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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Jeffrey Michael DeSalu entitled "Brown People, Green Spaces: Colonial Imaginaries and the Whiteness of Nature." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology.

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**Brown People, Green Spaces:
Colonial Imaginaries and the Whiteness
of Nature**

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Science
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jeffrey Michael DeSalu
May 2023

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ABSTRACT

For several years, conversations about the absence of racial and ethnic diversity in ecology and evolutionary biology (EEB) and the conservation movement have been growing in scope. Critics argue that the overwhelmingly white demography of EEB departments and conservation organizations deprive both of a necessary diversity of perspective and, more importantly, deprive people of color and other minoritized groups of a voice in the study of and advocacy for their lived environments. Here, I situate the current conversations in historical context, arguing that the current lack of diversity is in part a reflection of the material and ideological bases for environmentalist thought being deeply embedded in the white supremacist assumptions of a colonialist perspective. I further argue that, if our departments and organizations are to truly diversify, we must both confront this history explicitly, and open ourselves to critical perspectives from groups and coalitions we have previously ignored.

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PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the past several years, fueled in part by the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, societal conversations about the effects of persistent racial inequality have significantly increased in both depth and frequency [60], [74], [78], with the Black Lives Matter movement in particular gaining unprecedented visibility [80]. Though this conversation has arguably been most prominent in discourse surrounding the American criminal justice system, few areas of American life have been left untouched. These include academia — ecology and evolutionary biology in particular — and the conservation movement EEB often intersects with. These conversations are critical; the near complete absence of people of color in organismal biology [5], [47], [53] is not only morally suspect, but actively detrimental to the breadth of ideas and perspectives represented in the field. There seems to exist, at this juncture, both the understanding and the collective will be required to reevaluate the ethics that we wish our fields and our causes to reflect, and to examine why, precisely, there is so little diversity present in both.

Whatever our present concerns about inclusivity, allyship, and anti-racism, it bears acknowledgement that the history of the conservation movement and the history of the theft and destruction of Black bodies are one and the same. Our current attempts at inclusivity have failed, at least in part, because these attempts take the premise of early conservationist rhetoric and thought at face value. A more critical evaluation of both would clarify the connections that existed between conservation and the hostile ethno-racial and class politics of the era, and how those connections continue to manifest today.

If we are to truly carve out a space within our field for voices and groups that have been forced into the periphery of existing power structures, those early ideas, and their enduring influence on the dominant cultural narratives in EEB and in conservation more broad-

ly, are where we need to begin. The alternative is functionally equivalent to attempting to explain the phenomenon of mass incarceration without referencing the legacy of slavery.

Many of the concerns regarding the social politics of our field that are beginning to come to the fore -- most notably the apparent alienation of people of color -- ultimately derive from precisely this historical context. Thus, here I wish to articulate a view of history that offers a more critical perspective on the cultural and economic roots of our fields, our causes, and our beliefs. Only once we have come to terms with this history, and its ongoing impact, will we possess the means to allow a broader set of people a sense of presence and influence within the field.

It is my hope that, if these roots are made explicit and visible, more scholars and conservationists will begin to see how they influence their own views on nature and its accessibility. Ultimately, this might help to produce a cultural shift in our understanding of who "counts" as a stakeholder in the preservation of our natural environment, and with it a willingness to more actively and adaptively expand the pool of those interested in conservation and the academic disciplines it intersects with.

PART TWO
EARLY CONSERVATION

Generally, when we speak of “nature,” we do not mean the interconnected network of continually occurring biochemical processes, but the meaning we have ascribed to those processes [1]. Nature, such as it is, does not exist independently of our characterization of it. This is a truth that ecologists and activists are often less than fully transparent about, as it is easy to conflate Nature as we conceive of it — the map — with our natural environment as it exists — the actual terrain. The philosophical precepts that undergird the map that we have drawn for ourselves, our *environmental imaginary*, so to say (see: the works of Lacan, Castoriadis [13], [39]), can and should be understood as artifacts of the era and peoples that produced them. Like so many ideas that were ascendant in European thought in the 19th century, they are in strong need of interrogation.

