The 2020 Social and Environmental Apocalypse: Reimagining Black America

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Prelude: Writing as Community

While the COVID-19 pandemic has had disastrous impacts on marginalized communities, the global situation has also set the stage for a number of activist movements and virtual writing spaces as a form of resistance. In the midst of the pandemic, the founder of Black Women PhDs® and a former colleague/friend came up with the idea of starting a writing accountability group for women of color. Women of color from several countries and generations began convening to write together in a virtual setting. Writing soon evolved into inviting speakers, holding virtual happy hours, sharing resources, and creating a sisterhood. This article is a product of that virtual space of accountability, and we are all ever grateful to have the opportunity to work together. The lead author, an environmental justice scholar-activist, came across the call and first thought that it would be great to blend their voice with that of a counselor educator and cross-cultural relations enthusiast. This circle was then expanded to bring in the perspectives of two others who would add breadth, depth, and biophysical considerations to the piece. As we each proposed our ideas for the direction of this writing, we realized our ideas were all connected. This article embodies the cohesive, transdisciplinary vision of four scholars and scholar-activists across three time zones.

Inception

Just what is a "shared" planet? Equitable distribution of resources? Optimization of population dynamics across taxa? Shared governance of

resources and communities? Has the planet ever been "shared," or is it even "shareable?" While arguments abound as to whether or not Earth has ever been a truly shared planet, since colonialism, humanity has existed in an unshared or inequitable sharing of planet. This is evidenced by the exploitation and marginalization of Black, brown, and Indigenous communities to support the mass proliferation and outsized consumption of communities of European descent. As it stands, unshared space is a hotbed for inequity and degradation of both the land and the communities who occupy it. Space (shared or unshared) is an important factor in any future visioning, as food, water, shelter, and *space* are the basic needs for survival. Humanity's current inequitable consumption of Earth's resources is driven by socioeconomic ideologies developed by white oppressors. Much of these beliefs lie at the root of myriad contemporary environmental, economic, and social injustices—which are both the source and an exacerbating factor of the disparate effects of climate change (Martinez 2020). Perhaps the most perverse thing about racist policies and ideals, as both source and aggravator of climate change, is that the very countries most responsible for the massive anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions leading to this human-made phenomenon are those least negatively affected (Nugent 2019).

Indeed, climate change itself is a result of racism (Martinez 2020) and is so deeply tied to other social issues that it is considered by Kamala Harris, vice president of the United States, to be a national security threat (Harris 2019). Despite the promise of free markets, buy-ins to this economic system have magnified preexisting inequitable distributions of exploitative power structures that not only create but also preserve Earth's status as an unshared planet. The U.S. environmental justice movement has arisen to triage some of the damage caused by an unshared planet by marrying the civil rights and environmental movements. In desperate attempts to rectify the impacts of centuries of discriminatory housing, lending, and policing policies, as a society we keep repackaging the injustices of the past; this is the basis for reform. This is why revolution is the necessary step toward justice and a shared planet. However, as we will illustrate in this article, revolution has been long stifled in the United States because it has been intertwined with reformist attitudes and actions. In this article, we first set the stage for how the planet has never been a shared space, citing examples from the U.S. police and vigilante brutality and long-standing environmental trauma that has existed as a result. Next, we discuss one activist response, namely, Black Lives Matter, as it is a modern and salient example for the layperson, but not to negate the fact that many movements have come before it. We then transition into our call for revolution and lay out a vision for the future. While the connections drawn in this article may not be obvious for some, we feel it is important to outline how environmental racism is a branch of the tree of systemic racism that is alive and well in this country. It comes as no surprise that the environment is used as a weapon against Black, brown, and Indigenous peoples considering that 1) dominant Western ideals see people as being at the top of a hierarchy and natural resources as being tools at

their disposal and that 2) white supremacists never intended for Black, brown, and Indigenous peoples to share space with people of European descent, nor do they wish to acknowledge the humanity of the Black, brown, and Indigenous peoples.

Evidence of an Unshared Planet

Earth as an unshared space leads to oppression, suffering, inequitable distribution of power (especially over land-use decisions), and the series of injustices critically interrogated in this article. We center the experiences of the Black diaspora, primarily in the United States, to chronicle the intended and unintended consequences of an unshared planet. As evidence of an unshared planet, the mobility of Black people both historically and currently, is shaped, restricted, and determined by land-use decisions like zoning, redlining, and policing. This section points out how mere methods of policy reform do not go far enough in addressing systemic racism and marginalization because with the reform of one set of policies comes another set of same or worse policies in their place. Instead, we must incite a robust revolution that prioritizes environmental justice and places the needs of the Black diaspora at the center.

