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Confronting White Environmentalism

Kayla L. Gomez

Every evening, no matter what happened that day, I sit and talk with my partner about how our days went. We start each conversation with the same guiding question: What was the peak and what was the pit? It always differs; the peak has varied from being assigned as design editor of their department's journal to only taking 40 minutes to find a parking spot instead of an hour, whereas the pit has varied from getting just one question wrong on a quiz to a loved one dying.

Since the semester started, I began to notice that days ruled by 'the pit' have been occurring more frequently. I was getting annoyed easier, I honed in on the little things, and I would essentially catastrophize the entire day. It wasn't anything extreme, but it was enough to force me to take a step back and evaluate what was happening. Why am I angry? What is the root of this issue?

One day, my partner and I were grocery shopping. I'm Mexican and Central American and he's Chicano; we both have brown skin (his being much darker than mine), so it's not uncommon for us to be glared at, or get an occasional temporary stalker as we walk down aisles. This grocery trip, however, was noticeably more hostile than usual ones. Upon entering the store we were greeted by a white man in a MAGA hat standing with his arms crossed by the door (he didn't work there), periodically followed as we walked around by white employees, and treated to some lovely scowls from the white cashiers who were smiling only a second ago at the beautiful white couple checking out before us. When we finally returned to the car, we both breathed heavy sighs of relief and expressed how horrible that experience was. We felt an amalgam of emotions: fear, embarrassment, shame, anger, confusion, out of place. During the car ride home, I began reflecting on these emotions more

deeply. I replayed every microaggression that occurred and how each had affected me, weighing heavier and heavier as they built upon themselves.

While in this reflection, I began to realize that the weight felt by my experience at the store was similar to the weight that has been sinking my daily pit deeper and deeper since the school year began. In all honesty, I was confused. I was an undeclared major last year and had been yearning for a sense of place within the University when I fell in love with the Environmental Studies major. Now, I take classes with wonderful professors and I am feeling the most enriched in an educational setting than I ever have been before. The program is great, my peers bring interesting and new perspectives, and the discussions are powerful; I genuinely love learning, getting the education I came for, and being in an academic setting. Overall, school has been great so far. Why, then, has this weight been getting heavier with each passing day?

I woke up one day and felt out of place. It was cool and foggy, as Humboldt County tend to be, a stark contrast to where I grew up in the Coachella Valley (affectionately dubbed 'the desert' or 'the valley'' by locals). A desert in every sense of the word, what it lacks in flora and fauna (to the untrained eye) it makes up for in the rich and beautiful culture that roots itself throughout the valley; a culture built by artists, immigrants, the Native tribes who exist there to this day, and the locals who know every back road in the area. While I love Humboldt County and all that it has offered and given to me, there are days when I remember what home was and compare that to what it currently is. By no means do I believe one is better than the other, but when I'm walking around the valley I see a community that represents me, welcomes me with open arms and makes me feel at home; this doesn't happen often when I'm walking around Humboldt County. I looked at my partner sleeping beside me, saw home in his skin and felt back in place.

I went to class that morning and began to feel out of place again, only this time it felt different. As my classmates

trickled in, I began to realize I was one of three non-white people there. According to the 2018 Census, the population of Hispanics and Latinos in Humboldt is 11.8%. While roughly 12% may be enough for Humboldt county, it was extremely jarring to me. Throughout my full day of classes, I took note of how many white people were in the room. I felt more and more out of place and began to think about the implications of this observation. These classes were full of discussions about the climate crisis and movements being pushed by the youth; movements led by youth-of-color prioritizing justice, intersectionality, and reframing; movements asking for clean water, clean air, and accountability. How funny, I thought, that these youth-of-color who have probably been fighting for justice their whole lives are being presented as a radical change in what environmentalism looks like. Which begs the question: What do environmentalists look like?

When you think of environmentalists, who do you imagine? Do you think of the environmentalists who came before like Rachel Carson, Henry David Thoreau, or Aldo Leopold? Or do you imagine Julia 'Butterfly' Hill, David Attenborough, or Greta Thunberg? Perhaps your local homesteader? Now think of environmentalism; what do you imagine? Do you imagine a mass demonstration? Maybe you think of the 1970s Earth Day demonstrations, the Climate Strike, or the U.N. Climate Conference. When you think of environmentalism, is the main color in your mental picture white?

I do not want this perspective to be misconstrued as an attack against white people. This is, rather, meant to question why we tend to view the concept of whiteness as what is typical. While white people tend to hold this viewpoint more (whether they mean to or not), it is still present in communities of color. It's why people of color are referred to as being 'surprisingly well-spoken' by their white colleagues and consequently told they are 'speaking white' by their own family members. It's why brown and black girls feel ugly for not having rosy cheeks or colored eyes, or why skin lightening cream is so

popular among non-white people. It's why television in Mexico is filled with light-skinned actors despite this not accurately representing the viewership. It's why the history taught in classes hones in on the waves made by the founding fathers, but never seems to focus on the indigenous people whose societies were far more advanced than we are taught. This view is what leads to divisiveness in academia, the beauty industry, media, history and more.

