

“THERE’S NOT MANY TIMES WHERE PEOPLE ASK FOR YOUR STORY”:  
TOWARD A MORE COMPLETE NARRATIVE REFLECTING  
EXPERIENCES OF ENVIRONMENTAL  
PROFESSIONALS OF COLOR

by

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## **DEDICATION**

To Duval, Penelope, and Seneca

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	xi
ABSTRACT.....	xii
 CHAPTERS	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Problem Statement.....	2
The Making of a Dominant Environmental Narrative.....	8
Purpose and Research Questions .....	13
Study Significance .....	14
Definitions .....	16
Chapter Summary .....	17
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	18
Race, Racism, and Critical Race Theory.....	19
What is Race? .....	19
Racism Theory, Social Racialization, and Microaggressions .....	21
Critical Race Theory .....	24
White Innocence: Race, Nature, Space .....	30
Retelling the Story.....	33
A Brief Black and Brown Environmental History .....	33
Environmental Justice Scholarship.....	36
Environmental Jobs, Workforce, and Diversity Demographics .....	38
Narrative Omissions in Environmental Scholarship .....	42
Understanding Representation in Environmental Careers.....	45
Career Scholarship, Personal Agency, and People of Color.....	47
Social Cognitive Career Theory and Environmental Diversity Research.....	47
Beyond the Pipeline: Career Advancement .....	50
Chapter Summary .....	52

III. RESEARCH METHODS.....	54
Critical Race Theory and Narrative Research.....	54
Sampling Plan.....	57
Institutional Review Board Approval.....	58
Beta-Testing.....	59
Site Selection .....	60
Data Collection Summary .....	61
Participant Selection .....	62
Positionality and Ethics .....	66
Data Collection - Interviews .....	69
Member Check.....	72
Data Analysis.....	72
Counterstories and Themes .....	74
Chapter Summary .....	74
IV. COUNTERSTORIES .....	75
Early Career Professional Counterstories .....	77
Athena Baker.....	77
Cyrus Carter.....	81
Dahlia Chiba.....	84
Grace Chen.....	88
Natalia Diaz.....	92
Nina Espinoza.....	96
Pilar Castillo.....	99
Tessa Chung .....	102
Trinity Anderson.....	106
Mid-Career Professional Counterstories .....	110
Aaliyah Johnson .....	111
Breonna Harris .....	114
Audre Howard .....	118
Daniel Gonzalez.....	122
Esme Ho.....	126
Fiona Huang.....	130
Lianni Joshi.....	134
Reina Gomez.....	138
Soledad Iglesias .....	141
Veronica Feng.....	145
Upper Management Professionals Counterstories .....	149
Aaron King.....	149
Greg Kim.....	153



Zaynab Marashi.....	157
Lakshmi Kumar .....	160
Porfirio Martinez.....	164
Paloma Lara.....	168
Leadership Professionals Counterstories .....	173
Bob Wagner.....	173
Frank Sato.....	177
Nohemi Pacheco.....	181
Noelia Torres.....	185
Nico Perez .....	189
Kamala Singh.....	193
Paz Velasquez.....	197

## V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION.....202

Theme 1: Microaggressions (a.k.a. The microaggressions and the unconscious bias is just astounding!).....	204
Tokenism.....	206
Othering.....	208
Questioning Expertise .....	209
Being Silenced .....	211
Theme 2: This is (not a) Meritocracy (a.k.a. That is the kind of shit that people would say to me).....	212
Being Undervalued.....	213
White Champions .....	215
DEI (Wolf in Sheep's Clothing) .....	218
Theme 3: Whose Environmentalism? (a.k.a who cannot be interested in that?) .....	221
Hold Your Pearls - People of Color are (shockingly!) Not All the Same.....	222
People of Color Have Unique Connections to Nature and the Environment .....	223
People of Color Give Nature Meaning.....	225
People Ruin Everything, But Some Might Hold the Solutions.....	226
Theme 4: Race plus Gender (a.k.a. when we are in the same room with men, and particularly White men, they sort of are immediately seen as experts).....	229
Theme 5: Emotional Burdens (a.k.a. I was kind of, like, suffering in silence).....	232
Theme 6: Courage and Resilience (a.k.a. as long as you are comfortable in who you are, people can't knock you off your feet).....	234
Theme 7: Connecting to Nature and People (a.k.a. a mix of	

community and things that ground me).....	237
Theme 8: Playing the Game (a.k.a. becoming shrewd enough to know what’s happening) .....	240
Chapter Summary .....	243
VI. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS.....	244
Reflections .....	244
Research Summary and Conclusion .....	247
Implications: “you have to do your own homework.” .....	251
Last Thoughts.....	254
APPENDIX SECTION .....	255
LITERATURE CITED .....	262

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Data Collection and Analysis Timeline.....	61
2. The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment Outreach for Study Participation .....	62
3. Participant demographics.....	65
4. Early Career Professionals .....	77
5. Mid- Career Professionals.....	110
6. Upper Career Professionals .....	149
7. Leadership Career Professionals.....	173

## **ABSTRACT**

Whiteness is central to power in the United States. Racial hegemony was fundamental to the country's nation-building and the backbone for the nation's nature-building. White upper-class urban men nurtured concepts of nature and race to create a dominant storyline steeped in racial stereotypes that permeated the American conservation movement and modern environmentalism. The narrative helped White people justify their social hierarchies, expulsions, enslavements, internments, segregations, and exclusions of people of color from nature. The narrative catalyzed notions of people of color's intrinsic lack of interest—and therefore lack of belonging—in nature, ignoring people of color's histories of participation and unique relationships to nature and the environment. The dominant narrative reinforced and was reinforced by racialized institutional structures to exclude people of color from environmental decision-making, even defining the meaning of environmental jobs. White spaces, institutions, and narratives have had enduring repercussions for people of color's sense of place in the outdoors manifested through traditional environmental workforce recruitment and retention practices and workforce demographics.

Using a critical race theory lens, this qualitative research study cultivates a deeper understanding of the personal and professional experiences of 32 people of color who work or have worked in the environmental field. Through counterstorytelling, this study also uncovers the impacts of structural barriers on people of color professionally in an arc from early career, mid-career, upper management, to leadership positions. The understandings

gained from the counterstories told from the perspective of the people most affected by racism challenge dominant narratives about how and how much people of color value nature or the environment. The counterstories reveal that systemic barriers to equity, inclusion, and belonging in the environmental field were often the result of institutionalized racism or racism amplified by sexism. The findings highlight participants' strength, courage, and resilience in the face of the systemic barriers they directly experienced or witnessed, revealing how environmental professionals of color fight against racialized institutional barriers, subvert institutional forces working against them, persevere, and find relative success and peace working in the environmental field. The findings also provide insights into why environmental professionals of color leave environmental jobs or the environmental field altogether.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Christian Cooper grew up in Long Island, New York. As a child, he connected to nature through birdwatching, a hobby influenced by his schoolteacher parents and one that he continued to enjoy throughout his life — ultimately becoming a voluntary board member of New York City Audubon (Betancourt 2020; Nir 2020). On the morning of 5 May 2020, the same day that police arrested and killed George Floyd, Mr. Cooper went birdwatching in Central Park as he often did. During his walk, he came upon a White woman whose dog was off-leash against park rules. Mr. Cooper asked the woman to leash her dog, which she refused to do multiple times. He decided to record the encounter, which at the time he thought “was just a conflict between a dog-walker and a birder” (CBS 2020). That pivotal decision would eventually throw into sharp relief the role that race and ethnicity (race/ethnicity) play in American society and in people’s sense of place in nature and the environment. Once Mr. Cooper began recording the woman on his phone, she became agitated and threatened to make a false claim to the police that “there’s an *African American* man that is threatening my life [emphasis added]” (Nir 2020). She later carried out her threat.

In an interview the following month, Mr. Cooper recalled “[s]he basically ... pulled the pin on the race grenade and tried to lob it at me,” and that “[s]he was going to tap into a deep, deep dark vein of racism, of racial bias that runs through this country ... and has for centuries” (CBS 2020). While Christian Cooper’s video caught national attention, his experience was not unique (McKittrick and Woods 2007; Alkon 2012; Finney 2014a; Lanham 2016, Lanham 2017). Intentionally or not, the woman in Mr. Cooper’s story exploited racial constructs, weaponized her victimhood to manipulate deep-seated racism, and tapped into entrenched notions of power (whiteness) in space, nature, and the environment (Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003; Brahinsky, Sasser, and Minkoff-Zern 2014).

In the chapters that follow, I present the results of my research in which I sought to uncover how race, space, nature, and racialized power structures manifest within environmental organizations through the narratives of people of color who work or have worked in the environmental field. Using a critical race theory (CRT) lens, I examined the dominant narratives that have defined the American conservation movement and modern-day environmentalism — and have been used to enforce and reinforce power within White institutions. Finally, I sought to use this dissertation as a platform to facilitate sharing the stories and elevate the voices of environmental professionals of color within the framework of academic research.

### **Problem Statement**

Whiteness is central to power and privilege in American society (DiAngelo 2006; McKittrick 2011; Finney 2014a; Zimring 2017; DiAngelo 2018) where racism and racial hegemony were fundamental to nation-building and served as cornerstones for the American conservation and environmental movements (Merchant 2003; Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003; Blank, Dabady, and Citro 2004; Kosek 2006; Glave 2010; Finney 2014a; Harvey 2016; Taylor 2016; Zimring 2017). According to Cronon (1996) and Taylor (2016), the White affluent men who led the conservation movement wielded their concept of wilderness to control, displace, and exclude people of color from nature. However, the dominant nation-building story has veiled this racialized history even when confronted with frequent contemporary racist acts similar to the one Mr. Cooper experienced (Mock 2020). The dominant narratives have contributed to ensuring that White decisionmakers controlled the creation, and administration, of institutions (Crenshaw et al. 1995) that mold how Americans define, interact with, and perceive their sense of place in nature and the environment today (Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003; Finney 2014a; Brahinsky, Sasser, and Minkoff-Zern

2014). The inextricable relationship between the nation's racialized history and the institutions that govern nature and the environment not only manifests in the demographic differences of how people interact with nature and the environment (Finney 2014a; Pearson et al. 2018), but also surfaces in demographic representation within the environmental organizations themselves (Finney 2014a; Taylor 2014; Taylor 2016).

In a groundbreaking study in 2014, environmental sociologist Dorceta Taylor found that professionals of color made up between 12 and 16 percent of the traditional nature-based environmental workforce, and did not reflect the racial/ethnic demographics of the American population (Taylor 2014; Colby and Ortman 2015). The relative lack of diversity within traditional environmental organizations had been a subject of criticism since at least the 1980s (Bullard 1993a,b; Davis et al. 2002; Taylor 2014; Finney 2014a; Haynes and Jacobson 2015; Beasley 2016; Beasley 2017; Green 2.0 2017, Green 2.0 2018a,b, Green 2.0 2019; Johnson 2019; Taylor, Paul, and McCoy 2019). In the years following Taylor's study, environmental organizations were under mounting pressure to diversify their workforces (Green 2.0 2019) and acknowledge the racism inherent within the environmental field (Finney 2014a; Purdy 2015; Taylor 2016). Some traditional environmental nonprofit and philanthropic organizations began to heed the increasing demands to diversify, resulting in an upward trend in racial/ethnic workforce diversity between 2017 and 2019 (Green 2.0 2019). However, it was not until Mr. Cooper's video went viral shortly after the videos of the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man who was murdered while jogging, and George Floyd, who was choked to death by police, went viral (Burnes 2020; Levenson 2020) that traditional environmental organizations began to publicly acknowledge their organizations' racist origins (Degnarian 2020; Fears and Mufson 2020; Nobles 2020; Tompkins 2020; Tyson 2020).



The response to Mr. Cooper's video was swift. An online group of Black scientists (#BlackAFinSTEM) "identified with the pressures of being Black and carrying out our field tasks in a world that marginalized minorities" (Sheriden Alford in Kutz 2020). Members also became concerned that what had happened to Mr. Cooper would deter Black people from pursuing their interests in natural science or conservation (Mock 2020). Consequently the group organized the first #BlackBirdersWeek to elevate Black birders and normalize Black conservationists and naturalists ( Calma 2020; Kutz 2020; Langin 2020). The online campaign coincided with nation-wide protests calling for social justice (e.g. Black Lives Matters) following the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless other Black and Brown people (Calma 2020; Kutz 2020; Smith 2020). Anna Gifty Opoku-Agyeman put the campaign into the broader social justice context when she wrote, "Black Birders Week is protesting for the existence of Black people in the natural space, in the birder space, in the explorer space. The protests happening across the country are broader than that. It's arguing for the existence of Black people in space, period"(Calma 2020). Tying the campaign to its own institutional practices and recognizing the underrepresentation of people of color in the environmental field, the National Wildlife Federation announced that because of Black Birder's week, they would expand their "Conservation Fellowship & Internship Programs to create opportunities dedicated for young biologists of color (students & recent grads) to help more #BlackBirders launch careers in conservation" (@NWF, Twitter, 6 June 2020).

There is little doubt that a fully integrated, inclusive, and demographically diverse workforce provides myriad benefits to private, governmental, and nonprofit organizations alike (Beasley 2017; Smith-Doer, Alegria, and Sacco 2017), including traditional environmental organizations (Beasley 2017; Johnson 2019). A diverse workforce leads to

increased creativity and innovation, problem-solving skills, intellectual engagement, and motivation (Sugrue et al. 1999; Gurin et al. 2002; Gurin et al. 2003; Antonio et al. 2004; Roberge and van Dick 2010; Pew Research Center 2018). Organizations with racially/ethnically diverse leadership improve organizational performance (Beasley 2016), have employees who more frequently act against racial/ethnic bias (Gelfand et al. 2013), and have employees of color who advance more quickly among their ranks than organizations that lack diversity (Dobbin and Kalev 2007). In the environmental field, many leaders have also acknowledged that increased diversity would improve their organizations' interests and effectiveness by improving creativity, strengthening ties to the community they serve, enhancing management-employee relations (Beasley 2017), increasing membership, and enhance fundraising (Johnson 2019).

As evidenced by the National Wildlife Federation's statement after Black Birders Week, many prominent environmental organizations publicly expressed an interest in increasing their racial/ethnic diversity for decades. However, in 2008 nearly 30 percent of traditional environmental organizations had no people of color on staff and nearly 30 percent of the organizations had not hired people of color in the previous three years (Taylor 2008). By 2014, professionals of color made up 12.8 percent of new hires (Taylor 2014). It is not surprising, then, that the environmental workforce diversity statistics Taylor found in her study were so low. Beyond the general workforce, Taylor also found that most professionals of color working in traditional environmental organizations were not in the top leadership positions — fully 97 percent of executive directors, presidents, and vice presidents were White (Taylor 2014). Environmental workforce demographics did not reflect the racial/ethnic demographics of the American population, 40 percent of which were people of color at the time (Colby and Ortman 2015). The environmental workforce

demographics also lagged behind other science, technology, mathematics, and engineering fields, particularly with respect to representation of Black and Latinos/as (Pew Research Center 2018). Despite an upward racial/ethnic workforce diversity trend since 2014 among organizations voluntarily reporting demographic data (Taylor 2018; Green 2.0 2019), how — and whether — environmental organizations continue to diversify is particularly urgent considering the U.S. Census projections estimating that by 2045 more than half of the U.S. population will be people of color (Taylor 2014; Beasley 2016; Frey 2018; Bonta 2019).

While the lack of representation in traditional environmental organizations is clear, what needs further exploration is understanding the lived experiences of people of color who have already chosen an environmental job and the barriers they face in achieving equity (Bonta 2019; Tyson 2020). The need for this collective understanding became starkly apparent in the summer of 2020 when Ruth Tyson’s open letter *An Open Letter to the Union of Concerned Scientists: On Black Death, Black Silencing, and Black Fugitivity* sent shock waves within the environmental community and provided a window into her experiences working in a traditional, White environmental organization (Degnarian 2020; Jacobs 2020; Mazur 2020; Fears and Mufson 2020; Tyson 2020; Wernick 2020). Through her storytelling, Ms. Tyson shared her interests in community gardening and food systems that led her to accept a position working for the Union of Concerned Scientists and the fundamental role that institutional racism and race/ethnicity played in her departure from the organization.

Ms. Tyson’s accounting countered the organization’s publicly stated values (Union of Concerned Scientists 2020) although she initially believed that the organization shared her own values of improving community and environmental justice (Tyson 2020). She described quickly becoming disillusioned with the organization’s values. She explained the challenges she encountered navigating the White organizational culture — one in which employees of

color, particularly Black women like herself, endured microaggressions that “felt more like dodging the devil than the mosquito bites described in our racial equity training,” (Tyson 2020, 8) and one in which she felt alone.

“I tried to bring life. I tried to bring spirit. But it almost always just felt like death. I was drowned in the loneliness of my sterile, box office.”

—Tyson 2020, 8

Ms. Tyson described feeling tokenized and used to advance the organization’s diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals. For example, she shared that not only did she have to do all of her work, she also had to be “the voice of Blackness in every room” (Tyson 2020, 7). She was put on all the racial equity task forces, she had to help her team make decisions on equity, she was not adequately supported, and she was not compensated. She soon realized that the organization had not made the “infrastructural, cultural, and procedural changes to prioritize and accommodate the POC [people of color] people nor the actual work of racial equity” (Tyson 2020, 11). As a result of the workplace dynamics, Ms. Tyson wrote about how her work and health suffered. She ultimately chose to leave the organization once she acknowledged her “exhaustion with whiteness, with [W]hite institutions, with being the only one in the room to have to really think about it. To really feel it” (Tyson 2020, 14).

## **The Making of a Dominant Environmental Narrative**

Mr. Cooper's encounter with racism in nature and Ms. Tyson's experience with institutionalized racism in the environmental field are not new phenomena considering that race, racism, and nature are woven into the fabric of our nation's history (Merchant 2003; Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003; Finney 2014a; Harvey 2016; Taylor 2016; Zimring 2017). However, the dominant environmental narrative has whitewashed people of color's history, has absolved the White dominant culture from responsibility (Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003; Taylor 2016; Zimring 2017), has perpetuated and reinforced a false narrative that people of color intrinsically lacked an interest and do not belong in nature and the outdoors (Taylor 2007; Taylor 2008; Taylor 2011b; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2014), and has resulted in the relative racial/ethnic homogeneity of the environmental field (Taylor 2014; Bonta 2019; Green 2.0 2019; Johnson 2019).

Environmental decision-makers, organizational workforces, and memberships have historically been dominated by affluent White men and, to a lesser extent, affluent White women (Bullard 1993a,b; Kosek 2006; Taylor 2008; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2016). Thus the prevailing understanding of the American conservation movement and environmentalism marginalizes and often omits people of color's histories and visibility and envisions a movement created by White for White people (Glave 2010; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2016). White hegemony had severe consequences for people of color and their relationships with the environment over time — starting with the forcible removal and displacement of Indigenous/Native Americans from their ancestral lands to make way for White ownership and national parks, enslavement of Africans and their descendants to provide White American landowners free agricultural labor, Jim Crow era racial/ethnic segregation to safeguard White dominance, lynching to instill White domestic terror, the internment of

Asian Americans during World War II to assuage White fear, the post-racial colorblindness and meritocracy to ignore White people's power and privilege, immigration and customs enforcement to fortify White control, and the myriad institutional practices that have had lasting legacies on how people of color interact with the outdoors and perceive their sense of place in the outdoors (Merchant 2003; Moore, Kosek, and Panadian 2003; McKittrick 2011; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2016; Zimring 2017). Contrary to the dominant narrative, the Civil Rights Act and the post-racial era did not end racism in the environment field — the same people who administered policies of segregation and racial/ethnic domination remained as the decision makers and as leaders of institutions, including environmental institutions (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Higginbotham 2013; Bonilla-Silva 2015; Parker 2015; Taylor 2016). Brahinsky, Sasser, and Minkoff-Zern (2014, 1143) observed that spaces, whether neighborhoods, parks, forests, or fields, continue to be “racially coded based on notions of environmental privilege” — where those who have power, principally wealthy White people, define desirable or undesirable spaces and control access to those spaces. The result is that wealthy White people and communities with environmental privilege enjoy the benefits of the environment, while poor people and communities of color carry the burden of environmental injustices and racism (Brahinsky, Sasser, and Minkoff-Zern 2014).

The dominant environmental discourse was reinforced through associated academic research, which largely ignored people of color's participation in the environment or treated people of color's environmental activities as separate from traditional environmentalism (Glave 2010; Finney 2014a; Taylor, 2014). In fact, there is a long history of people of color's role in the environment and in environmental activism — from Booker T. Washington's establishment of the Tuskegee Institute in 1881 devoted to training Black teachers, including agricultural practices, to the sanitation workers' strike in Memphis in 1968, to activism

around more contemporary environmental challenges such as severe lead contamination in Flint Michigan's drinking water, and to the Dakota Access Pipeline potential impacts on Standing Rock Sioux reservation's drinking water (Bullard 1993a,b; Merchant 2003; Taylor 2008; Glave 2010; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2014; Parker 2015; Taylor 2016).

Most early research from the 1980s concerning relationships with the environment focused on reporting how people of color participated in the outdoors, understood traditional environmental issues, or were concerned with the environment. However, much of that early research narrowly defined environmental activities to activities such as hiking in the wilderness — without historical and cultural contexts — and omitted research on engagement in local environmental concerns and environmental activism altogether (Taylor 2008; Taylor 2011b; Taylor 2014). Many of these early studies concluded that people of color were more concerned with meeting basic needs than with environmental issues (Taylor 2008; Taylor 2011c; Taylor 2014). These research omissions helped portray White people as being more concerned about the environment than people of color, a stereotype that persists to this day (Glave 2010; Finney 2014; Taylor 2014; Pearson et al. 2018).

Since the 1980s, a handful of researchers began critically examining the dominant narrative surrounding people of color's lack of interest in the environment that had been adopted by the public, institutions, and confirmed by earlier studies (Taylor 2007; Lee 2008; Taylor 2008; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2014). This body of literature revealed that people of color are just as likely and, in some cases, more likely than White people to be concerned about the environment and the environment's impact on people (Taylor 1989; Parker and McDonough 1999; Jones 2002; Jones, Castellanos, and Cole 2002; Taylor 2002; Mohai 2003; Adeola 2004; Whittaker, Segura, and Bowler 2005; Jones and Rainey 2006; Taylor 2007; Taylor 2008; Mora-Trejos 2015; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2014).

With respect to the environmental workforce, researchers initially concentrated on quantifying diversity and the underrepresentation of people of color in environmental careers (Taylor 2007; Taylor 2008; Taylor 2011b; Taylor 2011c; Taylor 2014; Balcarczyk et al. 2015; Haynes and Jacobson 2015; Taylor 2015; Beasley 2016). Later, researchers began focusing on understanding the barriers to entry into environmental careers among people of color (Quimby, Wolfson, and Seyala 2007; Taylor 2008; Taylor 2011b; Balcarczyk et al. 2015; Haynes and Jacobson 2015; Haynes, Jacobson, and Wald 2015; Beasley 2016; Taylor 2016; Beasley 2017). Taken together, a disconnect emerged between the number of qualified people of color, the perceptions of opportunities and barriers in environmental careers, and the recruitment, retention, and career advancement practices of environmental organizations (Taylor 2011b,c; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2014; Haynes and Jacobson 2015; Beasley 2016; Taylor 2018).

Despite academic findings to the contrary, as of 2018 most Americans tended to misperceive that people of color and of low-income were not as concerned about the environment as White or affluent people (Pearson et al. 2018). The stereotype that people of color were unconcerned with the environment was influenced by a lack of representation of people of color in nature or the outdoors in social and traditional media (Finney 2014a, Pearson et al. 2018). The stereotype was reinforced by racist depictions, particularly of Black people as animalistic or posing a threat to White people in nature (Finney 2014a). The stereotypes that form part of the dominant narrative have posed a significant barrier for people of color to engage in environmental initiatives (Pearson et al. 2018) and traditional environmental activities (Finney 2020).

Racialized notions of nature permeating the dominant narrative coupled with the disenfranchisement of people of color in decision-making have also had enduring effects on



environmental workforce recruitment and retention practices (Bullard 1993a,b; Taylor 2007; Taylor 2008; Taylor 2011b; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2014). Environmental organizations have taken piecemeal approaches to increasing workforce diversity since the 1960s — where increasing representation was often the only goal and racial/ethnic inclusion and belonging were (intentionally or unintentionally) undervalued and underfunded (Beasley 2017; Bonta 2019). Demographic studies of environmental organizations and their volunteers in the 1960s and 1970s revealed that White, middle to upper class, educated men made up the vast majority of the environmental workforce (Taylor 2014). Acknowledging the non-representational makeup of the environmental workforce and bolstered by the Civil Rights Movement, environmental organizations such as the National Parks Service and Sierra Club initiated diversity programs dating as far back as the 1960s. Those efforts, however, helped gender diversity in terms of the representation of White women, who as of 2014, made up over half of the environmental workforce and leadership but did not meaningfully help racial/ethnic diversity (Taylor 2014).

If traditional environmental leaders and professionals continue to reinforce the dominant narrative by ignoring the interlaced relationship between race/ethnicity and nature and the environment in pursuit of quick fixes to the “diversity problem” and continue to marginalize people of color’s environmental interests and concerns, their missions will become irrelevant to the majority of the population, environmental challenges like climate change will not be adequately addressed, and environmental inequities will continue to be disproportionately shouldered by people of color (Taylor 2011a; Taylor 2014; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2016; Pearson et al. 2018; Colman 2020). In contrast, by embracing racial/ethnic equity environmental leaders can advance their organizational missions and seek justice for the racism upon which American environmentalism was founded. If environmental leaders

are truly committed to racial justice as many stated in 2020, they will have to accept that the dominant narrative is incomplete at best. They will have to accept and fight against the prominent role that racism and other forms of subordination currently plays in the environmental field. They will have to recognize and fight against the institutional power dynamics that only benefit White people, communities, and interests within and outside of their organizations. And most importantly, they will have to make space for other voices at the decision-making table, listening to and acting on the experiences of those who have been left out of the environmental conversations.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to cultivate a deeper understanding and to tell the stories of the personal and professional experiences of people of color who work or have worked in the environmental field. It was also aimed at uncovering the impacts of structural barriers in environmental organizations on people of color professionally in an arc from early career, mid-career, upper management, to leadership positions. I used a critical race theory lens to illuminate and understand professionals of color's journeys as they navigated their jobs and careers in the environmental field and to address the following research questions and accompanying secondary questions:

- R1: What are the lived experiences of people of color who have chosen to work in the environmental field?
  - How have these experiences influenced the careers of environmental professionals of color?
  - How have these experiences shaped the career outlooks of environmental professionals of color?

- R2: What systemic barriers to equity, inclusion, and belonging do professionals of color perceive in environmental jobs?
  - How do perceptions of systemic racism influence environmental professionals of color's careers?
  - How do intersectionalities amplify the experiences and perceptions of systemic racism?
- R3: What strategies do environmental professionals of color develop in response to the systemic barriers they encounter?

Over the spring and summer of 2020, I interviewed 32 environmental professionals of color at various stages of their careers to explore their lived experiences. I used critical race theory and narrative research to facilitate counterstorytelling and provide a framework for understanding the roles race/ethnicity played in shaping their careers (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Through their counterstories, each participant challenged the dominant narratives about people of color's intrinsic lack of interest and sense of belonging in nature, including having negative images of nature or not being as concerned about environmental problems as White people (Quimby, Wolfson, and Seyala 2007; Haynes and Jacobson 2015; Haynes, Jacobson, and Wald 2015). The counterstories also challenged the dominant narratives about how people of color interact with and value nature and the environment (Sheppard 1995; Taylor 2007; Lee 2008; Taylor 2008; Taylor 2014; Pearson et al. 2018). The counternarratives also challenged the myth of post-racial environmental institutions (Taylor 2007; Taylor 2008; Balcarczyk et al. 2015; Haynes and Jacobson 2015; Johnson 2019).

### ***Study Significance***

The dominant White American culture has dictated how people of color interacted with nature and the environment, reinforced institutional structures that exclude people of

color from environmental decision making, and even defined the meaning of an environmental career. The resulting dominant environmental narratives have been steeped in stereotypes about American conservation and environmentalism that glossed over exclusions of people of color in the environmental field and emphasized assumptions about people of color's sense of place, interest, and belonging in the outdoors. The dominant narratives have also ignored people of color's histories of participation in the environment and unique relationships to nature. White spaces, institutions, and narratives have had cascading and long-lasting effects on mainstream environmental workforce demographics. The understandings potentially gained from stories told from the perspective of the people most affected by racism can challenge these dominant narratives, provide insights into the relative lack of diversity in the traditional environmental field, and lead to institutional changes.

Much of the research related to the barriers facing people of color in mainstream environmental careers has focused on barriers to entry, places too much emphasis on self-agency, and not enough emphasis on the institutional structures that work to exclude people of color from those careers. The lack of representation in traditional environmental careers is clear. However, absent from the literature is understanding the lived experience of people of color who have already chosen an environmental career, and the barriers and opportunities faced in achieving equity and a sense of belonging.

Consequently, this study seeks to enhance previous environmental workplace diversity research by focusing on the experiences of environmental professionals of color, rather than recruitment into environmental careers. It will shed light on the institutional barriers that people of color face who have already demonstrated a commitment to working in the environment and have already become employed in the field. It will also shed light on the strategies that people of color develop to navigate the barriers and support their success.

It will also reveal reasons why people of color leave environmental jobs or the environmental field altogether.

My motivation for conducting this study and subsequent framing in critical race theory is grounded in my personal and professional experiences as well as in critical geography and other critical literature. Understanding the role that race/ethnicity and racism play in human-environment interactions, specifically in the American environmentalism context as represented in environmental workforce statistics, is central to this study.

### ***Definitions***

For the purposes of this research, I defined *early career* as the first five years of employment, *mid-career* as employment beyond five years and not in a management position, *upper management* as employment beyond five years and with management responsibilities, and *leadership* as the top positions within an organization or executive management.

To ensure inclusion from broad perspectives, I defined *environmental field* to include traditional nature-based environmentalism, environmental justice, environmental advocacy, environmental education, research, and urban planning in the private, governmental, nonprofit, and academic sectors (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010; Taylor 2014).

Because race/ethnicity is based on self-identification and social, cultural, and political constructs, scholars have used multiple and inconsistent terms to describe racial/ethnic categories in the United States (Vidal-Ortiz 2004; Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Brahinsky, Sasser, and Minkoff-Zern 2014; Miville and Ferguson 2014; Taylor 2014; U.S. Census 2017b). Using a single term to collectively describe distinct racial/ethnic groups whose histories and experiences are unique and have incredible diversity can be at risk of being reductive. Unless otherwise stated, I indicated an individual's self-described race/ethnicity. While problematic and rapidly-evolving, I chose to use the term the term *people [or person] of*

*color* where necessary rather than the emerging and more precise term *Black, Indigenous, and People of color (BIPOC)* or the more outdated term *minorities* (Garcia 2020; Grady 2020; Kim 2020). I used *White* to describe people who are of European descent (Taylor 2014; U.S. Census 2017b; Ewing 2020).

