




11-4-2019

White Guy Hiking: How I Learned to Think Critically About My Ecological Identity

Nick Engelfried
Western Washington University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/s2ss>

 Part of the Civic and Community Engagement Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Educational Sociology Commons, Environmental Studies Commons, Place and Environment Commons, and the Theory and Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation

Engelfried, N. (2019). White Guy Hiking: How I Learned to Think Critically About My Ecological Identity. *Summit to Salish Sea: Inquiries and Essays*, 4(1). Retrieved from <https://cedar.wwu.edu/s2ss/vol4/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Summit to Salish Sea: Inquiries and Essays by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

White Guy Hiking: How I Learned to Think Critically About My Ecological Identity

Nick Engelfried, Western Washington University

Abstract

Our encounters with the “natural” world are made possible by a complex of historical, political, social, and economic forces that shape each person’s ecological identity, or the way in which we relate to nature. I grew up in a White, middle-class family with easy access to green spaces, and this contributed to my growing up to become an environmental activist and educator. I now realize the doors which opened to allow me to embark on this path did not do so by chance and that many other people are prevented from engaging with nature in the ways I did as a child, teenager, and young adult. In order to be an effective environmental educator I have realized I must think critically about the forces of power and privilege that filter the ways in which different people relate to the natural world around them.

Keywords: ecological identity, White, privilege, nature, natural, biophilia, education, environment

I would like to acknowledge we are on ceded and un-ceded territory of many sovereign Indigenous peoples, including but not limited to the Upper Skagit, Sauk-Suiattle, Nooksack, and Nlaka’pamux. Let’s take a brief moment of silence to remember how their care for the landscape means this beautiful place can exist today.

At the beginning of my story, I’m digging in the dirt in my family’s backyard in Bay Area California, uncovering creatures that scurry and wriggle when exposed to sunlight. Pill bugs on their backs wave many pairs of legs in the air or roll into tight defensive balls. Earthworms contract themselves back underground. Some I pick up in my four-year-old hands, depositing them safely in a jar of moist soil.

Experiences like this awakened in me the inborn connection with the more-than-human world that exists in all cultures. Evolutionary biologist Edward O. Wilson calls it *biophilia* – a deep affinity for the natural world all humans have the capacity to feel, provided it is nurtured and allowed to flourish (Wilson, 1994). Like thousands of children who become environmentalists biophilia blossomed in me because of early interactions with nature. It started with worms and pill bugs.

But there is more to this story. As a child I was unaware of the social and historical forces that made my backyard experiences possible. Those earthworms and pill bugs were newcomers to North America. This continent has native earthworms—but they are shy, elusive, and have been supplanted over most of their range by species that came nestled in the roots of plants introduced from Europe. Pill bugs, land-dwelling relatives of crabs and lobsters, arrived in a similar manner.

I tell this story from my early childhood because the way we tell stories matters. In a version of this one, a child digs for bugs in the dirt and deepens his love of nature. The child seems to have no history, neither do the bugs—we see only an idyllic image in the moment. But nature does have history. So do people.

As an educator I want to help people connect with nature the way I did as a child and continue to do as an adult. But to do that effectively, I believe I must address historical and social forces that have given people like me easy access to green spaces and “natural” environments, while placing others in homes next to coal-burning power plants and waste incinerators.

I now know how European earthworms and pill bugs came to North America. But how did I enter the picture? I was born into a White middle-class family in the Bay Area. My ancestors arrived there by way of multiple continents. I eventually realized to truly comprehend my ecological identity, my sense of how I relate to nature (Thomashow, 1996), I must engage this history and my own later experiences. In doing so I hope to shed light on a process other educators may find useful.



Figure 1. *Crocus heuffelianus*. Photo by *xulescu_g*.

\The picture above is *Crocus heuffelianus*, a plant from Romania. My paternal Grandmother Lila’s side of the family were Jewish Romanians who emigrated to North

America in the late 1800s—exactly why I’m not sure, though European anti-Semitism likely had something to do with it. Some came through Ellis Island, some by way of Canada. They ended up in San Francisco, then a city of around 230,000 and one of the Coast’s biggest commerce centers.

The San Francisco area was and remains the homeland of Indigenous peoples like the Coast Miwok, a federally recognized tribe who now own land near Santa Rosa; and the Muwekma Ohlone, a tribe still striving for federal recognition (National Park Service, n.d.). In 1776 Spanish soldiers and missionaries launched a wave of colonization that forcibly removed Indigenous people from almost all their homeland. Over the next two centuries California went from a Spanish colony, to a Mexican colony, to a U.S. state in 1850. The city soon drew immigrants from around the world (White, 1991).