Legacy of Police Brutality and the Limitations of Reform

Policing is an issue that goes hand in hand with environmental degradation and environmental weaponization (Hill 2016). In 2020, we witnessed Black folks not being able to breathe due to police chokeholds, not being able to breathe due to contracting COVID-19, and not being able to breathe due to air pollution in our communities. Outcries and protests spread throughout the country and demands to defund or abolish the police ensued. However, these demands were not merely the result of recent events. They are the manifestation of over 400 years of exploitation and oppression of Black people through chattel slavery followed by the systematic disenfranchisement of "freed peoples" through discriminatory laws, policies, and practices that form the U.S. criminal justice system (Hannah-Jones 2019). Many have suggested that the criminal justice system merely needs to be reformed by way of better training for officers or better policies to protect incarcerated people. However, the call for environmental justice must include revolution by demanding true justice in the criminal justice system and dismantling the police force as it operates in the United States.

One of the things that has haunted the United States for decades is the legacy of a criminal justice system used as a form of oppression for Black, Indigenous, and brown people. Many people have disillusioned themselves with the realities of this problem by believing that those trapped in the cycle of the prison industrial system are criminals who deserve punishment and that reforms to this system have constituted progress. However, we assert that what these individuals see as reform is merely a repackaging of the same racism of the past. In the book *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander describes mass incarceration as a form of Black slavery (Alexander 2010). Alexander asserts that since the end

of the original Black slavery, there have been numerous forms of slavery set up to take its place. First, there were the Black Codes, followed by Jim Crow, and now mass incarceration. Many people have said that the criminal justice system is broken, but others have pointed out the truth: the system behaves as it was designed, as it follows suit of these other systems. The criminal justice system is not broken. It is operating just as the oppressor intends, as a system functioning to dehumanize, eradicate, and sicken Black people (Black men in particular) and other nonwhite individuals as "inherently criminal" (Alexander 2010, 197).

The criminal justice system is flawed and racially biased at every level and is deeply impacted by geographical and spatial considerations. It works to oppress BIPOC people through discriminatory policies and enforcement of those policies. The institution of this legacy began back in the day with vagrancy laws that gave police the ability to arrest people for appearing to be homeless or unemployed (Blackmon 2009). An officer could merely look at a Black person and claim they appeared to be breaking a law. This led to a disproportionate number of Black people experiencing the environmentally hazardous and physically tortuous conditions of prisons. It further perpetuated hordes of Black people being subjected to the environmental injustices related to farm labor as white oppressors would pay off the vagrancy fines or court fees incurred by Black people in exchange for often endless stints of farmwork (Blackmon 2009). Over time, as vagrancy laws were repealed, the behavior continued under the cloak of other tools (both legal and unwritten) at their disposal. Alleged petty crimes, stop-and-frisk, suspicion of danger, and even discriminatory lending practices are all current tools used to maintain a system of racial hierarchies and to eradicate Black people from certain spaces. Footage of police officers antagonizing Black and brown people for allegedly "trespassing" abounds, including some instances when the alleged suspects are standing on their own property. The antagonism that is directed at Black and brown folks on their own property is an illustration of the geographical and spatial considerations at play in the criminal justice system. In other instances, the alleged suspects had already abided by the instruction to walk away when the police decided to follow and berate them. When a suspect is abiding by the instruction of the police and operating in a way that is considered correct within the realm of the system and still manages to be shot, one wonders if any method of reform would cause real change. White oppressors have used systems to avoid their greatest fear: Black people will rise up and take back power. Thus, it would seem that the real failure is the fact that white oppressors have been allowed to dominate. The next course of action would be to use revolutionary tactics to overthrow the oppressors, making their deepest fears a reality.

A recent story causing public outrage involved the attempted murder of Jacob Blake, a Black man in Kenosha, Wisconsin, shot seven times in the back by police, in front of his children, as he tried to enter his car (Paybarah and Fazio 2020). A startling image has circulated showing a Black man bleeding from the whips on his back on one side and a Black man bleeding from bullet wounds in

his back on the other side (Figure 1). This image demonstrates the unsettling truth about what happens in the United States when a Black and a white man attempt to share space. Contrast this to the young white supremacist male who walked past several police officers with an assault weapon in hand after shooting and murdering several individuals and was neither stopped nor confronted, in the same city, days apart (Willis et al. 2020). This teen was charged with homicide for murdering several protestors, but pled not guilty (Booker 2021). To some the mere arrest may seem like justice, but it is not justice when an innocent Black womxn gets shot to death in her bed by the police while a white terrorist retains his life (Grassroots Law Project n.d.). It is not justice when a Black man is gunned down by white supremacists, in broad daylight, and the murderers are arrested only when the Black community and allies demand it. And it is not justice when white supremacists are allowed to storm the Capitol during the certification of a free and fair election and the police do nothing to stop it. After such heinous actions, many still produce petitions calling for lawmakers to address these wrongs—showing how even activists have notions of revolution that are much too bogged down by reformist tendencies.