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I shared the historical relationships between race and nature and the environment in the United States and how that relationship manifests in the present, both in how people of color experience and are perceived in nature and in environmental work settings. Against this backdrop, I outlined the purpose of this qualitative study to cultivate a deeper understanding and to tell the stories of the personal and professional experiences of people of color who have worked in the environmental field. Contemporary environmental labor statistics also provide the context for another goal of this study which is to understand the role that structural racism in environmental organizations has had on people of color professionally in an arc from early career, mid-career, upper management, to leadership positions. In chapter two, I will review literature to give insights into the historical contexts, the contemporary challenges, and structural and institutional barriers that many people of color face in the environment field.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

My research questions were centered on deepening the understanding of the personal and professional experiences of people of color who work or have worked in the environmental field. Through stories told by early career, mid-career, upper management, and leaders of color, my research was also aimed at uncovering common structural barriers, including institutionalized and other forms of racism within environmental professions. The literature themes I selected to present in this review informed my research design and was fundamental to contextualizing these stories.

First I explored literature on the evolution of the ostensibly evident concepts of race and racism. I also reviewed how these concepts informed the origins of critical race theory and how CRT has been applied across many fields of study, including geography. Next I examined how race and nature have been interdependently conceptualized over time. After presenting essential background literature to understand academic debates surrounding these seemingly simple concepts I historically analyze the origins of the dominant American environmentalism narratives. Following in the tradition of other critical race scholars, the historical analysis provides necessary context to the environmental literature I later present. I end the chapter with a review of career scholarship as it pertains to people of color and people of color in the environmental field.

As this chapter will show, there have been relatively few researchers and studies focused on the career paths of environmental professionals of color (Taylor 2014; Haynes et al. 2015; Beasley 2017; Bonta 2019; Johnson 2019). The studies that do exist point to a pervasive lack of representation in traditional environmental careers (Taylor 2014; Green 2019). However, largely absent from the literature is understanding the lived experience of people of color who have already chosen an environmental career and the barriers and

opportunities faced in achieving equity and a sense of belonging (Bonta 2019; Johnson 2019).

### **Race, Racism, and Critical Race Theory**

“Oh, god. Where do I even begin? Race is a part of everything in this country.”

— Aaron King, 2020

#### ***What is Race?***

In order to understand people of color’s lived experiences in the United States, it is important to first discuss race. Scholars from across disciplines have long debated how to conceptualize and theorize race (Smedley and Smedley 2005; Omi 2010; Smedley 2011). Race has been imagined, questioned, and reimagined based on the political and social power dynamics of that particular time (Smedley 2011). The breadth of literature on race reveals that race has been theorized based on biology, culture, politics, nation of origin, religion, or some combination of these and other categories to socially differentiate one group from another (Du Bois 1897; hooks 1981; Kosek 2006; Brahinsky, Sasser, and Minkoff-Zern 2014; Ikuenobe 2014; Harvey 2016; Hall, Mercer, and Gates; 2017; Zimring 2017). In a historical review of the origins and evolution of race, Smedley (2011) advanced the idea that the hierarchy of races became crystalized in the 18th century and that “[o]nce ‘race’ became the major mode of thinking about group differences, history received its simplest (and most distorted) explanation for all human achievements. Thus, any society composed of ‘inferior races’ lost the potential for social, economic, and political advancement in the minds of [W]hites” (Smedley 2011, 167). While the concept of race was used to define otherness, whiteness was, and continues to be, central to power and privilege in our society



(Frankenberg 1993; DiAngelo 2006; Guess 2006; McKittrick 2011; Finney 2014a; Zimring 2017; DiAngelo 2018).

Until the mid-20th century, the biological inferiority of people of color represented the dominant discourse about race, which was bolstered by researchers who classified race as biological categories (Smedley 2011; Harvey 2016; Zimring 2017). Categories of race essentialized political and cultural differences by linking a person's physical traits (e.g. skin, hair, or facial features) to a person's innate characteristics (hooks 1981; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Blank, Dabady, and Citro 2004; Kosek 2006; McKittrick 2011; Finney 2014b; McKittrick 2014; Harvey 2016; Taylor 2016; Zimring 2017; Robbins 2019).

W.E.B. Du Bois (1897) questioned the biological explanations of racial differences at the end of the 19th century; however, social scientists only began to argue that race was socially constructed in earnest after the mid 20th century (hooks 1992; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Hall 1996; West 2017; Gilmore, 2002; Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Braun 2003; Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003; Blank, Dabady, and Citro 2004; Degruy-Leary 2005; McKittrick and Woods 2007; Finney 2014a; Omii and Winant 2014). Popular views on racial differences tied to identity persisted fueled, in part, from commonly held racist beliefs and from the field of genetics that continued to use racial categories as a way to demonstrate human diversity (Smedley 2011; Yudell et al. 2016). Any biological differences between races, albeit minor, garnered attention both within the genetics field and in mainstream media (Roberts 2011; Smedley 2011). Roberts (2011) postulated the successful sequencing of the human genetic code in the Human Genome Project would end the debate over biological racial differences. Despite the conclusion that people irrespective of race were 99.9% the same, genetic researchers continued to use racial categories to study biological differences without clear

definitions of race or the context of racist policies and geographies that could influence those differences (Roberts 2011; Smedley 2011; Yudell et al. 2016).

### ***Racism Theory, Social Racialization, and Microaggressions***

According to sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Americans and social scientists alike accept that race and racism are self-evident concepts (Bonilla-Silva 2015). However, as with race, there has been little agreement within the social sciences on what racism refers to and whether it is as a useful analytic frame (Jung 2015). Since Ruth Benedict first theorized racism as a set of beliefs about one ethnicity's superiority over another ethnicity's inferiority in the mid-20th century, "[i]ts narrow focus on ideas has reduced the study of racism mostly to social psychology, and this perspective has produced a schematic view of the way racism operates in society" (Bonilla-Silva 1996, 466). For example, in 1970 Pierce argued that racism at an individual level was a mental health problem in which deluded people believed that skin color determined inferiority. He further suggested that racism posed a public health threat at a community scale (Pierce 1970).

In the decades that followed, scholars noted that the most frequent acts of racism had transformed from overt aggressive behavior (Dovidio et al. 2002; Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder 2008; Sue et al. 2008, Sue 2010) to more subtle, subversive, and insidious acts that conveyed underlying hostility (Sue et al. 2007b; Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder 2008; Sue et al. 2008; Sue 2010). Over this timespan, many scholars attempted to conceptualize and theorize evolving expressions of racism (Rowe 1990; Dovidio et al. 2002; Sears and Henry 2003). bell hooks noted that, "As I write, I try to remember when the word racism ceased to be the term which best expressed for me the exploitation of [B]lack people and other people of color in this society and when I began to understand that the most useful term was [W]hite supremacy" (hooks 1989, 112). Despite hooks' and other critical race scholarship,

the view that racism was discriminatory behavior based on prejudicial beliefs toward a race/ethnicity remained largely unchanged within mainstream social science scholarship until the late 1990s (Lorde 1991; Marable 1992; Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2001; Blank, Dabady, and Citro 2004; Feagin and Feagin 2012; Jung 2015).

Bonilla-Silva's 1997 structural theory of racism introduced a framework that changed the trajectory of racism scholarship (Jung 2015). He argued that racism as conceptualized was too narrow and could not explain all racial phenomena (Bonilla-Silva 1997). Instead he contended that racism should be used to "describe the racial ideology of a racialized social system. That is, racism is only part of a larger racial system" (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 467). He further argued that "racism should be studied from the viewpoint of racialization" (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 475).

Building from Bonilla-Silva's work, other scholars continued to improve upon the study of racism. For example, Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000, 61) postulated three fundamental conditions of racism including, "(1) one group believes itself to be superior, (2) the group that believes itself to be superior has power to carry out the racist behavior, and (3) racism affects multiple racial/ethnic groups." Others refined the scale of racism (Jung 2015). For instance, Feagin and Feagin (2012) defined individual racism as face-to-face hostile acts of a person from one racial group towards another racial group and institutional racism as the systemic, cumulative, and covert acts ingrained into the everyday practices of institutions that negatively affect subordinate groups. Although it has been applied to many forms of discrimination, the term "microaggression" emerged as one of the most broadly adopted within racism literature to describe subtle forms of racism (Sue 2003; Sue et al. 2007a). Sue et al. (2007b) advanced the concept of microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or

unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults that potentially have harmful or unpleasant psychological impact on the target person or group” (Sue et al. 2007a, 72). Because of their subtle nature, microaggressions make racism and other forms of discrimination difficult to interpret and cumulatively have harmful emotional or psychological consequences on the recipient (Sue et al. 2007b).

When President Obama was elected as the first Black president, scholars began debating whether the U.S. was entering into a “post-racial” era (Wise 2009; Bonilla-Silva 2010; Perry 2011; Bonilla-Silva and Ray 2014). Fewer acts of overt racism coupled with Obama’s election entrenched the belief that Americans had achieved a colorblind society (Cohen 2011). A superficial colorblind climate developed where White people willfully ignored racial disparities and racist acts (Jung 2015) while people of color were suppressed from openly acknowledging the racisms they were experiencing or witnessing (Bonilla-Silva and Ray 2014; Jung 2015; Yancy and West 2018). As Cohen described, “In the wake of the election, commentators and politicians felt empowered to tell Black people and Black youth in particular that it was now time to stop the ‘whining’ because they had no more excuses” (Cohen 2011, 200). Scholars like Bonilla-Silva and Ray (2014) continued to reject the idea that racism in the U.S. was on the decline and held to the structural racism theory arguing that racism was still very much present but was subtle, systemic, and had been institutionalized (Bonilla-Silva and Ray 2014).

In 2015, renowned philosophy scholar George Yancy wrote an open letter published in the *New York Times* where he asked White Americans to contemplate the ways in which they benefited from racism. He asked if they were “prepared to be at war with yourself, your [W]hite identity, your [W]hite power, your [W]hite privilege?” Yancy, believing some of the post-racial colorblind society rhetoric of the day, naively expected to receive either a neutral

response or gain a few White allies to join him in the fight against institutionalized racism (Yancy and West 2018). Instead, the response was an avalanche of vitriolic racist hate mail, personal attacks against his character, attacks against his scholarship, physical threats, and death threats for which Yancy was fully unprepared (Yancy and West 2018). In *Backlash*, Yancy questioned how his letter could elicit such a response (Yancy and West 2018). A new analytic frame for understanding racism may offer insights (Jung 2015). Moving beyond Bonilla-Silva's structural theory, Jung theorized that scholars could better reject notions of a colorblind society and disrupt racism by conceptualizing racisms as structures and ideologies (Jung 2015). Using arguments from anti-Black racism and assimilation scholarship, Jung noted that "racisms against different peoples [of color] are inextricably linked but also qualitatively different, demanding our analyses and politics to reflect and make sense of this complexity" (Jung 2015, 105).

Any way it has been defined or theorized, racism is a shared and pervasive phenomenon in American society that benefits White people and disadvantages everyone else. Racism affects how people share or omit discourses about race, how people are perceived, counted, and portrayed in the media, as well as how people form their identities and experiences with the world (Delgado and Stefancic 2013; Chapman 2013; Finney 2014a; Delgado and Stefancic 2017).

### ***Critical Race Theory***

With its interdisciplinary origins in critical legal studies and radical feminism, critical race theory (CRT) emerged in the 1980s as lawyers, activists, and scholars began focusing on the loss of momentum after the civil rights movement and the failure of civil rights laws to end structural racism and racial discrimination (Bell 1980; Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000; Howard-Hamilton 2003; Ladson-Billings and Tate 2006; Tatum 2007; Delgado and Stefancic

2013; Lopez and Warren 2015; Delgado and Stefancic 2017). As I explored in more detail in the previous section, overtly racist Jim Crow-era policies were being slowly replaced by subtle, institutional, and seemingly nonracial (colorblind) systems and practices (Bonilla-Silva 2015). On the other hand, CRT scholars argued that racism was ingrained into every system and political, cultural, and economic facet of American life to perpetuate racial oppression (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Lynn and Adams 2002; Taylor 2009; McCoy and Rodricks 2015). CRT scholars also advanced the idea that race and discrimination were inseparable from a person's experience, both to those advantaged and oppressed by race (Collins 1996; Collins 2000a,b; Ladson-Billings 2000; Ladson-Billings and Tate 2006; Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings 2016).

The theory which emerged from such scholarship and activism was a critique of colorblindness and included many of the traditional civil rights movement goals within a historical, social, economic, and cultural context (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Cabrera 2018). CRT's fundamental aim was to study and disrupt existing relationships between race, racism, and power (Delgado and Stefancic 2013; Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Scholars from across disciplines have used CRT in their research to shed light on institutional racism, however geographers have not often applied CRT in their scholarship (Delgado Bernal 2002; Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Pillow 2003; Ladson-Billings 2006; Baszile 2008). Critical race theory has at several interconnected tenets although not all CRT scholars include every tenet in their research and others have incorporated additional principles that suit the needs of their discipline (Delgado 2009; Crenshaw 2011; Capper 2015).

From the outset, critical race theory was not without controversy itself both within the academy and in public discourse. Kennedy (1989), a legal scholar, rejected CRT's central tenets including the use of storytelling in its analysis. This critique was particularly

controversial because Kennedy was Black (Cabrera 2018). In a review of the application of CRT in legal scholarship, Subotnik also argued that because “CRT advocates” included storytelling and their own experiences in their work, it changed the very nature of scholarship, shutting down any possibility for discourse (1997). Pointing to examples of CRT scholarship that included provocative and emotional language, Subotnik wrote that “law review editors, waiving usual standards, have privileged a long trail of undisciplined - even silly - destructive, and above all, self-destructive articles” (1998, 695). Some critics based their critiques on their ideological differences on racism (McWhorter 2000; Horowitz 2006; Cabrera 2018). For example, McWhorter critiques stemmed from his worldview that racism created a culture of defeatism, victimology, separatism, and anti-intellectualism among Black Americans (McWhorter 2000). Other scholars pushed against using CRT as a theoretical framework because it was exclusionary and did not allow for White counterbalance (Litowitz 1996). Cabrera posited that because CRT was developed without a theoretical racial framework (Crenshaw 2002; Cabrera 2018), it allowed for descriptions of racist phenomena without sufficient understanding how the phenomena are structured (Cabrera 2018).

In the public domain, CRT has been politicized by conservative politics (Cabrera 2018). Indeed, *Breitbart*, a far-right conservative website, used its release of a video of President Obama as a law student being introduced and hugging one of the CRT founders Dereck Bell to highlight the dangers within the Obama administration (Shapiro 2012). In 2020 citing “divisive un-American propaganda,” President Trump issued an executive order canceling government contracts for workforce training on critical race theory, White privilege, or “efforts that teaches or suggests either (1) that the United State is an inherently racist or evil country or (2) that any race or ethnicity is inherently racist or evil” (Dawsey and

Stein 2020). On his first day in office in 2021, President Biden rescinded the order (Guynn 2021).

Below I present six CRT tenets guiding my research (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000; Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Yosso et al. 2009; Delgado and Stefancic 2013; Delgado and Stefancic 2017).

***CRT recognizes the centrality of race and racism.*** Dereck Bell (1992) first articulated the permanence and dominance of racism in legal scholarship. Based on Bell's foundational work and social science scholarship described in the previous sections, critical race theorists today accept that race is a social construct (Jung 2015). CRT does not question the existence of race, instead it advances the idea that race is reinforced through social, institutional, and individual norms, practices, and beliefs (Matsuda et al. 1993; Delgado and Stefancic 2007). CRT seeks to explain how racism is systemically woven into the fabric of the American political, social, and economic structures (Delgado and Stefancic 2007) and how those structures serve to perpetuate racism (Matsuda et al. 1993). Critical race scholars use race and racism to examine existing power structures and question White privilege, White supremacy, and whiteness as property to perpetuate the marginalization of people of color (Crenshaw et al 1995; Harris 2001).

***CRT challenges the dominant narrative.*** Critical race theorists challenge the dominant ideological claims of objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity. CRT scholars argue that the American ideal of a colorblind society ignores real inequalities, oppressions, and lack of opportunities faced by people of color (Delgado 1989; Bell 1995; Ladson-Billings 1998; Delgado 2003).

***CRT recognizes interest convergence.*** Theorized by Derrick Bell in 1980 as an early critique against civil rights laws that were meant to eliminate racism in their application,



the *interest convergence theory* promotes the idea that racism is only addressed and people of color's causes are only advanced when White people have a self-interest in that cause (Bell 1980). CRT scholars adopted interest convergence theory in the repertoire of critical race analysis (Delgado and Stefancic 2007).

***CRT is interdisciplinary and provides historical context.*** While its origins are from within critical legal studies, CRT is interdisciplinary, drawing from psychology, sociology, history, and education (Delgado and Stefancic 2012). Thus CRT scholars are also interdisciplinary in their analytic approaches (Matsuda et al. 1993). CRT also challenges ahistoricism, which are the histories based on White supremacy and erasures of people of color's pasts (Matsuda et al. 1993). As a result, CRT scholars provide contextual and historical analyses to revise histories told only from the dominant White perspective (Matsuda et al. 1993; Delgado and Stefancic 2013).

***CRT values experiential knowledge.*** Critical race theorists challenge the silencing of people of color's voices (Matsuda et al. 1993). Scholars recognize the power of voices of color to challenge dominant narratives. CRT scholars incorporate people of color's experiential knowledge as legitimate scholarship and their stories can be told through narrative and counter-storytelling methodologies (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Importantly, CRT acknowledges that race alone cannot account for disempowerment. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw first advanced the concept of intersectionality to describe the multiple identities people have and the ways in which systems of oppression based on each of those identities come together (Crenshaw 1989). Therefore, while CRT scholars foreground race, they also recognize the multidimensionality of oppressions through the intersectionalities of race/ethnicity with sex, class, national origin, sexual orientation, and other personal

identifiers. Through stories, CRT scholars can uncover the intersectionalities at play (Delgado and Stefancic 2017).

***CRT is committed to social justice.*** Taking all the tenets together, critical race theory scholars are committed to eliminating and ending racial and other forms of oppression and injustice (Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano 2007).

Although CRT began in the legal field, the application of CRT has extended beyond the discipline, especially in education, political science, and ethnic studies (Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Cabrera 2018). Researchers from various fields of study have applied CRT to foreground race and challenge dominant narratives or fundamental assumptions, including those of a race-neutral and colorblind society; fair social, economic, education, political, and legal systems; and equal distributions of power and resources (Revilla and Asato 2002; Taylor 2009; Lopez and Warren 2015).

Critical race theory is not a dominant framework in the social sciences and relatively few geographers have integrated CRT within their scholarship (Kobayashi and Peake 2000; Pulido 2000; Delaney 2002; Peake and Kobayashi 2002; Price 2010; Pulido 2015; Cabrera 2018; Van Sant, Milligan, and Mollett 2020). The growing number of geographers that engaged with critical race literature since the early 2000s resulted in a significant body of critical geographic scholarship about the interconnection of race and place, historical landscapes of race, persistence of racial inequality and White supremacy, racial-colonial influences on the production of environmental knowledge, and more (McKittrick 2006; McKittrick and Woods 2007; HoSang, LaBennett, and Pulido 2012; Faegin 2013; Finney 2014; Omi and Winnat 2014; McCutcheon 2016; Bledsoe and Wright 2019; Van Sant, Milligan, and Mollett 2020; Barra 2021). In 2010, Price noted that critical geographies of race and CRT shared common goals and each could enhance the other, highlighting common

themes in both bodies of literature including the centrality of race and racism, the realities and challenges of Black and White binaries, and the use of narrative as an analytic lens to explore race (Price 2010). Van Sant, Milligan, and Mollett argued that the contributions of critical geographies of race or Black geographies scholarship under the auspices of political ecology was “sometimes overshadowed by the plethora of analyses which either ignore racial politics or treat them as the ‘cultural’ debris of political economy” (Van Sant, Milligan, and Mollett 2020, 631). With respect to this study, CRT has yet to be used widely to explore how race and racism simultaneously shape the construction of nature and race and influence environmental labor market discrimination (Finney 2014a; Taylor 2014).

### **White Innocence: Race, Nature, Space**

“There are few forms of nature that do not bear the traces of racial exclusion.”

—Moore, Kosek, and Pandian (2003, 2)

The mutually reinforcing concepts of race and nature, and the evolution of those concepts over time provide the fundamental historical frame for understanding contemporary views on the environment and environmentalism, environmental scholarship, and environmental workforce statistics. Although race and nature have long been conceptualized, social scientists only recently began to critically argue how these socially constructed concepts were used together to strengthen cultural and political White supremacy throughout American history (Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003; Blank, Dabady, and Citro 2004). There is a growing body of literature positing that race and racial hegemony were essential to America’s nation-building and nature-building, providing license for the myriad oppressions and subjugations aimed at Indigenous Americans, African slaves and their American descendants, Latinos, Chinese-Americans, Japanese-Americans, and

countless others (Merchant 2003; Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003; Blank, Dabady, and Citro 2004; Kosek 2006; Glave 2010; Finney 2014a; Harvey 2016; Taylor 2016; Zimring 2017).

An essential element of this critique was that by defining non-White people as part of nature, White people gave themselves cover to view themselves as civilized, justifying their social hierarchies, violent exclusions, and oppression (Brahinsky, Sasser, and Minkof-Zern 2014; Harvey 2016; Taylor 2016). For instance, Merchant and others have suggested that labeling Indigenous Americans as savages served as justification for forcibly removing and displacing Indigenous Americans from their ancestral lands (Merchant 2003; Harvey 2016). Within the Black studies literature, scholars since W.E.B. Du Bois have also pointed to how designating Black Americans as chattel, beasts, monkeys, or three-fifths human and Black women as overly sexualized served as White justifications for slavery and oppression (hooks 1981; Merchant 2003; Glave 2010; Finney 2014a; Zimring 2017). Zimring theorized that the production of stereotypes that non-White people were unclean, including eastern and southern European immigrants, also served to ensure that White people remained in power (Zimring 2017).

Another essential element of the historical critique of the nation-building and nature-building story was the systematic racialization of nature. Like race, human geographers and other social scientists suggested that nature was also socially imagined (Demeritt 2002; Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003) and defined in relation to the production of race and other forms of social difference (Cronnon 1996; Outka 2008; Finney 2014; Zimring 2017). Cronon (1996) argued that wilderness, or nature untouched by people, had been socially constructed by wealthy White men in the early 19th century after becoming disillusioned with living in increasingly crowded cities overrun by immigrants and poverty (Finney 2014a;

Taylor 2016; Zimring 2017). Cronon cited the removal of Indigenous Americans to create uninhabited national parks and wilderness areas as the most glaring example of the construction of wilderness (Cronon 1996). Several others suggested that the idea of a wilderness free of people was reinforced by the writings of explorers like Lewis and Clark and later by writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, along with conservationists like John Muir (Denevan 1992; Callicott 2008; Taylor 2016; Zimring 2017). Referencing new racial awareness resulting from the environmental justice movement and the inclusion of environmental historians of color, a handful of environmental historians set out to write about the environmental history of race in the early 2000s (Merchant 2003; Glave 2010). Through their lens, a new picture began to emerge that challenged the notion of wilderness free of people, positing that wilderness had been conceptualized as nature free of people of color (Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2016).

Adding to this interdisciplinary body of work, critical geographers challenged the concept of colorblind spaces. This growing body of work revealed that although people of color signified nature, their natural environments have been confined to White controlled spaces — plantations, reservations, working fields, and internment camps (Glave 2010; McKittrick 2011; Brahinsky, Sasser, and Minkoff-Zern 2014; McKittrick 2014). In *Black Faces, White Spaces*, Carolyn Finney sought to answer why Black Americans were underrepresented in environmental history and in the outdoors (Finney 2014a). She examined how the natural environment had been conceptualized and compared how Black and White Americans were represented in nature. She theorized that the ways in which Black people interact with and view themselves in nature or the environment is rooted in history and in lived experiences, and reinforced by their representation in nature (Finney 2014a). Consequently, the antecedents for the racial/ethnic disparities we see today in relation to

nature and the environment were historically folded into the American environmental narrative.

### **Retelling the Story**

“The dominant environmental narrative in the United States is primarily constructed and informed by White, Western European, or Euro-American voices. This narrative not only shapes the way the natural environment is represented, constructed, and perceived in our everyday lives, but informs our national identity as well.”

— Carolyn Finney (2014a, 3)

The dominant American narrative envisioned an environmental movement of White people, by White people, and for White people (Glave 2010; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2016). Absent from this narrative are Americans of color who were relegated to supporting characters if mentioned at all. In the next section, I will briefly retrace parts of American environmental history foregrounding the histories of people of color who contributed or were affected by those histories. This context is necessary to understand how the long tendrils history manifest in environmental careers and in environmental scholarship today.

### ***A Brief Black and Brown Environmental History***

During the 19th century’s age of Manifest Destiny when Daniel Boone and, later, Theodore Roosevelt were setting off on adventures in so-called uninhabited wilderness and open spaces of the west, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 was in full effect (Merchant 2003; Kantor 2007). The forcible removal of Indigenous Americans from their lands was integral to the birth of the National Park System. Once Indigenous Americans were no longer present, White leaders created a story that depicted former tribal lands as isolated, undeveloped, and pristine natural spaces setting the stage for preserving the untouched wilderness (Cronon 1996; Spence 1996; Merchant 2003; Kantor 2007; Finney 2014a; Taylor

2016; Zimring 2017). The realities of how the Indian Removal Act was implemented was concealed. For instance, in 1851 after the Ahwahneechee people who had lived in Yosemite Valley for 3,000 years lost their final battle against a White volunteer militia, the U.S. government removed most of the remaining Ahwahneechee people from their ancestral lands and placed them in reservations (Spence 1996; Taylor 2016). A decade later, John Muir began advocating for the protection of Yosemite Valley to preserve its natural integrity and wrote disparagingly of the Ahwahneechee who remained often referring to them as dirty in contrast to the clean wilderness (Muir 1911; Spence 1996; Merchant 2003; Kantor 2007; Taylor 2016). Thanks to Muir's efforts, Yosemite was declared a state park in 1864 and then a national park in 1890.

After the Mexican American War, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 obligated the U.S. government to respect existing land grants (Taylor 2002; Kosek 2006). However, approximately eighty percent of those grant claims were never ratified and stripped Latino and Indigenous American land ownership. Because of this unofficial federal policy, millions of acres of land from California to Texas were left in limbo, much of which was then acquired by the federal government as National Forests. The federal government later enforced access and used laws alienating Latinos and Indigenous Americans from their means of subsistence (Kosek 2006).

In the late 1860s, the Central Pacific Railroad employed between 10,000 and 12,000 Chinese workers to build the U.S. transcontinental railroad (Chang and Fishkin 2015). But their contributions in this significant national achievement after the Civil War (Chang and Fishkin 2015) and their mistreatment compared to their White counterparts (Taylor 2016) has been largely ignored. After the completion of the railroad, in 1882 Congress passed the first in a series of acts, known as the Chinese Exclusion Act, aimed at excluding the

immigration of Chinese laborers who made up nearly a quarter of the work force in California at the time (Pegler-Gordon 2006; Price 2018). In addition, in 1890 the city of San Francisco enacted zoning ordinances aimed at restricting mobility of the nearly 20,000 Chinese residents (Taylor 2016).

After hundreds of years of slavery, the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 did not result in Black Americans receiving the same freedoms as White Americans. The end of Reconstruction in 1877 marked the beginning of nearly a century of policy-driven and institutionalized segregation that ensured the continued exploitation and inequitable treatment of Black people and inequitable access to land, including land ownership, agriculture, and parks (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Taylor 2002; Blank, Dabady, and Citro 2004; Glave 2010; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2016). Local laws throughout the U.S. required that public places be segregated by race, including public parks, and the National Park System's policies followed those same local laws segregating bath houses, picnic areas, lodging, and camping areas (Taylor 2016). Not only were Black people limited in their access to public spaces, but the domestic terrorist acts of lynching ensured that Black people remained in fear and uncertainty with respect to the outdoors (Taylor 2002; Glave 2010; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2016).

People of color have also contributed to environmental causes throughout history. Overlooked stories include how Booker T. Washington established the Tuskegee Institute to train Black teachers in the rural south about a broad range of academic and quality of life skills, including agricultural practices (Glave 2010). Or how Indigenous American and Black people participated in building the state and national parks in segregated Civilian Conservation Corps companies and camps between 1933-1942 (Cole 1999; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2016; Wimmer 2016). Or how during the modern environmental movement of the



1960s and 1970s, people of color were engaging in environmental-social activism such as the 1964 National Indian Youth Council's "fish-ins" to protest against Washington state's restriction of Indigenous American fishing rights (Taylor 2002; Taylor 2011a); the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike to protest the city's lack of response to the deaths of two Black garbage collectors (Bullard 1993a); and the United Farm Workers' grape pickers strike and grape boycotts in the 1960s that resulted in formal recognition of the union representing Latino, Filipino, and Black farm workers (Taylor 2002). In the 1980s, people of color led the environmental justice movement in response to these and other environmental injustices, converging the modern environmental and social justice movements (McGurty 1997; Bullard et al. 2008).

Although the Civil Rights Act made racial discrimination and segregation illegal, the ensuing colorblind and post-racial eras did little to eliminate lasting legacies of the country's racialized environmental history (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Higginbotham 2013; Taylor 2016). Nature and the environment remained racialized spaces (Finney 2014a; Taylor 2016). In the sections that follow, I present three literature themes stemming from this history.

### ***Environmental Justice Scholarship***

Reverend Benjamin Chavis first conceptualized environmental racism in 1982, which he defined as policies of environmental racism, enforcement of racist policies, siting of toxic waste disproportionately near communities of color, government endorsement of pollution effects on people of color, and lack of representation of people of color in environmental leadership (Bullard 1993a,b; Merchant 2003; Bullard et al. 2008). The environmental justice movement gained momentum after the release of a United Church of Christ report, *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States*, revealing that 10,000 toxic waste sites were situated near communities of color (United Church of Christ 1987). Bullard argued that companies did

not choose the toxic waste sites because they were environmentally appropriate but rather because the communities of color lacked the power to oppose that siting (Bullard 1993a,b).

Since the defining moments of the environmental justice movement, most early environmental justice scholarship focused on studying and identifying spatial patterns of environmental racism and impacts on human health (Arriaga 2010; Taylor 2009, 2011a). As a leading voice within environmental justice scholarship, Bullard challenged the concept of colorblind power structures contending that power played a significant role in this expression of environmental racism, including people of color's lack of political power, poverty, and lack of mobility (Bullard 1993a,b). By the early 2000s environmental justice scholars had broadened their focus to include the interrelationships between communities of color, power, and environmental hazards (Pulido, 2000; Bullard et al. 2008). A decade later, a number of critical environmental justice scholars began questioning why the environmental justice movement had seemingly stalled, calling for a stronger theoretical framing of environmental racism as White supremacy (Pulido 2015) or racial capitalism (Pulido 2017).

The prevailing environmental literature about people of color's participation largely ignored environmental activism altogether (Taylor 2014). Finney argued that because people of color's participation in environmental causes was often labeled environmental justice, it has been marginalized from mainstream environmental discourse (Finney 2014a). As a result, several scholars have maintained that the dominant narrative that is reflected in the media's racialized portrayal of people of color —particularly Black people— in the outdoors (Finney 2014a) and in environmental research design (Taylor 2014), reinforced how people see themselves in the environment (Glave 2010; McKittrick 2011; Brahinsky, Sasser, and Minkoff-Zern 2014; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2016) and in environmental careers (Finney

2014b). However, how the dominant narrative affects people of color's environmental career trajectories and career outlook has not yet been fully explored.