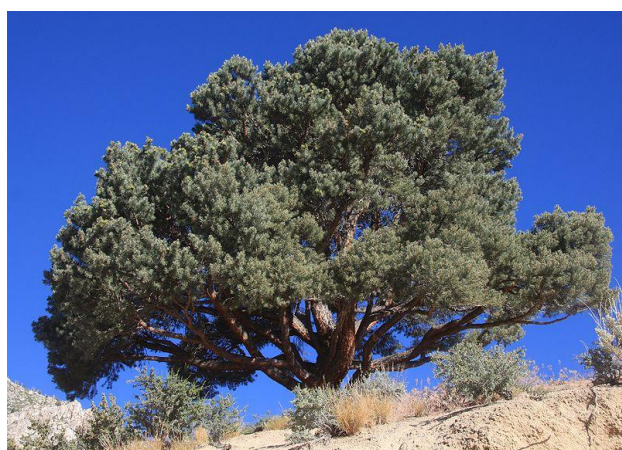


Figure 2. *Pinus edulis*. Photo by Dcrjrs.



Figure 3. *Abies pinsapo*. Photo by 15Gitte.

The above are a Spanish fir, *Abies pinsapo*, found in Spain; and piñon pine, *Pinus edulis*, from Southwestern North America. Some of my ancestors must have come to North America from Spain in the invasion that started in Mexico and spread north. As far as I know, my maternal grandfather descended from a mix of Spanish and Indigenous North American ancestors— which specific groups I don’t know. Spanish conquest of large parts of southern North America was so complete and brutal, the tribal identities of many Indigenous people were lost. They mixed with the Spanish, and their descendants—including part of my family—came to be seen as neither Spanish nor Native American, but Mexican.

My maternal Grandpa Charles Santillanes was born in 1940s Colorado, homeland of the Zuni, Apache, Arapaho, Comanche, and many other Indigenous peoples. Like California this area was controlled by Spain, then Mexico, then the U.S. But while the land passed from empire to empire, the people there remained. After U.S. annexation many so-called “Mexicans” were ironically treated as foreigners (White, 1991).

I don’t know if my grandfather’s family was among these Colorado Mexicans, or if they migrated from farther south. What I do know is my Grandpa Charles was ashamed

of being Mexican and spent much of his life trying to leave his culture behind. He came to California as a young man.



Figure 4. *Fritillaria meleagris*. Photo by Sten Porse.

This is a checkered lily, *Fritillaria meleagris*, native to parts of Western Europe including Germany, Holland, and the British Isles, all places other members of my family came from. My Jewish Romanian Grandma Lila, on my father's side, married my Grandpa Fred, whose family at some point came from Germany. In California my Grandpa Charles married my Grandma Mary, whose ancestors came to the U.S. from Britain and Holland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Romania. Germany. Britain. Spain. Holland. Indigenous North America. Genetically I have roots in all those places – but in daily life this doesn't affect me much. Unlike many people in this country I am not constantly reminded where my family came from. Unlike ancestors on my Grandma Lila's side, I never feared discrimination because of my family's religion. Unlike my Grandpa Charles, I was never told I couldn't do something because of my race. Because to mainstream U.S. culture there's one thing about me that matters more than probably anything else: I am considered White.

I'd like to talk about Britain, one of the places where the idea of Whiteness as an identity came from. It isn't where most of my ancestors lived. It isn't even where my German last name, Engelfried, originated. But it is the country that most shaped colonization in North America.

The British have long had a conflicted relationship with nature. Their elites developed templates for colonization and industrialization that led to today's worst environmental problems. Yet, countless ordinary Britons have had a deep, appreciative relationship with nature. They shaped traditions of nature observation that influenced me growing up. Here's a quote from Gilbert White, a British naturalist who lived near England's Sussex

Downs in the eighteenth century, describing a landscape where “wild” nature blends easily into cultivated farmland:

Though I have now travelled the Sussex-downs upwards of thirty years, I still investigate that chain of majestic mountains with fresh admiration year by year; and I think I see new beauties every time I traverse it...As you pass along, it commands a noble view of the wild, or weald, on one hand, and the broad downs and sea on the other. (White, 1789).