Even in the cases when a Black man does retain his life, his spirit is killed within the confines of the prison industrial system (e.g., spirit murder in Williams 1991). Prisons have been hotbeds for exacerbated income, health, mortality, and environmental inequalities that affect people who are not incarcerated. Black men and womxn receive harsher sentences than our white counterparts (The Sentencing Project 2018). While it is common for white teens to receive probation or a mere warning for small infractions, Black children are often treated as deviants and sentenced like adults in the prison industrial system. In the film *Pushout*, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Monique W. Harris describe the criminalization that Black girls experience in K–12 schools. For young Black boys, they make a silent covenant with their teachers to "behave" in class, and in exchange the teachers have low academic expectations and "relieve" the students from the trap of the school-to-prison pipeline (Noguera 2003). This process continues into adulthood.

Further dehumanization of BIPOC, who are disproportionately imprisoned, occurs in prisons, which are often seen as the only acceptable use of land that has been excessively degraded environmentally, land that is correlated to abnormally high rates of cancer, valley fever, and respiratory illnesses among inmates (Bernd et al. 2017). Black people may not officially be considered three-fifths of a human anymore, but we are still treated as such. Black families are disbanded through the sustained incarceration of young and adult Black men (McClain 2019). On release, they often are unable to vote or secure employment, yet their bodies contribute to the population counts used to calculate each state's Electoral College allocation (Bradshaw 2018). While behind bars, Black and brown folks experience some of the deepest environmental injustices (Bradshaw 2018; Cartier 2020). Many prisons are situated on brownfields and Superfund sites and lack amenities like air conditioning and access to clean and reliable drinking

water (Cartier 2020; Pellow 2021). For instance, Rikers Island jail, with its 56 percent Black and 33 percent Latinx population, is built on top of a landfill (PBS 2017; Pellow 2017). One study found that ZIP codes that contain prisons have higher Toxic Release Inventories than ZIP codes without prisons (Leon-Corwin et al. 2020). It is no coincidence that the most vulnerable populations in the country are subjected to the most heinous environmental conditions in the United States through the prison system.

The powers that be in the United States claim that slavery is abolished, but the prison system is just a reformed version of enslavement, while the criminal justice system serves as a stand-in for a "reformed" overseer. Inmates are legally allowed to be paid pennies on the dollar for highly skilled and highly dangerous labor, a phenomenon that would be unacceptable if they were freed men (Quigley 2003). Many Fortune 500 corporations like Walmart, Victoria's Secret, and Starbucks use prison labor for their products, and even public universities are often state obligated to contract with prisons as well (Burke 2020). This institutional reliance on cheap, enslaved labor is kept alive by policies that enable its existence and continual morphing. This is not a new circumstance. It is further evidence of unshared space and how prisons provide an added layer of complexity to environmental justice issues.

Douglas A. Blackmon's *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* discusses how prisons were used to re-enslave Black people following the Emancipation Proclamation (Blackmon 2009). In the late 1800s, Black people would be arrested for petty offenses and fined at incredible rates. In some cases, they were fined $24 or more, the equivalent of three months of labor. As mentioned earlier, unable to pay the fees, a white man would "step in," pay the fee, and force the offender to work off the debt, effectively forcing them back into an enslaved state. This has startling similarities to the cash bail system of today. In other cases, in the 1800s, sheriffs would sell convicts on the private market, which was allowed under the law. This ludicrous loophole in the law would be exploited further as law enforcement would intentionally not record an arrested individual's charges, the amounts of their fines, or how much time was due to work off the debt. This intentionally poor and inaccurate record system sometimes led to infinite sentencing. Even though record-keeping systems have been reformed, it has not kept Black people from being inequitably sentenced.

In Alabama, there was a pattern of disarming Black men by finding them guilty of a frivolous crime, locking them away, and then pimping them out as physical laborers. Whites were threatened by freed Black people with guns and responded by using the prison system to revoke Black constitutional rights and sovereignty. In some southern states, hard labor markets were driven by convicts. For instance, convicts were often forced to labor in coal mines. In some coal mines, convicts made up half of the employee base. This practice of subjecting inmates to work in coal mines is a prime example of the types of environmental injustices that we propose must be disallowed by dismantling

the prison-industrial complex and the systems that undergird it. Blackmon's book details the accounts of many convicts who endured the worst conditions in the coal mines. They were often unable to bathe or change their clothes for weeks. The mines were an incredible health hazard, which caused some whites to suggest that the convicts not be required to work in the mines. This wasn't due to any humanitarian care but rather to protect their investments. Arguably, this history illustrates environmental racism in the United States long before the term was coined by Dr. Robert Bullard. In recent years, many environmentalists have campaigned to "Quit Coal." While these environmentalists are advocating against coal for environmental reasons, the legacy of slave labor is another reason not to support the coal industry (or the prison system).