Consider the measures of civilizational progress that were employed — and are still employed [15], [77] — before and during the development of urban industrial infrastructure. Cultures that were willing to embed their structures, both social and physical, in a surrounding environment that they did not attempt to dominate and whose resources they did not maximally exploit were regarded as inferior, as primitive [45]. Societies that prioritized such harmony were commonly viewed as savages, and in need of paternalistic guidance [13]; this was, in fact, perhaps the most explicit and popular rationalization for the early era of European colonialism [61]. The white cultures that invaded and coopted these territories spent centuries believing that the Nature that held those savages within it was valuable only as an instrument [72] — that as a habitat it was crude, unconquered, and fit only for animals. This, it should go without saying, is a very different environmental imaginary than the one we would see develop relatively soon afterwards, and which should still be recognizable to us today.

Though earlier initiatives existed globally as European nations expanded their colonial influence, the environmentalist movement as we think of it today cohered in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, aided economically by the development of scientific methodologies capable of demonstrating the threat environmental deterioration represented to trade among European colonies, and socially by responses to mounting industrial modification of domestic environments [34]. During this period, observers witnessed a paradigmatic transformation of social and economic relations, particularly for those whose principal labor output was displaced from land they cultivated and instead sold for wages. It was a time in which society saw an unprecedented accumulation of wealth and commensurate increases in inequality [22], [65]. Not by coincidence, this was the backdrop against which we began to think of conservation of the environment as a social and political priority.

It was the backdrop as well for the shift in how Europeans conceived of Nature. This occurred around the middle of the 19th century, when the rates of industrial development in cities increased dramatically, because that was when the primary output of industry transitioned from textiles to steel [20], the production of which is self-reinforcing. As historical facts, these are both mundane and well-understood; I reference them here to contextualize the inception of environmentalist thought because I have seen others acknowledge their central importance to early environmentalists only rarely, and as a result tend to find their accounts of history dissatisfying. Our aesthetic understanding of Nature, our transition into a new environmental imaginary that exists to this day — one that held a nascent belief in the "purity" of Nature — began as a direct consequence of rapid economic development.

What could be seen was the emergence, among the bourgeois and upper class, of an affinity for quasi-Darwinian conceptions of the poor, marginalized urban labor force that characterized them as culturally and morally unfit [29], [35]. These social divisions were

routinely drawn along existing racial delineations; in both the U.S. and British cities, non-white immigrants (e.g., Irish, Italians, Poles) were often overrepresented in factory jobs [36], [56], [79]. From this, we also began to see a budding aversion to the idea of the city, in which those laborers resided [40], and a reversal of the dichotomy used to assign value to the natural. The expanding industrial sectors of the city now served as a locus for the diseased, vulgar, and unrefined [26], [33], intended almost exclusively to produce units of commercial output, and the undeveloped — previously the lands of the bestial and sub-human — was ascribed a sort of untouched sacredness [17], [49]. This is not to say that the wealthy no longer resided in the affluent neighborhoods of the city, or that the poor were not already dwelling within impoverished neighborhoods long beforehand; both are certainly true. However, this seems to have been the point where the purity of nature — the sense that it was pristine and somehow *distinct* from human civilization — emerged. It was at precisely the point when some of the most developed parts civilization became almost entirely dependent upon modes of production that were regarded as filthy and distasteful [26], [33], [35], tolerable only because of the vast wealth they produced. This period in time, in which there was a surge in the migration of groups — often involuntary — to urban environments, either through displacement or immigration [36], [63] was when the rush to claim nature as a sanctuary for affluent whiteness, not simply separate from but existing in opposition to the city began.

This accounts for the persistence for our particular environmental imaginary. The widespread and ongoing celebration of nature as it exists independently of human societies is in part a function of this process of wealth creation having never stopped. This was, arguably, the first instance of white flight as we understand the term. The transportation infrastructure and stage of economic development were not yet sufficient to render suburbs feasible, but there existed a view of nature as something that needed protecting from the very forces that served as the source of wealth for many who sought to protect it, and for many of the same reasons that would later see whites expand into suburbs. As cities,

heretofore centers of culture and civilization, could no longer be easily defined in these terms, flight took a form that contemporary technology allowed for: ideological. Nature was reimagined as categorically unique, the idea of which excluded even those societies that had historically subsisted within it — an idea that informs conservation organizations' willingness to evict indigenous populations from their land to this day [14].