White expressed deep appreciation and attentiveness to the more-than-human landscape. But in the last couple hundred years the interactions people like White had with nature seem to have grown less common in the English-speaking world. To test this, some researchers studied the Oxford English Dictionary, a book that “seeks to capture the evolution of all words in the English language” during the last five hundred years (Atran, 2008). Each entry tracks how use of a word has changed over time and includes quotes from literary sources illustrating how it was used. The researchers examined how sources and quotes referring to trees increased or declined in the dictionary between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries.

References to trees and specific types of trees peaked in the nineteenth century, not long after Gilbert White’s time. But that’s not all: in the nineteenth century more references mentioned trees by their species names. By the twentieth century most simply referenced “trees” broadly (Atran, 2008). English-speaking people’s perception of nature has grown fuzzier as oaks, apples, and maples were replaced by a tree is a tree is a tree.

Writer Robert MacFarlane spent years collecting nearly-extinct words from the British Isles that describe natural features. They include “shreep,” meaning dispersing mist; “ammil,” ice coating the leaves after frost; and “roarie-bumblers,” wind-blown storm clouds (MacFarlane, 2015). These are words used by people who paid such close attention to the natural world, they needed words to describe specific formations of mist and ice.

For centuries most Britons were small farmers and people associated with farmers who grew food and raised livestock on communal commons. They interacted with soil, weather, and landscape. But over several centuries, escalating in the 1700s, the commons were increasingly privatized and deforested with use of the land being intensified by Britain’s elite. Similar scenarios played out elsewhere in Europe (Snyder, 1990).

Forced off communal lands, farmers became laborers for the new factories. Meanwhile the British and other European powers were carving the rest of the world into colonies, seeking markets to supply their new industrial economies with raw materials. Desperate for better opportunities, working-class Europeans became settlers. In this way the displaced of Europe displaced other peoples in other lands.

My own family came to California, by various routes. My early childhood experiences there planted the seeds of my ecological identity, but those seeds took root and blossomed in Oregon, where we moved when I was five. Between about nine and twelve is when a

child's sense of self and place solidify, as they begin forming identities as individuals who see the world differently from others (Thomashow, 1996). Just after I turned eleven my family moved again, to Bend in Central Oregon. Our house was on the edge of town on two and half acres of lava rocks, junipers, sagebrush, and other high desert shrubs.

Central Oregon lies within the homeland of the Northern Paiute people, semi-nomadic gatherer-hunters whose lands White settlers stole. Now many live on the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs and Burns Paiute Reservations (Hanes, n.d.). Today parts of Central Oregon have turned artificially bright green because of irrigation, but much remains the landscape of soft colors the Paiute have long tended, and which thanks to their care still exists today: the soft light green of junipers, muted dark green bitterbrush, soft blue-grey sagebrush, and light gray-brown boulders.

Let me tell a story from a typical summer evening during the time I spent in this landscape. It's pleasantly cool, a contrast to the stupefying heat of afternoon. I am twelve, and I'm heading outside with a small bag made for me by my mother slung over one shoulder. Inside is a spiral-bound notebook, colored pencils, and a handheld net made from a small plastic bag fitted over a frame of twisted wire clothes hanger.

I take out my notebook as I approach a bitterbrush bush. It has gray bark and tiny wax-covered leaves. I see a pair of pentagon-shaped stink bugs on a twig. Their bodies are soft brown, supported on three pairs of jointed legs. Each has a needle-shaped proboscis kept folded beneath it when not in use. I make a drawing of the bugs and some written observations in my notebook.

Next my eye is drawn to a black insect in the bush's higher branches, climbing with studied slowness. It is a broad-necked darkling beetle, smooth and dark as obsidian. It settles on a twig and starts nibbling one of the small bitterbrush leaves.

I know from past experience darkling beetles always wait for evening to venture up the bushes. I've found them in early afternoon, but only by lifting up rocks or logs where they hide from the heat of day. When exposed, the beetles don't scurry away like some insects. They have another defense. An alarmed beetle will press its face to the ground, lifting its posterior skyward. From this opening it emits a chemical that smells faintly like glue. The scent doesn't bother me, but apparently repulses some predators.

This darkling beetle, on the bitterbrush, nibbles a leaf leaving a barely-visible dent in the side before moving on to the next one.

I've observed this behavior before: I know the darkling beetle won't eat a whole leaf, but will instead consume only a small part of each one. I don't know why (and now, some eighteen years later, I still don't know why). My twelve-year-old self hypothesizes the insect is avoiding noxious chemicals in the leaves. Perhaps by eating only a small part, it somehow avoids triggering the bitterbrush bush's chemical defense system.

