a critique of modernist and colonial philosophies of unlimited progress, unchecked development, the privileging of Western scientific notions of objective truth and control of nature, and the hierarchical separation between nature and human culture. This antimodernist analysis is also implicitly a critique of the mainstream environmental movement, which, activists argue, upholds the same underlying colonial philosophy of nature as "other" to human culture.

The activists' approach to reinventing nature, I suggest, contains both deconstructive and constructive elements. Their critiques of conventional or dominant ideas of nature and environment demonstrate how these constructs and their policy implications are detrimental to certain *human* communities, primarily the poor and people of color. Exposing the historical and ecological effects on humans *and* the nonhuman world of these dominant ideologies reveals their limitations as theoretical foundations for a just environmentalism. Environmental justice groups, while strongly criticizing mainstream conceptions of nature, also *produce* a distinct theoretical and material connection between human/nature, human/environment relations through their notions of "community." Community becomes at once the idea, the place, and the relations and practices that generate what these activists consider more socially just and ecologically sound human/environment configurations. These processes of critique and construct both engage the project of reinventing

nature. In the paragraphs that follow I will briefly discuss some of their key points.

Communities of color involved in environmental justice organizations develop a critique of what I call the colonial discourse of Euro-American forms of "nature talk." Colonial discourses of nature, they argue, constitute one of the historical progenitors of contemporary environmental racism. Although "nature talk" separates humans from nature and posits them as superior to nature, it specifies that some humans are in fact part of nature. In other words, particular Euro-American romantic constructions of nature (see, for example, the extended descriptions that Merchant, Cronon, and Slater offer on the Edenic or sublime notions of nature from Western traditions) have been and continue to be problematic and even genocidal for people who have been characterized as being more like nature and thus less than human. The discourse that opposes an Edenic or sublime nature to a fallen culture either categorizes people of color as identical *with* nature, as in the case of indigenous peoples or Third World natives (thereby entitling Western colonizers and slave traders to exploit and have dominion over some humans in similar ways in which they would feel entitled to exploit nonhuman nature),[22] *or* classifies them as people who are anti-nature, impure, and even toxic, as in the case of poor communities of color living in contaminated and blighted inner cities or in the surrounding rural wastelands. Images of people of color in the mainstream environmental literature not infrequently depict throngs of overbreeding, slashing and burning, border-overflowing, and ecologically incorrect Third Worlders or illegal immigrants. Such images encode these groups as anti-nature or out of touch with the natural world. Wilderness or Eden must be located where these "toxic" or "fallen" peoples are not.

The Edenic notion of nature becomes, for many communities of color, a tool of oppression that operates to obscure their own "endangered" predicaments. Such a conception of nature is also seen by many activists to be the moral authority on which white, bourgeois culture bases its often genocidal environmental policy decisions. So the trademark slogans of mainstream environmentalism, such as "Save the whales" or "Extinction is forever," are seen to reflect concerns of white people who are blind to the problems of people of color. The obsession with saving the rain forest and preserving

biodiversity at the expense of local cultures is seen as a decision to trade them off. As a consequence, many white environmentalists claim that people of color aren't interested in saving nature or the environment—even though the Black Congressional Caucus has registered the strongest voting record on Capitol Hill on issues of the environment. Clearly, activists of color have substantial interests in the conceptual project of "reinventing" the dominant idea of nature in mainstream environmentalism.

How a particular community of color perceives its relationship with nature or reinvents it is based on specific experiential and historical realities. One of the central premises of this book is the argument that what we understand as nature is historically dynamic and culturally specific. What counts as nature is therefore different among various people of color groups that have very different cultural histories. In fact, for many environmental justice activists from different ethnic backgrounds, the leadership summit revealed that there is no "natural" bond among people of color groups. They had to tackle the hard work of recognizing one another's specific cultural understandings of nature and the environment, as well as one another's specific experiences of environmental racism. Paul Ruffins, an African American journalist who attended the summit, explains that for various human groups in North America the different definitions of and relationships to nature that they espouse depend on how they got there. Obviously, the experience of dislocation and relocation in relation to the land and to "place" was very different for Native Americans, European settlers, enslaved Africans, indentured Chinese laborers, and Mexican inhabitants of the Southwest. Ruffins argues that, as an urbanized African American, he was forced to consider that a Native American's thinking about "mother nature" and "whales as brothers"—terms that sounded suspicious to him at first—may be different from the colonial nature talk embedded in a mainstream environmentalist's insistence on saving an endangered species at the expense of human cultures. He writes,