With this shift in thought came a novel mode of white colonization: conservation [11]. This is where I, and many others in the humanities, often come into conflict with those working in disciplines such as conservation biology: the act of conservation demands a decision as to what must be conserved, and thus hinges upon a subjective evaluation of need and worth. Insofar as this is true, it is inherently an act of curation, and by extension, an exertion of control. To conserve is, in some sense, to determine. Such determinations were and continue to be made largely by individuals who have seen the scale of environmental deterioration and poverty present in urban industrial centers and chosen to re-envision nature as something to be cordoned off and kept away from the masses, potentially effecting these determinations with resources obtained from the labor of said masses [37].

Similar approaches have typified the priorities and behaviors of conservation organizations in the intervening decades. Globally, prominent conservation organizations have consistently fought for the creation of reserves, including in such reserves land already occupied by indigenous populations [3], [14]. It is only in the relatively recent history that there have been prominent voices within the conservation community willing to engage with its history of antagonism towards indigenous communities and role in the displacement of thousands of conservation refugees and undermining the capacity of indigenous populations to effectively lobby and communicate with their own governments [3], [14]. The base assumptions held by many working in conservation biology do not differ substantially from those held by their institutional forebears, such as Sierra Club founder

John Muir [28], [68]. In such disciplines, and in related movements, that critical lack of difference may not be clear to those whose voices remain audible, but it is evident to the non-white voices whose priority and validity have, historically, been downplayed and disregarded.

PART THREE

ALTERNATIVE IMAGINARIES

There are of course exceptions to this shift in thought. Much of the reformulation of nature detailed above occurred in Europe and the Northeastern U.S.; in the American South, where chattel slavery was still practiced, the association between the natural and the savage remained a practical necessity. In the years leading up to and following the Civil War, nature was evaluated in terms of its extractive potential until it became economically infeasible to do so [41], suggesting that perhaps the purity nature might be seen to be proportional to the degree of distance a politically empowered class is able to assert between its material source of wealth and an agrarian way of life. As much of the economic output of the South was still generated by the production and export of cotton and a handful of other goods by unpaid (and, later, barely paid) labor [30], not only was their environmental imaginary instrumental in its constitution, but the players of that instrument had to be understood as their categorical inferiors for the enforced hierarchy to retain its legitimacy. Thus, characterizations of Nature in the antebellum South were often more in line with the environmental imaginaries of European colonialism [34].

As was briefly mentioned in an earlier section, to the degree that they occurred in European colonies, attempts at conservation were undertaken largely when the perceived legitimacy or effectiveness of continued extraction of resources or flow of trade came under threat [51]. For the most part, conservation policy was regarded as the province of the state, as colonial holdings were essential for a nation's security; policy decisions thus tended to be technocratic in character and not widely publicized or discussed [34]. Perhaps the first prominent instance of this moderating pressure came near the end of the 19th century, when the slaughter of Indonesian birds of paradise became so egregious as to arouse condemnation, even in the European markets where high premiums were paid for fashions that incorporated exotic feathers [76]. Such measures, however, were often relatively constrained [34]. Outside of the economically necessary and the occasionally

alarming, the moral view of nature as something worth preserving rather than pillaging was generally applicable not within their mines or upon their plantations, but domestically. Even then, the ideological justifications for conservation were adopted primarily when it facilitated the necessary establishment of nature as an exclusively white, bourgeois space.

The variation in patterns that existed between distinct modes of production (industrial, agrarian), forms of social control (slavery, serfdom, non-union wage labor), and understandings of nature (separate from society, a part of society, a source of value, valuable in itself) again serve to underscore the centrality of material wealth in the construction of nature and its accompanying meaning. In every instance, as location and geography shift, and as the interests of the politically empowered diverge, the demands acting upon our understanding of nature change with them. Must nature be used to justify the isolation of the privileged, or simply their control over the subjugated? Regardless of which of these demands were met, few if any of the sociocultural factors instrumental in the development of the conservation movement can be disentangled from the virulently classist form of white supremacy that undergirded much of the era's political sensibilities in the Anglophone world [50], [66].