### ***Environmental Jobs, Workforce, and Diversity Demographics***

Another legacy of environmental racism is how environmental careers themselves have been defined and analyzed. A review of environmental literature revealed that studies on environmental careers or the environmental workforce typically only include traditional, nature-based environmental organizations (Bullard 1993a,b; Taylor 2011a; Taylor 2014; Taylor, Paul, and McCoy 2019). Although people of color made up approximately 78 percent of the environmental justice workforce, environmental justice organizations were not included in most environmental workforce studies (Taylor 2014).

Environmental workplace diversity literature emerged in the 1960s when academics and activists alike began drawing attention to the lack of diversity in the environmental movement and workforce (Fox 1985; Taylor, Paul, and McCoy 2019). This relatively small body of literature consisted mainly of studies aimed at quantifying the lack of diversity within traditional environmental organizations because few organizations reported their workforce demographics (Taylor, Paul, and McCoy 2019). Findings from studies between the 1960s and 1990s revealed that although environmental organizations stated their commitments to diversity, the workforce remained dominated by White, upper-middle class men as it had since the beginning of the conservation movement (Fox 1985; Environmental Careers Organization 1992; McGurty 1997; Taylor 2014; Taylor, Paul, and McCoy 2019). According to Taylor early diversity efforts had significantly increased gender diversity and the representation of White women, who made up over half of the environmental workforce but had not proportionately benefited people of color (Taylor 2014).

Traditional environmental organizations across the country were criticized both within and outside academic scholarship for alienating people of color and for the relative lack of racial/ethnic diversity in their workforce (Davis et al. 2002; Taylor 2014; Finney 2014; Haynes and Jacobson 2015; Beasley 2016; Beasley 2017; Green 2.0 2017; Green 2.0 2018a,b; Green 2.0 2019; Johnson 2019; Taylor et al. 2019). In 1993, Bullard cautioned that because traditional environmental organizations were not interested in issues of environmental racism, they would never be able to attract many people of color into their ranks (Bullard 1993a). Environmental leaders often cited few job openings and lack of applicants of color were to blame for their slow rate of diversifying their workforce (Beasley 2017; Taylor, Paul, and McCoy 2019). Several scholars sought to explain the lack of applicants of color by correlating the few students of color enrolled in agriculture, natural resources, and forestry programs (Davis et al. 2002), by understanding the negative connotations of manual labor in agriculture among students of color (Talbert et al. 1999), and by lack of exposure to environmental issues among communities of color (Valdez 1995).

Benjamin Chavis posited that one of the characteristics of environmental racism included organizations that had few people of color in environmental leadership positions (Lazarus 2000). Furthermore, Taylor found that in 2014, professionals of color made up between only 12 and 16 percent of the traditional environmental workforce with only 12 percent in positions of leadership (Davis et al. 2002; Taylor 2014). Most people of color working in mainstream environmental careers were not in top leadership positions — fully 97 percent of executive directors, presidents, and vice presidents were White, while 58 percent of diversity managers were people of color (Taylor 2014). These findings do not reflect the American population and lag behind other science, technology, mathematics, and engineering fields (Taylor 2014; Pew Research Center 2018). The 2015 U.S. Census reports

showed that approximately 40 percent of Americans identified as people of color, including 23 percent of the population who identified as Black/African American, Asian, Native American/Indigenous American, or two or more races and 17 percent that identified as Latino/a (Colby and Ortman 2015; U.S. Census Bureau 2017a). Notably, U.S. Census projections estimate that by 2045, people of color will likely make up half of the U.S. population (Frey 2018).

In the years after Taylor's groundbreaking study caught national attention, traditional environmental organizations were also under increased pressure to acknowledge the racism inherent within the conservation movement (Finney 2014; Purdy 2015; Taylor 2016) and in their organizations' histories (Degnarian 2020; Fears and Mufson 2020; Nobles 2020; Tyson 2020). While several traditional environmental nonprofit and philanthropic organizations began to heed the mounting public demands, resulting in an upward trend in racial/demographic workforce diversity between 2017-2019 among responding organizations (Green 2.0 2019), workforce diversity was still not keeping up with demographic trends nationwide (Johnson 2019; Taylor 2018). In fact, Taylor's 2018 report of 2,057 environmental nonprofits showed that people of color made up less than 15 percent of the workforce and less than 20 percent of board membership (Taylor 2018).

There is strong evidence throughout the literature that workforce diversity addresses social equity and is critical to excellence by increasing problem solving skills, intellectual engagement, and workplace motivation (Sugrue et al. 1999; Gurin et al. 2002; Gurin et al. 2003; Antonio et al. 2004). A fully integrated, inclusive, and demographically diverse workforce provides a myriad of benefits to organizations (Beasley 2017; Smith-Doer, Alegria & Sacco 2017), including environmental organizations (Beasley 2017). Organizations that have diverse leadership improve organizational performance (Beasley 2016) and have a

positive effect on increasing diversity in new lower management positions (Dobbin and Kalev 2007). Beasley's (2017) survey on the significance of diversity among environmental non-governmental organization leaders, executive recruiting firms, and philanthropic leaders revealed environmental employer's belief that diversity could benefit their organization and their organization's effectiveness by improving creativity, strengthening ties to the community, and enhancing management-employee relations. In traditional environmental professions where partnerships and public support are often paramount, a workforce that can reflect the public's diverse experiences and points of view can help organizations create the strong partnerships needed to be effective (Bonta and Jordan 2007; Taylor 2014).

Since the passage of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, employers have been prohibited from discriminating against employees based on sex, race, color, national origin, and religion. However, discrimination within the workplace still exists, has become subtler over time, (Krysan and Lewis 2004; Blank, Dabady, and Citro 2004; Sue et al. 2007b, Sue et al. 2008; Sue 2010) and can sometimes lead to increased conflicts, misunderstandings, and low morale (Sue 2003, 2010; Roberge and van Dick 2010; Sue et al. 2008). To address the potential negative consequences of increasing diversity in the workplace, many businesses, institutions, and organizations shifted from a focus on diversity toward a focus on creating an environment of inclusion (Ferdman and Deane 2014.; Shore, Cleveland, and Sanchez 2018).

Academic scholars have also begun to confront institutionalized forms of discrimination. For example, Strum (2006) developed a framework of inclusion based on documented underrepresentation of women and people of color in institutions of higher education. This framework involved identifying barriers to participation and pathways to increased participation. Building on Strum's work, Dobbin and Kalev (2007) studied the

application of Strum's inclusion framework in a corporate setting and found that workplaces that have diversity in senior personnel and leadership positions also have a positive effect on increasing diversity in new lower management positions (Dobbin and Kalev 2007).

However, within the environmental field, addressing workforce diversity is nascent with environmental organizations taking a piecemeal approach. Johnson found that "those in the environmental movement have focused their efforts on increasing diversity through recruitment and selection procedures, but many have not yet begun to think about ways of increasing the promotion and retention of people of color" (Johnson 2019, 4). In the same report, Johnson laid out the ways in which large nonprofit and philanthropic organizations could retain and promote people of color within their ranks. Bonta (2019) provided guidance for environmental philanthropies to develop and incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion principles.

The bulk of environmental workplace diversity literature has been aimed at quantifying the lack of diversity within mainstream environmental organizations. Although these studies have shed much needed light on systemic failures to address racial equity in the environmental field, they have also served to keep environmental justice organizations out of the spotlight.

### ***Narrative Omissions in Environmental Scholarship***

"Knowledge economies are engines for oppression"  
— Collins (2000a)

Critically analyzing and questioning the context within which knowledge is produced has been a fundamental frame in Black feminist studies (Lorde 1984, Collins 2000a), science and technology studies (Demerit 2001; Latour 2004; Whatmore 2009; Walls 2016), and feminist and other critical geographies (Hiemstra and Billo 2017; Zaragocin Carvajal,

Moreano Venegas, and Álvarez Velasco 2018; Kong and Qian 2019). Researchers convey their knowledge as unbiased and consumers of this knowledge do not question the context in which knowledge is produced (Demerit 2001). However, social and political contexts do play into all levels of knowledge production (Demerit 2001). Knowledge suppression, on the other hand, also informs knowledge production and practice. Collins outlined that manifestations of knowledge suppression include thought omission, trivialization, and depoliticization and create subjugated knowledge (Collins 2000a). For example, Pulido (2000) observed that racism is not studied in environmental racism research, rather it is included as a normative concept that informs the research resulting in a denial of racism's spatiality. As the previous section suggested, considering the role that research plays about who and how people engage in the environment is important because it provides knowledge from which both environmental organizations and people of color draw conclusions about the environment and people of color's place in the environment (Glave 2010; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2016).

Most early research, spanning nearly two decades from the 1960s to the 1980s, about how people interacted with the environment and their interest in the environment came from the point of view of traditional environmental participants: White, educated, and middle class (Taylor 2008, 2011b,c, 2014, 2015). As evidenced by environmental activism and the environmental justice movement, people of color have often engaged with the environment differently than mainstream environmental participants (Taylor 2008, 2014), but most early researchers ignored people of color's participation in environmental justice activism and their participation in the outdoors (Taylor 2008; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2014). Not surprisingly, early research results found that people of color were less aware of environmental issues, less interested in participating in environmental affairs, had lower rates



of participation in the outdoors, and were generally less interested in the environment than White people (Sheppard 1995; Taylor 2008, Taylor 2014). Taylor writes, “In explaining their results, researchers argued that minorities were too concerned with meeting their basic needs to focus on environmental issues” (2008, 97).

Since the 1990s, studies of people of color and their relationship with the environment have been aimed at critiquing the idea that people of color are not as interested in the environment as White people (Taylor 2007; Lee 2008). There is now a wealth of research that indicates that people of color are just as likely, and, in some cases, more likely than White people to be concerned about the environment and the environment’s impact on people (Taylor 1989; Parker and McDonough 1999; Jones 2002; Jones, Castellanos, and Cole 2002; Mohai 2003; Adeola 2004; Whittaker, Segura, and Bowler 2005; Jones and Rainey 2006; Taylor 2008; Mora-Trejos 2015). For instance, in a 2005 study on spending for the environment, Whittaker et al. found that Black Americans and Latinos/as supported higher levels of spending for the environment than White people (Whittaker et al. 2005).

However, the misconception has persisted among scholars, traditional environmental organizations, and the public that people of color do not care as much as White people about the environment (Bonta and Jordan 2007; Glave 2010; Taylor 2014; Pearson et al. 2018). For example, Quimby, Wolfson, and Seyala’s (2007) study on the influence of social cognitive variables on adolescent’s interest in environmental science found that urban high school seniors of color exhibited less concern about environmental problems and less interest in environmental science than did their White counterparts. As with previous studies, the survey instrument used to assess the students’ concerns about the environment did not include environmental justice or local environmental issues (Quimby, Wolfson, and Seyala 2007; Taylor 2008). Further, a National Academies of Sciences study released in 2018

found that most Americans of all races underestimate people of color and people with low incomes concerns about the environment and associate the term “environmentalist” with White people and people with high-income (Pearson et al. 2018).

One of the most influential scholars who has challenged many of the assumptions in environmental literature about how people of color value the environment is Dorceta Taylor. Principally through an environmental workplace diversity lens, Taylor’s research laid bare the sheer scale of underrepresentation of people of color and created the foundation for future environmental workplace diversity scholarship (Taylor 2007, 2008; 2011b,c, 2014, 2015, 2018).

### ***Understanding Representation in Environmental Careers***

Excluding Taylor, the handful of scholars that have sought to understand the underlying reasons for the underrepresentation of people of color in environmental careers have also not included environmental activism or environmental justice in those analyses. Mirroring research findings from traditional environmental perspectives, these studies found that the most prevalent barriers to entry into environmental careers among people of color included a lack of direct experience with natural settings, a lack of positive images of nature, lower concerns about the environment than White people, and perceptions of racism in environmental careers (Quimby, Wolfson, and Seyala 2007; Haynes and Jacobson 2015; Haynes, Jacobson, and Wald 2015). More scholarship is needed to understand the underrepresentation of people of color in environmental careers that does not limit the inclusion of people of color’s experiences with the environment and broadens the definition of what it means to work in an environmental career.

Several studies on organizational recruitment found that recruitment practices in the environmental field were often prejudicial (Taylor 2007, 2008; Balcarczyk et al. 2015; Haynes

and Jacobson 2015) and frequently ignored the places with the most potential new applicants of color (Taylor 2014). For example, Taylor found that although STEM students of color's salary requirements and willingness to take positions in environmental careers were on par with White students, students of color reported not being recruited at the same rate as their White counterparts from environmental organizations (Taylor 2008). Further complicating recruitment practices, a disconnect existed between environmental organizations' and recruiting firms' understanding about the underlying reasons that hinder diversity, negatively impacting the goal of diversifying organizational leadership (Beasley 2016). According to Haynes and Jacobson (2015), diversity-centered internships could act as pipelines for environmental career choices; however, it was unclear whether ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, and gender breakdown of the internships had an impact on the effectiveness of that pipeline. In Finney's study (2014a), Black professionals in traditional environmental organizations believed that historical environmental racism and exclusion were major challenges in their jobs whereas their White counterparts did not. These findings suggested that environmental organizations should change recruitment practices, create tailored internships for people of color, and foster networks of people of color within the organization (Taylor 2008; Finney 2014a; Beasley 2016).

What remains to be explored is understanding the lived experience of people of color who have already chosen an environmental career and the barriers and opportunities they encounter in the environmental field. A quantitative study that focused on racial and gender differences in environmental career mobility and compensation provides an important baseline (Taylor 2011b). In 2004 and 2005, Taylor conducted a survey of 265 environmental professionals and found that employees of color were more likely to be paid lower starting salaries than White people. Employees of color perceived that they were

currently paid less than their White counterparts although the study demonstrated that there was not a significant current wage gap. Taylor (2011b) concluded that people of color made up the wage gap by staying employed much longer than White employees in one organization — 72 percent of people of color had worked for only one environmental organization throughout their career compared to 39 percent of White people. Indeed, further exploration is needed to understand people of color's persistence in environmental careers considering actual and perceived salary inequity.

### **Career Scholarship, Personal Agency, and People of Color**

The most robust research into career choice, diversity and career paths, and people of color's perceptions with respect to careers in general comes from the fields of psychology, public administration, sociology, education, and, recently, from science. Although education research has embraced critical race theory scholarship, the broader interdisciplinary literature on career theories has not and has narrowly focused on White middle-class men (Leong 2000; Fouad and Byars-Winston 2005; Patton and McMahon 2014). Career literature can be categorized into several themes: career theories, the STEM pipeline, and career advancement.

### ***Social Cognitive Career Theory and Environmental Diversity Research***

Traditional career theories developed in the 20th century focused on the characteristics involved in career choice and later evolved to include person-environment connections and the process of career development (Leung 2008; Patton 2008). More recently, modern career theories have challenged traditional theories to include contexts of social or environmental systems (Patton 2008). One of the relatively newer career theories that has been used with respect to research into people of color and career choice is Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Fouad and Byars-Winston 2005; Patton and McMahon

2014; Balcarczyk et al. 2015; Haynes and Jacobson 2015). SCCT highlights three phases of career development that include the following: development of academic and career interest, selection of academic pursuit or career path, and performance and persistence (Lent et al. 2002; Lent 2005). The theory posits that careers develop within a cultural and environmental context, including support and barrier variables as well as person variables such as ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status (Lent, Brown, and Hackett 2002; Lent 2005). SCCT also incorporates three social cognitive variables which further influence an individual's career decision, including self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Lent, Brown, and Hackett 1994; Lent, Brown, and Hackett 2002).

Thus, personal agency is the most influential factor in SCCT career choice (Lent, Brown, and Hackett 1994; Zunker 2011). However, personal agency assumes that institutions are colorblind and that institutionalized racism does not affect career advancement. Lent (1994) hypothesized that when individuals have high self-efficacy (or competency) and expect positive outcomes, they will develop career interests and create goals and actions. Conversely, if individuals have low self-efficacy or if they expect negative outcomes, they will not form an interest in a given career (Lent, Brown, and Hackett 1994). For example, perceptions of self-efficacy in math and science influenced Black college students' interest in environmental areas (Quimby, Wolfson, and Seyala 2007). Further, individuals' career interests would more likely become career goals and actions when they perceive favorable environmental conditions (or opportunities) as opposed to unsupportive conditions (or barriers).

Another limitation of the research using SCCT with respect to people of color is the focus on studying career choice among high school and college student populations rather than development and advancement at various career stages (McWhirter 1997; Luzzo and

McWhirter 2001; Balcarczyk et al. 2015; Haynes and Jacobson 2015). SCCT asserts that the process of career interest, choice goals, and choice actions repeats throughout one's life, but career and academic interests tend to stabilize in early adulthood (Lent, Brown, and Hackett 1994). Once individuals pursue an environmental career, however, they will encounter additional barriers and opportunities that influence whether to persevere in the career and that influence whether they will advance in the career.

Researchers have acknowledged several limitations to the applicability of SCCT to people of color's environmental career choice (Tanner 1980; Floyd 1999; Parker and McDonough 1999; Floyd and Johnson 2002; Haynes, Jacobson, and Wald 2015). Limitations include that SCCT does not specifically address the importance of childhood experiences in nature as a support to environmental career interest, nor does it address the historical marginalization of people of color as a barrier (Tanner 1980; Haynes and Jacobson 2015). In response, Haynes, Jacobson, and Wald (2015) proposed a modified SCCT model called the Framework for Career Influences which added specificity to the contextual influences that support or hinder people of color pursuing environmental careers. The expanded social contextual influences included discrimination and the role of mentors; familial contextual influences; structural contextual influences, including institutional diversity, STEM education, financial assistance, and retention in major; and experiential contextual influences, including recruitment, exposure to nature, and exposure to the career field (Haynes, Jacobson, and Wald 2015).

However, as with SCCT, the Framework for Career Influences did not consider institutionalized or systemic racism and was developed to focus on career choice and not career development. Furthermore, the framework included a foundational presumption that harkens to the enduring myth that people of color have negative perceptions of the

environment. Specifically, the framework theorizes that people of color's "lack of access to positive nature-related opportunities that likely contributes to racial or cultural predisposition for negative perceptions of nature" (Haynes, Jacobson, and Wald 2015, 229).

The most relevant question for the purpose of this study is whether any career theory should be applied to examine people of color's careers because the theories were developed based on research using European and White American middle-class males and lack contextual consideration for different career needs and barriers (Stitt-Gohdes 1997; Lent, Brown, and Hackett 2000; Leong and Hartung 2000; Phelps and Constantine 2001; Cornileus 2012).

### ***Beyond the Pipeline: Career Advancement***

A frequently used metaphor is the concept of the education-to-career pipeline (Arnett et al. 2009; Pender et al. 2010; Grebski and Cai 2010; Shaw and Stanton 2012). STEM degrees are commonly considered as pipeline degrees for environmental careers because students that graduate with STEM degrees frequently work in the environmental field (Arnett et al. 2009; Grebski and Cai 2010). Education-to-career pipeline strategies are particularly important with respect to encouraging people of color to pursue careers in environmental fields (Adams and Moreno 1998; Chawla 1999; Talbert, Larke, and Jones 1999; Quimby, Wolfson, and Seyala 2007). Even though there has been an ongoing national effort to increase people of color in the STEM workforce since the 1980s (NAS 2007, 2011; Malcom, Chubin, and Jesse 2004), this effort has not translated into environmental degrees. In 2011, 90 percent of environmental degree holders were White, while only four percent of environmental degree holders were Latinos/as, three percent were Asian, and two percent were Black (Carnevale et al. 2011).

In terms of career advancement, perceptions of race and experiences of racism negatively impact career development among people of color (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, and Wormely 1990; Semple 1991; Thomas and Gabarro 1999; James 2000; Belk 2006; Cornileus 2012). Furthermore, the intersectionality of gender and race significantly impacts career development, especially for women of color (Dickens and Dickens 1991; Thomas and Gabarro 1999; Cobbs and Turnock 2003; Belk 2006; Taylor 2011b; Meléndez, G. and Özkazanç-Pan 2020) in academic careers (Belk 2006; Williams-Bruce 2013; Soto 2014). Belk (2006) found that there were significant differences in the perception of career advancement between Black women and Black men student affairs administrators. Differences included that the women were more likely than men to perceive greater disparities to career advancement, increased gender discrimination, elevated professional requirements, and underutilization of their professional skills (Belk 2006). Soto (2014) used a SCCT approach to conduct a study on 13 early career Black and Latina female university faculty. The major challenges the women faced included vague promotion and tenure expectations, pressure to obtain external funding; managing work-life balance, navigating a gendered and racialized academic environment; and service requirements (Soto 2014). Foundational strategies which helped women faculty of color overcome career challenges centered around personal agency, including self-confidence, self-efficacy, an underlying drive to succeed, professional socialization as well as institutional frames including a support system and a supportive work environment (Soto 2014).

Although many studies have indicated that Black men earn significantly less and are unemployed at much higher rates than their White counterparts, few studies have focused on the experiences of men of color's career development experiences (Cornileus 2012; Williams 2014). In his 2012 study of 14 Black male professionals, Cornileus found that the men's



career development was influenced by personal and cultural identity, gendered racism, internal and external organizational resources, and informal and formal learning. Further, as with Soto's 2014 findings in women of color university faculty, Black professional men also employ a range of strategies to manage the impacts of racism on their career development (Cornileus 2012).

Questions remain about the current body of career literature's transferability to the lived experience of people of color in environmental fields. Coupling critical race theory's underpinnings of prioritizing race as the central analytic lens and its commitment to social justice along with political ecology's grounding in the inextricability of race and nature and how those conceptualizations have materially impacted the ways in which people relate to nature and the environment will help address some of the weaknesses identified in the traditional career literature.

### **Chapter Summary**

In chapter two, I explored the literature on the conceptualization of race, racism, nature and how these concepts are mutually reinforcing. I explored the origins of critical race theory, the history of the American conservation movement, and contextualized modern mainstream environmentalism and environmental justice to provide insights into people of color's relative absence from the environmental professions.

The review of literature revealed that much of the research related to the barriers facing people of color in traditional environmental careers has focused on quantifying underrepresentation, has focused on barriers to entry, placed too much emphasis on self-agency, and not enough emphasis on the institutional structures that work to exclude people of color from those careers. I identified gaps in the literature which were a thorough understanding of the lived experience of people of color who had already chosen an

environmental career and an understanding of how structural barriers influence people of color's ability to achieve equity in the environmental field

In this review, I also critiqued environmental scholarship with respect to how people of color relate to nature, along with an examination of theoretical frameworks used in that scholarship. The literature review showed that despite experiences with racist practices and policies, people of color continue to hold a strong environmental ethic and choose to pursue traditional environmental careers and environmental advocacy careers.

The information I presented in this literature review informed my study, providing important quantitative information on the underrepresentation of people of color in the environmental field and the quickly evolving conversations among practitioners sparked both from scholars of color and from the Black Lives Matter social justice movement in 2020. In chapter three I will describe why I chose to combine critical race theory and narrative research as the methodological framework for this qualitative study. I will also provide details on the study design, including the participant selection, my positionality, ethical considerations, data collection, and analysis.

### III. RESEARCH METHODS

The dominant American culture has dictated how people of color have interacted with the environment, has reinforced institutional structures that exclude people of color from environmental decision making, and has even defined the meaning of an environmental career. It has created a storyline steeped in stereotypes about the American conservation movement and modern environmentalism that has glossed over exclusions of people of color in the environmental field and emphasized assumptions about people of color's sense of place and interest (or lack of interest) in the outdoors. My goal in this qualitative study was to uncover how race, space, nature, and racialized power structures manifest within environmental organizations through the narratives of people of color who work or have worked in the environmental field. My intent was to cultivate a deeper understanding of the barriers and opportunities environmental professionals of color experience and how those experiences influence their career progression and outlook. The study consisted of 32 interviews with environmental professionals of color at various stages of their careers and addressed the following research questions:

- R1: What are the lived experiences of people of color who have chosen to work in the environmental field?
  - How have these experiences influenced the careers of environmental professionals of color?
  - How have these experiences shaped the career outlooks of environmental professionals of color?
- R2: What systemic barriers to equity, inclusion, and belonging do professionals of color perceive in environmental jobs?

- How do perceptions of systemic racism influence environmental professionals of color's careers?
- How do intersectionalities amplify the experiences and perceptions of systemic racism?
- R3: What strategies do environmental professionals of color develop in response to the systemic barriers they encounter?

### **Critical Race Theory and Narrative Research**

In designing this qualitative study, I chose to combine critical race theory and narrative research to facilitate participant counterstorytelling (Connelly and Clandinin 2000; Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Clandinin, Pushor and Murray-Orr 2007). This methodological framework helped illuminate the lived experience of people of color employed in the environmental field and understand the role race/ethnicity played in shaping their careers (Solórzano and Yosso 2002).

Critical race theory has several interconnected tenets which I described in detail in chapter two (Delgado 2009; Crenshaw 2011; Capper 2015). Scholars have applied some combination of the tenets in their research to foreground race/ethnicity based on the principle that race and discrimination are inseparable from a person's experience, both to those advantaged and oppressed by race (Collins 1996; Collins 2000a,b; Ladson-Billings 2000; Ladson-Billings and Tate 2006; Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings 2016). Scholars have used CRT to study and disrupt existing relationships between race, racism, and power (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000; Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Yosso et al. 2009; Delgado and Stefancic 2013; Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Scholars have also incorporated CRT tenets to challenge narrative omissions within the body of literature and create space for the

exploration of the experiences and knowledge of people of color (Solórzano and Yosso 2002).

Dominant narratives, also known as majoritarian stories (Delgado 1989; Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Delgado and Stefancic 2013) are stories that are most commonly known and believed and carry assumptions from the perspective of racial, gender, class, and other forms of privilege (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). To challenge dominant narratives, CRT scholars have generated stories, or counterstories, from the perspective of the people most affected by racism and other forms of discrimination (Delgado and Stefancic 2013; Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Counterstories can intervene in the inherent omissions and erasures of dominant narratives. Counterstories can also challenge traditional explanations of power relationships by emphasizing the role of context and history in meaning-making (Delgado 1989; Delgado and Stefancic 2013; Delgado and Stefancic 2017).

Delgado first theorized using counterstorytelling as a method and identified several forms counterstories could take, including chronicles, narratives, allegories, parables, dialogues, and more (Delgado 1989). Solórzano and Yosso defined counterstories “...as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told... [and] is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 32). In practice, CRT scholars have applied a range of counterstorytelling methods including the creation of autobiographical stories, biographical stories, composite narratives that draw from various stories, family histories, cuentos, and testimonios (Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Perez -Huber 2008; Delgado and Stefancic 2013; Delgado and Stefancic 2017).

Narrative research aligns closely with CRT counterstorytelling (Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Narrative research advances the concepts that people

organize their experiences into narratives, that stories depend on a person's experiences and values, that people place meaning on those experiences, and that stories are multidimensional (Connelly and Clandinin 2000; Moen 2006; Clandinin, Pushor and Murray-Orr 2007). As a methods framework, narratives are collected and analyzed through a hermeneutic, or interpretive, process (Moen 2006).

Combining CRT and narrative research added depth to this study because it facilitated conveying participants' experiences through 32 biographical counterstories and describing meanings they placed on those experiences (Connelly and Clandinin 2000; Moen 2006; Clandinin, Pushor and Murray-Orr 2007). It provided a lens through which I was able to explore the participants' personal and professional experiences with nature and the environment, racism, systemic barriers and racism in the environmental field, and racial and other forms of inequities (Rollock and Gillborn 2011; Crenshaw 2017). This approach allowed me capture the complexities and unique journeys of each of the participants, including the circumstances that led to the participant's current roles and the influences and challenges that shaped their career paths. This approach also facilitated my interpretation of the counterstories and helped me organize and convey emergent themes to deepen the understanding of environmental professionals of color's experiences (Moen 2006).

### ***Sampling Plan***

This study was not intended to make generalizations about the experiences of people of color as a monolithic group, nor was it meant to be a comparison between the experiences of people of color and White people. Rather, this study was meant to uncover the unique perspectives and experiences environmental professionals of color encounter and influence their careers. In addition, it was also meant to elevate stories that have not been included in the dominant environmental narrative. Recognizing that any study about the

experiences of people of color could be at risk for being reductive and perpetuating racial essentialisms and stereotypes, I was careful in how I designed the research, selected and interacted with the participants, and framed the analysis to avoid any racial/ethnic essentialisms and stereotypes.

The premise of this study was based on research showing that people of color were underrepresented in the environmental field (Taylor 2014; Taylor 2018; Green 2.0 2019; Taylor, Paul, and McCoy 2019), that even fewer hold environmental leadership positions (Taylor 2014; Beasley 2016) and that programs focused in increasing diversity were not founded on inclusivity principles (Beasley 2017; Bonta 2019). Thus as I considered the relatively small population in addition to the uncertainty of the number of people who would be willing to share their stories, I chose to include participants who would be willing to share their stories from across the United States and with distinct backgrounds, including race/ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and age.

Through my literature review, it was also apparent that much of the qualitative CRT career research in other fields such as education and psychology included a limited number of participants focusing on people from one race/ethnicity, one gender, and/or one career stage. Because there had been relatively little research beyond STEM education and early career recruitment pipelines as I described in chapter two, I chose a sample size of between five and ten environmental professionals of color from each of the four career stages I defined, with an aim of including 30 people in this study (Guetterman 2015).

### ***Institutional Review Board Approval***

Because I planned to use human subjects, this qualitative research study required Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Prior to submitting my IRB application, I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative's (CITI Program) basic course

in Human Research in March 2017 and the refresher course in August 2019 (Appendix 1: CITI Program Course Certification). In November 2019, I received a letter of support from Texas State University's Meadows Center for Water and the Environment (Meadows Center) to distribute the invitation to participate letter through their internal email distribution list (Appendix 2: Letter of Support). In December 2019, I submitted my IRB application to the Texas State Institutional Review Board for approval. In late December 2019, IRB requested minor modifications and, in January 2020, approved the application at the Exempt Review Level (Appendix 3: IRB approval). The approved IRB included an Invitation to Participate Letter and a Research Protocol.

In late March 2020, the Texas State University's IRB Chair requested that all researchers at Texas State University who had an approved protocol involving human subjects amend their IRB applications to minimize the risk of exposure to the coronavirus. I submitted an amended protocol removing all person-to-person contact, where interviews would be conducted via Zoom video-conferencing, and the informed consent to interview would be collected via DocuSign electronic signatures. On 5 June 2020, IRB approved the amended protocol (Appendix 4: IRB COVID Amendment).

### ***Beta-Testing***

While I awaited the initial IRB approval, I beta-tested the semi-structured interview prompts with four colleagues who work in the environmental profession. After each interview, I asked for feedback to improve both my interview style and the interview prompts themselves. Based on that feedback, I was able to gain confidence in my interview style and adjust the prompts to elicit a flowing conversation.



### ***Site Selection***

As I described in the sampling plan, I chose to include people from across the United States to participate in this study for many reasons. First, I was concerned that I would not get enough participants if I limited participation to one state, such as Texas where I currently reside. Finding people willing to share deeply personal stories was inherently limiting and further complicated when there is a relatively small pool of potential participants. Also, building trust between the participants and me was critical to this study. Part of that trust was ensuring that the participants' stories remain anonymous, which would have been exceedingly difficult to do within a single state and a small pool of participants. Second, having worked in environmental leadership positions in Texas, including environmental philanthropy, I was concerned that there could be insurmountable power dynamics where people might feel obligated to participate or would feel uncomfortable sharing their experiences for fear of financial consequences. Third, I believed that limiting the scale to a state or region would exclude people who had moved between states throughout their careers. Fourth, another foundational assumption for this research was that the underrepresentation of people of color in the environmental field was unique to the United States because of the nation's history and culture (Finney 2014a, Taylor 2014, 2016). Therefore, I did not include people who had only been employed outside of the United States to participate in this study.