> Many African American environmentalists define ourselves by our concern for the urban environment. We have vigorously attacked white environmentalists for their concern with saving birds and forests and whales while urban children were suffering from lead paint poisoning. For me personally, the most spiritually uplifting part of the Summit was the opportunity it gave me to temper that thinking, and spend more time considering the need to protect the land for its own sake. This came about partly from meeting black ecologists from the south who are fighting to save black farmers from losing their land and to preserve traditional black communities such as the Georgia Sea Islands, which are threatened by resort development.

> But the most unique experience was the opportunity to interact with so many Native American and Hawaiian brothers and sisters and experience cultures that can only be understood in relationship to a piece of land or a body of water. Hearing Native Americans who have been oppressed since 1492 explain the need to protect "our brothers the whales," helped me to truly experience the moral imperative of protecting animals and trees and land.[23]

The multiracial dialogue afforded by the summit provided the opportunity for people of color groups to understand their historical and cultural differences, to see how they are similarly or differently positioned within colonial discourses of nature, and to begin to build a common environmental justice discourse that may embrace ideas as seemingly polarized as "whales as our brothers" and cities as ecologically sound environments.

Ruffins's testimony speaks to the point that cultural and historical differences in perceptions of nature and environment among people of color groups may be productive of, or militate against the formation of, environmental justice coalitions. He cited the summit as a moment when these multiple histories and cultures were able to unite in a collective conversation. This process of community and coalition building for environmental justice may be similarly inspired when people of color groups share their different experiences of environmental oppression in everyday life. These may include experiences of racism, economic hardships, toxic poisoning affecting one's health or the health of one's children, and feelings of alienation from one's surroundings and sense of place. Colonial discourse of nature often emphasizes the problem of increased alienation from nature as a consequence of capitalist advancement. As we learned from Slater's and Cronon's essays, the construction of wilderness as Eden was necessary to ameliorate the problems of alienation, spiritual depletion, and corruption brought about by unrestrained capitalist greed.

Carl Anthony, director of the Urban Habitat Program of the Earth Island Institute, in San Francisco, writes about the forms of alienation that people of color, especially African Americans, have been made to suffer.[24] This alienation, he argues, is a result of a profound sense of loss suffered by many people who have been forced off their land and detached from their sense of place (like the Native Americans and Mexicans who were dispossessed of their land, or the Africans who were shipped to America on slave ships) or by those who, because of class and racial oppression, must live in the forsaken, highly polluted inner cities with "no functional relationship to nonhuman

nature." He and others are interested in examining the nature of the psychological damage being done to inner-city youth when they compare their environment with the resplendent images normally associated with the American landscape.[25] For Anthony, reinventing human relationships with nature depends upon the production of what he calls a culturally and historically sensitive form of "ecopsychology"—an analytical method to understand how different groups' specific views of nature are central to human identity formation. The histories of racial and class oppression that underlie an inner-city dwelling person's "non-functional" relationship to nature, and the reality of living in an impoverished environment, would result in a form of alienation and notion of self that, according to Anthony, must be addressed in order for the ecological health of the local community and natural environment to be transformed.

Experiences of alienation from nature, from one's environment and sense of place, and the forms of identity that ensue, differ among various people of color communities. As numerous scholars of the environmental justice movement have shown, however, the framing of a collective experience of alienation and oppression often works to mobilize community activism.[26] Many activist members of the Western Shoshone, for example, invoke their cultural heritage in relation to their intergenerational connections to the land as the political motivation behind their decades-long struggle against the U.S. government's annexation of their ancestral ground for the Nevada Nuclear Weapons Test Site.[27] The experience of alienation and dispossession, in the case of the Western Shoshone's land-rights claims, constructs activist political identities, African Americans have different ties to the North American landscape. As a result of historical and demographic patterns of industrial development and post-Reconstruction labor migration, they live in predominantly urban communities. As Anthony has argued, the "non-functional" relationship with nature that results from living in an impoverished, polluted environment may produce a disabling alienation that breeds hopelessness in local communities.