The Next Wave of Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is one alternative to the menial reforms we have seen from within the system. BLM advocates for the cease and desist of police brutality on Black lives while aiding in the combating of systemic racism (Garza 2014). The valid anger of the BLM movement continues despite ongoing internalized societal pressures and self-directed decorum regarding policing within the Black community (e.g., monitoring vocal tone when pulled over, appearing friendly or less aggressive by smiling, keeping an ID nearby at all times, or keeping hands constantly visible). These measures are taken in hopes of escaping unharmed while being stressed to acclimate in order to fit a predominantly Eurocentric society. Reformists have argued that assimilating or attaining individualistic achievements (e.g., titles, status, or wealth) would quell the negative experiences of Black people navigating daily life. However, the Black celebrities, professionals, and even police who simultaneously experience oppression alongside Black laypeople prove this theory untrue. No matter the respectability politics of self-directed decorum when interacting with police or level of capitalist achievements, the Black body is still subject to execution without regard for safety or context. Nevertheless, the stress to acclimate built up to the point where a revolution became inevitable, and thus the BLM movement was born.

Need for the Movement

BLM attempts to act as a form of revolution by aiming to dismantle a police system that was questionable since its creation. The early police system in the United States lacked formality and consisted of surveillance by community members over those participating in prohibited behaviors related to sexual or betting activities (Waxman 2017). This informal group of community police was known to consume alcohol and even sleep during their shifts (Waxman, 2017). This later led to the need for supervision, but even that supervision was not without flaws, thus requiring informal surveillance to shift into more formal systems in growing U.S. cities (Waxman 2017). Other states promoted the administering of civil law in varied ways throughout the country.

The first civilly financed law enforcement of the U.S. settler state was established in Boston in 1838 to support those with commerce who were in need of protection for their physical property (Waxman 2017). The South later used law enforcement as a means of enforcing the continued enslavement of Black people who were considered property at that time (Waxman 2017). This historical context highlights the earlier roots of racism within the law enforcement structure that continues to influence the disregard for Black people and the resultant hunger for survival in the Black community. Relatedly, Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* describes the dilemma of the Black body with jarring examples that included Black parents heavily disciplining their Black children out of fear of losing sight of them during outings. This fear is due to the embodied reality of the greater danger faced if their Black child encountered the police (Coates 2015). The fear that Black parents have has been prompted by Black slayings such as Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin, and Tamir Rice, among many others. BLM calls for a revolution that would evoke a world in which this sort of fear is no longer a part of the everyday experience of Black people.

Beginnings of the Movement

Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi coined the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter in reaction to the slaying of Trayvon Martin, who was implicitly criminalized and killed while his killer, a vigilante, was not convicted (Garza 2014). Trayvon, seventeen years old, walked home after purchasing an iced tea and candy while talking on the phone to his girlfriend (Lee 2013). His killer reported that Trayvon appeared to be participating in suspicious activity while looking as if he might commit a crime (Lee 2013). BLM elevated awareness regarding the targeted, senseless, and brutal slaying of a young Black life. The movement deliberately humanized Trayvon's narrative and expanded necessary context to him and many others later murdered at the hands of police officials, refuting the false claims of victims wielding weapons as told by mainstream media. Mainstream media contribute to the diminishing respect for Black lives when it puts forth opposing voices to corroborate and rationalize the slaying of Black people (e.g., if _____ had followed the orders of the officer, _____ had a criminal background, etc.). Thus, social media advocacy led by BLM amplified the movement's mission to dismantle white supremacy and laid the social infrastructure necessary to produce greater action, such as protests and conferences (Garza 2014).

Growth of the Movement

The BLM hashtag was on its own not enough to constitute a revolution. BLM later developed beyond social media in association with community workers to advocate for justice within the Ferguson community after the similar slaying of Mike Brown (Garza 2014). In 2014, eighteen-year-old Mike Brown was walking home through the middle of the street in his neighborhood when his killer, assuming that he had committed a robbery earlier, shot him six times (Chaudhry 2016). The movement continues to advocate for justice in the slaying

of Black lives, including the recent injustices toward Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, while also enabling the revitalization of older activists to participate in the proposed efforts (Rickford 2016). It appears that the movement inspired the (non-Black) masses, but what has really occurred is white people appropriating the movement, thus diluting the original intent (Garza 2014). BLM has a number of limits as a social movement as it relates to their ability to truly revolutionize the United States. As it stands, BLM has fallen short of creating both reform (nationwide changes to policing policies) and revolution (overthrowing the police structure as a whole by any means necessary). Perhaps this is due to the attempts to revolutionize in such a way that still has undertones of reform.

The fact that BLM has yet to produce overwhelming change in the past eight years emphasizes the lack of social and political power from this movement that intends to be revolutionary but is held back by reformist techniques. In 2020, the illumination of the persistent and disheartening lynching of Black lives via social media encouraged a swelling of protests and advocacy efforts. Recent reports bolstered that over 93 percent of protests were acknowledged as peaceful despite continued mischaracterization by the media that labeled them as violent due to concern over looting and the destruction of physical property (Mansoor 2020). While the statistic of almost all BLM protests being nonviolent has been touted as a positive thing, it must also be noted that true revolution calls for the need to understand when it's time to escalate. Leaders such as Harriet Tubman, Malcolm X, and Angela Davis, an earlier affiliate of the Black Panther Party, have shown us that often the threat and willingness of violence is required to revolutionize the social landscape (Davis and Platt 2014; Sandarg 1986).