Initially, I had planned to conduct interviews in-person whenever possible and via Zoom when I could not meet with the participant in person. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the U.S. in March 2020, I immediately changed all scheduled in-person interviews to Zoom. As a result, all but one interview was conducted via Zoom.

## Data Collection Summary

Once I received IRB approval, I initiated data collection and then I analyzed the data. The data collection and analysis timeline is summarized in the table below (Table 1).

**Table 1: Data Collection and Analysis Timeline**

Months in 2020	Data and Analysis Process
February - May	Recruited participants using the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment website as a platform for invitation. Invitations sent through Meadows Center newsletters, affiliated environmental organizations, national environmental organizations, and by snowballing.
March-June	Potential participants contacted me via email.
March-June	Replied to potential participants with additional information, disclosures, and possible scheduled times in 1.5 hour increments.
March-June	Interested participants replied with their preferred interview time.
March-June	One or two days prior to the interview, sent consent forms via DocuSign as a reminder and confirmation of the interview.
March-June	Conducted interviews. Recorded the interviews with a handheld audio recorder for the in-person interview and Zoom for remote interviews. Took extensive notes.
March-July	Within two weeks of each interview, sent follow-up emails thanking participants and updating them on the research timeline.
April-July	Processed the audio recordings to remove ambient noise.
April-July	Transcribed the interviews via online transcription service.
May-June	Peer debriefing with Dr. Emily Summers, created a coding system and codebook using interview notes, <i>a priori</i> CRT codes, and emergent codes.
May-July	Compared the audio recording, written notes from the interviews, and draft transcripts to ensure accuracy and developed final draft transcripts.
July	Member-checked by sending the final draft transcripts to the participants and included additional information, included additional information participants sent to the transcripts.
July	Used pseudonyms for each participant and removed potential identifying names/locations to protect identities and produced final transcripts.
May-July	Independently coded the final transcripts in MAXQDA Plus 2020. As I coded, I added extensive notes in MAXQDA for reference later.
May	Trained my colleague, Farnaz Seddighzadeh on the codes, using the codebook.

May-July	To code-check, Farnaz Seddighzadeh independently coded each final transcript. In addition, she put notes in MAXQDA for reference. We compared each transcript after independent coding and discussed differences or additional codes that should be added.
August	Finalized coding transcripts to prepare data for interpretation.
September-November	To answer R1, used the coded transcripts to write counterstories for each participant. To answer R2 and R3, I looked for patterns or commonalities in the coded transcripts, identified salient themes, and interpreted results.

### ***Participant Selection***

Following the sampling plan described above and to the greatest extent available at the time of this data collection, I included participants from distinct backgrounds, including race/ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and age. To recruit this diverse pool of potential interviewees, I used the IRB-approved invitation letter that contained context for the research. In February 2020, the Meadows Center created a website and added the link to their Educational Research page on the Meadows Center’s website (Meadows Center 2020). The Meadows Center also included the invitation and the URL in several of their newsletters (Table 2).

**Table 2: The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment Outreach for Study Participation**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Outlet</b>	<b>Reach</b>	<b>Link Clicks</b>
2/26/20	Email Newsletter (Texas+Water: Vol. 3, Issue 2)	7,414	10
2/27/20	Email Newsletter (Waterways - Quarterly Texas Stream Team Update)	3,563	11
2/28/20	Email Newsletter (Texas+Water: Vol. 3, Issue 2 [resend])	6,467	7
3/3/20	Email Newsletter (Cypress Creek Project Quarterly Update)	217	1
3/3/20	Email Newsletter (Upper San Marcos WPP Quarterly Update)	173	2
3/9/20	Twitter	934	3
3/9/20	Facebook	1,064	12
3/9/20	LinkedIn Company Page	179	7
4/20/20	Facebook	587	14

5/4/20	LinkedIn Company Page	232	8
5/11/20	Facebook	953	74
5/12/20	Twitter	645	14
5/15/20	LinkedIn Company Page	121	10
5/16/20	Facebook	507	18
5/21/20	Twitter	432	14
	<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>23,488</b>	<b>205</b>

I chose this distribution approach because I had a previous long-term professional relationship with the Meadows Center and was familiar with their robust online databases. The Meadows Center’s distribution network included approximately 14,000 people who had previously expressed an interest in water and environmental issues in the United States and included people of color employed in environmental careers in the nonprofit, governmental, advocacy, education, and philanthropy sectors. In addition, because it is part of Texas State University, the Meadows Center had previous experience successfully distributing academic research surveys that aligned with their mission.

I used the Meadows Center’s website platform as a springboard to widely and equitably distribute the invitation to participate. Because of my 20-year professional environmental career, I used my own national professional network and a snowball sampling approach to identify potential participants for the interviews. Once the website was live, I shared the link with several professional colleagues and asked if they would share the link through their own professional networks, including but not limited to Environmental Defense Fund, Harvard School of Forestry alumni, Hill Country Alliance, Hill Country Conservancy, National Wildlife Federation, the Nature Conservancy, the O’Niell School of Public and Environmental Affairs alumni, Texas Living Waters, Texas Water Foundation,

and the Water Funders Initiative. I also shared the link with colleagues via LinkedIn and invited their participation.

This initial outreach yielded approximately 35 people from across the U.S. who contacted me via email expressing their interest in participating in the study in March 2020. I emailed all interested individuals in which I disclosed additional information about the purpose of the study and my personal interest in the work. In addition, I sought confirmation of their participation prior to setting up the interview. Based on positive responses, I scheduled both in-person and Zoom video conferencing interviews. In mid-March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused several Texas participants to withdraw their offer to participate. In addition, to ensure the safety of the participants, I changed all of the originally scheduled in-person interviews to Zoom.

In April 2020, I assessed whether I had a sufficiently broad pool of participants, experiences, and perspectives. At this stage of the study, I decided that it would be important to purposefully select professionals of color who were early in their careers (Guetterman 2015). Through snowballing and additional network outreach, I was able to schedule interviews with 32 participants. Participants included: nine early career professionals; ten mid-career professionals; six upper management professionals; and seven leadership career professionals. The participants had a range of organizational experience, including in governmental environmental agencies, public utilities, nonprofits, philanthropy, private consulting, education, advocacy, and environmental justice organizations. The participants also had a wide range of environmental volunteer and professional experience, including urban planning, social or environmental justice, community organizing, green transportation, grantmaking, communications, engineering, research, field crew, research, community outreach, environmental education, restoration, monitoring, infrastructure mitigation, and

more. All participants had graduated with at least an associate's degree, with many of the participants holding advanced degrees. Furthermore, the participants had experiences in at least 26 states across the U.S. (Table 3).

**Table 3: Participant demographics**

	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Self-described Race /Ethnicity</b>	<b>Career Stage</b>	<b>Organization (s) Sector Worked</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Income Range (thousands)</b>	<b>Gender (F/M/Other)</b>
1	Athena Baker	African American	early	NGO	20	<\$50	F
2	Cyrus Carter	Black	early	NGO, private	30	\$50-\$100	M
3	Dahlia Chiba	Asian American/ Japanese-Filipino	early	NGO	20	>\$100	F
4	Grace Chen	Taiwanese-American	early	NGO, government, private	30	<\$50	F
5	Natalia Diaz	Peruvian-American	early	NGO, government	30	>\$100	F
6	Nina Espinoza	Hispanic - Costa Rican/Nicaraguan	early	private	20	<\$50	F
7	Pilar Castillo	Hispanic	early	NGO, academia	20	<\$50	F
8	Tessa Chung	Asian-Caucasian	early	NGO, government	20	\$50-\$100	F
9	Trinity Anderson	Korean-Black	early	academia	20	<\$50	F
10	Aaliyah Johnson	Black-American	mid	NGO, government, advocacy	30	\$50-\$100	F
11	Breonna Harris	Black	mid	NGO	30	\$50-\$100	F
12	Audre Howard	African American	mid	NGO, government, academia	20	<\$50	F
13	Daniel Gonzales	Filipino	mid	NGO, government	30	<\$50	M
14	Esme Ho	Asian American	mid	NGO, government	30	\$50-\$100	F
15	Fiona Huang	Chinese-American	mid	NGO, private	30	\$50-\$100	F
16	Lianni Joshi	Asian American-Indian American	mid	government, private	30	\$50-\$100	F
17	Reina Gomez	Latina	mid	government, advocacy,	30	>\$100	F

18	Soledad Iglesias	Native-American/Latina	mid	NGO	30	\$50-\$100	F
19	Veronica Feng	Asian/ White-Jewish	mid	government, advocacy	30	>\$100	F
20	Aaron King	African American	upper management	NGO, government	40	\$50-\$100	M
21	Greg Kim	Asian American/Korean-American	upper management	government, private	30	>\$100	M
22	Zaynab Marashi	Iranian-American	upper management	government	30	\$50-\$100	F
23	Lakshmi Kumar	South Asian	upper management	NGO, advocacy, private	30	\$50-\$100	F
24	Porfirio Martinez	Mexican-American	upper management	government	30	\$50-\$100	M
25	Paloma Lara	Hispanic/White	upper management	NGO, government	30	<\$50	F
26	Bob Wagner	African American	leadership	NGO, government, private	60	>\$100	M
27	Frank Sato	Asian-Japanese-American	leadership	government	60	>\$100	M
28	Kamala Singh	South Asian	leadership	NGO, government	40	>\$100	F
29	Nohemi Pacheco	Latina	leadership	NGO, academia	40	>\$100	F
30	Nico Perez	Hispanic	leadership	NGO, academia	50	\$50-\$100	M
31	Noelia Torres	Hispanic	leadership	NGO, government	50	>\$100	F
32	Paz Velazquez	Hispanic	leadership	NGO, government, private	30	\$50-\$100	F

### ***Positionality and Ethics***

In qualitative research, the role of the researcher is an important consideration, particularly when it comes to researching issues of inequity (Alcoff 1991; Gunaratnam 2003; Pillow 2003). Who I am and my own lived experiences are integral to my research interests. Throughout this study I thought critically about my positionality and carefully weighed how my perceptions shaped the research, including when and how much of my racial/ethnic

background I should disclose to the participants. Most importantly, I wanted to ensure that I followed best practices to conduct an ethical study in which participants were treated with respect and felt comfortable sharing their own experiences (Creswell and Poth 2018). Twine, Warren, and Warren (2000) suggested that the significance of being of the same race (racial insider) or of a different race (racial outsider) as the research participants' race is largely contextual. Being a racial insider alone does not necessarily ensure the researcher's ability to represent the participant (Twine, Warren, and Warren 2000). Rather, the researcher's awareness about race and racism are often more important (Twine, Warren, and Warren 2000).

***My background:*** I am a Venezuelan-American Latina woman. The culture of my nation of birth and my family are a big part of who I am. My perspectives were forged as I have vacillated between the binaries of privilege and disadvantage inherently tied to race, gender, class, culture, and circumstance.

***Becoming White:*** I grew up in the middle class and, like a majority of the Venezuelan population at that time, I was *morena* — racially mixed White, Black, and Indigenous. When I permanently moved to the U.S. as a teenager into a lower-middle class household in the Midwest, my identity became a subject of conversation and question for which I had little preparation. White Midwesterners — including strangers in stores — often asked me, “what are you?” or made unprovoked xenophobic comments like “go home you fucking immigrant.” Because my mother is White and my younger siblings are half African, our family was also the target of overtly racist acts. Although I never quite wrapped my head around American racial differences at the time, I tried to fit into the predominantly White culture, including working hard to eliminate my accent. After graduate school when I moved



to Texas, I suddenly passed for White. When people discovered my upbringing, the most frequent response became “you don’t look Hispanic [Latina/Venezuelan].” It was surreal!

***Privilege:*** Although I have never considered myself to be one, I know I have directly benefited from the privilege of being a White American. The most stark examples are when I’m able to carry out mundane activities alone and I never get followed by clerks in stores nor do I ever get stopped by police while driving a car for no apparent reason, unlike when I am with my husband who is Black.

***Intersectionality & Guilt by Association:*** In my environmental career, that privilege has extended to a point — I am a woman after all. For example, I attained upper-management positions, but White male counterparts ascended more quickly or were paid a higher salary for less work. White male colleagues have taken my ideas or work as their own, questioned my expertise or authority, and cut into my presentations to “help me out.” I have had to temper my personality to fit within the workplace culture. I have had enough privilege to call out racist behavior or practices I have observed but not enough social capital to change work culture or decision-making. My social capital has been further reduced when White colleagues have discovered that I am Latina or have a Black/African/Venezuelan/immigrant family. This othering has included overt “you are a Mexican from the south” comments, subtle shifts in rapport, or sidelining my expertise to social justice issues.

***Vanilla Radical:*** Over the years, I have had countless conversations with my friends of color about our experiences in the environmental field, the challenges they faced, and the disconnect between our realities and White leaderships’ perceptions. When I reached a management-level position, I felt emboldened to share my sense of urgency to address the lack of diversity in the environment and to concentrate my work on diversity, inclusion, and environmental justice. Increasingly, I became frustrated with my organization and the

environmental community as I attempted to elevate these issues. Although I was met with well-intentioned interest, I encountered stereotypical assumptions about people of color's lack of participation in the environment. For example, I often heard hiring managers say that they could not find qualified candidates of color to fill entry-level positions despite knowing that I had been working with over 30 college students of color each year who met those qualifications. These observations (before I had the language to adequately articulate that disconnect) led to my decision to pursue a PhD to understand the disconnect between what I considered to be reality and the false narrative of the environmental field.

### ***Data Collection - Interviews***

Prior to the start of each interview, I collected "Consent to Interview" forms from each participant. As most of the interviews were conducted remotely, I used DocuSign, a secure online electronic signature platform, to collect the consent forms. Next, I followed the IRB-approved interview protocol where I provided an introduction, iterated the purpose of the study, that it would be recorded, and how the recordings would be transcribed and kept confidential (Creswell 2014). I then gathered participants' demographic information, including race and/or ethnicity; gender; current/highest stage of environmental career; age range; and income range (Table 2). Finally, I asked if the participants had any additional questions, which I answered prior to initiating the recording.

I used semi-structured interviews to allow a more thorough exploration of experiences in early career, mid-career, upper management, and leadership level positions than either an unstructured or a standardized interview would permit (Creswell et al. 2007; Creswell 2014; Merriam and Tisdell 2016). The semi-structured interview method allowed for enough structure to critically analyze responses as well as flexibility to encourage participants to tell their stories from their perspective and explore experiences in an open-

ended format (Creswell 2014). During the interviews, I took extensive notes to help with my active listening, ensure that I did not inadvertently ask questions the participant had answered, and remind myself to go back to topics participants raised that I wanted to further explore. I also used the notes to jot down themes I heard echoed in other interviews.

I used the following prompts to guide each semi-structured interview:

1. Start by telling me a little bit about yourself — where did you grow up, where did you go to school?
2. What do you think made you an environmentalist or choose this career?
  - a. Was there anyone who inspired you? Did you have a role model?
3. What was your path (school, jobs) once you knew you had an interest in the environment?
  - a. Was it easy to find your first job?
  - b. Did anyone help you in your career?
  - c. Did you have colleagues that you identified with/you considered your peers?
  - d. Was the environmental field what you thought it would be?
4. What have been the most rewarding experiences in your job(s)? Why were these experiences exceptionally rewarding? Was your race/ethnicity, or other aspects of your identity or personal circumstances, a factor?
5. What have been the most challenging experiences in your job(s)? Was your race/ethnicity, or other aspects of your identity or personal circumstances, a factor?
6. Did you overcome those barriers or obstacles?
  - a. If so, how?
  - b. If not, what would have helped you do so?
7. Do you feel you've missed opportunities in your career?
  - a. If so, which ones? How/Why?
  - b. Was your race/ethnicity, or other aspects of your identity or personal circumstances, a factor?
8. How would you say these experiences (of social exclusion, racism, classism, ageism, etc.) influenced you or your career path?
9. What do you think would have to change for there to be more people of color in\_\_\_:
  - a. environmental jobs
  - b. environmental leadership positions
  - c. What advice would you give someone with your background who is entering in this career — or what advice would you give your younger self?
10. What does \_\_\_ mean to you:
  - a. Nature and/or the environment
  - b. Environmental job

To conclude the interview, I asked participants if they wanted to add anything or whether they wished I had asked them something I had not included.

Most of the participants revealed very intimate details of their lives, some of which elicited emotional responses. Because I wanted to focus on the participants' stories, I limited my reactions as much as possible during the recording. After each interview, I asked participants if they would be willing to talk with me after I stopped recording. All participants agreed. During this debriefing, I shared my reactions to their stories more candidly, including highlighting examples where I identified with the experiences they shared. Although I thanked each person for their willingness to participate in the study, every participant thanked me for including them in the study — many stating that this was the first time they had been asked their perspectives, that the interview had felt like a therapy session, or that they appreciated not feeling alone in their experiences. I also provided my planned timeline for finishing the research and told them I would send the results when I completed the study. Within two weeks of each interview, I sent follow-up emails thanking participants and updating them on my timeline.

I conducted one in-person interview at an office in downtown Austin, Texas. I conducted the rest of the interviews remotely. I recorded the in-person interviews using a digital audio-recorder (1) and the remote interviews using Zoom (31). Next I saved the audio files to a personal computer and used Apple Logic Pro X and plug-ins to clean the audio files, which included: reducing background noise; removing hum from direct current, ground rumble, or any other low frequency sources; reducing high frequency distortion or crackle; removing sibilance (i.e., any harsh “s”, “j”, “ch” sounds); and lightly mastering the audio files.

I compared various artificial intelligence transcription services and found that most of them had difficulty understanding and transcribing accents with more than 60% accuracy. Based on time and financial constraints, I ended up choosing scribie.com's and rev.com's

manual transcription service, which provided 90- 95% transcription accuracy. After I cleaned the audio files, I uploaded them to the secure online portals for transcription. Once each interview was initially transcribed, I reviewed and corrected the transcripts using scribie.com's and rev.com's online portal.

### ***Member Check***

I sent the final transcripts of individual interviews to each participant inviting them to provide any additional information. I reminded participants that I would be taking out all identifying information from the transcripts in my analysis. Out of the 32 participants, 19 people responded to acknowledge that they did not have anything to add or to provide additional information. Since the timing of my interviews occurred between March and June 2020, Christian Cooper's confrontation in Central Park, the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and subsequent racial justice protests affected the context of the interview for many of the participants. As a result, several participants provided additional information within the unfolding racial justice backdrop.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the transcripts had been reviewed by the participants, I downloaded them to my computer and assigned participants with pseudonyms and changed personal identifying information, including names of colleagues, places of employment, and geographies. Next, I imported the transcripts into MAXQDA Plus 2020 for coding and analysis.

The coding process was deliberate and iterative (Saldaña 2016). I created an exploratory code book starting with *a priori* codes and definitions based on Critical Race Theory themes and subthemes I had noted during the interviews. I peer debriefed with my advisor, Dr. Ronald Hagelman, and committee member, Dr. Emily Summers, on the preliminary codes. Next, I applied the exploratory codebook to five transcripts and

discovered additional emergent codes. Using the four *a priori* CRT themed codes and six emergent themed codes, I developed and entered the resulting codebook, including definitions and examples, into MAXQDA.

While I coded the remaining transcripts, I enlisted the help of a trusted colleague, Farnaz Seddighzadeh, to independently code the 32 transcripts. Based on that independent coding, code-checking conversations, and numerous readings of the transcripts, I discovered additional themes, which I included as codes and later applied to each transcript. I also reorganized the codes several times throughout the analysis. The final six code categories and sub-categories, included:

1. White Culture - Work Culture
  - a. DEI
  - b. Race and Racism
  - c. Job opportunities
  - d. Work Setting and Organizational Structure
  - e. Whiteness as Property
  - f. Diverse Workplace
  - g. Meritocracy
2. Racism and Microaggressions
  - a. Interest Convergence
  - b. Internalized Racism
  - c. Race is a Social Construct
  - d. Question Expertise
  - e. Target of Discrediting
  - f. Exclusion
3. Intersectionality
  - a. Gender
  - b. Age
  - c. Class
  - d. Geography
  - e. Language
  - f. Political/Economic Influence
4. Burden - Emotional Reaction
  - a. Sacrifices and Regrets
  - b. Future Outlook
  - c. No Passion
  - d. Disillusionment
5. Gaming the System
  - a. Understanding the Game
  - b. Social Capital

- c. Resilience
  - d. Passion - Nature and Community
  - e. Insulating connections
  - f. Courageousness: Persistence, Fight back, Taking risk
6. Background and Stories
- a. Career Trajectory
  - b. Education
  - c. Familial

### ***Counterstories and Themes***

Once the transcripts were coded, I looked for patterns and identified themes that answered my research questions. I considered how best to present each participant's unique experiences based on these themes. The resulting 32 counterstories found in chapter four answered Research Question 1. I also identified commonalities and salient themes to answer Research Questions 2 and 3, which are presented in chapter five.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I described critical race theory and narrative research and why I selected them for this qualitative study. I also provided details on the study design, including the participant selection, my positionality, ethical considerations, data collection, and analysis.

I used critical race theory to help illuminate the lived experience of professionals of color employed in the environmental field (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). I also chose narrative research because it advances the concepts that people organize their experiences into narratives (Connelly and Clandinin 2000; Moen 2006; Clandinin, Pushor and Murray-Orr, 2007). Using CRT and narrative research, I created biographical counterstories based on 32 interviews of environmental professionals of color. This approach helped capture the complexities and unique journeys of each of the participants. It also helped reveal the circumstances that led to the participant's current roles and identified the influences and challenges that shaped their career paths. I present participant counterstories in chapter four.

## IV. COUNTERSTORIES

“I feel better about myself with this interview.... There's not many times where people ask for your story.”

— Audre Howard, 2020

In this chapter, I share the counterstories of the 32 individuals who participated in this study. Each counterstory stands on its own and uniquely challenges the narratives that have dominated the environmental field about how people of color interact with and value nature (Sheppard 1995; Taylor 2007, 2008; Lee 2008; Taylor 2014; Pearson et al. 2018), the dominant narrative that environmental institutions are post-racial workplaces (Taylor 2007, 2008; Balcarczyk et al. 2015), and why people of color are underrepresented in the environmental workforce and in environmental leadership positions (Finney 2014; Taylor 2014; Hayes and Jacobson 2015; Hayes, Jacobson, and Wald 2015; Johnson 2019). The counterstories break away from traditional White-centered scholarship by exploring the reasons for underrepresentation through environmental professionals of color's own voices, journeys, and perspectives.

Each counterstory is organized in a similar format, starting with the participants' self-described race/ethnicity and background; the genesis of their nature/environmental interests; their career paths and major influences; the participants' most rewarding and challenging career experiences; the strategies participants developed to overcome challenging circumstances, structures, or barriers; the participants' future career outlook; and, lastly, the advice participants would have given their younger selves or a person with a similar background who was considering an environmental job/career. Due to the fluid nature of the conversation in the interviews, however, in a few instances participants did not share every category above.



The counterstories are grouped by career stage and presented in the professional arc from early-career, to mid-career, upper management, and leadership positions. Wherever possible, I used direct quotations from the interview transcripts to highlight the participants' own voice and unique experiences. I omitted false starts, stutters, and fillers such as "ums" and "uhs" to the extent that these omissions did not change the central meaning of the participants' stories. I bracketed and described names, locations, employment places, or other identifying language choices to protect participants' identities.

The counterstories offer a window into the array of experiences, barriers to equity, strategies developed in response to barriers, and career outlooks among environmental employees of color who participated in this study. Taken together, the participants' counterstories answer the first research question and accompanying secondary research questions below:

- R1: What are the lived experiences of people of color who have chosen to work in the environmental field?
  - How have these experiences influenced the careers of environmental professionals of color?
  - How have these experiences shaped the career outlooks of environmental professionals of color?

The counterstories also reveal convergent and divergent themes among the participants' experiences and bring to light some of the reasons why relatively few people of color are represented in the environmental field. These salient themes will answer the second and third research questions, which I will explore further in chapter five.

## Early Career Professional Counterstories

Nine early career professionals participated in this study. In terms of race/ethnicity, two of the participants were Black, two were Asian American, three were Latina, and two were Multi-Racial/Ethnic. Six participants were in their 20s and three were in their 30s. Five participants made less than \$50,000 per year, two made \$50,000-\$100,000, and two made more than \$100,000. Eight of the participants were females and one was male (Table 4).

**Table 4: Early Career Professionals**

	Pseudonym	Self-described Race / Ethnicity	Organization (s) Sector Worked	Age Range	Income Range (thousands)	Gender (F/M/Other)
1	Athena Baker	African American	NGO	20	<\$50	F
2	Cyrus Carter	Black	NGO, private	30	\$50-\$100	M
3	Dahlia Chiba	Asian American/ Japanese-Filipino	NGO	20	>\$100	F
4	Grace Chen	Taiwanese- American	NGO, government, private	30	<\$50	F
5	Natalia Diaz	Peruvian-American	NGO, government	30	>\$100	F
6	Nina Espinoza	Hispanic - Costa Rican/Nicaraguan	consulting	20	<\$50	F
7	Pilar Castillo	Hispanic	NGO, academia	20	<\$50	F
8	Tessa Chung	Asian-Caucasian	NGO, government	20	\$50-\$100	F
9	Trinity Anderson	Korean-Black	academia	20	<\$50	F

### *Athena Baker*

"Another thing that was challenging was me finding my voice in that space and not doubting what I have to offer."

Athena Baker, an African American female in her 20s, grew up with five siblings in a lower-income neighborhood of a major metropolitan city in the Midwest. After her parents struggled with student loans from her older siblings, they insisted that Athena attend a

community college, where she felt she did not receive the quality of education for which she had hoped. Athena was inspired to work in environmental education because her community had landfills and hazardous materials, and did not have many public parks. She described that there were several community engagement efforts to revitalize the neighborhood, including creating community gardens. However, she also observed that White people led those efforts, not Black community members themselves.

"And, I was kind of interested in those gardens, but I noticed there were never Black people who were helping in those gardens; always White people helping in those gardens. And so, I just was like, 'Oh, well, I don't really know if that's for me,' you know?"

After college, she volunteered for an AmeriCorps program focused on bridging inequities and opportunities for inner-city youth who would not otherwise have them. The AmeriCorps program opened many doors for Athena and led her to an apprenticeship and paid positions at an environmental nonprofit organization.

Athena had many rewarding experiences in her current organization. She appreciated colleagues who were patient with her and were willing to teach her new concepts. She appreciated meeting new people with new perspectives even though she worked in a predominantly White space. She also described her fieldwork as being incredibly positive, "like, for example, we would go out, and we would go on a bird walk. And, for the first time, I would see a trumpeter swan. And it was a sight to see. And it made my day."

However, having never worked in an office setting, it was difficult for Athena to adjust to the work culture. She felt that she had to code-switch, learn how to speak the same language as her colleagues, not be herself, and put in considerable effort to socialize and relate. "It's not just sunshine and rainbows that you would think."

"Like, 'Okay, this is how people are talking. Let me try to talk how they're talking.' Like, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do.' You know what they

say? And so, I was trying to talk and then trying to listen. [...] And, I noticed that there was a common trend of certain words that people will use.” She described that the pressure to fit in caused her to have “imposter syndrome,”

where she struggled with self-doubt and not feeling valued by her managers. In several situations when Athena felt her manager did not provide the support, guidance, or recognition she deserved, she remarked that she did not know how to advocate for herself. In those situations, she sought guidance from peers and mentors who helped give her the confidence to find her voice.

"A part of my deliverables were to travel to the schools that I were coordinating. And, some of the schools were up north. [...] And, I was just like, 'It's costing me a lot a month to put a 30-Day on my bus card,' [...] And so, I was very frustrated, and I was like, 'Oh, well maybe I just need to do this, and just make it work, and suck it up.' And so, for a while, that was my mantra, which is terrible. [...] And so, I had spoke to one of my Corps members. [...] I was like, 'I don't really know what to do about this.' And she was like, 'Well just [...] tell them that's not feasible,' [...] that was my first time hearing that word. [...] She told me what to say. And so, I literally just said what she said. And then, he's like, 'Oh, okay.' And then, he started to help me out. And I was just like, 'That's all we need to do?'"

Athena explained she did not have many peers which she felt she could relate to “because I feel like part of me has my guards up. And I feel like I canceled out a couple of opportunities when I shouldn’t have with bonding with other people.” She described feeling intimidated by the smart people at her organization, “...and I didn't want to seem like this dumb Black girl, honestly, from an impoverished area in [my city].” However, she sought advice and support from three women colleagues of color, whom she described as essential to her survival at the organization.

“ So, it was just like my supervisor; he would give me his approach to his supervising. And then, when I felt like I needed a woman's lens on things, I would go to [two colleague names] about certain things, and they will give me advice. And so, I don't think I would have survived that apprenticeship without them at all. At all."

In addition to the personal challenges Athena faced fitting into the workplace culture, she described many instances of inequity within the organizational structure that directly affected her. Other departments within her organization, which were predominantly White, were better funded and able to fill vacant positions. In contrast, in her department, which predominantly included employees of color, employees were frequently overworked and not often promoted or recognized for their work. When Athena's manager left the position, the organization's leadership asked her to stay because they recognized her as an asset to the organization. However, leadership was unwilling to pay her what she felt she was worth, offering her part-time employment without benefits. And, due to her lack of confidence, Athena settled for what leadership offered her. Upon reflection, however, she wished that she had spoken up for herself sooner and planned to do that more in the future.

"And, I kind of was like, 'Okay, you know, you got to play the game. You got to play the whole back and forth game a little bit.' But, I feel like I didn't know if I was worthy enough to say that, 'This is not enough for me to be part-time because of the deliverables and what you expect from me.' And, I wish that I, at the time, would have fought more when things got tough for me to be full-time."

Athena believed the experiences she encountered had put up roadblocks to advancing in her career and affected her livelihood. However, she did not always want to assume that people were working with malice. Reflecting on her experiences, Athena said, "...sometimes, some Black people, we sell ourselves short compared to other races. Because, initially, we don't even feel — society doesn't let us feel like we're worthy, we're valuable, we're credible. So, in those situations, we kind of take what we can get when we can actually fight for more." She added, "I think that Black people have a unique experience to nature that isn't often talked about... because of lynching, and stuff like that."

### ***Cyrus Carter***

"I think for myself, it's like, 'Oh, I am one of the few Black people here and consistently, at least in the last year or so, like selected for these things.' And so, 'How do I spread this out?'"

Cyrus Carter, a Black male in his 30s, grew up in a military family and moved around several times, eventually living in the South during high school and going to a university nearby his home to study environmental engineering. After completing a co-op at his university and finding many mentors through that experience, Cyrus landed a job at an environmental engineering consulting firm. Although Cyrus did not spend much time outdoors with family, he recalled going backpacking and hiking with college friends and taking a sustainability class with an inspiring professor, and how these experiences influenced his desire to go back to graduate school to focus on environmental science and public affairs. After graduate school and a foreign exchange program, Cyrus entered into a Ph.D. program that incorporates behavioral science into sustainability.

Cyrus described having had mostly positive experiences throughout his environmental career. Cyrus' gregarious and outgoing personality and prioritizing networking helped open doors to several job interviews and later to positions. As a result, Cyrus had many opportunities throughout his career and education.