This evening is rounded out by a strange insect I've never seen before: a white, slender-bodied cricket with threadlike antennae. It perches wraithlike on a twig, so still I almost don't see it. It must be a female since it has a stubby ovipositor, or egg-laying tube, protruding from its behind. This, like my other observations of the insects, goes down on paper in my notebook.

That's one example of the interactions I had with nature in adolescence. I spent most of my time outside in spring and summer. I sketched insects and learned the names of plants. I collected water from puddles to examine under a microscope. I tracked marmots on a hill behind the house and watched birds come to our feeder. My parents supported these activities.

My relationship with nature contrasted with the lack of connection I felt with most people. I was a quiet, shy kid, and during adolescence it seemed harder than ever to connect with people my own age. It felt like other people communicated with a secret code invisible to me. Only in my twenties did I realize I had characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome, now called high-functioning autism. Non-verbal communication cues were and continue to be extremely hard for me to read. Insects, plants, and birds I could understand.

These were the circumstances that allowed biophilia to blossom in me. From a child digging in the dirt I became an awkward adolescent who got along better with animals and plants than people. Later as a teenager, I volunteered at the Oregon Zoo and a wetland nature center. In college I majored in environmental studies and took field trips to old-growth forests.

I am immensely grateful for these opportunities. I also recognize the need to acknowledge the doors which opened for me did not do so by chance, but due to a complex of historical, social, and economic factors. These same doors are not opened for many people. Here's a quote that helps show what I mean.

No free Negro, or mulatto...shall come, reside, or be within this state, or hold any real estate, or make any contracts, or maintain any suit therein; and the Legislative Assembly shall provide penal laws for the removal...of all such Negroes and mulattoes, and for their effectual exclusion from the state, and for the punishment of persons who shall bring them into the State, or employ, or harbor them. (Loewen, n.d.)

These words are from the original State Constitution of Oregon, where I lived from ages five to twenty-three. When Oregon became a state in 1859 not only were Native Americans banished to reservations, African Americans were legislatively excluded from living there. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, laws passed by Congress with support from White West Coast population centers banned most immigrants from Asia. Racial exclusionary language in the State Constitution was gradually disregarded or invalidated by federal laws like the Civil Rights Act, but was not completely removed until the early 2000s (City of Portland, n.d.).

Meanwhile dozens of cities in Oregon and throughout the country – especially small rural towns – enacted what scholar James Loewen calls “Sundown Town” policies, excluding specific groups of people such as Blacks or Chinese. The name Sundown Towns comes from the fact that targeted people were not supposed to be seen in town past sundown (Loewen, n.d.).

Today, some people ask why People of Color in much of the U.S. are disproportionately concentrated in cities, not more rural areas with easier access to green space. The answer is, certain large cities were the only places People of Color could settle without being lynched. Many places remain Sundown Towns in spirit, from rural towns to affluent suburbs. They are places where entire groups of people are consistently made to feel unwelcome or unsafe.

Easy opportunities to nourish biophilia are inequitably distributed. This isn’t to say cities don’t contain nature, or that many urban children don’t develop love for the natural world. But environmental education as our society has constructed it is designed for people who have a certain kind of relationship with open green spaces. It fits the experience of people like me. When my family lived in a relatively small Oregon town on a patch of sagebrush steppe, we never had to worry about being ostracized. When we later moved back to the environmentally friendly Portland area, we continued to fit right in.

My love of the more-than-human world grew from years of contact with green leaves, birdsong, scent of rain-touched soil; from feeling a caterpillar’s prickly feet on my arm, placing a drop of water under a microscope and watching it come alive. These experiences were relatively easy to access for a White middle-class adolescent and teenager. My identity as a White person also meant as I grew older, I could participate in protecting the world I loved without too much fear of bodily harm.

My transition from nature appreciation to political action came when I was seventeen or eighteen as I learned more about environmental threats like climate change. I became an activist in college – first at Portland Community College, then Pacific University in Forest Grove, Oregon. I organized environmental documentary showings and put up posters about the administration’s lack of support for sustainability initiatives. I annoyed some college administrators and interpreted this as a sign of success. Even so I eventually graduated.

The next several years I spent immersed in environmental activism – which inhibited more than contributed to securing a gainful career. I volunteered for the Oregon Sierra Club’s campaign to close the state’s only coal-fired power plant. And I joined a grassroots effort to stop construction of new natural gas pipelines through Western Oregon.