PART FOUR
THE MODERN IMAGINARY

On the occasions that I have asked colleagues about the moral basis for their investment in their discipline and environmentalist causes, their responses consistently fit within the above tradition, though often without their appreciation. I have been told that overpopulation is a significant problem for conservation — which is to say, I have been told that Asian and African population growth is something environmentally minded individuals should be deeply concerned about, though the practical implications of such concern remain implicit. I have been told that nature needs protecting from human civilization, as though the two are, and ought to be, distinct, for every civilization. I have had nature explained to me, time and again, and it has always been the nature of the wealthy and the white. In our discipline, there is no other nature.

Any interest in diversifying EEB and environmental organizations needs to account for this, or it is doomed from the start. People of color do not tend to pursue careers in our field and are often visibly absent from environmentalist causes despite our acute vulnerability to, for instance, the effects of climate change and the environmental deterioration of urban centers [6], [10], because we often feel as though we are trespassing. Intentionally or otherwise, we are *made* to feel as though we are trespassing.

Consider who we picture when we think of activities like hiking, camping, and kayaking. Who feels at home in nature? To whom are the great outdoors sold? Whose land and neighborhoods must be traversed to reach them? Whose purposes do they bend to? There are stark differences in preference for outdoor leisure activities among people of color [2], sometimes based on perceived safety [64], and often not simply because of lack of access to local outdoor environments, but because of lack of access to *well-maintained* outdoor environments [32]. The National Park Service has similarly reported that demographic usage of national parks is disproportionately white [62]. When agencies consider

whether to prioritize recreation or conservation in the development and maintenance of outdoor spaces, race is one of the most significant indicators in determining which use-case a person supports [57]; how do power differentials across racial coalitions, as well as the makeup of agency staffs, influence agency responses and policies?

More broadly, these differing patterns of behavior and preference evoke a distinct environmental imaginary — one informed by a brutal marriage to unknown ecosystems; generations of forced labor and lifelong bondage to land owned by others; meager, grudging compensation; the eventual, often illusory opportunity to own land that had, in truth, been theirs for centuries; and, at last, mass flight from that very land, driven by the promise of subjugation and racial terrorism. The soil may be the same, but the land has come to mean something very different. Within the fields and politics and movements that concern themselves with this land, however, our experience of it is, at best, marginal [25]; nature is not allowed to belong to us. Contrary to conservationist rhetoric, however, it does not belong to everybody, and it certainly does not belong to *nobody*.

I do not pretend that the above account is without valid contention. However, I do not believe it to be so baseless as to be immediately dismissible, and that is the implication of the near complete avoidance of the relevance of white supremacy in conservation circles and among university faculties, outside of token condemnations. It is, for those of us who live under it, a noisy silence. This is a subject that bears discussion, and not simply in the abstract. It is not enough to acknowledge that it should be considered and addressed by somebody, somewhere — it must be acted upon by us, whoever and wherever we are. This injustice may not have begun in our lifetimes, but it nevertheless continues to have very real effects on the lives of many Black people, as well as their understandings of their place in academia and environmentalist movements. I look at the graduate student roster in my department, and I see only one African American man — myself. Having similarly looked at the rosters of EEB departments in many other universities, I am not

alone in being alone. None of us are. If nothing else, I argue this: whatever we are doing, it has not worked.

PART FIVE
POSSIBILITIES FOR CHANGE

The introspection I am advocating for within EEB is already beginning to occur [16], [44], but it lacks a full understanding of the field, the history of conservation, and the relationship both have to white supremacy. Without beginning our examination at precisely the point at which those three factors converge, any efforts to reform and diversify our field will first reaffirm the white colonization of Nature, thus undermining their own purpose. There needs to be more room made for, and emphasis placed upon, a consideration of the precise societal context that biological research occurs within. This cannot simply be a passing acknowledgement that many of the researchers associated with the modern synthesis were vocal eugenicists [46], [76], [81], but why that was the case, and what it meant for those around them — those they learned from, and those they taught. These are perspectives that the humanities and other disciplines have explored, in great detail, for decades [1], [7], [8], [12], [19], [27], [43]; it is time to listen to them, and to allow for a more collaborative effort at historical revisionism.