Cyrus emphasized having mentors as a major factor in his success, explaining that he had a "cabinet of people" upon whom he could lean. This network of mentors showed up for Cyrus multiple times throughout his career, providing guidance about career direction and making connections for job opportunities. On several occasions, mentors pushed Cyrus into taking leadership positions for which he felt too young and inexperienced. Despite these insecurities, Cyrus often took a risk and accepted those opportunities as they came. "I feel

like so much of my career has been opportunities are coming my way. Or like, 'You should do this.' I'm like, 'All right, I'll just run with this.'"

In addition to mentorship, Cyrus identified that having champions within his organization who could vouch for his work and expertise was essential to his success. "I think having those people to have your back and sign off on, 'Oh this person is legit.' [...] I think that has carried me through a lot of situations, or you know every time that's at work or someone be like, 'Oh, that one's work is not good' and whatever, and I'm just like 'Pfft' you know? Everyone, but not everyone, but the people that need to know that I'm a star performer."

As a result of his network, he was often in a position to choose where he worked. "I'm really privileged to kind of pick where I wanted to work. And yeah, one of the things with that office, it's fairly young, it's diverse. Not just like, I think too, what was cool, not just like the entry, lower level, but in the senior leadership as well." Cyrus recognized that his positive work experiences would have been different at less diverse organizations and that race or other personal identifiers such as gender were factors at play for other people. He recalled an example in a previous position where one female employee found out that she was the lowest-paid engineer at the organization while Cyrus was one of the highest-paid.

Cyrus felt fortunate to have been selective about where he worked, emphasizing that he chose to work in environmental organizations with diverse staff. "Because I think if I had gone to that office, and I was the only Black person or minority, [...] that would have been tough even if everyone was amazing [...] and particularly early on in my career." Cyrus explained that fitting in, not being the only person of color in the organization, and being able to relate and feel comfortable with his colleagues and supervisors were important to him.

“I think a challenge that I think is not necessarily unique to me, as a person of color, but I think it's more highlighted, or it's just a stronger effect that I think going into environment where you're one of a few that look like have a background that you do. And even if it's real or not, feeling like you fit in, I think that's like a thing that I don't know[...]"

However, Cyrus was also challenged by frequently being the only person of color in the broader environmental field. He questioned the organizations' motives that invested in sending staff to diversity, equity, and inclusion trainings and conferences and whether everyone took those efforts seriously.

“I think what something I struggle with is normalizing my presence or more people of color in these environmental roles, more specifically. [...] I'd like to get to a point where that's not a thing anymore. And I say that, because [...] sometimes, I don't know if people take it as serious that aren't bought in. It's like, "Oh." This is like a token kind of gesture, you know, if that makes sense.”

Citing his race was not a negative factor in his career progression, Cyrus acknowledged he was one of the few Black people in his field and a frequent target of opportunity. As a result, Cyrus felt compelled to give back by encouraging other environmental professionals of color the same way that he was encouraged by his mentors.

"But, I also will, I feel like, be mindful of absorbing all of these really cool opportunities, you know? I don't know if it's like an unfair thing to say, but for me, I think for myself, it's like, 'Oh, I am one of the few Black people here and consistently, at least in the last year or so, like selected for these things.' And so, 'How do I spread this out? How do I get other, you know, make sure this is passed on?' So like I'm not the only one. I hate to have that feel that way. I don't suspect my White colleagues or feel they think of like that. Even it's like, 'Oh, why am I the only one that's getting all these?' and having to deal with that. Or not, deal with it, but I don't know, I just think that's something that is important to me, and I know that's why someone's pushed me and encouraged me. So, I definitely try to, at least for myself, pass that on."

Cyrus credited his military brat upbringing as having given him the advantage of being comfortable around people of different backgrounds from him, saying that he was



able to navigate the challenges of working with so many people who did not look like him and were his dad or grandfather's age because of that experience.

“And so, my friends were a lot of interracial couples or from all over different worlds, or various different backgrounds, a lot of different language spoken in their houses. And so, I think for me, even in that environment, having some comfort navigating those tricks, even still working in the environment, I'm not gonna pretend that wasn't a challenge. I just wonder to what degree that's unique for me or everybody, yeah.”

Cyrus' future environmental career outlook was positive. He speculated, “I think at this point now, it's for me personally, I feel like I'm gonna be, not that everyone isn't, but I feel very confident my careers, I feel confident my career where it's gonna go, I don't know what it'll be.” Cyrus' advice to his younger self focused on finding mentors and influencers who would champion him. “But, I think for me, whether it be a person of color or not, I think having those people to have your back and sign off on, “Oh this person is legit.”, or whatever I think that has carried me through a lot of situations.”

### ***Dahlia Chiba***

“Somebody asked, 'What are we doing about diversity, equity, and inclusion?' So my frustration comes with, 'Why is this following me at every place that I go?' and 'Why is it that we're always just starting the conversation at these places that I go to?' And it just feels like I've been talking about this for the past ten years, and nothing really has been done in any of the institutions that I've been.”

Dahlia Chiba, an Asian American female in her 20s, grew up in a large metropolitan city in the West. She developed a passion for the outdoors from an early age on family camping trips to visit national parks throughout her childhood. After earning two prestigious degrees in environmental focus areas, Dahlia worked at state parks, an urban forestry nonprofit, and a sizeable philanthropic foundation before landing her current position at a smaller philanthropic foundation.

“So that's where I really found my, I guess, passion for wanting to work outside or be outside or try to make a career in the environmental field. So both visiting national parks but also my parents, I think, had a big influence on me. And that's probably pretty unique, I would say, for a person of color 'cause I'm already like fourth-generation Asian American.”

Also, Dahlia's parents, who worked in the environmental field, played a big part in influencing her desire to go into the environmental field. Citing her Asian American heritage, she acknowledged that other Asian Americans face cultural pressures to go into specific fields, such as medicine or law. But her situation was different in that she never experienced those cultural pressures from her own family. “My parents did something that was pretty unconventional for their time and their generation, and so I think they gave me the flexibility to do that on my own.”

Dahlia found it challenging to find and connect with mentors of color in the environmental field but had several White mentors throughout her career. In particular, Dahlia's step-father, who is White, helped make many connections for her, find internships while she was an undergrad, and introduced her to people in the philanthropic field.

“POC mentors exist, but there aren't easy ways to connect and find them. It can feel uninviting to be the only POC, and the excuse for not hiring more POCs for executive positions is often that they don't exist and aren't qualified. They exist, and they're out there, but the hiring search isn't tapping into the right places to recruit highly qualified POCs. It's not lack of interest in entering the environmental field that's a barrier, but there is no clear pathway to enter the field, and it's difficult to navigate the space without a mentor.”

Race/ethnicity and culture were major factors each time she considered taking or passing over environmental job opportunities in particular geographies. For instance, the possibility of being a target of racism and not being near other Asian Americans in rural America caused her to look for and take positions in metropolitan areas.

“So it definitely came down to both what are the environmental opportunities that I have, but also what lifestyle I want to have, and working in a rural place would be really hard, I think. And being in [my state], it's easy, especially the [the area I grew up in] surrounded by Asian Americans. It just

feels more comfortable for sure. Even being in [a town in the East Coast] was weird. I knew some of my friends who traveled an hour and a half to go to a bigger Asian grocery store.”

Dahlia had several rewarding experiences throughout her career that involved working directly with people with whom she felt she could make a connection. She felt able to give back to them in service as well as have a positive impact on the environment.

“We worked with a very cute couple in [a northeastern state] who had a forest property of about 50 acres. They reminded me very much of my grandparents 'cause they were of Japanese descent, and the connection he had with the land was very similar to my grandfather of wanting to make it a Japanese garden like aesthetic, not wanting to use pesticides, keeping it all-natural. And just being able to interact with them, find out what their goals were for managing their property, doing research, monitoring the property, getting some baseline data, making our own recommendations about what they could do to meet those goals in a way that matched their values was a great experience for me, but also in my learning. But also great to be able to give back to two folks who just on this property in [the state] and just really wanted to do whatever was best for that piece of land.”

Dahlia’s most challenging workplace experiences were related to participating in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. She observed that in every university she attended and every job, these institutions were just starting to think about having DEI conversations with employees and students for the first time. As a result, she felt frustrated taking part in these conversations multiple times as it never seemed others were genuinely invested in making a real change and the conversations were performative rather than actionable.

"And I'm like, 'Oh my God, we're starting this conversation again.' And it always starts the same, of, 'This is an important issue, but we don't know what to do about it.' And then you don't see a lot of things happening about it, and you just talk in circles, and you're all trying to be very sensitive and aware of things. And then going to the [philanthropic foundation], again, it popped up. Somebody asked, 'What are we doing about diversity, equity, and inclusion?' So my frustration comes with, 'Why is this following me at every place that I go?' and 'Why is it that we're always just starting the conversation at these places that I go to?' And it just feels like I've been talking about this for the past ten years, and nothing really has been done in any of the institutions that I've been.”

In addition to feeling frustrated, Dahlia felt increasingly tired participating in these nascent DEI conversations. Because there was an expectation for all the employees of color to participate in these efforts and take a leading role, Dahlia believed her involvement was tokenism. Once she decided not to join a DEI task force, she “felt bad, and almost felt guilty, even though that was probably only my perception of myself, nobody else was putting that on me.”

“And I decided not to join because I was so tired of having these conversations, so tired of trying to convince people that it was an important issue. And also kind of feeling like I'm tired of being the token person just because I am a person of color. Why am I always looked at like, 'Come join this DEI thing because it should be important to you because you're Brown.' I'm like, 'No, that's not necessarily the case.' And I'm tired of having the conversation. It wears on you after a while.”

After the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor, which sparked protests and caused discussions of racial equity to surge, especially at organizations with a social mission, Dahlia examined the subject of DEI efforts she had experienced. She acknowledged her perception about DEI had changed in recent months, but that she still felt burdened with promoting DEI.

“[...] I was pretty pessimistic about DEI efforts in philanthropy, but with recent events, I've seen large foundations and our own small foundation make real progress in moving this agenda forward. It's a little frustrating, might not be the right word, that the perfect storm of terrible events has finally pushed my colleagues to understand why I've been saying DEI is an important topic to tackle in the first place. It still feels like the burden to propose actions my organization can take to promote DEI falls a lot on me as the one person of color. I don't think it's true, but it still feels like I have an obligation to push the agenda forward because no one else will.”

The challenging workplace experiences surrounding DEI influenced Dahlia's career path. Although there were opportunities to move into the DEI space at other environmental organizations, Dahlia recognized she did not have the patience for such work. As an outlet and a way to give back to her community, she became involved with an Asian American

student organization, speaking on panels, and becoming a mentor to students interested in an environmental career. Dahlia's future job outlook was positive because she felt that in her current job, she had the social capital to make decisions and speak up about DEI when the time was right. She also felt optimistic that her organization's leadership would be receptive to the discussion.

Dahlia's advice to her younger self focused on the importance of seeking mentors and taking opportunities when they come. "Don't be afraid of finding that mentor because it's really about the people who can help you out. You can't do it on your own. Getting that next job, the most important thing is who you know. It's not your resume, it's not the grades that you get in school. Making that time to make the personal connections."

### ***Grace Chen***

"I feel like I've just been swimming my whole life and trying to figure out where I can create the biggest impact."

Grace Chen, a Taiwanese-American female in her 30s, grew up in an upper-middle-class suburban town outside of a large metropolitan city in the Midwest. Her neighborhood and schools were predominantly White, with only a handful of other students of color. At an early age, Grace became interested in the environment, in part because of her sister's influence and similar interests. Grace explained that her desire to make an impact in the world came from her upbringing.

"And so I recognized that I grew up with a lot of privilege, which I'm very thankful for, from my parents. But I also feel like with having immigrant parents, there is a certain amount of thriftiness built into our upbringing where it wasn't like you could just buy whatever you wanted. There's always this, "We came to this country with just \$500 and made our way." My parents are very much like, "We pulled ourselves up from our bootstraps," which I have mixed feelings about. But I think they really instilled that you don't take anything for granted, and [...] nothing is handed to you, you have to work hard, and that whole narrative of things."

She went on to receive a bachelor's in urban planning from a prestigious university. Afterward, Grace began her career working in a temporary position at an environmental agency on the West Coast, where she became disillusioned with traditional environmental work. She explained that she felt she was not valued, her work was not meaningful, and her organization did not give her any responsibility.

“So working in this field, I really felt like nothing that I was working on had any impact. 'Cause you go through school, you go through high school, and they say you're gonna change the world, and they say, "Do something meaningful with your life." And then you sit there, and you read documents, and they amount to nothing.”

While the environmental agency's staff makeup was predominantly White, many employees of color created a support network where Grace could connect and share frustrations. Because of her privileged upbringing and living in a large city, Grace had not experienced racial/ethnic prejudice. However, she noticed it would be difficult to advance into management at the agency as a person of color.

“I feel like it was really hard to get to the next level for a lot of us. So it's like, 'Okay, we can enter the field, but we can't be management.' Like, you are not management material. And it also felt really competitive, so it's like you are fighting for that space with other people of color. It doesn't feel like it's that open to us. But I never thought that experience was unique to being in the environmental field, I feel like that's ubiquitous across all fields, like corporations or nonprofit or government work. There's always this feeling that you can't get beyond a certain level.”

Based on this experience, she decided to shift her career toward jobs that would allow her to have more hands-on work and local impact. However, the late 2000s recession made it difficult to find a job, so Grace moved to a skiing town and became a dishwasher in exchange for skiing and housing. She enjoyed the simple lifestyle and tangible experience of washing dishes which contrasted with her experience working in a traditional environmental job. “I did that, and then after that, I said, ‘It's pretty clear to me that I'm not meant for office work.’” After several seasons and temporary jobs, Grace entered into a farm

apprenticeship program which sparked a passion and changed her career path. Later she worked on community farms and composting programs in various states across the country.

Her career shift to community farming was outside of the traditional environmental field. Compared to traditional environmental jobs, she did not expect ever to make much money in farming. However, she felt fulfilled because she enjoyed the tangible, hands-on nature of farming.

“And once again, it was very tangible, very tactile, like I worked with my hands. And it felt really great to be able to feed food that was grown locally and organically to a community. I could wrap my brain around that. I don't think I'm the large bigger-picture thinker. That's not my strength. I'm much more small-picture.”

She also felt rewarded because she found people with whom she was able to relate. Grace admired the high code of ethics that farmers followed, which aligned with her values: hard work, sharing resources, and not focusing on material wealth. “I should say the urban farming world, a lot of people seem to have this meandering completely crazy path. And a lot of people that I talk to have this similar, ‘I feel like I am mission-driven, I feel like I wanna have an environmental impact, but I don't wanna work in an office.’” Grace found an inspiring role model in a one boss, who was a woman and whose values mirrored her own. “I've never had anybody with that kind of impact because everybody else has taken a path that I don't wanna take.”

Even though she had finally found her passion, Grace found it difficult to justify her career choice to her parents, who had immigrated to the U.S. and achieved success in their education and careers.

"They didn't know other paths other than my mom grew up in the countryside and with a pit toilet and her whole life she was like, 'The only thing I don't want for you is to have that life. I don't want you to have to worry about money, and I don't want you to have to worry about living in the countryside and having a pit toilet.' And then she's like, 'Why are you becoming a farmer? What is happening?' It's unfathomable for her that I

would be working physically so hard for a pittance, and she's just like, 'What?'"

Grace lamented the lack of diversity in the urban farming community, which included people from privileged backgrounds who were mostly wealthy, White, and male.

"And so, yeah, that's kind of the community, but definitely it's not a lot of people of color. So it's a lot of times people who have come from a pretty privileged background, and that part makes me feel uncomfortable, which is the same background that I come from. But I wish it was more diverse income-wise, and certainly people of color-wise."

She found it exceptionally challenging to navigate being one of the very few women in community farming. She often experienced microaggressions and felt othered because of her gender. Grace credited her husband for supporting her financially, especially when they decided to have a child.

"But being a woman, I feel like that is one of the hardest things like, 'Oh wow, you're a farmer, and you're a woman.' 'Oh, you shouldn't be lifting that.' It's just like you constantly hear these things, and [...] it beats you down, and you're like, 'Just shut up'."

Grace was hopeful about her future career path. Due to her husband's job, they had relocated to another state, and she took a position in environmental education. She soon realized that environmental education was not for her. "And through the whole time, I've always thought about recycling, and my dream, my long-term goal of one day hopefully, I will achieve this goal is to start a compost business."

Grace mused that if she could go back in time, she would have liked to have had the opportunity to go to a trade school because the academic route was not for her. Grace's advice to her younger self was to try different things and seek out different experiences "because it took me so long. I was like, 'I just don't really understand what the meaning of life is.' And then once I found that, it was like, 'Oh, this is what I wanna do.' To get that feeling is really amazing."



## ***Natalia Diaz***

“I could rewrite my history so many times. But I don't think it helps me to take the lessons learned and just move forward from today. So I think in terms of opportunities; the history is what it is, but I can always change what's going forward from today and onwards.”

Natalia Diaz, a Peruvian-American female in her 30s, grew up in a predominantly White suburb of a major metropolitan city in the West. At an early age, she became aware of the environmental ethic through recycling and attending a summer camp where she was inspired to pursue an environmental career. Natalia went to a prestigious university to receive a bachelor's in environmental engineering, worked in environmental jobs, attended another prestigious university for graduate school, and was working in an environmental agency.

Finding her first environmental job was difficult because Natalia did not have a built-in network and felt intimidated by networking. Many organizations also required prior experience, so it was a continuous cycle of needing experience and not being qualified enough to get it.

"And I didn't have any direction, I didn't have any guidance on like, 'Oh, you should apply to these environmental consulting firms 'cause they're not doing wastewater treatment they're doing all these really cool other things.' But I felt like I applied, my application went into nowhere land. Nobody told me about you actually have to know the people before you apply and have those relationships already set up, and the importance of a warm introduction kind of thing."

A research project led Natalia to a full-time, unpaid job opportunity in India, where she and her colleagues later tried to create an environmental nonprofit. Although unsuccessful, Natalia's experience in India was one of the most positive in her career because of how much she accomplished and the camaraderie she felt with her colleagues. After she returned to the U.S., she took a paid entry-level position in environmental education. This position was challenging because she felt that the organizational structure was linear and that

leadership was not engaged in day-to-day activities. She had little guidance, no training, no mentorship, and few resources to carry out her work. “It was kind of trial by fire, like get out there, go to these inner-city schools, and teach environmental science lessons, go! And that was the level of guidance we had.” At the same time, she did not have enough social capital to ask for help.

“I just did not have the training or the guidance, nor the visibility with leaders or even just the other parts of the [environmental outreach organization]. We were sectioned off into this one group of like, “Oh, you do outreach,” versus programming that happened actually at the [environmental outreach organization], people that would come to us.”

Natalia’s graduate school opened many career opportunities. Natalia was matched with several mentors as part of a mentorship program that led to internships and jobs. “And I had such an incredible experience with this mentor who really helped me guide my summer internship trajectory which landed my full-time offer at [my organization], which led to a lot of other things and just connections.” She was also recruited by a public utility to be part of their training program after graduating, which opened a pathway to permanent upper-level job placement.

Natalia quickly became disillusioned during her first rotation in the two-year training program, and she questioned her career choice. Natalia sought an opportunity to move to an environmental department, and her supervisor at the time became upset and retaliated against her. “...It was months before she was able to look me in the eye the same way and treat me the same and give me meaningful work.” Natalia did not seek help through the organization’s HR department; instead, she began looking for another job.

“...I just felt like, ‘Man, this is like... Where am I working? What am I doing here?’ Kind of existential, ‘Did I make the right move? What is going on here? I need to rethink this as a career option.’ I think it got me to also look for new rotations that I would be working with somebody really strong and positive and able to coach me.”

She eventually moved to the environmental department with a supervisor she admired. The new position was an immensely rewarding experience because Natalia felt valued, and she took pride in her work. She was able to be creative, have ownership over her work, and positively impacted people's lives.

“If I were to boil everything down and look at it in hindsight, the most rewarding is, where have I made an impact on people's lives, and what sort of good decision-making have I fostered? So part of my prior roles at [my agency], I wasn't really feeling like I was having that positive impact in terms of the business decisions that are more environmentally friendly or conscious or whatever.”

Natalia observed that she did not have positive or negative experiences in her workplace because of her race/ethnicity “...cause I think I pass for mixed anyway, and mostly American, anyway, like American being a melting pot, but I speak really good English and clear English. And so, there's not really any judgment on that front." However, she did experience gender biases in her workplace, which was dominated by men. Unlike her male colleagues, she felt people did not take her seriously because she was a woman, and they frequently questioned her expertise.

“I don't know what it would be like to be a man and be delivering that information, but I imagine there would be a lot more authority, kind of respect given towards that. And this is pure conjecture, but at a company full of male engineers, which is [my agency], that tends to be kind of like, if you say it and you say it with authority, and you're a man, 'Okay, cool. We're just gonna go do that.' But I feel like maybe sometimes people are like, "Well, really? Do we have to do that?" when a woman delivers it.”

Her organization's leadership, who were all men, also placed more value on the expertise of the people who had been with the organization the longest. For example, Natalia and another female colleague found a legal compliance problem and raised their concerns with the organization's leadership; however, leadership told Natalia and her colleague that the concerns had to come from someone in a more senior position. As a

result, they requested a senior manager to review their claims and bring the same concerns to leadership, resulting in delays to the project.

“So we brought this up and [...] were told, ‘Oh, I need to hear this from somebody higher up. You don't have any standing,’ essentially. I was kind of floored. I was like, “Wait, what?” Thinking that meritocracy was real and thinking that if you raise an issue, somebody has to listen to you and follow up, address it. And I just felt like, ‘Wow, I've never been told that,’ and it really hurt.”

Natalia's future outlook was positive. She had recently accepted a position in the private sector, and she was excited about the opportunity. Natalia felt that if she had stayed at her agency, she could have had more influence on the ground. Instead of rewriting her history, she wanted to look towards the future. “I would like to reframe my future job, the one that I'm about to accept on April 2nd, with a new mindset, a new approach, and a better Natalia. I'm going to try to be the best Natalia I can be in this new role and just really think forward about it, not dwell too much on the past.”

Natalia's advice to someone with her background entering this career was focused on getting hard skills, getting a mentor, building a network of professionals, and never feeling “regret over bad decisions that you've taken in your career because you will always learn from something.” Because Natalia's experiences with mentors were crucial to her career success so far, she became a mentor for college students at the local university as a way to give back to her community. She found that being a mentor to a person of color in the environmental space “has been so fulfilling and wonderful because I just wish everybody had a mentor or several. And I think it's played a really big part in my life and my professional trajectory and opened up certain opportunities that maybe I wouldn't have had otherwise.”

## ***Nina Espinoza***

"You're not falling into the trap that you are that stereotype. You're just taking advantage of it."

Nina Espinoza, a Hispanic female in her 20s, grew up in a large Southern metropolitan city with five siblings to a single mom. Nina received guidance from an outreach nonprofit that helped lower-income students pursue college degrees. Based on her mother's income, this nonprofit advised her to complete her basic course requirements at a community college nearby, then transfer to a university after two years. Nina had always been interested in animals and the outdoors, but it was during her first semester at the community college that her advisor introduced her to wildlife biology. With guidance and encouragement from an advisor and her mother, she decided to pursue wildlife biology as a major. She felt profoundly grateful for the experience.

"I had moments of just like gratefulness or just being blessed that I was able to experience this and I was able to go to class and enjoy being in class and just enjoying that I had the privilege to continue my school and have the resources needed to do that."

Nina's mother and sister were the most significant influence on her decision to study wildlife biology and pursue an environmental career. Placing alignment with her values and happiness over potential income, they encouraged her to find her passion and work in a field she loved.

"My mom and my sister especially pushed me to just be, I guess, be happy and just kind of kept pushing me saying like, it's going to be okay even if it's hard and they always supported like a lot of people don't really expect environmental jobs to be good."

Despite her passion and knowing what she wanted to do for her career, Nina found it extremely difficult to find her first environmental job. It was "kind of like a gut punch sometimes" because she would "put [her] whole heart into an application" and not get the

position. Often, Nina did not have enough experience nor the right degree, and, frequently, the organization would not even call her back to let her know she did not get the position. She became disillusioned and lost hope of finding an environmental job. Nina questioned whether she had made the right choice in picking her major.

“So I always had that moment of, well, I can burn my degree, and it would give me heat instead of anything else. So I had moments of self-doubt just because I didn't know if I can get a good job with my degree.”

Nina was sometimes suspicious whether, during the hiring process, she would get hired as a token person of color or if she would be less competitive because of her race/ethnicity.

“So I'm going to be hired because of my last name or my first name, and I always had that fear where they saw my name, and they would be like, 'oh, well, she's Brown. So we're not going to hire her because this now' or 'we are going to hire her because she's Brown and she has a really Brown name. So she's going to bring our diversity up.' So I always had that kind of here that they're going to have me as the token person.”

Eventually, Nina interviewed with her current company for a bird technician position. However, during her interview, the hiring team instead offered her a position in disaster recovery and environmental compliance to get her foot in the door and “get experience so that your next job can look at those experiences and hire you.” Nina was grateful for the opportunity to build skills, get experience, and build her resume.

During the year that she had been with the organization, Nina had several positive experiences helping families access permanent housing after natural disasters. Also, she liked her supervisor, who went out of her way to give Nina more responsibility and provide professional development opportunities. For example, because she knew Nina wanted to do more fieldwork, she reached out to different managers across the organization to see if there were short-term field projects in which Nina could participate. When an opportunity for a

month-long field job in two other states became available, her supervisor encouraged her to take it because it would open doors for her future career.

Nina recognized that while it was impossible to separate herself from her race or gender, there were moments when she would forget that the rest of the world saw those aspects of her identity before her personhood. As a result, even though she was the only person of color on her field project team, she was caught off guard when a White female coworker singled her out in front of other staff. The culture at her workplace allowed for racial microaggressions to occur unaddressed and without consequences.

“We were having kind of a team dinner, and she just randomly brought it up saying, ‘oh yeah, Nina is the only person of color here,’ and it was just out of the blue. We were just kind of talking, and it was kind of like a lull in the conversation. Then she just brought it up, and it was just not necessary. So it was kind of annoying because it's not something that you need to bring light to. Instead, just acknowledge it and see, I don't know. It didn't need to be a conversation. I think it just bothered me that it was a conversation.”

Nina explained that the coworker often brought up how she was the only person of color at work while at the same time trying to relate to her. She reported, “So it was just kind of a weird thing that she kept bringing up, and then there were times where I felt with her that she kept bringing up or she would call me ‘chica’ or she would say a lot of things in Spanish because she studied environmental law with a minor in Spanish.” However, the coworker’s racist approach to try to relate with Nina came across as cultural appropriation, otherism, and, in some cases, bragging about her privileged experiences.

“I guess what bothered me is she picks and chooses what she wants from different cultures so that she can bring it into her life so that she feels like she's different from everybody else and that she is more cultured and she appreciates more culture, but really, it's just very obnoxious and kind of arrogant in a way because it's just kind of flaunting your privilege and flaunting like you've been to these places when other people haven't or can't.”

Nina longed for people to recognize her for her work ethic, intelligence, and personhood rather than her gender or race. She hoped that in her future jobs, that would be the case. So her advice to her younger self centered around understanding the difference between being a stereotype and taking advantage of opportunities.

“In the sense that you're taking advantage of the opportunities that you're given. You're not mooching. You're embracing the opportunities that are given to you so that you can better yourself. That you're not just mooching off of something and being the stereotype, you're not being the stereotype. If you are, that's okay because you're taking advantage of the stereotype.”

### ***Pilar Castillo***

"Imagine me ten years from now with my Master's, maybe teaching about this kind of thing and teaching other professionals on how to merge their passion for the environment and communications. I feel like I could be a trailblazer."

Pilar Castillo, a Hispanic female in her 20s, grew up in a large Southern metropolitan city, which had a large Latino/a population. Pilar was proud of her different identities — being Latina, female, lesbian, and low-income background. She was interested in science and from an early age writing stories and poetry, drawing influences from nature. She became interested in an environmental career after volunteering for environmental clean-up efforts in her home area. Pilar went to college in a small city, earning a degree in communications and media, then an internship working at an environmental nonprofit organization affiliated with her university. After graduating, Pilar first worked at an environmental public relations firm and later worked in her current position at a community-based environmental nonprofit organization.

Pilar had several female role models throughout her career. Among them, her high school counselor stood out because she gave Pilar advice that resonated. “She told me it never hurts to ask, and it never hurts to try.” This motto inspired Pilar to try new ideas and



do what she wanted to do, even if it meant not making much money in an environmental career. Her current boss was also a source of inspiration for Pilar because of her boss' work ethic and because her boss genuinely cared for her employees and colleagues.

Pilar's most rewarding work experiences were the "many little victories" she achieved because she believed that environmental work would never be complete. She felt proud of her work when she could merge her interests in the environment and her community, using her communication skills to help. She also pointed to several examples where she felt ownership of a project, whether it was putting on an event, coordinating volunteers, or managing the project from start to finish.

Pilar noted that most of the environmental field, and most people who attended environmental meetings, were White men. Her current organization was also mostly White but female. She tried not to let the lack of diversity bother her because she felt most of the people who worked in the environmental sector were progressive, and she hoped that colleagues did not judge her for being Hispanic or female. She also believed that because she grew up and currently worked in a city with many Hispanic people, she did not often think about her race/ethnicity.

However, when she worked at the environmental public relations firm that was led by an older White woman, Pilar had a more challenging time ignoring the power dynamics of race/ethnicity when conflicts arose.

"But, for example, when I worked at the PR firm [...], I was this young Hispanic female. And it was led by a female, but also this old White female. And so, when there were conflicts or difficulties, I, again, tried not to think too much about identity, but also that I am this young person trying to talk to this old person about stuff, that I am this Hispanic person trying to talk to this White person about stuff."

The job turned out to be the most challenging of her career because her boss did not respect her, and Pilar felt compelled to defend herself continuously. Pilar described one key exchange with her boss as the worst experience she had ever had in a job: after working on a project for a long time and after several revisions, she still had not gotten it right. “And she told me, well, this is my boss that told me, ‘When are you gonna work hard enough to be good enough?’” Pilar took that comment to heart and began to doubt herself and question whether she could ever be good enough in communications, the environment, or work in general. Because she did not have colleagues with whom to talk, she also began to wonder if her mistreatment was because of her age and race/ethnicity.

"It's still hard to say if it was a personality thing or if it was a difference in expectations or what it was. But again, at that point, I had to use the only tools at that time were, 'This is an old person, I'm a young person. This is a White person. I'm not a White person.' That this is someone who did not have the same experience as me growing up."

It took Pilar leaving the position to build up her self-confidence again. “I think more or less, in the past, that was two years ago, but I think that now, I've really done so much better at saying that I am good enough, that I'm always working 100%...” Pilar also spent time trying to understand why her boss might have mistreated her and to have compassion for her boss' situation. "I hate to use the word bitch, but sometimes people will come across that way. And so that maybe she had to work really hard to be where she is and anything that threatens her success may be what causes her to start a fight or to again, or, I guess, start a fight is really the only word I have for that.” Pilar also turned to music and poetry to help her reflect on and overcome challenging experiences.

“I actually have a poem that I read at the finals for a poetry competition about two weeks ago, and it's called ‘Damn, Susan,’ and it's all about my old boss, and it was just so I could say the words out loud and then let it go. That's a big part of the poetry for me, too, is being able to let it go, let go of those setbacks, and those things that I have felt like have held me back for so long for my own self-confidence.”