Energy companies had proposed a network of pipelines to transport fuel imported as liquefied natural gas, or LNG. They would cut through Mount Hood National Forest and miles of farmland – including small organic farms in Forest Grove, where I’d gone to college. And they would further cement the region’s dependence on fossil fuels.

One day in 2009, we activists who opposed LNG learned the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which permits new pipelines, was coming to Oregon to visit the proposed route for one of the LNG projects. Their staff would meet with landowners affected by the pipeline and representatives from the pipeline company. One day of site visits would be near Forest Grove, the other in McMinnville—home to Linfield College where I knew student activists. I reached out to contacts at Pacific and Linfield and we came up with a plan: when FERC arrived in Oregon, we wanted to greet them.

We coordinated with landowners who would also be there to meet FERC. On FERC's first morning in Oregon we showed up in the parking lot of the Red Lion Hotel where they were staying.

To give them credit, the FERC people were receptive to talking with us. We got into cars and accompanied them on visits to several properties that would be crossed by the pipeline. For a moment it felt like something really inspiring might happen. At each property, landowners talked about their concerns. Some students asked questions about fossil fuel dependence and climate change. Representatives from the pipeline company, including the CEO, Peter Hansen, also accompanied the FERC caravan. All the key stakeholders were present—and if you don't know, getting stakeholders together is a big thing in environmental education.

But then I noticed something. When a question came up that directly involved the LNG company, company representatives would address it, always assuring everyone they would not cause any environmental or safety problems. Otherwise they were mostly silent. At one farm we listened as the landowner spoke passionately about how building the pipeline would endanger his livelihood and the land he cared for. Meanwhile Peter Hansen, the company CEO, stood off to the side not really paying attention, eyes half closed as though trying not to fall asleep.

I couldn't believe it. Here were people describing how this pipeline threatened their land and families' welfare. You'd think the least the CEO of the company could do would be to listen. But the industry people weren't acting concerned. Later on that CEO made jokes about safety worries. On another landowner's property, a company rep seized the opportunity to take GPS coordinates despite being explicitly told not to by the landowner.

This was a key lesson to me. You can get stakeholders together; but when the system is set up so those with more money, power, and privilege have most influence, simply letting everyone speak isn't enough. It isn't just who's speaking that matters, but who's listening.

Experiences like this helped forge my identity as a political activist. When I moved on from Oregon it was to pursue a Master's in environmental writing at the University of Montana in Missoula. I plunged into another two years of school. Meanwhile I got involved in maybe the biggest environmental fight I'd been part of: a campaign to stop an enormous new coal mine meant to feed global export markets, the Otter Creek Mine.

This mine would have been in eastern Montana in the beautiful Tongue River Valley. On one side of the Tongue River is the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. On the other side live farmers and ranchers, folks like the landowners I'd met in the LNG fight. Trains carrying coal from the mine would have traveled across Montana and to the West Coast, passing through dozens of towns including Missoula. Members of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe, nearby ranchers, and residents of rail towns opposed the mine.

I finished my first Master's in 2013 but stayed in Missoula two more years to work on the Otter Creek campaign. A lot happened during that time. I helped organize protests, rallies, and petition drives. But what was most inspiring were the incredible people I interacted with.

I met farmers trying to practice sustainable agriculture, fighting the seizure of their land to build a railroad for servicing the new coal mine. I met college students challenging their university to divest from fossil fuels. I met retired people willing to get arrested standing in the paths of coal trains to protect their grandkids from climate change. And I met people whose ancestors had been fighting to protect Montana's lands longer than anybody.

In 2013 I was invited to attend an activist training camp called Moccasins on the Ground organized by Indian People's Action, a group that advocates on issues affecting Native peoples in Montana. Moccasins on the Ground was part of a series of Indigenous-led trainings held across the Midwest, meant to prepare people to take direct action against fossil fuel projects—specifically the Keystone XL pipeline, which at that time looked likely to begin construction soon.

Moccasins on the Ground was held on the property of a sympathetic rancher outside the tiny town of Whitehall, Montana. It was a multi-day event of workshops and trainings on nonviolent direct action. Indigenous speakers from Montana, Idaho, and South Dakota talked about their work to defend the land. The basic format was similar to other activist training camps I'd attended, but I soon began noticing something different. Though this was a camp about environmental issues, many speakers talked about things which don't fit within what I'd thought of as "environmental" topics.

One speaker talked about her work as a mortician, ensuring the bodies of deceased Native women were attended to with proper cultural ceremony. Others spoke about the destructive effects of alcohol on reservations, putting alcohol in the same undesirable category as "environmental" threats like toxic waste and oil.