I realized recently that this is what leads me to feel out of place in my major. The concept of whiteness being the norm followed me from the grocery store to school. No matter the setting, it's impossible to escape the assumptions made about you. I will never fit into what many of my own peers view as an environmentalist because I am not a white environmentalist. I can't afford to consistently shop locally, make the transition to a fully vegan diet or miss work to attend climate strikes and climate 'die-ins', therefore I am not a dedicated environmentalist. I advocate for clean water, clean air, and justice for our communities of color, therefore I am a social justice activist and not a true environmentalist. My identity and experience as a person-of-color living in America merely lends itself as a racial and environmental justice perspective in Environmental Studies. I am brown therefore I am not an environmentalist; I am a racial perspective. I will not be reduced to a token perspective; I am an environmentalist.

I rebuke the gospel preached by mainstream environmentalism, which claims that we need to focus our attention solely on repairing the environment and saving species by using reusable straws and adopting minimalist zero-waste lifestyles. To focus our attention on this cause removes mankind from nature by perpetuating the thought that we are not part of the ecosystem or among the species that need saving.

I rebuke this unspoken system of environmentalist 'brownie points' earned by how many protests you attend. To measure your dedication to the cause in this way overlooks the privilege it takes to be able to participate in such events.

I rebuke the predisposed notion of what an environmentalist looks like. To envision an environmentalist and only come up with white faces grotesquely overlooks the work of Dolores Huerta, Leanne Simpson, Vandana Shiva, Wangari Maathai, Chico Mendes, and many, many others.

How, then, can we become better environmentalists? First, we must remember the history of the environmentalist movement. Whether we want to admit it or not, it is rooted in racism. The institutions of environmental power were created by white men and are dominated by white people. There is a reason brown and black voices, who have been begging for justice for decades, are not as stressed in environmental education of all levels. There is a reason these voices were silenced. It was not accidental, nor was it just a result of time.

Second, we must not view brown and black voices as mere perspectives. While I may not speak for all brown and black people, having my thoughts labeled as a 'colored perspective' makes me feel like a token. Labeling my ideas this way separates them from the core issues at hand. It creates further divisiveness in academia and is not appropriate in the context of intersectional environmentalism, which leads me to the third way we can become better environmentalists...

We need to reframe what baseline environmentalism is. Limiting your vision of environmentalism to keeping the air clear, soils clean, and keeping the icebergs from melting in the name of solely preserving the flora and fauna, is cheating you and your fellow human out of justice. When you fight against the development of industrial sites in favor of clean air, can you not fight for both the flora and fauna as well as the communities of color whose children will develop asthma and other long-term health issues if all goes to plan? When you fight against the use of pesticides in the food we eat, can you not fight for the farmworkers who are forced to put their lives in danger of breathing in these chemicals to make a wage? When you bring awareness to the dangers of melting ice caps, can you make

your message include both the polar bears and the indigenous tribes who depend on sea ice to bring them food to hunt? Viewing environmentalism only as conservation is inhumane and shallow. Social justice is not separate from environmentalism. It is environmentalism.

Lastly, we need to destigmatize conversations surrounding race in the classroom. Environmental justice is not a new idea. It has had time to be explored, yet the conversations surrounding it never reach their true potential. Academia is a historically white area, and to ignore these conversations is to be complacent in the fight for inclusivity. Recently, we had a discussion about race and justice in one of my classes. Not many people spoke up or shared their thoughts, and I suspect it's because race is such a taboo subject. As a person of color living in America, I get scared to bring up race as I never want to make the wrong person angry; to some, this is good enough grounds to get hurt or killed. Contrarily, I've heard white peers say that they feel like they don't have a say in discussions about race; in fact, they have a huge part! We need to be honest about race. Do we ignore these important discussions because they are too touchy, or are they too touchy because they force people to confront their privileges? I am brown but I am not as dark as many of the people in my community. I benefit from white privilege, but not in the way that white people do, and I want to be forced to confront and discuss this in an academic setting. If we continue to dance around it, we only separate ourselves by race even further. We create a deeper 'us vs. them' ideology, which, as seen throughout history, only ends in fear and violence.

I don't want you, reader, to feel as though I am condemning the climate movement or the activists who are making waves in the fight for justice. Movement is still progress. I am grateful and excited to be living and aware in a time where I can see history happening before my very eyes. I do not, however, want the plights of brown and black environmentalists swept under the rug as they have continuously been over the course of time.

I want us to be critical. I want us to question why the name on everyone's lips is 'Greta Thunberg', and not Xiye Bastida, Autumn Peltier, or Vic Barrett.

I want to feel as much of an environmentalist as my white peers who fit into the stereotype of a 'typical' environmentalist. I want my fellow peers of color and I to feel like we are not only a token perspective of environmentalism, but are core to the movement.

I place no blame on the program or the university, both of which preach inclusivity to their fullest extent. Instead, I call out the institutional and historical suppression of brown and black voices in the fight for justice of all kinds. I call out racism and unrecognized privilege. I call out us all for being too scared to have conversations about race. I understand that it is real and frightening. It has created violence and division in almost every aspect of society. But if race is a constant, why do we choose to ignore it?

By closing ourselves off to and limiting these discussions, we are cheating ourselves out of a future where inclusivity and intersectionality thrive and take precedence in all areas of our lives. If we want justice, we need to recognize and ask who the justice is really for.

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