Pilar was proud of what she had achieved in her career so far. That “in spite of growing up with no money and in spite of those challenges I had along the way, like that one boss, that I can do what I want to, that I can be successful in the niche I found myself, and I can still pay for my bills.” Pilar was uncertain about her future career path because her future job likely does not even exist yet, but she was excited about her prospects. She recognized that whatever it was, she would have to “brush off comments like that.” Even if she were the only Hispanic female in the room, she wanted to feel valued.

“I don't know what my career looks like five, 10, 15 years down the road. Even if I did a Google search right now for job descriptions, I don't even know if any of those would be what I'm looking for or if what I'm looking for hasn't even been created yet. And so, it's just really exciting for me.”

Pilar's advice to her younger self was not to pigeonhole herself, to be open to new experiences, and to give the same advice as her high school counselor told her years before:

“The advice I would give to myself would be I think really just driving at home those words that I've carried with me all this time about, 'It never hurts to ask, and it never hurts to try.'”

### ***Tessa Chung***

“I've had those weird communication, [...] like they have to get used to me and I have to show my credibility, or we just work with partners that think women are overreacting, but men aren't.”

Tessa Chung, a bi-racial Asian-Caucasian female in her 20s, grew up in a large metropolitan area in the Southwest. She carried an appreciation for the culture and held that her identity was tied to the region. Tessa's family was left-leaning and recycled, but she did not grow up camping or spending much time outdoors. Tessa felt lost in undergraduate college but found her path in the environmental field, seeing it as a middle ground between her varied interests. Tessa's passion for the environment was sparked when she took an introductory sustainability course in college. After which, she made a commitment to an environmentally-focused lifestyle and volunteered for several environmental activist groups.

“I remember that it just sort of blew my mind, every little thing I was learning about and I had trouble sleeping 'cause it was almost like so depressing that we had so many issues and chemicals but yet we've come such a long way with environmental laws and regulations and things like that and so that was kind of how I found my path.”

Graduate school changed Tessa’s perspective on how to approach environmental work. Whereas before she had been an activist, protesting environmental injustices and running campaigns, after graduate school, she realized that she had to “balance multi-purpose management.” Tessa also credited her graduate school program for opening the door to many enriching mainstream environmental job experiences, including a local citizen science organization, two federal environmental agencies, and a municipal water utility. After graduate school and through her graduate alumni network, Tessa landed her current position as a coordinator at a regional collaborative organization in the Midwest.

Tessa pointed to many women who served as role models throughout her school and career. She admired her teachers and the strong female professors she encountered, including her advisor, who observed that the science and environmental classes lacked racial and gender diversity. As a result, she tended to “gravitate towards those women more than male colleagues or male professors.” One female professor, in particular, inspired her local environmental activism work and helped her cultivate her interests. One of her most positive work experiences was during a summer internship at a national park. Her manager, who was also a woman, encouraged her to take the time to experience the park and created a flexible and enriching work culture. Tessa felt empowered to control her own experience.

“So it'd just be like, “Well, hike all the trails first.” You can actually tell people, like the visitor center, for example, and I would do some that sort of engagement as well. So that was probably like the best job ever. I really don't think if anything can ever top that.”

Another role model, an outlier, was her mother’s boss, a White man who founded an environmental consulting firm. Tessa credited him as her mentor because she felt that he

understood her and gave her essential advice to navigate an environmental career. “So I think he's been able to cultivate or pull out what I'm saying when I sometimes don't know what I want.”

At her current job, which was her first full-time, long-term environmental position, Tessa was proud of what she had accomplished in a short period. She was recognized for her work and gained confidence as she quickly learned to perform her job duties with little guidance. "So we're kind of still in the middle of it, but it feels like a really big achievement, at least for me, just because I went from being really lost and confused to having really a lot of confidence with what I'm doing and having a handle on it.”

In this position, however, Tessa found it challenging to navigate a high-level coordinating role of several state environmental authorities and the lack of diversity among the older White male managers.

"They're all very White and male, and so it's sort of interesting to have that dynamic sometimes where I've been the young coordinator, and I've had to tell older men what to do."

Her observations of and experiences with, the dominant workplace culture was influenced by her own racial/ethnic identity. Tessa did not “fit into this box” because she was bi-racial; rather, her racial/ethnic ambiguity benefited her when she was perceived to be White. “People look at me like maybe something's a little off, or they just think that I'm White, and so I think just like assumptions about me and maybe just their comfortability with me because of that.”

Tessa believed that rather than her race/ethnicity, it was her age and gender which were the primary motives behind the workplace microaggressions she experienced at the hands of her colleagues. However, when she described these colleagues, she referred to their intersectional personal identities as being older, White males. For example, some of her

older, White male colleagues frequently questioned her expertise, cut her off when she spoke, or were offended when she voiced her own opinions. Tessa felt that these attitudes diminished what she was trying to do, and she often felt she had to prove herself.

"One particular guy would question everything I said, sort of that, like, 'Is that true? Is that accurate?' Kind of thing like that, and I got to the point where I had even talked to my boss about it, and she was willing to step in, but it got better, and then some of that, along the way, felt like growing pains."

She was careful to explain that she did not experience these microaggressions with all of her White male colleagues. "Cause other White males that I work with are not like that and are receptive to hearing what younger people think and incorporating that or sharing their wisdom and not in sort of inserting their opinion, and I think that's sometimes what you get a lot with people that are like careered, federal staff, or state staff that love to hear themselves talk."

Reflecting on her worldview coming out of college and into her first full-time job, Tessa found it challenging to manage the urgency she felt to solve big environmental problems of pollution and climate change versus her organization's approach, which required compromising and balancing environmental and economic needs.

To overcome these workplace challenges, Tessa created and leaned on an insulating community of people who championed her, appreciated her work, and provided mentorship. In addition, Tessa also focused on achieving small goals locally and in her spare time to make an impact and to connect with others at her organization who share her values.

Tessa's future job outlook was uncertain. It had not been easy for Tessa to land her current job. She did not believe she would stay in this role forever because she did not like the benefits, did not have a big impact at the state or local level public service, and did not feel like a scientist any more. Nevertheless, she was concerned that if she were to try to

switch careers now, she would have to start back at an entry-level position. “So, I'm unsure of my next step and what that looks like, and I think it might be a little bit easier though for me when I have more experience in this role and in this title, and I certainly wanna see some of my projects through.”

### ***Trinity Anderson***

"I feel like once I get a job in the environmental field that I can be a mentor for someone or voice my opinions, kind of lead the way, just because there's just been so few people that have done that for me."

Trinity Anderson, a Korean-Black female in her 20s, grew up in a small rural town in the South. She spent a great deal of time outdoors, picking berries at her grandmother's house, visiting the zoos with her elementary school, or visiting the nearby state park and large cat refuge with her father. She declared, “I always knew I wanted to do something with wildlife.” Despite her parents' significant financial hardships and lack of guidance, Trinity graduated from a state university, where she majored in wildlife biology.

Growing up, Trinity directly experienced overt racism and witnessed White people being racist towards her parents. These experiences shaped how she related to people who shared a similar background as she did and why she found it difficult to relate to privileged White people. "I just feel like if they don't share the experience, then it's very hard to speak up and out against it, or just even basic ideas. I feel like, collectively, you're going to feel like people are against you in a way. Or maybe your past experiences taught you not to speak up as much or just to let things go.”

Trinity credited a high school teacher who encouraged her to go to college and informed her about scholarships available to her because of her father's military service.

“I did have a teacher in high school that I felt like was a mentor. She was always the kind of the teacher that stayed late. She would help us with our

homework. She would give us rides home. She would encourage us to join after-school programs, things like that. She'd always say, 'Hey, they're having this college prep. They're having this financial aid seminar.' She'd always tell us about things like that. And so, that's where I first learned about Hazelwood and things like that. Okay, I can find a way to pay for school, basically."

She chose the state university because it was the school that would offer her the most financial aid. "I feel like that has been the most helpful thing that I've ever done. I finished school with zero debt." While attending school, Trinity faced health and financial hardships, including her parent's home foreclosure. "Even in school, it was just such a struggle for me, because not only with the foreclosure but before that, after my freshman year, I found out that I had a tumor. I had to take off a year from school just to recover from that."

Other than a few friends who were women of color with similar financial backgrounds, Trinity did not have a support system nor mentors. Her professors were mainly White men, and she could not relate to them. She often lacked confidence, and when her peers questioned her opinions, she did not speak up.

"I really do wish there were more people of color that were in a higher position to mentor me. I feel like a) it would be a lot easier. It's a lot more shared common experiences. Not only that, a lot of my professors, and things like that, were men. White male. There's nothing wrong with that, but it's a different interaction to me."

Trinity explained that her professors would often advise students based on assumptions from their White and financial privilege. She instantly felt othered, excluded, and ruled out. She reflected that meaningful and applicable advice could have come from a person of color.

"We would notice that this one professor would always say, 'You should go travel. You should just go do this.' We would always laugh and be like, 'We'd love to do that, but financially, we can't.' People will be like, 'Oh yeah, we're going to Alaska. I'm studying abroad.' I'm just like, 'Okay, that's really cool.' But I would have liked for someone to come from a position similar to my



own, or just understand the racism and just the challenges that people of color face, to build more experiences around us.”

Trinity felt a connection with one White male professor who shared his experiences growing up with financial hardships. His classes were among the highlights of her university experience because he offered to pay for meals during their field trips. “I feel like that made a huge difference. I went on every single trip that I could go on; I went on it. I don't know. It's different in how they discuss things. Just even that small thing was such a huge difference on how I felt about my experience, in general.” Another highlight was when she worked in her only environmental job as a research assistant. During her senior year, she learned about an opening in a lab and actively petitioned the botany professor to hire her.

“Honestly, I felt like she didn't want someone that was graduating so soon because I was graduating in a few months, myself. But I was like, 'I don't care. Even if I'm just a volunteer, I want to do something in your lab.' Eventually, she just was like, 'Okay, I'll hire you.' It was really nice.”

After graduation, her financial status made finding an environmental job impossible. Even when she was qualified for a job, she could not take positions that required driving her own car because she did not have one. “And then, a lot of the jobs wanted you to have your own vehicle or have your driver's license, or be able to drive, or things like that. I just didn't have it.” She could not take an environmental internship because those paid less than retail jobs. Also, she could not afford moving costs or risking not having a job when it ended. “And then, I considered doing internships. But the way I felt, my family, financially, is just not well off. My home foreclosed while I was in school. I couldn't really go and do an internship where I realistically wasn't making any money and have nothing to come back when my internship was done. You know? It just wasn't realistic for me.” Furthermore, because Trinity had limited environmental work experience, she did not apply to jobs for which she thought she was unqualified. “I think another big challenge is a lot of people really

just want you to have experience. I haven't really applied to that many jobs, just because either I felt like I wasn't a good fit for them or just the factor of moving. ”

As a result, Trinity ended up working for a phone surveying service, a retail company, and a district attorney’s office where she was currently employed. She felt discouraged, but, at the same time, hopeful about her future environmental career prospects. She was committed to maintaining her environmental skills and staying engaged with environmental organizations, even through social media. “It's weird because I almost find mentorship on social media, in a weird way, just through postings, following other people of color that are in the environmental field, and just doing things like that.” She also planned to participate in more environmental workshops and look for jobs through a college job posting board.

“I'm hoping once I have enough paid time off, I can maybe go do a workshop, or something like that, that's beneficial and still investing in myself. I like to tell myself I'm my biggest asset. I need to invest in myself. Still getting paid, technically, but also working towards a future that I want.”

Trinity hoped to someday become a mentor to others because so few people helped her out. She wished she would have actively sought a mentor because, if she had, then “maybe an opportunity would have opened up for me.” In addition to seeking a mentor, she would have advised herself to get more hands-on experience, become involved in environmental organizations, and “try and look at what jobs are looking for at that time, and try to focus on those things.”

### Mid-Career Professional Counterstories

Ten mid-career professionals participated in this study. In terms of race/ethnicity, three of the participants were Black, four were Asian American, one was Latina, and two were Multi-Racial/Ethnic. One participant was in their 20s and nine were in their 30s. Two participants made less than \$50,000 per year, six made \$50,000-\$100,000, and two made more than \$100,000. Nine of the participants were females and one was male (Table 5).

**Table 5: Mid- Career Professionals**

	Pseudonym	Self-described Race /Ethnicity	Organization (s) Sector Worked	Age Range	Income Range (thousands)	Gender (F/M/ Other)
1	Aaliyah Johnson	Black-American	NGO, government, advocacy	30	\$50-\$100	F
2	Breonna Harris	Black	NGO	30	\$50-\$100	F
3	Audre Howard	African American	NGO, government, academia	20	<\$50	F
4	Daniel Gonzales	Filipino	NGO, government	30	<\$50	M
5	Esme Ho	Asian American	NGO, government	30	\$50-\$100	F
6	Fiona Huang	Chinese-American	NGO, private	30	\$50-\$100	F
7	Lianni Joshi	Asian American- Indian American	government, private	30	\$50-\$100	F
8	Reina Gomez	Latina	government, advocacy, academia	30	>\$100	F
9	Soledad Iglesias	Native-American/Latina	NGO	30	\$50-\$100	F
10	Veronica Feng	Asian/ White-Jewish	government, advocacy	30	>\$100	F

### ***Aaliyah Johnson***

"If I had to quantify it, I feel like 85% of my perspective is because I'm Black. Mostly I'm Black, secondly, woman. Well, Black, I come from a working-class background and then a woman. In that order."

Aaliyah Johnson, a Black female in her 30s, grew up in a large metropolitan city in the South. She currently worked as a project manager for a large nonprofit environmental organization on the West Coast. Aaliyah's entry into the environmental field did not occur until she had explored other majors in college. She had "always wanted to help and save humanity and save the world" but, because of her introverted personality, she realized that she did not want to "interact with people on a personal basis directly." By chance, Aaliyah met a professor who eventually convinced her to major in environmental studies. While her college major was not perfect, she had finally found a group of peers to whom she could relate. Even though they were mostly White and male, Aaliyah related to them because "they were half hippies, if not full hippies, and I consider myself quasi hippie."

After graduating from college, Aaliyah worked for a state environmental agency for several years. However, she quickly became disillusioned with the agency's mission, which she felt was to ensure that environmental regulations did not negatively affect businesses instead of protecting the environment. To cope with her disillusionment, Aaliyah created insulating connections by volunteering at environmental nonprofit organizations and the city as well as creating a professional network to try "to do something good and feel good about what [she] was doing."

Aaliyah's networking led to a pivotal moment in her career path when she was invited to an anti-racist workshop. Here she connected with her future mentor, who was White, through shared views on spirituality and environmentalism. She also met a person,

also White, who eventually led her to her next job opportunity at a national environmental nonprofit organization and a lasting career shift into the nonprofit sector.

Aaliyah attributed much of her success in her career to her personality, her networking, self-determination, and hard work.

“And I'm actually surprised how far I've gone in my career with only a bachelor's because there are a lot of over-educated people in resource and environmental studies 'cause a lot of people are passionate about it, but there's not enough work for us, and so you're competing with a lot of PhDs and masters students or graduates, and so I think one of the reasons I've gotten so far is because I have this streak of outgoing-ness and hustle mentality when it comes to jobs.”

She also attributed her career success to being among the few Black women in the environmental space. As the frequent target of opportunity, she recognized that those opportunities were also borne from racism in society in general and institutionalized racism in the environmental field. Touching on the confluence of being othered, tokenism, interest convergence, White saviorism, and power, Aaliyah explained:

"I think my race and probably gender, mostly race has helped me because the environmental field is mostly progressive White people and so they're like, 'Oh my God! There's a Black girl. Get in.' And so I think that's been helpful for me. It's also frustrating because they are progressive White people but are still so endeared to keeping the current structure and not asking complex questions or thinking of things in a critical way that it makes it frustrating for me, but I'm still in that space, so yeah."

These dynamics of systematic racism affected Aliyah both by restricting her educational achievement and by helping her advance in her career that was still bound by institutional racism.

“I feel like if I were White, I would already have a graduate degree. Meaning, I would come from a family and have the resources and experience where I would have the graduate degree to be able to get to the positions that I want to get. I wouldn't need the help of progressive White people. But because I'm Black and I haven't had the resources to have a graduate degree. It is helpful that the progressive White people see value in me being a person of color in the environmental field. In that way, it's helped. Does that make sense? [...]The White progressives being open and accepting and wanting to have

more diversity, it's positive in that they put me places. It's not positive as in they don't have any idea of what it would take to actually get equality or equity in the environmental field. Outside of 'Oh, there's a Black person. Come on in' that's it."

Aaliyah pointed to experiences volunteering for her community as being the most fulfilling.

"I was most fulfilled in the endeavors where I could bridge environmental justice and traditional environmentalism, but that's never been a part of my job. It's tiring to do this work outside of work and to feel and to know that my organizations can't. They aren't adaptable enough or flexible enough to see how these seemingly disparate activities will strengthen the organization as a whole."

This positive experience contrasted with the emotional burden she carried advancing these same concepts with the environmental organizations that were not yet ready to change.

Aaliyah's future job outlook was positive and focused. She was proud of how far she had advanced in her career with only an undergraduate degree. However, Aliya witnessed her current manager, a woman of color in a leadership position, having difficulties making changes related to equity. "But I'm like, 'It's just you.' It's just her. I don't know how much of her it would take to actually make change, and she's in leadership. I think her White counterparts would have to join her in that effort, and I haven't seen that." As a result, Aaliyah believed that unless she pursued an advanced degree, she would continue to have limited power to voice her opinions and to implement her ideas to "make the kind of change that I want in the current structure of environmental nonprofits."

Coupled with her drive to pursue an advanced degree and her inherent networking and people skills, Aaliyah's motivation to add to her social capital resulted from being the target of retaliation after she and another woman of color spoke up about increasing equity within her previous White-led environmental nonprofit. Leadership created a hostile work

environment where Aaliyah felt she could not speak up authentically without repercussions, and eventually, she left the organization and the state.

"One of the reasons I left [my city] is because when I and other women of color within an environmental nonprofit spoke about the issues of equity within the environmental field, the repercussions were vast and led to me leaving the state in that environmental organization because the older White people that were in control made it a problem for me professionally and made a problem for the other woman of color professionally and none of us work within that specific space that we were in. I don't feel comfortable. I feel like it makes me vulnerable to speak up about my opinions and about what needs to change, and so I feel like it's a better use of my time for me to go in education and try to make change the safest and best way that I can, which is not usually speaking to people directly."

Aaliyah was also motivated because she believed she had limited advancement opportunities within her organization to move into a leadership position and increase her salary without a more advanced degree. "...I don't think I could get higher pay or more responsibility without getting a graduate degree, which is what I plan to do next year."

When asked what advice she would give to her younger self, Aaliyah said, "Maybe, I would tell people 'Go work at [the state environmental agency], get your experience, don't expect too much and then move on.' Yeah."

### ***Breonna Harris***

"So it's funny, everything in my life has been centered on Caucasian activities."

Breonna Harris, a Black female in her 30s, worked as a senior manager for a large environmental nonprofit organization in the Northeast. Breonna started her career in the private sector after receiving a Business Administration degree. Realizing that she did not like the private sector, she joined the Peace Corps and currently held a mid-career position. Breonna grew up in a rural northeastern state, which sparked her interest in the environment and her environmental career.

“I grew up on 50 acres. And this was the '80s. So I was the latch key kid; nobody was home. I played outside with the dog. So that kind of fostered my love of nature and the environment before the buzz words of environmental conservation and social justice and farm-to-table. We were very much growing our own food and living off the land, and it was before that became a thing. So I've always just felt tied to it. And honestly, the opportunity opened [at my job], I felt like it was a good fit for what I was interested in. But also I was 20 something and just done. So it was more of a necessity that has grown into a passion than the other way around of it really being strategic and me knowing that I really wanted to work in the environmental conservation sector.”

Breonna had several rewarding experiences throughout her career, including her time with the Peace Corps. She reflected that the Peace Corps afforded her the opportunity to become determined and self-sufficient, create a network of demographically diverse peers, and add clout to her resume. In addition, Breonna felt that her professional photography work was immensely fulfilling.

However, in her current mid-career position, Breonna found it difficult to be one of the few employees of color. She frequently experienced microaggressions at work and was not convinced that her organization was invested in changing the culture unless she were to experience an act of overt racism. While the organization had been making an effort to become more inclusive, she did not observe leadership addressing the workplace culture that allowed these microaggressions. Breonna also felt, “... that burden of the teachable moment is with [her] every single day.”

"I think the biggest thing right now at [at my job], it's not that I work with anyone who is inherently racist, but the microaggressions and the unconscious bias is just astounding. And so, [my organization] has recently, in the past three years, made a big push to put diversity, equity, and inclusion work at the forefront. What I am not seeing is the actual passion behind that. So everybody wants to say, 'yes, we're on board. Everybody should feel comfortable and included', but then when it comes to investing in that work, I don't know if I've seen it yet. So that's been a challenge. It's been a challenge to get any kind of direct messaging out to the organization about behavior and microaggressions. And it's challenging to hold the executive team to any kind of action as far as consequences to people's behaviors. So, anything short of calling me the N-word, are they really going to do



anything? And that's where I've seen it gets really frustrating when, because there are so few of us, it starts to feel like, 'Am I crazy? Am I being overly sensitive?' And then I think about it too much, and I'm like, 'I should have said something.' So that's the biggest challenge that I'm finding right now."

Breonna carried the emotional toll of the microaggressions. "And so, I always kind of walk into work being like, 'What stupid shit is somebody gonna say today?' Do you know what I mean? It's like I'm already defensive about what's gonna happen or what somebody's gonna say." She often had feelings of exclusion, feeling othered, questioning her experiences, and not having a voice in her workplace. Her self-insulating reactions to microaggressions, as in not speaking up at meetings, affected her job performance.

"I guess I don't feel, like, psychologically safe when I walk into work. And so I think that it does create some barriers in communication, about who I'm really willing to work with or how open I am in meetings when I already come in with this thought of like, 'Oh, here we go, X person is in this meeting,' You know what I mean? Like, I come in with this negativity, how open can I possibly be? And I also, in meetings, what I've been noticing is, I'll say something, and there'll be silence or no acknowledgment of what I've said, and a White woman will repeat what I've just said, and everybody is like, 'That's a great idea. That's a good point.' And so it does affect how much I speak up in meetings, 'cause I'm like, 'Why bother? I'm just feeding them my ideas.'"

Although Breonna had a group of peers to whom she could relate, she found it hard to find mentors who looked like her. She believed her direct supervisor, who was White, was not an advocate for her and had effectively silenced her but was an advocate for her White peers' advancement opportunities. She pointed to this racist treatment as having a direct negative impact on her professional advancement.

"So I've noticed that she will champion my White colleagues with the same title, and many of them have become directors, many of them have been presented with opportunities for growth. And I have talked to her several times about a possible career growth for me, different career paths, different ideas that I have. And I noticed that when I bring this up for the next two weeks, our check-ins will be canceled. So it's very hard to even present my own ideas about what I would like to do in the organization. It's kind of a slap in the face after eight years. Why would you not want to invest in

someone who has been there for so long? And the answer is they do. You just have to be White.”

Breonna was disillusioned with her current organization and had interviewed for other positions outside it. However, Breonna decided to stay with her current organization because she believed in the mission, the job security, the network of peers she respected, and to prove to the organization’s leadership that she could. “I guess there's something in my mind that is like, ‘I'm gonna show them, like, I'm going to reach VP level, and I'm going to show them.’ And maybe that's just my Type A determination, maybe I just like slamming my head against the wall. I don't know what it is.”

Despite the workplace challenges, Breonna’s future career outlook within her organization was hopeful. She was exploring moving to another position where she could work in diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ). “And even if I didn’t get that position, I'm joining the DEIJ steering committee, and I'm getting more involved because I'm tired of screaming into the wind. At some point, somebody has to listen, and I just wanna be part of the solution.”

Breonna’s advice to her younger self would have been to believe in herself, not to question herself if something inappropriate or insulting happened in the workplace, and not make excuses for the White colleagues who created and enabled the racist workplace culture.

“I didn't realize how much persistence this was going to take. And I also would say you're not crazy, it's not just you. If you ever have to pause for a moment and think, "Was that?" It is. Right? Like if there's anything that catches you off guard and makes you hesitate, it is exactly what you think it was. Like it was inappropriate or insulting or it was harassment or whatever it is that triggers something in your brain, don't double think it. I think I did a lot of making excuses for White people for a long time, and so now, I am super frustrated and I have to funnel that emotion into something more productive, and that can be hard. And so, if I had been a little bit more head-on earlier in my career, I might feel differently today, but I don't know.”

## ***Audre Howard***

"I would just say you're enough. Everything that you may have doubts about, what you think is right or wrong, the things that keep you up, the convictions that you feel, you are enough, and those are who you are, and to embrace it."

Audre Howard, an African American female in her 20s, worked as a coordinator for a large environmental nonprofit organization in the Midwest. She grew up as an only child to Haitian immigrant parents in two large Midwestern metropolitan areas. Although her parents took her to local parks during her childhood, Audre did not go backpacking or camping like many of her professional peers. Audre's interest in the environment stemmed from trying to find solutions to problems associated with vacant lots and unusable land she observed in her neighborhood. While attending university, Audre fell in love with research, and later the environment and nature, as the vehicle to give back to her community.

Audre chose an environmental career to work with people rather than stay in academia and pursue a Ph.D. She had positions in state government, the private sector, academia, and eventually ended up in her current role in the nonprofit sector. She attributed being the target of opportunities in her career to her personality and ability to network.

"I feel like a lot of this environmental trajectory stuff has to be about who you know—95%. I fully believe in that. And that is really, really terrible to me because, again, if I didn't have this disposition, if I didn't have the social networking whatever, What does that even mean? So that's interesting."

Role models and mentors were important to Audre, but she had to curb her expectations regarding Black women and people of color helping her in that role. Audre explained that the expectations of how leaders of color should give back to their communities and serve in mentorship roles were unrealistic and were an additional burden on that leader.

"I was earnestly going to [a prominent woman of color in the environmental field's] door like, "You can be my mentor." And she's like... She didn't say no, but she's like, "Do you realize how much is on my plate?" And in my mind,

I'm now reflecting on those moments where the people who I wanted to be in direct relation with and have this bond, it was like they had to shoulder the world.”

Audre's most rewarding experiences in her career, and what motivated her to stay in the environmental field, were designing and implementing neighborhood-focused programs. Specifically, she emphasized those experiences where she gave back directly, valued people's time, and built authentic relationships and trust with predominantly socio-economically disadvantaged urban communities of color.

"So that sweet spot that I've been continuously diving into, thinking about getting feedback for, and building just trust so I can hear those responses, has been really my calling or at least my daily bread, if you will. So just meeting people where they are, I think. And that's easiest to do on a local level and working for a local organization than it is a national organization, I will say that. The trust is already built if you work for a nonprofit that's been in the community for 30 years versus one that's been around for 83 years, and then they just got into the community last month, and you gotta figure out why an 83-year-old organization is just now talking to a city.”

Central to Audre's most rewarding experiences was realizing that mainstream environmental language was a significant barrier to building foundational trust with communities. Audre was proud of her ability to talk about the environment in ways that met people where they were. Most importantly, how she chose to communicate changed the power dynamics and allowed her to learn from the communities' expertise. "[O]ne of the cool things I've seen is terminology is so powerful. And someone can be saying the same thing but in different words, and you're missing it completely." The mutual respect that Audre cultivated helped her achieve and surpass the organization's environmental goals. However, her organization's leadership was often dismissive of Audre's suggestions as unnecessary, even though her suggestions were based on her personal and work experiences and expertise with communities of color.

Audre found it challenging to reconcile her passion for her work and her organization's racist history and culture. As one of the few women of color in her organization, her White leadership discounted her expertise and committed other microaggressions. She also witnessed her White colleagues' lack of awareness of, and unwillingness to learn, the importance of being truly racially/ethnically inclusive. The microaggressions took an emotional toll on Audre. She grappled with avoiding painful conversations and feeling compelled to explain the value of her perspective, voice, and her worth to the organization. When she did choose to use her voice, she was hyperconscious of her approach, self-editing so that she would not offend her White colleagues.

“So it's more so me being the only person in the room or one of the few. And so we're constantly trying to gauge when we have the energy to explain, or when we have the energy to help reframe or to not offend, because it's been done. Not wrong, but it's just been done differently than what needs to be done. So we're in this paradigm shift, or at least a time in history, where [...] you are not gonna make the money you thought you were gonna make in the '50s because you're not relevant anymore. You know? And so if you wanna be relevant, yes, you need me or other people who are from vulnerable communities or minority communities to speak up on this work. But you also can't give us the burden to always speak on the work. You have to do your own homework.”

While she acknowledged that her organization, like many others, was on the cusp of change to be more inclusive of people of color and vulnerable communities, she was disillusioned and frustrated with her organization and the environmental movement in general. "What you should have been learning in your living room in picking up a book like once a year, you're now having to do in the workplace. And that's not where I get my learning. I'm not learning anything right now. "

The disconnect between Audre's current organizational culture and attitude towards working with communities of color in what she knew to be the right approach to build trust had a direct effect on how Audre navigated the workplace. In spite of being resilient, Audre

was cautious about what she said and questioned when she should speak up at work, even when she was confronted with racist behavior.

“Shoot, girl, yeah, I just don't talk as much. I mean, I have asked myself the question pretty regularly, ‘Is this, like, a when, how, like, when should I speak, in what way do I speak, and how is this gonna benefit not only me but who I'm speaking to?’ [...] There's just different battles, there's just different conversations that are worth engaging with. And we can say from a typical thing about personal boundaries, [...] there's times where I'm like, ‘Okay, that was just inappropriate.’ And then there's times I'm like, ‘Okay, I can't even get through having a conversation about why what you just did was just out of control.’ So personally, that's a whole thing, and being in a culture that I think I'm the first Black woman in [my region] to work there, I think.”

Audre managed the burdens, microaggressions, and feelings of being discounted at work by creating insulating connections, experiences, relationships with her family, work colleagues, and knowledge exchange outside of her organization. She attributed her resilience and persistence in this field to a combination of the privilege of her family's financial support to pursue an environmental career, her self-determination, and courageousness.

“And then also being very, very aggressive about my networks and how I'm presented to the world, and if I am acceptable, if I'm safe enough, and if I'm able to be a part of every environment that I put myself in. And I'm just now growing into another phase where I'm feeling like I can be courageous [...] So great time to shift, but it took me about eight years.”

Audre's advice to her younger self was to embrace who she was, use the wisdom and guidance from older family members and people in her field, speak up, and appreciate the journey.

“Oh, man. I would just say you're enough. Everything that you may have doubts about, what you think is right or wrong, the things that keep you up, the convictions that you feel, you are enough, and those are who you are, and to embrace it. Use discretion. Use wisdom of when to move, when to speak[...]. So just listening and hearing before speaking. And be slow to speak. I don't know what the scripture is. But the whole point is to be who you are, and you are enough, but also to use wisdom and guidance and tap into even people. Again, that intergenerational aspect. And that could be people in your field, but also family members. And to get that insight to lead you and guide you in the way that you wanna go in. Yeah, I think I would say

that. And definitely don't regret anything, man. Yeah, I don't regret anything. And I'm loving the journey..."

***Daniel Gonzalez***

"Be the quiet leader, but the leader that knows how to get things done and can motivate people, and you don't have to always be that big person, that big personality."