Complementary to this, the Black Panther Party utilized its symbol, a panther, to describe the group's response of not reacting with violence unless provoked, with the intent of defense (Harris 2001). The earlier creation of the Black Panther Party in the 1960s embodied sentiments related to empowering the Black community by (1) providing autonomy to Black individuals to determine the direction of the Black community; (2) funding jobs, housing, and resources to all of the Black community; (3) decolonizing education to depict the Black reality; (4) restructuring the judicial system to allow the Black community to be jurors in cases involving Black individuals; (5) refraining from involving the Black community in military engagement; (6) ceasing the robbery of Black individuals by white men; and (7) discontinuing police brutality impacting the Black community and freeing Black individuals from jail (Harris 2001). The Black Panther Party later faced issues that included ongoing debacles with another Black group, Karenga's U.S. Organization, as well as internal strife during the bicoastal expansion of the Black Panthers influenced by the criminal justice system (Harris 2001).

With regard to historical strengths and areas of improvement acknowledged in movements similar to the Black Panther Party, BLM has been unsuccessful in ways, but it has gained traction in others. For instance, the protests succeeded in exposing the need for society to address the unjust murders of Black people by both police and white supremacists more broadly. It should also be noted

that despite various attempts at manipulation and theft to not afford credit to its Black Queer Womxn founders, BLM has at minimum had a successful expansion globally, including formalizing multiple chapters across the world and hosting national conferences to organize activism and advocacy efforts (Garza 2014). The movement continues to gain support from "white Americans" despite political efforts to dismantle its impact (Bittle 2020, 9). The 2020 BLM protests resulted in an upsurge of information in the media surrounding the fallacies against Black lives, furthering the exposure of individual, organizational, and structural levels of racial discrimination. Relatedly, the permeation of organizational discrimination is illuminated in the continued impacts of the incarceration system, where it is "6 times more likely for a Black man to be incarcerated than a white man" (Galea and Abdalla 2020, 227). Structural discrimination is illustrated by the lack of representation of Black officials in positions of governmental power and influence. Public murals then have been used as a means of finding voice and taking up space in place of the missing representation.

The creation of murals and other public art symbolizing solidarity with Black lives is part of a spectrum of advocacy efforts tailored toward facilitating social change. Historically, Black art has continued to communicate subversive innovation through varied depictions of narratives that respond to socioeconomic and political events impacting the Black community (Cotter 2021; Raussert 2021). This illustrates how the concept of revolution in the United States is deeply intertwined with reform, as the increase of murals contributes to extinguishing anti-Blackness and white supremacy that "continue to be drivers of hate violence against Black Americans" (US Commission on Civil Rights 2019, 88). In Washington, D.C., visually artistic efforts have been undertaken by BLM supporters to assert proclivity toward Black lives. Doing so in the highly recognized "nation's capital" is groundbreaking, resulting in Google Maps' adjustment to capture the mural from their satellites (Locker 2020). The bold yellow letters displaying the movement's phrase seen also in California and other places further emphasize the continued need for regarding and centering Black lives, particularly as yellow is typically used in society to encourage caution and care (e.g., traffic lights, traffic lines on streets, and school buses). These public displays of artwork supporting the movement shine a light on racism, a problem that many white and non-Black liberals thought was over, as mentioned in *Demonic Grounds* (McKittrick 2006). In alignment with the hope of its founders, BLM will promote Black Liberation, including a heightened focus on intersectionality within Blackness, such as the concerns of LGBTIQ+, disabled, and other minoritized aspects of identity (Garza 2014). It shall not be a fad but rather a way of life.

The Next Wave of Environmental Justice: Environmental Injustice and COVID-19

Environmental injustice is the inequitable distribution of power over land-use decisions in marginalized communities (Taylor 2014). Historically, environmental

injustice has been characterized by BIPOC communities carrying an uneven environmental burden from things such as toxic waste dumping, factories releasing massive amounts of air pollution, and contaminants being released into the waterways (Taylor 2014). These concerns sparked the environmental justice movement. In the United States, the environmental justice movement was launched by a historically Black community in Warren County, North Carolina, battling chemical waste in their community for decades (Bullard 2008). This movement stands in stark contrast to the predominant environmental movement, which assumes a middle-class white positionality and is often thought to have been launched in 1962 by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. While the dominant environmental movement touches on the health impacts of pollution, it centers more on the preservation of nature and wildlife. The environmental justice movement, on the other hand, centers the experiences of minoritized people and the ways in which the environment is used as a tool for further marginalization and oppression. In recent years, the concept of environmental injustice has been expanded to include concerns such as marginalized communities having a longer and more difficult recovery period from natural disasters, small-island developing countries being the worst hit by the effects of climate change despite contributing the least to it, parks and greenspace being of poorer quality in low-income communities, marginalized neighborhoods having limited energy options at unaffordable prices, and, as described earlier, policing and prison ecology. As a result, a number of spin-off movements have grown from environmental justice, such as energy justice, food justice, climate justice, greenspace justice, and green criminology. Additionally, as this article asserts, environmental justice must also consider the interconnected histories of institutional racism that contribute to how environmental injustice is manifested.