It took a while for my Euro-American mind to figure out what was going on. But at last I thought I had it: these speakers came from a worldview where the sharp divide between environmental and social issues simply does not apply. I'm not talking about a Western romanticized view of Native Americans mystically entwined with nature. But what I saw at Moccasins on the Ground made me realize the very practical reasons for seeing nature and culture as a single continuum.

It seems for people who have lived in reciprocal relationship with the land for generations, sustaining culture requires sustaining the more-than-human environment which supports cultural practices. To those who grew up in mainstream Euro-American society this can seem utterly different from anything we're used to. But is it really so foreign to Western cultures? I think of people who lived on a lush, green island hundreds of years ago and looked out on a landscape clothed in icy shreep beneath the roarie-bumblers. I like to think to these people, the view of nature as culture wouldn't have been counterintuitive.

I feel deeply privileged to have participated in Moccasins on the Ground. I am also privileged in another sense, because I can't fully know the risks organizers of that event exposed themselves to. One purpose of Moccasins on the Ground was preparing people to take direct action against fossil fuel projects—to stand in the way of bulldozers and cranes if need be, even at risk of physical harm. Years later, many people I met there would join the encampment at Standing Rock, where peaceful protesters were met with mace and attack dogs.

I participated in some nonviolent direct action when I was in Montana. I was arrested during a couple of sit-ins, and blockade where me and other activists in Missoula, temporarily delaying a coal train from coming through downtown by sitting in its path. This wasn't as scary as it sounds; the train had slowed almost to a stop well before it reached us, and there was plenty of time to get off the tracks if we needed to. Eventually we were escorted away from the tracks by police and cited for trespass.

I'll be honest: I was afraid during that protest, though not of the train. Civil disobedience isn't a step to take lightly, and when I've taken it I've always been nervous. But I knew the consequences for me weren't likely to be too great. Partly that's because the actions were well planned to take few unnecessary risks. But partly it's because I was a White person in a group of White people, in a social-political system that marks White bodies as privileged. I could be reasonably certain of being treated by police officers with basic respect. This privilege doesn't exist for most People of Color.

This is a reality I've had to grapple with, and which the wider activist movement is grappling with. In some ways I think middle-class White people should be first to get arrested blocking coal trains and pipelines, since we can do it with least risk. I also recognize there are times like Standing Rock when People of Color have a right to be at the forefront because they have most at stake. Further, while participating in direct action is usually a choice for White people, others may have no choice because their very survival is on the line. Navigating these dynamics is complex and no two situations are the same.

What I do know is, we need to pay attention to privilege. We need to see why White people can live in certain places and others are excluded from them. We need to realize how People of Color are targeted by police. We need to recognize it's not simply about getting all the stakeholders together in one room. We have to see and make reparations

for the political-social forces that led to these inequities. We need to realize how environmental issues are deeply connected to racism, sexism, and classism.

Which brings me back to my activism. I got involved in it because of my affinity for the more-than-human world. But as I discovered, too often the consequence of deep involvement in environmental politics is spending less and less time outside. In Montana I was surrounded by spectacular wild places – and I did get out in many of them. I often encountered things that reminded me of the urgency of my activism, like Whitebark pines killed by pine beetles that have become more numerous because of climate change.

But as time went on I worked longer and longer days, often at a computer writing emails or going to meeting after meeting. I found it hard to spend large amounts of time in the forest, even on weekends. Meanwhile my list of projects kept growing. It got so I was trying to do so much, my activist projects themselves suffered – I wasn't able to devote the time to each task I needed to. But somehow I couldn't stop.

Things came to a head in 2015, when I could hardly pull myself out of bed each morning because just thinking about what I needed to do left me exhausted. I was severely depressed and knew it. My depression made my work less efficient because I had so little energy. It took longer to do things and I had even less time. One day I started fantasizing what it would be like to do something very different, while still having a positive impact on the environment. On a whim I did a Google search for Master's programs in environmental education. One of the first results was a place called the North Cascades Institute.

I arrived at NCI the next summer. With my new cohort of fellow grad students, I embarked on a place-based learning course that took us from the Salish Sea to the Methow Valley, from the Skagit River to alpine lakes. Then came a year living inside North Cascades National Park, teaching elementary and high school students about the environment and taking classes on curricula and nonprofit management. The following summer I got experience leading high school students on backpacking trips. I learned how much I enjoy working with teenagers, grew familiar with the North Cascades ecosystem, and one morning woke up to find a bear outside my tent. I'd like to thank Joshua Porter, Lindsey MacDonald, Saul Weisberg, Julie Stone, Sarah Parker, Kimber Burrows, Evan Holmstrom, and all the NCI staff and my cohort for making my time here so amazing.