This is not, however, the only possible response to experiences of environmental injustice. Often the only *functional* relationship with nature for many city-dwelling people or those living near toxic waste sites becomes the core of their political strategy. In other words, their knowledge of the

destruction of nature and natural systems in their local communities may function to mobilize them to act on these negative experiences. This knowledge often pits them against health department experts who would claim that there is nothing wrong with the environments in which they are living. But the community activists know otherwise—they often pay close attention to the changes they are living through as a result of toxic contamination of their environments. Many describe in great detail the profusion of respiratory illnesses, skin disorders, and cancers that they and their neighbors suffer. They talk about the increased miscarriages, stillbirths, deformities, pet deaths, deformities in animal births, plants that won't grow or that come up out of the earth in strange contortions, bad-smelling air, and foul-tasting water.[28] Such direct knowledge about changes in the environment, obtained through experience, is essential for the environmental justice movement's argument that people of color are often the ones who suffer the most from the effects of environmentally unsound industrial development.

Experiential knowledge of environmental degradation and toxic poisoning, and the community mobilization focusing on public health concerns that follows, is often, though not exclusively, an urban phenomenon. Industrial activity and its labor forces are concentrated in and around urban centers, as are most community organizations struggling for environmental justice. Because the overwhelming majority of African American, Latino, and Asian American communities in the United States are urbanized, the predicament of the "sustainable" city becomes one of the primary concerns of environmental justice activists.[29] Consequently, another one of the essential reinventions of nature that environmental justice activists highlight is the relationship of nature to the city—the constructed or built urban environment. Mainstream environmentalism generally describes the city as being in opposition to nature. As Michael Pollan has put it, the city is "written off as fallen, lost to nature, irredeemable."[30] In fact, many organizations, such as the Wilderness Society, the Nature Conservancy, and Not Yet New York, portray the large, modern, industrial city as a menacing, noxious sprawl of humanity representing the major threat to the survival of the natural world. The colonial discourse of nature has positioned cities as the repositories of waste, garbage, vermin, disease, and depravity—all features that, in colonial nature talk, are also associated with the people who must live there. Activists in the movement

argue that attention to the social and ecological sustainability of cities is the key environmental issue of the late twentieth century, a sobering proposition considering that most mainstream environmental organizations and environmental studies programs in U.S. universities pay scant attention to the problems and potentials of the urban environment.[31] The Urban Habitat Program, a project of the San Francisco Bay area environmental justice group Earth Island Institute, warns,

> In the next decade, important decisions about the future of cities and surrounding agricultural land will have consequences for millions of people. The deteriorated infrastructure of urban areas must be rebuilt. There are hidden rewards for undertaking a program of rebuilding our urban cores in tune with nature. The investment of the billions of dollars that will be required offers a multitude of opportunities for fresh approaches to affordable housing, public services, resources and waste. There is room for small projects and for bringing wilderness back into the city.[32]

For those who live, work, and play in industrialized urban settings, largely populated by people of color, the current rhetoric of "cities in crisis" is much more than empty words. Environmental justice organizations enumerate the many ways that U.S. inner cities and their poor and low-income inhabitants are in peril, often using the language of "endangerment." The question of what (and who) counts as an endangered species is therefore another crucial aspect of the environmental justice movement's reconceptualization of the relationships between nonhuman and human nature and the emergence of new ideas of nature and new forms of environmentalism. Activists use the highly potent and provocative signifier "endangered species" in strategic ways. For example, the brochure published by San Francisco's Citizens for a Better Environment sets up a counterintuitive use of a mainstream, yet very controversial, environmental slogan.[33] On the front cover of the brochure, underneath the bold appeal "Save an Endangered Species … ," we see depicted a cheerful scene of mixed gender, multiracial community members busily working in a very fruitful community garden that appears to encircle the city where they live. The slogan continues inside and, surprisingly, identifies as its object of concern not an endangered "warm and fuzzy" animal or a spotted owl but "… YOU!" The text asserts, "When California's water, land or air is poisoned, it's not just fish and wildlife that are threatened. So are we. Our families, our neighborhoods, and our cities are all at risk from irresponsible toxic polluters and unenforced laws." The accompanying image portrays an army of concerned citizens

forming an angry and determined barrier between the encroaching toxic polluters and their beloved, clean, and sustainable city. In this organizational brochure, Citizens for a Better Environment claims possession of the term "endangered species" in order to reinvent its limited use by mainstream environmentalists. The group shows that by focusing on a single issue, such as the federal listing of an endangered species, mainstream environmentalists miss or obscure the many other related problems that contribute to environmental deterioration for all species, including people.