In 2020, a new wave of environmental injustice has occurred—dare we call it pandemic injustice? Not only are Black and brown people being disproportionately plagued by COVID-19 and contracting it at higher-than-average rates in prisons, but now there are environmental implications as well. The West End Revitalization Association (WERA), located in Alamance County, North Carolina, submitted an urgent COVID-19 response request to the U.S. House of Representatives with the signatures of a number of individuals and organizations calling for environmental injustice from COVID-19 to be addressed. In this way, WERA has taken action toward reform in favor of environmental justice. The medical waste that has resulted from coronavirus support has been discarded in Black and brown communities across the country. Further, we know that workers living in these very communities are more likely to be dubbed "essential" (a quick turn from the formerly "low-skilled" label) and do not have the opportunity to work remotely or in some cases to work at all (Saraiva and Rockeman 2020). In 2020, prisons were some of the worst-hit places by the COVID-19 pandemic, putting the lives of many inmates at risk (Saloner et al. 2020), while their families are simultaneously and disproportionately impacted by the virus "on the outside" (Dyer 2020). In hospitals too, Black and brown folks are primarily the ones called

on to dispose of medical waste as a part of their work duties and thus are subject to more exposure. This is all while Black and brown people were dying from COVID-19 at the highest rates compared to other racial groups (Johnson and Buford 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, experts have voiced the importance of spending time in nature for mental and physical health purposes. For the Black community, we find that this suggestion is easier said than done, as shown in the following section, which illustrates how environmental racism is about more than natural resources; it is also about the racism that occurs in the human habitat.

"Shared" Space as a Battleground

In 2020, the world began to deal with unprecedented times. Not only have we been in the midst of a global pandemic, but the Black community in the United States is also dealing with a flashlight being shone on centuries-long oppression. While the global pandemic has caused much harm to the people of the world, it has also caused a slowdown in our fast-paced, first-world society, making space for non-Black people to notice the racism that they previously had the privilege of ignoring. One of the original manifestations of that oppression is the existence of public spaces as racist battlegrounds. Since before the founding of the United States, space has been racialized and contested based on racist ideologies of who belongs and who needs to be restricted in terms of both access and freedom of movement. From the robbing of land from Indigenous peoples to create national and state parks to the patrolling of Black and brown people simply trying to enjoy these parks, space has never been shared.

Dispossessing the Wilderness lays forth the argument that "wilderness preservation went hand in hand with native dispossession" (Spence 1999, 3). Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the U.S. federal government and its advocates constructed and pushed for public land management rooted in white superiority and dominance as caretakers and "deserving" users of the parks. For example, the lands seized to create Yellowstone National Park were declared unoccupied despite the park's active use by several tribes and bands, including the Shoshone, Crow, Blackfeet, and Sheep Eater. This land theft for the supposed "greater good" was not limited to the establishment of national parks. Many other so-called public spaces the United States touts as successes are the result of land theft. The 1862 Morrill Act, which is celebrated for its establishment of a nationwide network of public universities, was predicated on the seizure and unratified treaties of Indigenous lands from almost 250 tribal communities (Lee and Tristan 2020). In 1857, Seneca Village—a thriving, Manhattan village built by Black freed men—was demolished to build the infamous Central Park (Gilligan 2017).

Contemporary scholars continue to critique not just the oppressive histories of land and space but also the ways Black and brown folks continue to be monitored, restricted, and abused (Finney 2014; Hoover and Lim 2020; McKittrick 2011; McKittrick and Woods 2015; Porter et al. 2020). For example,

a common ecological concept termed the "tragedy of the commons" can also be viewed through similar analyses of shared space (Hardin, 1968) The tragedy of the commons describes the notion that if shared space exists with unregulated use, individuals will maximize their own production on the land, to the detriment of those sharing the land (Hardin 1968). In *Outdoor Recreation: An Introduction*, Plummer (2009) introduces the concept of the "tragedy of the recreation commons" as a phenomenon that describes the expectations people have regarding how and when they go out to enjoy the outdoors or nature, such as national parks. Often, what people enjoy most about parks is the ability to connect with the environment and the peace and serenity that those spaces provide (and perhaps the expectation that they will not be accosted based on the color of their skin). This results in the inability of some people to enjoy the benefits of parks due to the ventures of others. In the same way the tragedy of the commons rests on an idea of "shared space" being unshareable, the tragedy of the recreational commons rests on the expectations that white park-goers have in interacting with a "natural" space that is devoid of any people of color to accost them and spoil their enjoyment of the "wilderness."