What maybe helped me most at NCI was the time I spent hiking alone or with my cohort through some of the most spectacular landscapes in North America. The depression I'd felt in Montana faded, then disappeared.

There's a familiar narrative in Euro-American culture about going to the mountains for refuge from society. The fact that this storyline isn't especially original doesn't mean it resonates any less with me. The healing I found in the North Cascades is real.

At the same time, I realize this narrative works for me in part because of who I am. I'm a White guy – the archetypical White guy hiking in the woods. I come from a long tradition of White guys who also hiked in the woods, from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Jon Krakauer. I can pick up any standard nature writing anthology or outdoor magazine and find confirmation that, sure enough, hiking in the woods is a thing White guys do.

Some of my heroes are White guys who walked in the woods. They are people like Henry David Thoreau, whom I admire not only for his environmental philosophy but for his opposition to slavery and the Mexican-American War. Thoreau was part of the Transcendentalist movement, which came out of Romanticism and is partly responsible for developing the social construct of “wilderness” as a place of refuge. This wasn't a new idea – poets in places like China went to the mountains to escape society millennia before Thoreau. Indeed, Transcendentalism was influenced by writings from China and India. But people like Thoreau updated this tradition for their own time and culture. Others after them developed it further, placing more and more emphasis on the myth of an untouched “wilderness” that ignores the long history of Indigenous peoples.

I still revere Thoreau and lots of other White guys who hiked in the woods – but I also realize they missed some things. Most missed the degree to which Native Americans have shaped North American landscapes for millennia. Many idealized the “wilderness” as empty, when in fact it has been inhabited for generations. I now realize Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and modern ideas that evolved from them represent one story about humans and nature, but there are as many ways of looking at nature as there are human cultures. In fact, most cultures have lived in closer intimate contact with the so-called “natural” world than Euro-Americans have for a long time.

Mainstream environmentalism has ignored these other stories for too long. Not only that, we've neglected non-White-guys even when they were involved in writing our own story. I say “we” because I'm a product of Euro-American environmentalism. I first read Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Edward Abbey as a teenager – and got a lot out of them. I tried Ralph Waldo Emerson, but he was too dense for me. I knew Emerson was Thoreau's mentor and one of the first well-known Transcendentalists. But it was only when environmental scholar Dorceta Taylor spoke at Western Washington University last month that I learned how Emerson was influenced by another great writer who helped build the foundation for Transcendentalism: Phillis Wheatley.

Phillis Wheatley was sold as a slave at age eight in 1761, to a family named the Wheatleys in Boston. Despite being enslaved she began writing poetry at a young age and became a famous poet. She was emancipated around 1773. In Dorceta Taylor's words, “Wheatley's poetry is filled with Romanticism...Scholars argue Wheatley's work helped influence American outdoor enthusiasts and frame nature and the environment in Romantic imagery.” Wheatley's poems influenced people like Ralph Waldo Emerson (Taylor, 2018).

As environmental educators we need to talk about people like Phillis Wheatley, not just bearded White guys who like hiking in the woods. And as writers Lauret Savoy and

Alison Deming put it, we need to widen the frame of what's considered environmentalism and who's an environmentalist (Deming, 2015). We need to talk about Sundown Towns as an issue of environmental privilege. We need to talk about cultures whose environmental worldviews are vastly different from Euro-Americans'. We should do this because it's right, but also because if the field of environmental education can't do this, it's going to become irrelevant.

I want to share a story about the first trip for high schoolers I co-led in summer 2017, for NCI's Youth Leadership Adventures program. One of our students was born in Sri Lanka, another in the Pacific Islands, another in Central America. One girl, a daughter of Vietnamese immigrants, was president of her school's diversity club. Many of these kids speak multiple languages and they communicate on social media with people around the world. Most are very concerned about social justice issues—no surprise, since they are affected by them every day.

Some of these teenagers had strong existing connections to nature. The girl from Sri Lanka told me how as a child, she explored a landscape lush with tropical plants and saw elephants near her village. But this interest was not sustained by U.S. schools. Despite spending the last several years living near the North Cascades, at the start of our trip she couldn't recognize one native tree species—though she was interested in those we saw and quickly learned several.