Once we acknowledge that the nature we see around us is, in some sense, one we have built for ourselves, the onus falls upon us to ask why we have built only one. As I have argued, the nature we have seen to conserve is not apolitical or acultural; it is an environment laden with values. What communities and perspectives might we enfranchise if we were more willing to entertain a pluralistic understanding of nature, if we were willing to embrace the idea that for the escaped slave and the men who hunted him, the same forest could contain two very different natures?

Latinx artists and writers have been actively producing work interested in decolonizing environmental imaginaries for decades [73], but their representation in EEB and even in conservation movements is historically low [67]. North American indigenous cultures have similarly spent years actively resisting assimilation, and many different Native

American cultures maintain strong and diverse connections to their historic relationships to the natural environment, as have the African diaspora [24]; unfortunately, these are often regarded as valuable to mainstream perspectives primarily for their novelty as spiritual practices [4]. However, connections between spiritual practice and environmental imaginary are understandable, and the involvement of the former should not rule the latter out of consideration in academic and conservation contexts. Spiritual regimes can help to establish values, relationships, meaning — these may or may not be necessary for science, but they can certainly guide how we use science to interact with the world around us.

Environmental studies scholars are present throughout academia, approaching the subject from a variety of intersectional perspectives. Conservation movements rarely recruit from them, however [67], and anecdotally, I have encountered relatively few collaborations between EEB departments and departments in which environmental studies scholars would be based. Here again, we encounter the problem of coordination; both of these bodies of research exist, but points of interaction are rare. In my time as a graduate student, I attempted to coordinate a cross-listed course between the EEB and Africana Studies department that would explore relationships to nature in the Black community. This course never came to fruition, largely for reasons relating to changes in the administration of the Africana Studies department, but I do not believe that such cross-listed courses are in principle impossible or even necessarily prohibitively impractical. These are minor steps, but they are interventions we can perform into students' educations that may shape their career trajectories and exposure to ideas relating to those careers.

In more practical terms, access to outdoor spaces is constrained by a number of factors, ranging from, as was mentioned in an earlier section, poor maintenance of local parks to a simple lack of transportation options from communities to non-local park systems and outdoor spaces. Further problems arise when one considers the often high cost of outdoor

equipment, and the lack of accessibility options for people with disabilities. There are, however, a range of organizations attempting to combat each of these hurdles, and university outreach programs need to interact more directly with organizations whose goals align with institutional diversity initiatives. These programs are often self-funded and coordination and mutual support would not necessarily be financially intensive for either party.

A handful of organizations offer training, access to gear libraries that allow for access to outdoor activities independently of income level, or both (Outdoors Empowered Network and Bay Area Wilderness Training are two prominent examples [55], [69]), in addition to holding regular events in which those interested can enroll to experience the outdoors in groups. Melanin Basecamp holds events, though does not offer access to a gear library, but provides extensive coordination, information sharing, and blogging opportunities, the goal of which is, in addition to organizing outdoors events, increase visibility and social media presence and, by extension, shift cultural perceptions of who "belongs" outdoors [48].

Melanin Basecamp is an inclusive organization that incorporates various ethnic minorities and the LGBTQ+ community, but similar organizations exist for narrower purposes. Latino Outdoors performs similar work in the Latinx community [42], as does Native Women's Wilderness and Black Girls Trekkin for indigenous and black women, respectively [9], [52]. Get Out Stay Out fills an analogous purpose, but for indigenous migrant children [31]; this last group in particular is noteworthy, as it again underscores the importance of sensitivity to context. Indigenous migrant groups are often used as underpaid seasonal labor, and the social meaning of spending one's leisure time outdoors might feasibly differ considerably between migrants and another group; perhaps correspondingly, Get Out Stay Out's website is uncommonly explicit in stating they provide "culturally sensitive" outdoor programming. Disabled Hikers not only organize meetups and activi-

ties, but members routinely scout and evaluate the accessibility of trails for various types of disabilities [18]. Both the Washington Trail Association and Adaptive Adventures provide similar services [38], [59].