Daniel Gonzalez, an Filipino American male in his 30s, currently worked in a coordinator position for a large national environmental nonprofit organization in the Midwest. Daniel had not considered an environmental career as an option and majored in the social sciences while he was in college. His entry into the environmental field occurred after he graduated during the late 2000s recession and there were few job opportunities. "So, yeah, one of those hard, hard places. But I actually found, how I started my career in the environmental sector, is because of the recession." Daniel's first environmental job was through an AmeriCorps program focused on outdoor restoration, which he enjoyed and motivated him to pursue future jobs in the environment. Daniel worked for a state environmental agency, an environmental nonprofit, then received a master's degree in a related field and went back into the environmental nonprofit sector.

Daniel grew up with Filipino immigrant parents in a predominantly White community with relatively little racial/ethnic diversity. His upbringing, education, personality, and experiences shaped who Daniel was and to whom he could relate, asserting that throughout his life he found it difficult to relate to other people of color. "And folks of color are sometimes a challenge for me to tap into from like a peer sense, 'cause I honestly don't know what a lot of folks of color's personal lives are before becoming a professional. So that's hard to relate to as a peer."

Daniel did not have many role models or mentors because of his race/ethnicity. "I would say in general, no, not for me. Especially a male Asian role model in the

environmental sector, I would say there are few and far between in my career." However, he was able to connect with a White female mentor assigned to him through a mentorship program. Their conversations about the importance of diversity in the workforce helped him view the issue differently and opened career opportunities.

Daniel's most rewarding experiences in his career were when he helped young people, especially young people of color, find their path, uncover their intrinsic love of nature, and learn how to be leaders. His backcountry trail-building experiences were particularly meaningful for several reasons. From an environmental perspective, his work building trails was close to nature, and it left a legacy in the national parks. However, most important to Daniel was from a human connection perspective where he built an intentional community that worked hard together, shared common values, and learned from one another.

"So that was really rewarding and just gratifying to know that I could do that and also that I walked away from that program with a whole team of folks that I can always call. And we have this shared connection that really only people in that program really understand. Yeah, some folks are as close as my best friend. So that was really great to really figure out."

Daniel had many peers and friends within his organization with whom he could relate. However, he did not have many opportunities to build a network of peers of color outside of his organization in similar professional roles. Daniel believed that there was a need for a strong network of environmental professionals of color outside of his organization to encourage professional development and provide job opportunities between programs.

Daniel's biggest challenge, borne from not seeing his race/ethnicity reflected in leadership within any environmental organization, was finding a new way to be recognized as a leader that reflected his personality and style.



"Yeah, and then I think one of the biggest things that's a challenge is not seeing myself reflected in any kind of leadership capacity within an organization, within the sector in general, within the nonprofits here as a whole...I never felt comfortable in that, like seeing myself in that way, and I don't know if that's because I never saw a lot of folks that look like me in those, or is it just like something that I've learned over time because that's the way I grew up, I don't know."

He also identified disparities within his organization between programmatic positions like his that tended to have more people of color, and other positions like fundraisers that tended to have few, if any, people of color. He noted that programmatic staff did not have as many opportunities for professional development or opportunities to advance into upper management positions.

"So still nobody that I know in my kind of peer group has gone to like a C-suite type track or director type program yet. I don't know if that's because of age or career-wise or if it's just kind of this green ceiling for folks of color. I don't know, but that's an interesting kind of observation that I've had so far."

While he felt his current organization's leadership recognized his abilities and invited him to participate in organizational strategy, he was also suspicious of whether their motivations to include him were because he was a token person of color.

"So I've been invited to participate in those [strategic planning efforts], which is great, and I appreciate that. And I think that's partly because I have this thoughtfulness about how things work, and I'm not always the first to answer a question or respond. I need to take time to digest it. But on the other hand, I also see that as like a, 'Well, let's bring in Daniel. He's part of our diversity initiative. He's part of diversity. He's part of our diverse group of young leaders.'"

Daniel questioned whether his White-led organization was genuinely invested in creating an inclusive atmosphere among people of color. He felt his organization's leadership often discounted and undervalued his and other employees of color's opinions, expertise, and time. Daniel became disillusioned by how the former CEO handled the organization's first DEI initiative, which was mostly driven by employees of color—including Daniel, because the CEO did not implement its recommendations.

“...and the staff there created out of that, their experiences like a recommendations list and presented it to the then CEO, and it was pretty much just kind of shelved and all that work and time was kind of like shelved with it and those folks that did that were all folks of color. We're trying to create a more, an equitable or forward-thinking way that [my organization] could move in that direction, so that wasn't great.”

After leadership shelved the initial DEI work, the organization initiated a new DEI effort spearheaded by a woman of color. However, when a new White CEO came on board, he replaced the woman leading the DEI efforts with another woman of color without consulting or seeking guidance from anyone on the DEI committee.

"...but the White CEOs and general, like, C-suite, they're like, 'Oh, here's this, our new director of HR who's also a person of color, she's gonna lead this. Thank you for holding the torch for this initiative.' So that was I think a lot of us on the committee were just like, 'Why? What purpose is this?' There wasn't even like a conversation, or there was a conversation in so far as listening kind of and then, 'No, we're just gonna do this. We're gonna go this way.'"

Daniel felt the organization's White leadership saddled him and his colleagues of color with sustaining the DEI efforts and offering solutions that would make the organization more diverse. Although participating in the DEI efforts took an emotional toll, Daniel was committed to continuing the DEI work.

“I am glad that we're doing it. But I don't know what the long-term kind of view of this is from a leadership perspective. Like, okay, thank you for providing these challenges to us. How can we make this better? They're looking to like the DEI committee who are predominantly folks of color, because we care about this. Right. There are allies in there, that's great. Other folks that represent different aspects of diversity, but especially, when it comes to the topic of how do we get more diversity in these programs or whatnot, and you know. You just always look to the Black and Brown folks. It gets tiring and wearing. I wanna keep doing it, even though it's tiring and wearing, but it's so hard.”

In spite of the challenges, Daniel was motivated to stay in the environmental field because of his passion for working with youth. “I just feel like this inspiration like a next generation of folks, they care about something really passionately or don't, but are willing to

try something new and find out that they love it or maybe it's not for them but it instills some kind of conservation ethic, and that's something that I really admire and I want to keep fostering.”

Daniel's advice to his younger self was not to be afraid of failure, have a thick skin, and "... I would also tell somebody in my position, 'it's fine, it's okay to be raggedy.' So we say a lot in our organization because everything is hard, especially being a person of color in the environmental sector, is very hard. And sometimes you just gotta be able to express yourself and tell people that it is hard so that you can kinda change things.”

### ***Esme Ho***

"And so I think I sort of wrestle with, 'Am I doing enough? If I'm at the table, am I doing enough to change how the table looks, or am I just being complicit?'"

Esme Ho, an Asian American female in her 30s, worked in environmental philanthropy in the West. She grew up in a low-income household in a large metropolitan area with a large, tight-knit extended family. Esme credited her upbringing for the value she placed on community. She also credited her grandmother, a talented gardener and cook, for exposing her to the environment.

“And so we were, like many refugee immigrant families, just trying to figure out a way to stretch the dollar and feed everybody that was always around. And so my grandma had this amazing garden where she grew all the [Asian] herbs that we needed and really hot chilis and amazing guava and pomelo and lemongrass. Growing up, farm-to-table wasn't a thing to me 'cause that's just how we ate.”

Esme was a good student and, with financial aid, attended Ivy League schools, pedigrees she believed she needed as an Asian woman to improve her career options. After graduating, Esme worked as a political campaigner and sought several environmental fellowship opportunities. She felt lucky to receive the fellowships because of the built-in mentors that helped her create a network of peers and professionals who opened doors to

subsequent job opportunities. As a result, Esme could be more selective about the positions she pursued, focusing on organizations with diverse staff. She "often tried to work for a female boss or make strong connections with any people of color really that [she came] across because there's not that many, necessarily."

While she was in college, Esme spent a summer in Vietnam conducting research that turned into "a really powerful experience, in terms of me thinking about my identity and my responsibility." She witnessed the power imbalance between the government and the local community. She also became aware of her own powerlessness to change a work culture that clashed with her values.

Esme carried this sense of responsibility into each of her subsequent jobs. As a result, her career high water mark was working for a state environmental agency where the work aligned with her values, and she was able to learn and grow professionally. "[I]t was providing services to folks that otherwise would not get services. And it helped the environment. And it was providing job training to more green jobs." This positive experience cemented her interest in pursuing an environmental career.

The experience at the state agency stood in stark contrast with Esme's work in environmental philanthropy, where race and racism played central roles. She recalled that in a fellowship position early in her career, she was the target of racial microaggressions and stereotyping among her peers. Esme explained that microaggressions were part of environmental philanthropy's culture because of the "power dynamics associated with personal identifiers." She credited a female mentor for supporting her through one particularly negative experience.

"...There was just some program officer from somewhere who kept asking me about program work in China, and how that was going, and I was like, 'I do work in the West, so Oregon, California, Washington.' And then he just

wasn't listening and just continued to be like, 'But what's really happening in China to revolutionize climate change?' And I was like, 'I don't know.'"

After graduate school and several positions, Esme returned to environmental philanthropy but quickly became disillusioned because the racist culture had not changed significantly since her previous experience. She felt morally and philosophically conflicted between her current organization's reluctance to engage meaningfully in DEI efforts and her inability to influence its decision makers. On the one hand, she felt she had a powerful platform to make positive changes toward DEI principles; on the other hand, she still experienced and observed racism within the field.

"I am disappointed that I feel like the field in philanthropy hasn't made it further than when I remembered it when I worked at [my previous environmental philanthropic employer], where I was having sort of these, I guess, it's more like microaggressions now versus blatant racism, but it's still very much sort of present."

Esme recognized that she did not have the agency, the social or professional capital to advance DEI in environmental philanthropy as much as she wanted. This lack of power also caused Esme to stay silent around issues of race, even when she witnessed overt racism within her workplace. Esme questioned whether she had done enough to advance DEI conversations and whether she was complicit in the institutional racism by adhering to her position's role.

"I think it's also different because it's like I'm not White, but Asians are often White-adjacent, and I feel like the things that people say to me about Black and brown people because they think that it's okay is incredibly jarring. And I never know how to... Not never know, but I feel like how we would react as a human, and then this is like how in my professional capacity, I kind of have to gloss it over sometimes. And so, yeah, and I think it's tricky to navigate."

To manage the emotional toll that working in an institutionally racist field had taken, Esme relied on her peers and mentor networks as an insulating and grounding community.

She attributed having those relationships to her resiliency. She also began to garden, like her grandmother, and spend more time in nature.

“I think for me, getting outside and going on hikes and sort of remembering that initial feeling of peace and awe, and sort of wanting to make sure that more people have access to experiences like this, and having that be a really grounding experience is important. I can tell when I haven't gone out on a long enough hike in a while, and I get a little more bitter or something, which is not helpful right now when we're in shelter in place.”

Esme did not regret having gone into the environmental field but admitted that she might not have chosen this career if she were to start over. She believed that it would have been easier had she selected another career with more diversity; she would have felt more comfortable, not felt othered, and not felt compelled to code-switch. Since Esme did choose an environmental career, she felt responsible for staying and making it better.

"I feel like one of the values that I hold from my upbringing is very much a sense of community and stewardship and care both for people and [resources]. And so I feel like it's taken me awhile to surface that as what I took away from all those hours digging around in the garden. And if I had a blank slate and had to start over, I don't know that I would pick the environment, but that's where I've landed, and I think it's a good spot to figure out how to make connections between issues, and at its best, it can be something that provides for all communities. I guess all to say, I don't regret my decision."

Esme's advice to her younger self would enable her to persist in the environmental field and be resilient to the challenges she would face. Namely, seeking interdisciplinary training, building broad networks "that help soothe your soul and keep you honest," finding mentors from different ethnicities and stages of their careers, and investing in self-care early on. " 'Cause I feel it's easy to feel like you have to continue to work twice as hard and do all that immigrant guilt, but it's a long slog, and I think that if you don't have that community and that basis of self-care, you're not gonna be able to be resilient enough to stick with it."

### ***Fiona Huang***

"Stand up for what you think is right in a project. Because I think, certainly for people who are dismissed as passive Asian women, you kind of have to thwart these expectations. There is the initial impression that you are not gonna speak up that much."

Fiona Huang, a Chinese-American female in her 30s, grew up in a lower-end, middle-class neighborhood in the Midwest. Her parents had immigrated to the U.S. but found it difficult to navigate as people of color, causing one parent to return to their nation of birth. Fiona's neighborhood was very diverse, and she became aware of the deep racial segregation within her community when she was in high school.

While attending a private university, Fiona first became interested in pursuing an job in environmental markets, climate change, and climate justice. After graduating, however, Fiona had a hard time finding an environmental job. Although her university was prestigious, she felt she did not have enough social capital or networks necessary to help her. Fiona first worked in real estate, became a research assistant for a person she credited as her first role model in the environmental field, and later decided to go to graduate school to expand her environmental expertise beyond markets. Next, she returned to the environmental field in the private sector at a U.S.-based international environmental consulting firm. She chose international environmental work because she considered it to be more racially/ethnically diverse than her previous experiences. "So both because of my professional interest, my personal interest, but also my interest in working with more diverse populations, I have shifted toward working internationally."

Fiona's most rewarding work experiences were those where she felt she made a difference in the community where she worked. She shared one example of when she first became team lead for a project because the original team lead dropped out. As a result, she

gained some autonomy and responsibility for the project. She also felt empowered to stand up to a client, resulting in a more equitable and morally responsible project.

"It was rewarding because the partners we actually had in the [the country] were incredible to work with, but at the same time, it was really the first chance I had to stand up and kind of say, 'Fuck you,' to our client. And it's a very difficult power dynamic to tell your client that they're actually not doing something well."

She credited being a person of color with her ability to navigate the challenging power dynamics and ensure that the community's voices were heard.

"As a person of color, I might be able to be more patient in the way I'm listening to other people's desires of what they want. Our client, for some reason, was not interested in that. And so I think I provided a very useful kind of stewarding role in just ensuring that people were really hearing each other out."

Although the experience was rewarding, she also described it as being one that "drained [her] psychologically." She had burned out by not picking fights wisely, getting upset with people who were not implementing work in line with equity principles, and becoming disillusioned with one White male leader she had previously admired.

"I think it was depressing because one of the people from [an international organization] that was also participating in the project, is seen as one of the leaders in environmental and social standards [...] And working with him, I realized, 'Wow, this is just like a jaded old White guy. He doesn't actually care about enforcing these standards.'"

Fiona directly experienced and observed frequent microaggressions from her White, American colleagues based on her and others' race/ethnicity or country of origin. In addition to hearing racist comments based on racial stereotypes, Fiona recalled one White colleague that "looked at me and my colleague like dirt and didn't really come to us for our opinions even in areas of expertise that we clearly demonstrate[d] we had." She often found it difficult to react appropriately to these microaggressions.

"I've also been in situations in China where I'm the team leader [and] an older White person didn't even really acknowledge he was in China and he



would be like, 'Oh Fiona Huang can you translate this into Vietnamese.' Or he would constantly talk over me in meetings, even though this was his first time working on the project and he lacked the context both cultural and also project specific. And when somebody monologues over you, it's really hard to interrupt them, right? Then that's seen as rude. And so the few times I did that, he just doubled down. So it's also been cases like that where they're microaggressions, and I'm not sure how much to escalate as opposed to just go along with it."

She sometimes reacted to the microaggressions by talking with the individual or escalating her concerns to her direct supervisor, who was White and had made racist comments in the past. Fiona noted that her boss had become more receptive to her concerns over time. "... I think over the past several years, my boss [...], he's an older White man, he has really grown. Actually, he's fired somebody for saying something racist, and so recognizing that he also has a learning curve, he's learned to be a champion." However, she acknowledged that his motivations to address her concerns were more often based on the implications for the business' reputation.

"And I think he, there are very clear cases where it's something that damages the reputation of our business, if it's something that damages our reputation or has some more material implication, he'll definitely be the champion. I think if it's something a little bit more ambiguous or could be construed as just being too PC, sometimes he's like, 'Oh you don't need to be so judgmental.' Is basically his response. So it's been mixed."

Fiona created an insulating connection with one colleague who was also a woman of color and had a similar commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Fiona described this relationship as one that kept her sane on a daily basis because she felt validated and could talk to her colleague about the racial microaggressions they both experienced or observed within the organization. Whereas Fiona's boss had dismissed her concerns in the past, now their boss was more willing to listen with her colleague's support.

"But it's helped a ton to have my colleague [...] come on board because with both of us saying these things and [our boss is] like, 'Okay this is not just one judgmental person, this is an actual issue.' And I'm sure you've heard this

many times before, it helps more than one person in the organization to advocate for these issues."

Fiona believed her career advancement had been limited within her organization because of a combination of her race/ethnicity, age, and her introverted personality. She had the skills to perform the technical work, but her lack of social capital limited her ability to bring new business. She believed that there were double standards applied to her and felt socially excluded because she was "often at events where people are super buddy buddy and some of it is like old boys club or some of it is White women not really relating to me."

"...[S]o it's been really hard for me to navigate certain workshops or certain conferences when I'm the only non-White person in the room. And I think that that has probably in a very material way affected my ability to generate business. And demonstrate my worth to my company."

Fiona used her boss "as a crutch" to gain entry and overcome being socially excluded during conferences and networking events. She thought her boss was generous because he promoted her beyond where she thought she might be in her career. For instance, her boss had recently suggested that she could advance to managing director level in the future. Nevertheless, Fiona recognized a troubling dynamic with her boss frequently taking credit for her work.

"There are many, many proposals where he is the team leader because that's what's gonna bring in a contract, even though I'm the person doing most of the work and that is, I'm not gonna lie, it can be hurtful [...] Because he's still taking the credit on his resume, he still says, 'Oh, I'm the team leader.' [...] Like that doesn't help. Yeah."

Fiona's advice to her younger self was to find a role model early on because that would have helped her. She cautioned that racial power dynamics existed in international- and domestic-focused jobs and pointed to her domestic work as her most rewarding. She also suggested that learning how to stand up and speak to someone in a more powerful position was important, especially for Asian women.

"[...] I've worked in both domestic projects and internationally facing projects, and it's not that doing international work saves you from the racial dynamics. I've come to learn that, right? Maybe there are more diverse spaces, but the power dynamics are still very much there."

***Lianni Joshi***

"But I think in terms of wanting to do environmental work and then wanting to work in a diverse workplace, I think wanting to work in a diverse workplace definitely trumps the work. I'm ready to do anything right now as long as I'm in a more balanced work environment, 'cause I just don't feel like I'm thriving there. It's the old boys club thing, it's the lack of diversity, it just is killing me, I feel like."

Lianni Joshi, an Indian-American female in her 30s, grew up in an upper middle class, White, suburban neighborhood in the Northeast. Lianni's parents had immigrated from India, where they had grown up very poor. When her family moved to the U.S., "the idea was for them to create wealth for themselves, and then send that money back and bring everybody over."

Lianni stayed in her home state to go to university, where she studied engineering for her undergraduate and master's degrees. While completing her master's degree and for several years after, she worked for a large metropolitan water agency and a transportation authority. Her experience with the city was positive, which she attributed to there being over half female employees, a supportive culture, and her mentor. Lianni was inspired and motivated by her mentor, who was an African American male, to get a second master's degree in the environmental field at an Ivy League university.

"He would always be like, Lianni, you're a rock star, you need to go.' That's what he would say, he would call me a rock star. He's like, 'You just need to go.' And I didn't understand, I didn't get it until I went there. But I think this is what I'm trying to say, I never thought that somebody like me could go to a program at [my university]. And my boss is African American. He grew up in West Philly. He had the opportunity to go to [a prominent HBCU] when he was young when he was in college, and he had the opportunity to go to [Ivy League university]. But it was kind of maybe because he was African American and he was pushing me to do it, I think that's what enabled me to actually go."

While her mentor was encouraging Lianni to go to graduate school, she was worried about the additional financial burden of going to an Ivy League school. Her mother, who was a strong figure in Lianni's life, was not supportive of her decision because she would have to take on additional debt.

"And she's like, 'Why would you go?' She didn't even understand. She's like, 'You have a job, you already did a masters, why do you need to do this again?' And she didn't understand what [my university] was. She didn't know what an Ivy League school was. So she just didn't get it."

Lianni believed that the conflict between her family's cultural expectations and her choice to go to graduate school to further her career as a limitation she continued to feel burdened with today, "...and I feel like I hold that whole burden on my shoulders for a whole generation."

"My family, My dad's family [...] they're from the village. My grandmother didn't study past the third grade. [...] For them, for me to go and get another master's, like why am I not getting married? Why don't I have children already? Those are the limitations. It's like generational, cultural, that it's taken so long for me to learn to shed, and I feel like my husband has helped. He's helped me do that, 'cause he's always seen me as like, 'You are so much more than you understand.' But it's like me having to get away from my family and get married and move away to [my current city], for me to escape that and get away [...]."

Lianni's graduate school experience was positive, and she felt like she was thriving there. She felt valued and respected by the professors who treated her as an equal, and she felt "coddled in this utopic kind of environment." After she graduated, Lianni was able to find a position as a water engineer in the private sector, where she was currently employed. However, she quickly became disillusioned. She had had great momentum during graduate school, but at her new consulting position, she had to start over "from the bottom of the totem pole." Also, Lianni found it difficult to adjust to the consulting culture, which focused on billability, lacked diversity, dominated by White male engineers, and served affluent White communities that did not have water resources problems.

"Actually, I feel like since this slow down that I've put all these limitations mentally on myself. [...] I think that reality hit so hard for me when I left that I feel like [...] I can't get out from under it. And I feel like I'm limiting myself. And just to speak from a D&I perspective, when I started there, I was the only person of color when I started, I think. I think there was one gentleman who was African, [...] I think I met him one time. So I was the only person of color there. So I was kind of re-entering this industry where it is traditionally male-dominated, but this was very new to me to work at a place that was not this diverse."

She described being excluded from the relationships within her office as a “bro culture thing or old boys club thing” and with her direct supervisor, who was a White male. “‘Cause I see the way he treats my co-worker who he also reports to. They just have this rapport of a bro-y thing, where you can give each other shit about stuff. And I can't do that with my supervisor. It's really awkward between us, whereas I don't see that with [my male colleague] and him.”

Lianni and a colleague initiated a DEI within her organization after becoming inspired at a national conference. Her company's leader was supportive of the DEI work as long as Lianni and her colleague took on the burden to drive the effort. She questioned whether he was invested in implementing their recommendations and making organizational changes.

"He's like, 'This is something that's just gonna take more of my time, like another meeting or commitment that I have.' So he seems apathetic, really. I don't think that he doesn't care, because when [my colleague] and I first made the decision to create the group, we talked to him about it and he's like, [...], 'Look, we try to hire staff that is diverse, but it's really just like what's available in the market.' And I don't think he was really understanding or hearing us and maybe we weren't conveying it to him well enough, but he's very supportive of like, 'If you guys want something done, you have the support that you need to take that initiative on and do it and run with it.' So it's kind of on you to create what you want to do at work. So that's fine. We've been doing that."

Over the years, Lianni created many insulating connections to manage these workplace challenges and feelings of exclusion: with her husband, through her friendships

outside of work, like-minded colleagues, and through art. She also changed her job focus to marketing so that she could talk with people and attend conferences. Lianni was at a crossroads in terms of her future career path. She had been considering leaving environmental engineering, pointing to the difficulty she had working with male engineers. Nevertheless, she was committed to working in the environmental field if she could find a more balanced work environment, "'cause I just don't feel like I'm thriving there. It's the old boys club thing, it's the lack of diversity, it just is killing me, I feel like." However, she would not consider working for an organization that lacked diversity.

"And would I go and work where I'm the only minority again? Probably not. Because at least if I know that if I enter another workplace where I don't know if it ends up being a toxic workplace or whatever it is, at least I'm not feeling as alone. Yeah, yeah. I mean I definitely feel alone there. It sucks. But I don't know, I feel like I'm close, I'm close. I've been applying for jobs, I'm putting my resumes out there, I'm close. But yeah, the diversity work gives me a purpose, for sure [...]."

Reflecting on her younger self, Lianni wished that she had felt more self-worth to recognize when she was not respected or appreciated at work. To help her get through this challenging period in her career, she was focusing on why she was passionate about the work and remembering those moments when she was appreciated.

"But I feel like I've been trying to work on feeling appreciated, but I think I just need to ignore everybody and just remember what it was like when I was in that flow and when I was working well with my mentors and my supervisors. That's what I have to work towards again. And I can't let the noise around me bring me down. And that's what I've been thinking about in the last couple weeks, is reminding myself of my self-worth and remembering that I deserve to be at a place where people respect and appreciate me."

## ***Reina Gomez***

"I would say that my identity and all very much brings, and I bring this to my work now, is the importance of intersectionality in the environment. I don't do environmental work in and of itself. I don't work on biodiversity or what might be called traditional environmental work. I work on how the environment interacts with people, and bring a people-oriented lens, and I think that that is reflective of my personal story."

Reina Gomez, a Latina female in her 30s, grew up in a suburb outside of a large metropolitan area in the West. Her parents emigrated from Mexico to the U.S. and lived in parts of the city "that are identified quantitatively as environmental justice communities, so near freeways, near rail yards, those types of industrial uses that we have a lot of right next to Black and Brown communities." After graduating from college, her parents moved the family to the suburbs. Reina explained that the intersection of many aspects of her life and wanting to make the world a better place motivated her to pursue an environmental career.

"I think it was a little bit of like, 'Oh, this is interesting. There's a freeway right here.' When I would go visit my aunts and my grandma, and where I was born is next to a freeway, so that was part of it. And my parents, aside from wanting to have better opportunities to build wealth when they were making decisions about where to move, they moved out of urban [city], my mom didn't have asthma anymore. So it's a little bit of the public health aspects of the connection with the environment were of interest to me. And then, yeah, sort of like vocationally I also, I thought like, 'What can I do to make the world a better place?'"

Reina did not have a role model nor anyone who inspired her to enter into the environmental field. However, her father, who was in public service, introduced her to urban planning. "...[H]e's like 'These urban planners, that's so interesting. I never heard about this stuff.' So he would tell me about the existence of urban planning, which was sort of a new thing that he just had never heard about before..." Reina ended up studying urban planning for her bachelor's and master's degrees.

Her first environmental workplace experience was through a fellowship, which was meant to provide meaningful, experiential learning opportunities, where she was assigned a

mentor who helped her throughout her career. "[P]retty much any time I'm contemplating changing any part of my career, I talk to her about it. So yeah, that's been an ongoing relationship in terms of helping me manage my career." After the fellowship and graduate school, Reina found it difficult to find a job in urban planning because of the recession. Over the ensuing years, she held several environmental positions in government, private, and nonprofit sectors. However, she felt that she did not make as much money as she could have, were it not for the recession. She was currently working at the county level because it "...both offered me an opportunity to make more money and still feel passionate about the work I was doing and be part of an exciting opportunity."

Reina's most rewarding work experiences were those where she gave back to her community, including through local environmental justice advocacy and volunteer board service for a nonprofit that funded graduate student environmental leadership projects. One rewarding experience at her current job was when she was able to include non-traditional partners in a planning process, which made "...our plan a lot better and a lot more aggressive than we would have been able to do otherwise, and really built a very large coalition of folks who support the plan." This experience was exceptionally positive because her boss was a good leader and women of color made up most of the team. As women of color, they could make authentic connections with the community.

"And I think both because of his leadership and because he hired other great people, who are mostly women of color, we were able to... We had all had our own relationships that we brought to the process, and it really culminated in trust in the new part of the county, which actually most people don't trust."

The most challenging experiences throughout her career were when Reina experienced microaggressions at the hand of older White male engineer colleagues, who dominated the field. Her colleagues often questioned her expertise, discounted her input, or



patronized her because of her race/ethnicity, gender, and age. "But then even just beyond that, the getting called the one other Brown woman's name, like, 'No, I'm not [Maria Hernandez] actually.' Which is annoying." She described hiding aspects of her identity to fit in or prove herself, especially early in her career. For example, she stopped wearing her class ring and tried to look older so that her colleagues would take her seriously. Reina was prepared for this behavior in White male-dominated jobs, but she experienced microaggressions even in jobs with relative racial/ethnic diversity.

"A lot of the transportation professionals in [my city] are of color, but it's still very male-dominated, so that's always been another, like when I worked at the [state government agency], that was another factor there, that it was [...] the classic like, 'Well, I literally just said that idea, and somebody else said that and now it's a good idea. Okay.'"

Despite these negative experiences, Reina had a positive career outlook in her current role. She often thought "...about [the] intersection of urban planning and the environment, that the environment side has been better about the gender issues, but less about including communities of color in the conversation." She recognized that her personal identity played a considerable role in her career path and she was proud of how her values manifested in her work. "I don't do environmental work in and of itself. I don't work on biodiversity or what might be called traditional environmental work. I work on how the environment interacts with people, and bring a people-oriented lens, and I think that that is reflective of my personal story." She had also gained enough power to influence important decisions, including influencing the state agency to adopt a people-focused environmental strategy.

Reina's resilience attested to the support she felt from the many women of color with whom she had developed relationships throughout her career.

"I was very lucky to [...] start my career with a cohort of people. And it's a network, so even when I moved back to [my city] I have peers who are also

women of color who are from that program, that had done it either before or after me. [...] It's such a small world that [...]our work lives cross quite a bit. And yeah, through [...] the nonprofits that I'm on the board of, and just some folks from [my university] that I'm still close with that are other women of color."

Reina provided optimistic advice to people with her background who were entering into an environmental career. She suggested finding mentors, because mentors had been important in her career, and to be open to opportunities that the environmental field has to offer. "Environment is in a lot of things, so that there's a lot of opportunity. And I'd say that the field is really growing and it's a pretty exciting time, so just find some part of that environment field that is of interest. [...]There's a lot of time to explore it because it's continuing to grow."

### ***Soledad Iglesias***

"I saw the things around me, I saw the conditions that things were in, and I had my own critique and assumptions of it, but I didn't really understand the depth of the racism and White supremacy that shaped my community and the way that it looked."

Soledad Iglesias, a Native-American - Latina female in her 30s, grew up in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood in a large metropolitan area in the South. Her father was born in the U.S. and worked as a migrant farmworker, often moving between the U.S. and Mexico. Soledad and her siblings frequently acted as interpreters for her parents and as the bridge between their family and services and institutions. Because she felt valued and supported by her teachers growing up, she wanted to become a bilingual elementary teacher. So she studied education in college and graduate school.

It was while studying to become a teacher that Soledad discovered her purpose in social and environmental justice. Soledad carried much shame about the neighborhood where she grew up. However, she did not have the historical understanding or language to critically analyze why her community looked the way it did. Through her involvement with a

social justice community organization, she learned about her community's history. "I learned about the oil tank farms that I walked by on my way to school. I learned about all of the toxic facilities and the way that the [year] master plan zoned toxic industry to [my community]." Soledad "found and recognized that I had a voice that I should use." She was also inspired by the organization's leaders, who were women of color, because she felt reflected in them and because they voiced the racial injustices Soledad had felt throughout her life.

"I think seeing the two women of color who are leading the organization [...] other than my mom, I think that was really the first time that I had seen women as leaders, especially women of color as leaders. Women that looked like *mi tias*, that looked like my mom. And that was really impactful for me because it was also one of the first places where I saw and heard people talking about racism and White supremacy explicitly whereas before, there were things that I had thought about but it wasn't something that I would have a conversation with somebody about."