"Save an Endangered Species: You!" *(Courtesy Citizens for a Better Environment, 501 Second St., Suite 305, San Francisco, CA, 94107, 415-243-8980)*

The anthropologist Stephen Feld critiques the notion of endangered species effectively in the liner notes for his CD *Voices of the Rainforest*, a recording of a day in the life of a Bosavi rain forest community in Papua New Guinea. Feld writes,

> When I read that we lose 15–20,000 species of plants and animals a year through the logging, ranching and mining that escalates rainforest destruction, my mind immediately begins to ponder how to possibly calculate the number of songs, myths, words, ideas, artifacts, techniques—all the cultural knowledge and practices lost per year in these mega-diversity zones. Massive wisdom, variations on human being in the form of knowledge in and of place: these are co-casualties in the eco-catastrophe. Eco-thinout may proceed at a rate much slower than cultural rubout, but accomplishment of the latter is a particularly effective way to accelerate the former. The politics of ecological and aesthetic co-evolution and co-devolution are one.[34]

His argument suggests that it is neither logical nor socially just for environmentalists to focus their efforts on decontextualized "endangered species," because of the profound historical interconnections among human and nonhuman species. Moreover, his analysis implies that an environmentalism that conceives of the notion of endangered as also encompassing human cultural systems would be significantly more vigorous and effective. The reconceptualization of the idea of endangered species to include specific human cultures, developed by Feld and Citizens for a Better Environment, implies the reinvention of the definition of a critical environmental issue and how it should be addressed by a more socially just environmental movement.

All of the foregoing reinventions advocated by environmental justice activists have in common their rejection of the philosophical tenet that I have labeled colonial nature talk, separating nature and culture, separating a nonhuman natural world and nonnatural human communities. The environmental justice movement, in challenging mainstream environmentalism, argues that an effective movement must integrate, not dichotomize, the histories and relationships of people and their natural environments. Most environmental justice activists' discussions of nature are balanced with an analysis of the impossibility of separating it from "life," from cultural histories, and from socially and ecologically destructive colonial and neocolonial experiences. Many activists point to the importance of thinking "ecosystemically," and not just focusing on single-issue environmentalism. They offer a framework that insists on making linkages among the multiple

aspects of the ecosystem, including the biophysical environment, the built environment, and the social environment.[35] For these activists it is incomprehensible and inaccurate, as well as immoral, to separate them.

Ideas of nature, for environmental justice groups, are therefore tied closely to ideas of community, history, ethnic identity, and cultural survival, which include relationships to the land that express particular ways of life. The place —geographic, cultural, and emotional—where humans and environment converge is embodied in the ideas and practices of "community." One concept of community advances group identification with common histories, experiences and endurances of oppression, whether racial, ethnic, gender based, or socioeconomic. This view of community is often said, in the language of social science, to represent a "unity of sameness." In other words, those whom we identify as members of our community we recognize as having similar or identical features. Other, less anthropocentric and, some would argue, less conservative[36] conceptions of community exist, however, and emphasize the notion of "unity in difference."[37] This idea of community presupposes connection to and interconnectedness with other groups, other species, and the natural environment through everyday experiences with family, comradeship, and work. The cultural theorists Laurie Anne Whitt and Jennifer Daryl Slack argue that communities should be understood as "sites where the human and other than human are drawn together in multiple articulations."[38] They propose the term "mixed communities" to signify the relations of interdependence that inhere in geographically diverse "mixed species" (human and nonhuman) assemblages. An environment contextualizes a particular mixed community, "situating it within and bonding it to both the natural world and the larger 'containing society,' "[39] Communities and environments are therefore conjoined and must be understood as being mutually constitutive. Whitt and Slack continue,

> Communities, then, are as much results as they are causes of their own environments. One practical political consequence of this is that discussions of development cannot proceed reductively, by divorcing communities from their material contexts. Mixed communities and their constitutive environments are inseparable; they are the unit of development and of change. All development is, for better or for worse, co-development of communities and environments. And the relation between a particular community and its environment "is not simply one of interaction of internal and external factors, but of a dialectical development" … of community and environment in response to one another.[40]