The expectation of who cares for nature, who deserves to have experiences and relationships with nature, and how they experience nature have been managed by white expectations of wilderness, aesthetics, and control. The predictability of whites policing Black people in public spaces to maintain their white supremacy is exhausting yet persistent. Christian Cooper, a Black man and avid bird-watcher, was a victim of the intersection of this tragedy of the recreation commons and white supremacy. While birding in a park, Mr. Cooper asked Amy Cooper (no relation), a white womxn, to leash her dog (per park regulations). Amid her angry refusal and in retaliation for having her whiteness and privilege challenged, she threatened to call the police and followed through with it to report a Black man "threatening her life" (Hoover and Lim 2020). Dr. Carolyn Finney discusses both the experiences of being stopped by park police while leading a group of Black womxn on a hike in a national park and the erasure of her father's forty-year career as the caretaker of a multi-acre property in upstate New York (Finney 2020). Roz Joseph fell victim to this dangerous intersection as well while riding her bike when she was accosted by a white man in Palm Beach, Florida. Ahmaud Arbery was a victim of this vicious intersection when he was taking a run through a residential neighborhood and was brutally murdered by a racist white father and son. These folks and countless Black folks have fallen victim to this harsh intersection in recreational spaces or by merely existing in public space, being antagonized, abused, spit on, or otherwise molested by white oppressors.

An important point to note, however, are the ways Black and brown people have tended to and continue to make the land our home, carving out physical, emotional, and relational spaces to call our own. For example, in satirical response to Christian Cooper's assault and his own personal interactions with whites, Walter Kitandu, also a Black man, composed an "advisory warning" for his white neighbors, "warning" of a man [himself] who is both a birder AND Black

likely to be seen roaming the community with binoculars (Hoover and Lim 2020). In Black geographies, the works of Katherine McKittrick (2013, 2014), Ashanté Reese (2019), and many others paved the way for a reclamation and celebration of what "shared" space means to us. Shared space represents harmony between the physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental presence of beings. Furthermore, shared space allows for equity and longevity for both the land and the community who occupies it.

Shared space will continue to be ground zero for battles, as "we cannot have a conversation about sustainability, about any piece of land, unless we [all humans] have dealt with our relationships with each other" (Finney 2020). History shows the way "nature" and "preservation" have consistently served Western and white ideals and principles. What is different in the quest for a "shared planet"? What evidence from the past or present suggests that future shared spaces will somehow be managed differently than past transgressions? White supremacy has proven itself to be unreliable and unwilling to share resources, especially if it means prioritizing the needs of Black, brown, and Indigenous peoples and communities. With this understanding, conversations of climate change, justice, and mitigation become increasingly and intentionally violent when they fail to engage racism, colonialism, and white supremacy.

Hope for a Shared Planet? Black Is the Landscape, Black Is the Cultivator

Reform is so interwoven into the revolutions of real life that no actual example has realized the advanced state of peace and technological achievement as illustrated in *Black Panther*'s Wakanda. The film is a brilliant showcase in Black, Pan-African ownership and Black geographies, a reimagining of Black life sans white supremacy and anti-Black racism, a Black life rich in love, intelligence, ownership, and shared resources. As climate change disproportionately ravages the communities of Black and brown people (Martinez 2020), we build on the aforementioned discussions and look toward the future through the vision of *Black Panther*. The tragedy of the recreation commons plays out on a bigger stage as we critically analyze the impacts of climate change and broader society's propositions for climate change mitigation. An irony of the tragedy of the commons surrounds the simultaneous projecting of a narrative of communal neglect and disregard for shared resources while reinforcing the erasure of the many Black womxn who are often the caretakers of these spaces. But Marvel's *Black Panther* promotes Black womxn as creators and sustainers of technological advancements of Wakanda. Our focus on *Black Panther* aligns with the vision of Black womxn being uplifted and powerful, especially when considering earlier science fiction by authors such as Octavia Butler and her *Dawn* series. *Black Panther* follows the story line of T'challa (played by the late Chadwick Boseman) and his acquiring of the kingdom of Wakanda. The movie blatantly asserts the idea that without Black womxn, there would not be a Black Panther or a Wakanda. It also seamlessly minimizes yet examines the damaging

impact of white influence. For instance, the film showcases the villain focused on harvesting vibranium for global dominance along with another who undergoes a change of heart in his alliance. In this way, the film also broaches the topic of environmental racism.

To Be Continued: An Afrofuturistic Vision of Coalition Building and Change

Freedom is a city in Georgia founded by nineteen families who purchased almost 100 acres of land in coalition with one another with the intention of creating a safe city for Black people in response to the slaying of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd (Moorwood 2020). This initiative began with two Black womxn hoping to create a safe space for their relatives, again emphasizing the reality of Black womxn providing the fortitude and determination for a future of freedom through building alliances and change (Kirkland 2020). The city of Freedom represents a precedent of our Afro-futuristic vision of coalition building and change. Throughout the pages of this article, we provided a thorough outline detailing our understanding of environment and environmentalisms that transcends common interpretations of environmental burdens. We challenged monolithic perspectives regarding nature and documented experiences within unshared spaces by detailing the workings of the criminal justice system and land use, and we discussed our Afro-futuristic vision of shared spaces. Thus, we encourage and necessitate an Afrocentric uprising to channel our ancestral energy to deconstruct contemporary society and rebuild it into something equitable, communal, and just.