Every student in school comes from a culture with a history of connection to the more-than-human world. But for many, going through a Euro-American education system that recognizes only one dominant narrative, a tree has become a tree is a tree. We need an environmental education that affirms and sustains students' own cultural experiences with nature, and this cannot be done if environmentalism is just about White guys hiking in the woods. Even White students are ready for a more inclusive, representative narrative—I've seen this in the undergraduate class I TA'ed for this past winter on the literature of nature and place.

It's partly for this reason that when I graduate—meaning next week—I'll be launching a nonprofit called Reconnect Earth, to help high school students and undergraduates reach their full potential as agents of social and environmental change. Starting in 2019 it will lead summer backcountry trips that teach students about ecology, environmental issues, and grassroots organizing and social change. During the school year it will support students running their own campaigns at their schools.

I have one last story, about the experience that first made me realize I want to work with high school students. For context, my work study job last year was maintaining NCI's natural history collection kept in this room. I discovered new things about myself doing this, including that I enjoyed preparing dead bird specimens donated to NCI by people who'd found them already deceased.

About this time last year there was a snow avalanche across Highway 20, which trapped all of us living here for several days. It was when there was a high school group

visiting for Mountain School, our school partnership program. The students had to extend their time here so we staff and grad students planned ways to keep the students occupied. Among other things I led a bird taxidermy workshop quite a few students attended.

I was actually surprised so many students wanted to handle dead birds. But they got really into it. And I relate: there's something about running your fingers through the thousands of tiny waterproof feathers on a western grebe, or seeing how the bones in a bird's wing connect to the powerful flight muscles. When do most students get this kind of intimate, meaningful contact with nature? Not in school dissection labs where prematurely killed animals arrive by catalogue smelling of preservatives. Such mail-order biology treats animals like commodities, not organisms, and I fear does more to deaden biophilia than awaken it.

I believe young people need direct, meaningful contact with the more-than-human world. Some might find it joining a tradition of White people who walked in the woods. But increasingly this won't be enough, for students of Color or White students. We need a wider story. I don't claim to have all the answers. I certainly don't claim my nonprofit Reconnect Earth will have all the answers—but starting it and working with today's leaders of change is my way of continuing this journey. I invite you to join me on it by signing up on that sheet.

What I do know is we White educators must think critically about our identities and embrace the process of doing so. Like the dirt I dug in as a child, the landscape of environmental education is vastly more complex than I once realized. As a child, I had no idea what historical colonial and socio-political forces led to my encountering earthworms and pill bugs in my backyard. I see this as a metaphor for how my conception of my own ecological identity has broadened. It's involved grappling with deeply uncomfortable realities. But overall, learning to look critically at the world around me has been hugely enriching and informative.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'S2SS' written in a stylized, cursive-like font. The '2' is smaller and positioned between the first and second 'S's.

References

- Atran, Scott and Douglas Medin (2008). *The native mind and the cultural construction of nature*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- City of Portland (n.d.). Looking back in order to move forward. *Timeline of Oregon's Racial and Education History*. Retrieved from <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/bps/article/412697>
- Cronon, William (1995). The trouble with wilderness. In W. Cronon (Ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (pp. 169-190). New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Deming, Alison Hawthorne and Lauret E. Savoy (2015). Widening the frame. In Alison Hawthorne Deming and Lauret E. Savoy (Eds.), *The colors of nature* (3-12). Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.
- Loewen, James W. (n.d.). Showing general in OR. *The Homepage of James W. Loewen*. Retrieved from <https://sundown.tougaloo.edu/sundowntownsshow.php?id=776>
- Macfarlane, Robert (2015). The word-ward: Robert Macfarlane on rewilding our language of landscape. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/feb/27/robert-macfarlane-word-ward-rewilding-landscape>
- National Park Service (n.d.). Ohlones and Coast Miwoks. Retrieved from <https://www.nps.gov/goga/learn/historyculture/ohlones-and-coast-miwoks.htm>
- Snyder, Gary (1990). *The practice of the wild*. San Francisco, CA: North Point Press.
- Taylor, Dorceta (2018). *Power, privilege, and conservation: the quest for diversity, equity, and inclusion* [PowerPoint presentation]. Lecture notes.
- Thomashow, Mitchell (1996). *Ecological identity: becoming a reflective environmentalist*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- White, Gilbert (1789). *The natural history and antiquities of Selborne*. London, England: Benjamin White.
- White, Richard (1991). *It's your misfortune and none of my own : a new history of the American West*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Wilson, Edward O. (1994). *Naturalist*. Washington, DC: Island Press.