Environmental justice activists express their involvement with their natural environments as "community" or "mixed community" in the terms of living, working, and playing. This may include the diverse urban community projects organized by the San Francisco Bay Area "People of Color Greening Network." The Greening Network sponsors various urban environmental initiatives, such as creek restoration, farmers markets, and gardening projects in the local prisons. One venture of this sort is led by Trevor Burrowes and the East Palo Alto-Historical Agricultural Society, which reintroduces African American communities to their "agricultural heritage" through the cultivation of healthy, organic food in an urban setting. According to Burrowes, this is a direct way to confront and transform the "non-functional" relationship to nature suffered by inner-city African American communities. The community/environment "unity in difference" concept is also demonstrated in a community revitalization project, "The Great Los Angeles Gutter Clean-Up and Graffiti Paint-Out," subheaded "Healing Ourselves, Our Community, Our Earth," sponsored, in part, by Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles and reaching out to the entire city of Los Angeles as an "imagined" community writ large. Community members work together to paint out graffiti and toss trash and toxins out of gutters, streets and alleys to clean up neighborhoods and prevent pollution from reaching our beaches." Transforming the environment in which one lives, according to these activists, extends a sense of alliance and connection far beyond the boundaries of one's local habitat. This sentiment is reflected in remarks made by Robin Cannon during the battle against LANCER, when Concerned Citizens was joined by other women activists from different racial and class backgrounds all across Los Angeles: "I didn't know we all had so many things in common … millions of people in the city had something in common with us … the environment."[41]

Barbara Lynch has argued, in an article examining ideas of nature, community, and environmentalism shared by Latinos living in the United States, that the relationship with nature for these cultural groups has always been associated with an understanding of community. She writes of Dominican Astin Jacobo's Crotona Community Coalition, which reclaims redlined housing and empty lots in the South Bronx, transforming them into community gardens to plant corn, tomatoes, beans, and garlic, thereby re-creating a small inner-city Cibao (the Dominican Republic's agricultural heartland).[42] She also tells of

Puerto Ricans living in New York, such as Dona Licha, who speak of their relationship with the sea and fishing as central to life itself and who feel that their lives are endangered because of declining fish populations and the increasing pollution of New York's coastal waters. Fishing, for New York Puerto Ricans, also represents a relationship to community, one they feel is jeopardized by recent New York State restrictions on the recreational catch. According to Lynch, although these Latino communities support conservation efforts, they are concerned that state restrictions on activities such as fishing "will deprive them of an opportunity for contact with nature by restricting their ability to use the catch as an occasion for generosity to family, friends, and neighbors."[43] Lynch argues that both ideas and experiences of nature, inherent in "the garden and the sea" for U.S. Latinos, are manifest through and firmly rooted in community, and not only an expression of community as "sameness." Specific cultural groups, be they Puerto Ricans in New York, Chicanas in East Los Angeles, or Salvadorans in the San Francisco Bay Area, have built environmental coalitions, such as the Mothers of East LA, El Pueblo para el Aire y Agua Limpio in Kettleman City, and the El Puente Toxic Avengers in Pennsylvania, both in the United States and across the border with Mexico. Once again, we see relationships with nature and the environment converging with social justice considerations, and activated through ideas and practices of "community," as the essential feature of environmental justice organizations in the United States.

How could knowledge of these specific "inventions" of nature, which intimately associate it with everyday social and cultural life, inform a more inclusive and effective environmental movement? Moreover, in what ways can the environmental justice activists' reconceptualizations of the social and ecological connections between communities and environments help bridge the conceptual gap that splits humans from nature and likewise separates environmental from social justice concerns? Scholars of environmental justice such as Lynch, Whitt, and Slack, Devon Pena, Robert Gottlieb, Cynthia Hamilton, and Laura Pulido, among many others, make the argument that for people of color in the United States nature is located in many cultural histories, including painful histories of colonialism, and is tightly linked to alienating experiences of oppression, yet also to the experiences of affinity and partnership building that obtain in community. Their scholarship, together with

the extensive political organization and insights of grassroots environmental justice organizations such as Concerned Citizens, the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice, and El Pueblo para el Aire y Agua Limpio, offer clues about ways of unearthing existing inventions of nature that emerge not from mainstream nature talk but from other cultural histories that could offer a rich source for grounding new multicultural environmentalisms.