We imagine a world apart from a world that has been devastating for Black people due to villainous crack, as mentioned in the film *Brown Girl Begins*, directed by Sharon Lewis. In the film, there is a tension between different groups of Black people in how to respond. One faction wants a holistic plan for combating the health effects of the villain, one seeks to stir revolution and use violent tactics to overthrow the villain, and the last seeks reform by befriending the villain. Liken these three approaches to the state of Black America as outlined above. Getting in good with the oppressor is a tactic that has been used for hundreds of years. During original Black American enslavement, some Black people were tapped as overseers, while others had a place in the big house. Today, a subset of Black folks has been seen publicly supporting oppressors such as those who hold political office. These actions have not gotten them on the path to liberation—quite the opposite, in fact, for the oppressor always retains the upper hand.

Now imagine the health-focused healing approach. This approach centers individual self-care within a world that has been neither revolutionized nor reformed. Flash back again to the original Black American enslavement. Imagine a Black person beaten or raped, as triggering as it may be. There have always been healers in the community who were there to ease the pain (e.g., shamans, herbalists, and pastors). However, when does the pain stop? When can we cease picking up the pieces and stop the break from happening in the first place?

Today, many have taken up roles as midwives, counselors, social workers, or other healers. This has worked to some degree; for example, Black babies are three times less likely to die when cared for by nonwhite doctors. But what about those who don't have the luxury of access to these resources? This approach still leaves something to be desired.

Finally, there has always been a faction that advocates for overthrowing the system. In the days of the original Black American enslavement, some enslaved people like Harriet Tubman led hundreds of Black folks north to freedom. Then there was Nat Turner, who led a rebellion of seventy-five enslaved Black individuals in which sixty white people were killed over the course of two days in a battle for their freedom, later depicted in the film *The Birth of a Nation* (2016). Recall also brother Kunta Kinte, who tried repeatedly to run away until his foot was mutilated to cease the rebellion. Although fictional, this character is an archetype for enslaved Black men who were persistent in seeking freedom.

Imagine now the youth who have staged walkouts from their schools to protest the ways adults disregard climate change, to rally for the Earth that they shall inherit. Is it any less warranted than Harriet Tubman's "walkout" of the racist South? Imagine, too, when organizers in Atlanta, Chicago, and Los Angeles, among others, have risen up and begun looting the cities of the overseer. Is it so unlike the rebellion of Nat Turner? Recall the three Los Angeles transwomxn chasing their attackers to recover their stolen property. Is it any less brave than enslaved Black men running for their lives? There is a dire need for revolution, a revolution that will require the following strategies, among others, to be brainstormed to develop the foundation of a new system, a new Black America:

- Finding words to label and advocate against inevitable inequitable circumstances that may arise, for addressing problems must begin with naming them and acknowledging their harm
- Identifying and recognizing the perpetuation of the white gaze, a Eurocentric lens used to promote acceptance of some Black or otherwise marginalized individuals over others (a concept discussed in *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am* [2019]) so as to combat internalized behaviors of discrimination (Yancy 2016)
- Pinpointing and increasing sensitivity to the pervasiveness of misogynoir, the gender and racial oppression of transgender and cisgender Black womxn (Bailey 2021)
- Studying historical evidence relating to Black revolution worldwide (e.g., the first Black revolution in Haiti, Garveyism and the Liberia program, etc.)
- Allowing Black and otherwise racially minoritized groups to hold space with another, without the fear, confusion, and questioning of white audiences (Tatum 2017)
- Bringing to bear the demands of the Seventeen Principles of Environmental Justice and adding to them principles related to dismantling

the prison supersystem and disallowing pandemic injustice (First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit 1991)

Now let us envision the future. A future in which a Black baby's chance of survival is no longer dependent on the race of their mother's doctor. A future in which land is no longer stripped from Black and Indigenous folks like the dignity was once stripped from so many young Black and Indigenous girls who went missing and no one came looking for (Mayes 2017). A future in which "since racist criminalisation is the foundation of the U.S. prison system and environmental racism/injustice is a form of criminalisation, then one means of practicing radical environmental justice politics would include an embrace of abolition" (Pellow 2021, 4). A future in which it doesn't take a social media campaign to taste a small bite of the fruits of justice. A future in which onlookers actually intervene when they see a hate crime against a Black human being or a brown human being or a transgender human being instead of recording it on their phone. Better still is a future in which those hate crimes don't exist in the first place. A future in which a Black man can rest instead of working for years through his illness and having to hide it to appear strong. A future in which a Black womxn can have "one damn job instead of five or six" (Cottom 2018, 31). We call for an Afrocentric uprising in which we channel the energy of our ancestors to deconstruct the ever-flawed society of today and rebuild it into something new, beautiful, and just.

Note
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