Other organizations include Fat Girls Hiking, who organize and support hiking groups between women of various body types [50], and Outdoor Asian [54], who focus on organizing AAPI people. The Venture Out Project provides outdoor support for trans and queer people, and the LGBTQ+ community as a whole, which includes not only hikes and overnight activities, but, uncommonly, sensitivity training to summer camps and other outdoor organizations as well [75]. Unlikely Hikers is a larger organization that functionally includes all groups already mentioned, as well as explicitly including the neurodivergent [71]. People for Mobility Justice is not an explicitly outdoors group, but focuses on access to transportation in BIPOC communities [58], and in so doing addressing one of the principal difficulties in diversifying outdoor spaces. Their approach is, by comparison to other groups, more actively engaged in the political process, with particular attention given to policy surrounding sustainable transportation infrastructure.

In sum, there exist diversity-oriented outdoors groups for a number of major axes of marginalized identity in the U.S., though in practice these groups vary in size and reach, with a substantial number of them falling on the west coast (this may be reasonable, given that interest in outdoor activities can be assumed to vary, to some degree, with local geography). Relatively few are vocally critical of mainstream understandings of nature, but all of them actively seek to relitigate who belongs in, or is perceived to belong in, nature. Insofar as this is true, their success creates the potential for the ingress of new ideas and perspectives into conventionally white environments. The grassroots, unaffiliated status of a majority of these groups suggests that it is taken as a given that this type of organization should occur at the community level, and while this may be sufficient in population dense areas or environmentally vibrant regions, the difficulty that EEB departments have

in recruiting students from diverse backgrounds could be ameliorated if inroads to more diverse communities of youth interested in outdoor environments could be cultivated before the college or graduate school application process.

This lack of collaboration is not a problem unique to academia. Even large conservation organizations almost universally avoid collaboration with other organizations based around underrepresented groups [67]. Although a handful of organizations exist to mediate between the two — Greening Youth Foundation exists to recruit BIPOC youth into careers and conservation [70], and Environmental Learning for Kids (ELK) organizes outdoor, hands-on activities intended to familiarize children with limited access and resources with the outdoors and various related skills [21] — their scope is narrow (ELK operates exclusively in Colorado), and their track record is, according to a survey of conservation organizations as recent as 2014, mixed [67].

Conservation organizations must actively recruit from underrepresented demographics if they are genuinely interested in expanded their membership and leadership beyond white men and, increasingly, white women. This could entail more rigorous outreach in certain communities, or a more active engagement with environmental studies scholars and students, but in either instance, what *must* occur is a deeper level of interaction between organizations. Large organizations often reference diversity initiatives, changes in hiring practices, and other steps to diversify their employment. These are valid steps, but no organization needs to reinvent the wheel. There already exists a deep vein of community-run groups whose function is to expose their members to the outdoors, new environments, environmental justice causes, and more. The absence of diversity is commonly described as a problem of pipelines. The role of conservation groups now is to understand that many underrepresented groups have begun to build their own pipelines; they only need access.

PART SIX

CONCLUSION

Though I have argued that material conditions inform the discursive character of our environmental imaginary — of nature — this process is by no means mechanistic. What history has illustrated is that nature is, for us, malleable. It changes form and meaning as the social conditions that define it change. We have inherited a conception of the environment from societies whose primary political concerns were the establishment, maintenance, and justification of rigid hierarchies, and the makeup of our organizations broadly reflects these priorities, but they do not have to be our own.

For as long as nature has existed, there has been dissent around what it is. I advocate not for a new consensus, as any such consensus will be reached through isolation and suppression. Rather, a potential way forward lies in a comfort with vocal plurality. Our experiences of our natural environments are necessarily diverse, and a truer representation of those experiences will be commensurately discordant. If this diversity is a material goal rather than a rhetorical one, the first step is a ceding of cultural ownership and a form of outreach that does not seek only to teach about nature, but to learn about it from those we are reaching for as well.

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VITA

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