After graduate school, Soledad worked coordinating visitation at a detention center for immigrant women seeking asylum. Her passion for traditional environmentalism was sparked when she took her first camping trip at her next job as an advisor at a university cultural engagement center.

"I was concerned about the environment along the environmental justice front, but [...] I hadn't made this other connection or developed this other kind of relationship with the environment and with the land. And so when I went on that first camping trip and started hiking and spending more time outside, it felt like there was this other piece of me that felt fulfilled now."

Realizing the benefits of being connected to the outdoors had had for her, including a positive impact on her mental health and self-esteem, she became a volunteer mentor dedicated to getting girls engaged in outdoor activities. Soledad also decided to look for jobs in the environmental nonprofit sector that focused on social or racial justice.

"So in some ways, it felt like the stars magically aligned at that time because I was looking for something different, and the position opened, and I thought, 'Oh, here's what feels like would be a good fit that would combine the

experience that I have doing outreach and engagement with my love of the outdoors and with an interest and focus on racial equity."

Soledad was excited about the new job but did not know what to expect "...other than knowing that I was entering a very White environment and that that was gonna be a challenge. I didn't know to what degree it would be a challenge, but I knew it was gonna be a challenge." Indeed, Soledad found it challenging to work with White colleagues who did not have the same sense of urgency as she did about fixing the bigger problems of racism in the world. Setting aside those barriers, Soledad built relationships and had meaningful conversations with some of her colleagues who were interested in learning how to confront their racial/ethnic assumptions and biases. However, she found it difficult to have conversations about race with many of her colleagues who "...saw the work that they were doing from more of a savior complex and didn't understand why community members were responding in the way that they did." She was particularly disappointed with colleagues who were unwilling to be humble and do the hard work it would take to help build power in communities of color. She was often left feeling frustrated because she was "trying to convince people that lives are at stake, and when that can't be captured or understood, it feels like there isn't care for people like my family or people like the ones that are in my community."

Despite the challenges she faced trying to change her workplace's dominant White culture, Soledad felt supported by the director who hired her and felt positive about her work. However, after a leadership change, she became disillusioned because the new director did not prioritize racial equity and did not want to challenge the dominant White culture. The shift in priorities left a lasting emotional toll on Soledad because she "...was ultimately being asked to center whiteness and White people and White people's feelings to a much higher degree and that took a toll as well."

"...one thing that I started doing after I started at the job was beginning to incorporate the practice of a land acknowledgment and using that as a way to frame our events, but also frame our understanding of the land, and of why people of color engaged differently and maybe haven't been present or a part of these spaces or organizations. When I incorporated that, I didn't ask for permission, I was just like, 'I'm gonna do this.' And it was well received by the director, and it felt like there was a shared understanding that this was a part of healing, but also raising awareness. For the new director, I saw a lot less courage, and there was more fear about, 'well, what are our White patrons going to think? What are White donors going to think? We don't want to make them uncomfortable.' So there was a lack of willingness to be courageous, to be the leaders in this, and it felt like there wasn't space for my ideas and my own creativity."

Soledad was ultimately let go because the organization was struggling financially.

However, she was suspicious that the other reason for her termination was because her position on racial equity was an inconvenience to the new director. She noted that because she was the only employee working on DEI, once she left, "the organization was also not asked to do that racial equity work anymore."

Ultimately, Soledad left the environmental field altogether because she could not find environmental organizations focused on racial equity. If, however, she could find an organization that shared her values and where she could make a difference, she would love to go back to the environmental field in the future. Her advice to someone with her background entering the environmental field included not compromising one's values and not being afraid to actively reach out and create a support network of people of color.

"And even though I was ultimately let go, I think sticking by what I believed in and to not be willing to give that up is really important because otherwise, I think I could still be there, and my mental health would also be struggling a lot more. So I think being clear on what your values are and the kind of work that you're potentially maybe being asked to do."

## ***Veronica Feng***

“[C]oaching is like core to women of color leadership, it's just a thing we do, we don't not do it because I think women of color, we know that there's always gonna be someone who sacrificed for us to even have a crumb. And that we can never be irresponsible and just think about ourselves like if we lead a team or even if for just informally mentoring people.”

Veronica Feng, an Asian-White female in her 30s, grew up in a diverse suburban town outside of a large metropolitan area in the West. Although it was rare to see anyone who was bi-racial like herself, she had a very positive childhood. For most of her life, people thought she was a "minority of some kind, or especially Latina, or maybe Armenina or something" and that she was placed into ESL classes even though she was not bilingual and was a third-generation Chinese-American. She believed that growing up in a multicultural household and community made her "hypersensitive to race and cultural issues, and people not being understood." Simultaneously, Veronica also felt that because her Asian family did not talk about what they experienced, she did not have a clear identity or a community guiding her through her identity.

Veronica became interested in environmental and social justice issues as a teenager. She credited her aunt on her Jewish side as the person who influenced her liberal interests, and a commitment to riding the bus for her awareness of how wealth and politics affected environmental decisions.

Because she wanted to learn more about her Asian heritage and her commitment to environmental justice, Veronica majored in ethnic studies and urban planning in college. When she started her career, she was able to stitch her two passions together. Veronica's first environmental job was as an intern for a bicycle advocacy nonprofit where she quickly bonded with a colleague who was also bi-racial. Realizing their shared interests in DEI, they

started a grassroots initiative focused on including low-income day laborers into the bicycle community.

"And we were like, 'Oh my God, the bike world is finally starting to improve here. But there's no sense of diversity. What about the immigrants on bikes who ride to do construction?' And it just started. This one little conversation volunteering at an event together turned into, like, 'Hey, maybe we should start a project.'"

Veronica also bonded with her supervisor, who eventually became a mentor, because she was also Asian American and was committed to social justice and centering people of color's experience in her work. Veronica pointed to the many supervisors who were women of color as having the most positive impacts throughout her career in the environmental nonprofit sector. She looked up to these women because of their work ethic, the quality of their work, and because they created a workplace culture of care and mutual respect.

"And I also just have had this unique fortune of, in a lot of the nonprofit jobs that I've worked or interned in, I just coincidentally had really great women of color supervisors. I don't know how I was lucky to get that more than once, but it did, it happened for me, at least, three times and all of them were incredible mentors and inspirations and I definitely wouldn't be where I am today without their guidances [sic], [...]also just kind of taking notes on what they did."

These positive experiences stood in contrast with Veronica's experience in her current job, where she had a supervisor who was a young, White woman. Veronica compared her feeling nurtured by her supervisors of color at the nonprofits with the feeling of tension with her current supervisor at the environmental government agency. Even though Veronica felt supported by her CEO, she did not feel that same support from her supervisor. She explained that her supervisor was transactional, a task manager, managed her at a superficial level, did not coach her, and did not listen to her.

"There's these certain values that women of color mentors I've had always kind of reflected in their supervision that I definitely took for granted 'cause right now I have a younger White female supervisor who I have a lot of tension with. [...] And is very problematic on race, I'm like, 'Oh, this is my

first time dealing with this directly in a long time.' I've been nurtured with people that even if we had issues, we could talk about it direct. Just think of being able to talk about conflict directly, for example, or being able to just be less about transactional results, all of those things that you just take for granted with people of color who are emotionally mature as well. I'm like, 'Oh man. I was spoiled. This is definitely not the current dynamic I have.' But they taught me a lot of good life skills that I try to exercise where I can in my job now. [...]Now that I'm in a government agency, the culture is not similar."

Veronica's supervisor created a hostile work environment, where Veronica felt disrespected, devalued, and alienated because of her race and social justice values. Veronica's supervisor often questioned Veronica's efforts to be equitable in her work, directed her to put less of an emphasis on low-income communities of color, and often scolded her in front of her colleagues.

"Even if you fully believe in maintaining the status quo, and you don't care about people of color. Wouldn't you know to at least contain it so that it doesn't come back on you professionally in the organization? Like that to me was shocking, I was like, 'Optically, you're not even thinking, you're not hiding your fuckin' racism.' That's just sad."

Because leadership and most of her colleagues were White, Veronica questioned whether anyone would believe that she was experiencing microaggressions from her supervisor. As a result, she did not speak out against her supervisor through the chain of command. Instead, Veronica raised her concerns directly with the HR director, who was an African American woman, because she felt the HR director would understand. Even so, Veronica was cautious with how she presented her case to HR so that her concerns could not easily be dismissed.

"First, I led with, 'Here are the behaviors of her that I find...Here's what I've experienced. Here are the basic facts, and this is how I received it.' Because I understand that if I were to lead with emotion, the way my supervisor does, that it would invalidate everything I'm saying, and it wouldn't hold her accountable for the problematic things as a White woman she's doing to me as a woman of color."



Veronica hoped that the outcome of her complaint would be that her supervisor be held accountable and Veronica be allowed to do her work. Veronica was not afraid of her supervisor retaliating against her because she was planning to leave the job. However, she was concerned with what would happen to her direct report, who was also a woman of color. "Nothing's on the record about [my supervisor's] problematic behaviors, especially, towards people of color. I feel guilt and I haven't left. I'm just like, oh my God, I had to make sure that my baby girl's taken care of."

Veronica's future outlook was hopeful as she pivoted slightly to find a job in environmental justice. She also considered leaving the environmental space altogether as long as there was a cultural fit, where she could be in a leadership role and work on racial justice "without it being seen as a liability."

Veronica's advice to someone with her background and interested in this career was to become involved in many things. She explained that it would be hard, so they should ask for opportunities "because no one will give them to you as a person of color," push for better conditions, and not be too deferential. "Go into it knowing that there are these cultural biases that may impact you personally and advocate for yourself as much as you can because they're not gonna go away anytime soon."

## Upper Management Professionals Counterstories

Six upper-management professionals participated in this study. In terms of race/ethnicity, one of the participants was Black, two were Asian American, one was Middle-Eastern, two were Latino/a. Five participants were in their 30s and one was in their 40s. One participant made less than \$50,000 per year, four made \$50,000-\$100,000, and one made more than \$100,000. Three of the participants were females and three were male (Table 6).

**Table 6: Upper Career Professionals**

	Pseudonym	Self-described Race /Ethnicity	Organization (s) Sector Worked	Age Range	Income Range (thousands)	Gender (F/M/ Other)
1	Aaron King	African American	NGO, government, private	40	\$50-\$100	M
2	Greg Kim	Asian American/ Korean-American	government, private	30	>\$100	M
3	Zaynab Marashi	Iranian-American	government	30	\$50-\$100	F
4	Lakshmi Kumar	South Asian	NGO, advocacy, private	30	\$50-\$100	F
5	Porfirio Martinez	Mexican-American	government	30	\$50-\$100	M
6	Paloma Lara	Hispanic/White	NGO, government	30	<\$50	F

### *Aaron King*

"And I don't regret it even now, but if I could do it again, I wouldn't have taken the job. I would have done something very different because I think I could have had a better outcome going in a different direction, ultimately."

Aaron King, an African American male in his 40s, was born in a Caribbean country and moved to a large metropolitan city in the U.S. with his mother when he was a child.

"Basically the immigrant story. You come to America for better opportunities, so you make sure you get that better opportunity." Aaron and his mother lived in public housing until

they got settled. He attended public schools through college and graduate school, where he received degrees in engineering and business. He worked in the private sector, state government, a mainstream environmental nonprofit organization, and recently retired. Aaron valued racial/ethnic diversity as a major factor in the schools he chose to attend and in the jobs where he chose to work, even turning down scholarship opportunities because of the lack of diversity.

“But I turned it down because I’m like, ‘Okay, clearly there are not that many people of color in that school.’ For jobs, that was the same thing, right?”

Aaron reflected that his stalwart opinion on the importance of diversity was because of the racism he had directly experienced throughout his life, the stereotypes of Black men in media, and the burden placed on people of color “being the only one or the first” in an organization. In addition, providing financial support for his family was of paramount importance. “My priority wasn’t breaking down barriers. My priority wasn’t saving the world. It was making enough money to take care of my family. When I did that, or I felt I did that, then I could do other things, and that’s why I went into the environmental space.”

From an early age, Aaron wanted to be an engineer but quickly became disillusioned with private sector work. After graduate school and working in the energy field, Aaron “felt that that need to make money and kind of establish my foundation was done, and anything beyond that would be great, but I could live a good life giving back and doing things for other people rather than just padding my pockets, so to speak.” When a client offered him a position with a state housing agency, he “jumped at the opportunity.” However, Aaron found it challenging to navigate the slower pace of work, resistance to change, and the politics that influenced decision making. “So, things that would take another organization three, six months to do, it would take us two years. And if you wanted to, God forbid there’s an election happening, forget it.”

After working at the housing agency for several years, an environmental nonprofit organization recruited Aaron to a state-level director position. Aaron was interested in the mission of the nonprofit and hoped that his work would help the environment. “I mean, clean air, healthy environment, clean water. Yeah, who cannot be interested in that?” Also, it was not until Aaron worked at the nonprofit that he understood the consequences of environmental injustices, including the negative environmental impacts on his health.

“I developed asthma when I lived in [the city], and I didn't appreciate why I was developing asthma in [the city] until I started working at [nonprofit], and I'm like, ‘Oh, wow. Yeah, I'm right by that highway, I'm right by that highway. I've got a trucking route coming down here, and oh yeah, there's a sewage treatment plant around the block.’”

Even though the mission aligned with his interests, Aaron found it difficult to manage the lack of racial/ethnic diversity and his impression that environmental organizations were full of “trust fund babies, people who had so much money, they didn't know what to do with their time, whatever it may be.”

“Some of my biases turned out to be true. Some of them turned out to not be true, because I found a lot of dedicated people, from a variety of different walks of life and places, who were working there and were not the stereotype that I had at the time. But there were quite a few who fit the stereotype, very well in fact.”

He pointed to when he first encountered the organization's ingrained whiteness. After his team successfully completed a project, they wanted to share the results through privileged White-centered communication. Further, the team had not even engaged with the affected low-income community of color during the project. Aaron walked the team through his concerns and reframed the communication through the lens of the affected community. “That's what I kind of expected when I took the job, like just interacting with them from before, and when I saw it prominently on display, I was very taken aback, right?” As a result, Aaron changed how his team worked with communities and took it upon himself to build

trust and improve the nonprofit's reputation with the community and environmental justice leaders.

“One environmental leader basically said to me, ‘Look, the only reason I'm talking to you is because you're a brother. I mean, the last time one of your people tried to talk to me, I had a horrible experience.’”

Within the organization, Aaron faced the privileged, White culture in day-to-day interactions with colleagues and executive leadership, which frequently included racism, othering, questioning his expertise, being jealous of his achievements, and other microaggressions.

“There's a certain kind of racism in this country, right? There's the explicit, overt, ‘Get away from me, you n-word.’ Then there's the covert you don't really know who to trust. [...] With [nonprofit], it was much more covert, so I never knew what it was, and I never actually saw it that much. And when I did see it, it was kind of like, ‘What the fuck? Are these people not even clear in what they're doing?’”

Colleagues racially stereotyped and pigeon-holed Aaron's position to a narrow scope, dismissed his broader role and impact within the organization, and diminished his expertise. As a result, Aaron often felt forced to justify himself and his role within the organization.

“He introduced me to the other person in the room as someone working on low-income issues. And I'm like, and I looked at him. So, as I was introducing myself, I'm like, ‘I'm the director of [...] state. I manage all [...] state operations, including what's happening in the city. And yes, low income issues are a part of my job.’ And I had to clarify that. But that's all he thought I did. That happened more times than I care to even talk about, but that was a very regular recurrence. Yeah, that was just how it was.”

His colleagues' racist presumptions and Aaron's successful management of his team's work to be more inclusive with affected communities branded him with an organization-wide reputation. This reputation affected his leadership's willingness to elevate his work, including press coverage, making it difficult to fundraise for his projects.

Despite the challenges, Aaron had more good relationships within the organization than bad ones. To manage the impacts of negative interactions, Aaron developed many

insulating friendships. One relationship that stood out was with James, one of the only other African American men on staff and who was in a senior role. Their camaraderie grew from being othered, with colleagues mistaking Aaron for James, and turning the situation into a running joke between them.

“In fact, when I met him for the first time, it was maybe two weeks, we'd video conferenced up until that point. He comes up to me, he sits down, he goes, ‘So, how many people called you James so far?’ That, right there, told me okay, he knows what's up. He knows what's going on, right?”

Aaron's advice to his younger self was the same advice he got from his own mentors. It would be, "Look at the people who are there. Understand where they came from and where they want to go, and then ask yourself, ‘Do you want to be among them?’”

### ***Greg Kim***

“So anything to do with my racial identity, probably, doesn't spring to the top of mind when I think of barriers that I've faced in my career.”

Greg Kim, a Korean-American male in his 30s, grew up in a rural part of a Northeastern state. Greg became interested in the environment as a child, crediting having access to nature and his elementary school for instilling a sense of environmental stewardship. He attended an Ivy League school where he studied political science and became involved in environmental advocacy and sustainable education. Greg was fortunate because his educational pedigree opened many doors, and he was able to land energy and climate positions in municipal government. After working for several years, he returned to graduate school at another prestigious school to study urban planning. Greg had a clear plan to move into the private sector, so he focused on networking, sought opportunities, and was offered several positions through those networks. Ultimately, he chose the consulting position where he currently worked.

Greg enjoyed the service and mission-driven government work. However, he became frustrated with the slow pace. "Just my personal nature was I grew very sick of all the bureaucracy that's involved and civil servants who are there just to collect their pensions, unfortunately, like some stereotypes rang very true in my experience." His most rewarding experiences were when he was able to have a positive impact, and when he was able to grow professionally. He pointed to two examples as being particularly positive. The first was when he was part of a team that developed a municipal carbon reduction strategy; he felt rewarded because of the technical knowledge he gained and because he was able to communicate the work to new audiences. "For that part of my brain, that was just a really fun and incredible learning experience." The second positive experience was when he was the project manager tasked to develop a regional sustainability plan for several local governments. This experience was positive because of the scale of impact. Greg also found the work rewarding because he partnered with environmental justice and community-based organizations, which ensured the community was part of plan development.

"I'm not really aware of any other process in the environmental realm that went to sort of that depth and extent in sort of uplifting a lot of voices that have historically been excluded from policy making processes. There is a lot to be learned, sort of all around. And I think that was incredibly rewarding..."

Greg sought additional opportunities to advance his career. Most recently, he had been selected to participate in a mid-career fellowship, for which his employer paid. "It's been a really wonderful experience of having space to both talk about workplace challenges as well as learn about some different leadership frameworks..."

Greg did not experience barriers in his career, although he wished he had had more technical skills early in his career, or a technical degree, rather than learning it on the job. He

emphasized that he and other Asian American planners did not experience the same barriers that other people of color faced in their careers.

“I don't feel that I've faced the same [...] barriers as other people of color, or women, or people who identify as LGBTQ. Quite frankly, it's hard for me to point to significant areas based on my race and being a cisgender straight male is part of it, being Asian and sort of with the implications for the model minority myth and everything. I can't point to specific instances.”

He explained that if he experienced microaggressions, he did not notice them or did not remember them. “There probably are microaggressions here and there that I can't remember. I don't hold on to them, to be honest, so I can't name a specific instance or think of anything off the top of my head. Although, it does happen from time to time.” Greg reflected that because he had worked in two of the country's largest cities, with majority-minority populations, his colleagues and professional peers were diverse. However, he noted, his experience would have been different in other places that lacked diversity.

“That means that I am usually surrounded by a more diverse set of environmental professionals than I would find almost anywhere else. And my consulting work has taken me to other parts of the country and doing some work in [Western City] right now. And in that workshop, it is mostly White folks almost entirely. So, I think my racial identity may not have had as much of an impact on my experience, partially because of where that experience has been. And it has been in these very large cities with a very diverse populous.”

Although Greg did not experience advancement barriers because of his race/ethnicity, he recognized the value of increasing diversity in the environmental field. He also actively promoted diversity, drawing attention to a professional organization's selection of 100 fellows, only two of whom were people of color, or assembling diverse panels for conferences. “I have turned down panels that are all men, which happens quite a bit in this field as well.”

Within his current organization, the junior staff was relatively diverse because the organization intentionally recruited from a diverse pool. But this was not the case in mid-



career or leadership positions. "Actually now that I think of it, of senior staff, I think I might be the only person of color out of a group of 16 or 18 individuals." Greg participated in an employee-driven diversity and inclusion forum, where he was pushing organization leaders to change the mid-leadership recruitment practices. In addition to addressing structural inequities, the forum helped the organization change the office culture, become more transparent in its social and environmental equity, and hold itself accountable by tracking progress.

"I think once you get to mid-career, it's very infrequently is it a sort of a totally open call business position. It's usually [...] referrals, it's sort of approaching people of certain repute. And who are the folks that have access to all of the speaking opportunities, to other, I don't know, moments when they have high visibility? So that's part of why representation matters too, because it's all these little things that serve that up."

Greg was optimistic about the future. He was enjoying working in the private sector for the foreseeable future, but not forever. He would consider returning to government if he had a leadership role. "I think just being a little bit higher in the hierarchy, in the bureaucracy and being able to [...] shape direction a little bit more, would be something that I'd be interested in. Probably actually not for a big city like New York or LA, but for a more manageably [sic] sized one, I think, could be where I land."

Greg did not have role models or mentors. However, he recognized the important role that mentors played, and he went out of his way to help people who were considering an environmental career. "I make it a rule to actually always make time to speak with current students and probably have a conversation once or twice a month along these lines." His advice centered around having well-rounded skills, being flexible, and finding positions that align with interests and specialized skills.

## ***Zaynab Marashi***

“It did feel like he was just like, ‘Okay, White lawyer. I’m a White lawyer, he’s a White lawyer, she’s a White lawyer, let’s just plug her in there, so that we can look more official somehow.’”

Zaynab Marashi, a first-generation Iranian-American female in her 30s, grew up in a large metropolitan area in the South. Unlike other Iranian-American families they knew, Zaynab's parents took her and her sister on many camping trips while growing up. These experiences instilled a love of the environment and were encouraged by her father, who was "always very strict about like, 'we have to get out in nature.'" By the time Zaynab went to the state university, she had found that her "calling on this planet is to be a steward of the Earth" and felt lucky that she made this realization so early in her life. Her career began in college, working part-time at an environmental advocacy organization.

Later, Zaynab worked for an environmental consulting firm where she quickly became disillusioned because it felt like the work was "corporate greed to the max," and it felt like she was not doing actual environmental work. She took a risk by quitting her job and moving to another state, where she eventually found a human rights job. Through her networks, she met her future mentor, a White man who worked at a state environmental agency and was the director of a graduate environmental studies program. He convinced her to apply and offered her a fellowship geared towards women of color environmental leaders.

“And he said that they tend to give it to a woman of color. They were like, ‘We haven’t picked anyone for it yet. A lot of people applied, but we haven’t picked anyone.’ And they’re just like, ‘If you hurry up and submit your application,’ It was already past due. And he was like, ‘If you submit your application, I’m not gonna say you will 100% get it, but your odds are very high that you’re gonna get this fellowship.’”

Although he was initially dismissive of Zaynab because of her jovial and outgoing demeanor, her mentor saw her potential through her writing and gave her opportunities to work at the environmental agency, grow professionally, and advised her on how to fit into

the White-centered agency culture. She felt lucky to work for him and described this experience as a highlight of her career.

“And he was like, ‘I kinda wanna help you, while being someone that people can relate to is gonna serve you really well in your life,’ He just told me, ‘I wanna help you understand, at least from my experience working at this agency, there's certain procedures, certain tones.’”

In spite of that grounding, Zaynab's challenges in the workplace stemmed from working in White, male-centered workplace cultures. The environmental organizations were led by White men who "still [hire] a bunch of young women, mostly of color and [are] still discriminatory and speaking down to people," and who questioned Zaynab's expertise and was "not taken [seriously] as an environmental scientist." One experience at an environmental nonprofit turned out to be her most challenging, although the work itself aligned with her values, she had the power to control her program, and she enjoyed the work itself. She found it difficult to navigate the power dynamics with her supervisor, who was the White male director, and how he interacted with the junior women of color on his staff. He frequently talked down to her and the other women of color, made derogatory and racist comments, questioned their expertise, and scapegoated them if something went wrong.

“If any project got messed up, it was completely our fault. Even if it was very clearly something that they did, they would just find this way to use us as a scapegoat for if there was a problem. It felt like it was just easy, for them to be like, ‘Zaynab screwed that up,’ or, ‘Carmen screwed that up.’ And so that's where it was discriminatory. There were actually derogative [sic] comments I heard. My co-worker Carmen had to hear some derogative [sic] comments about her dad being macho because they're Mexican. What boss is allowed to say that anyway? But a White man saying that is really inappropriate. And so it was stuff like that. Honestly, it felt more abusive than someone that's just like, ‘Oh, I'm not gonna invite Zaynab to this conversation 'cause she's better at engaging immigrant communities than she is talking about how to write water policy or something.’ So yeah.”

The dynamics with her boss directly affected Zaynab's career advancement, her self-confidence, and her mental health. Zaynab had built a positive reputation for the program

she oversaw outside of her organization, where she received a lot of media attention. Her boss, however, seemed jealous of her successes. “But it felt like over time he was becoming potentially intimidated by the level of recognition that I was getting. I’m pretty sure that people even asked him if I was the director a couple of times, which probably pissed him off, knowing him.” The director hired a White woman to oversee Zaynab and take over her program. He told Zaynab that “...you can eventually become that person, but right now you’re not ready,” even though Zaynab had run the program successfully.

“So it’s like this person was just placed on top of me. Yeah. Yeah. And she didn’t know what she was doing, I had to train her on everything. There was no reason for her to be there at all. It was like, ‘Oh, we don’t have the resources to just be hiring a lawyer to be the full-time director of this program.’ And it was one of his friends, of course.”

Once the new boss took charge of the project, the nonprofit stopped paying the contractors, who were community-based organizations in frontline communities of color with whom Zaynab had built trust. The new boss put the burden on Zaynab to talk with the contractors, but Zaynab did not have the authority to change the situation any longer. The situation became untenable for Zaynab, and she ultimately left the position.

“She didn’t care, she would be like, ‘Zaynab, can you call them and just tell them that I’m working on it?’ And I was like, ‘You call them. You are getting paid three times more than me, you call.’ But she was like, ‘Yeah, it seems like they just feel more comfortable talking to you.’ And I was like, ‘And that’s why I should be the director, that’s why I should be in charge of this.’ But it just turned into too much. My husband actually begged me to leave that job, and I stayed for an extra year past the point that he was kind of like, ‘I can’t believe you’re still here.’ And it was because I recruited most of our subcontractors. I had those relationships, so I brought them on and I felt like that would be abandoning them if I left.”

Upon reflection, Zaynab felt that she stayed in the position longer than her White counterparts would have because, as a woman of color, she was taught to “tough it out and power through and we’re strong so we can handle anything.” She also reflected that “we

wanna take care of it, and we wanna just prove ourselves at this other level that we can handle these types of situations.”

After this experience, Zaynab rebuilt her confidence. She became an independent consultant, where she had ownership of her work and quickly became successful. "I was like, ‘Whoa! I just started being a consultant and I already have five contracts,’ which was pretty impressive." The consulting work led to a full-time DEI position at a state environmental agency, where she currently worked. Zaynab's new job had its own set of challenges, primarily because she was the only person in the agency focused on DEI. "One person doing that is not gonna lead to success. So I keep trying to tell them that.” Within a short time, Zaynab started a racial equity team that met monthly. Zaynab took pride in what she had accomplished and was optimistic about her future work. "I haven't heard of other agencies that the staff are meeting an hour every week or every other week to talk about race and equity."

Zaynab's advice to someone with her background entering the environmental field centered around recognizing the power and value that being part of two cultures brings to the workplace, including unique ideas, creativity, and innovation.

“And so I think to encourage them to continue to push themselves to think outside of the box that's being forced on them because their natural perspective is gonna be just much more powerful and much more influential than if you let them condition you to sound more like them.”

### ***Lakshmi Kumar***

“You've allowed yourself to be dehumanized. You've allowed yourself to be economically disenfranchised because you didn't fit in. And you have no other way to fight for yourself because there's a system that's not effective, or doesn't exist, or you're afraid of the ramifications.”

Lakshmi Kumar, a South Asian female in her 30s, owned her own environmental consulting business. She was born and raised in Africa and moved to the U.S. to pursue

environmental degrees in college and graduate school. Although Lakshmi's family did not push her into a traditional career path, they were concerned about her future financial stability in the environment field, and they often questioned her decisions. As a self-described “interdisciplinary”, Lakshmi worked in environmental research, education, infrastructure, and organizational consulting. “I think fundamentally what I've been trying to understand is how does the natural environment and ecosystem work as it relates to human interactions and human perceptions.”

For as long as she could remember, Lakshmi cared about the environment. Her family was fortunate enough to go on safaris and explore parts of her home country. She witnessed the impact people had on the environment, trash being dumped, smog from cars, and rivers being polluted. "So for me just to see how our environment had just degraded at such an exponential rate created a sense of urgency for me, within me, to make some sort of change about it, about that, and just understand why is it happening." She was inspired by a woman who was a prominent social, environmental, and political activist.

“Her activism was really what was inspiring to me, because I didn't think that people really cared about it besides myself. 'Cause everyone in my family just didn't care about environmental issues, and they just thought I was a hippie who just had nothing else to really care for besides trees and birds and animals and whatnot.”

After working at environmental nonprofits for several years, Lakshmi became disillusioned with the pace and workplace culture. "Just the egos, the perceptions, the bureaucracy, just the way the nonprofit sector functioned as a whole was very frustrating to me." She decided to switch to the private sector because she felt like she could have more impact. Lakshmi was happy with the decision because the private sector exposed her to different people and different perceptions about the environment. "So it really broadened my perspective about environmental issues for sure."

Lakshmi was proud of her career achievements, including pushing herself to get out of her comfort zone and learning new skills. She was particularly proud of the leadership role she had taken at the environmental consulting firm and the amount of business she was able to attract. "And I know that other people who were in my same position hadn't been able to get that type of money in throughout their time at the agency. So for me, that moment, I felt really proud about that." She was also proud of starting her own business. "So creating the business was the best thing for me, and learning how to do that was something I didn't know I would know how to do, but I'm doing it, and I feel good about it."

Lakshmi's most challenging workplace experiences stemmed from leaders' and colleagues' White American-centered stereotyping and racism. Lakshmi found it difficult to understand the workplace culture and navigate communication nuances. "I think my cultural perspectives, my culturalism, my own personal culture and the culture that I come from, I don't think I truly fully understand Americanisms or American way of communicating even though I've been in this country for a long time. And it's really caused me a lot of trouble because I didn't understand." Lakshmi felt that her colleagues did not attempt to understand her; rather, she had to fit herself into the workplace culture. As a result, she became insecure in her ability to communicate within cultural norms.

"It's just like, 'Okay, this is working protocol. Everyone needs to get in line regardless of your background, your culture, your belief, regardless of how you communicate.' And that is very discomfoting for a lot of, I think, people of color because we didn't grow up in White America so we don't know how you guys communicate kinda thing."

In all of her jobs, Lakshmi frequently experienced racist microaggressions, where she felt that she had to "justify my ethnicity or my background many times," but was not able to articulate those experiences as microaggressions until later. "I just know that it was making me uncomfortable, but I didn't know what it was. And I've seen this throughout all of my

professional experiences, whether it was in nonprofit, for-profit, in the corporation, it's been everywhere." Moreover, Lakshmi did not know how to respond to the microaggressions that she experienced, and nor could her colleagues of color comfort her or advise her for the same reason.

"But nobody taught us. Right? When we were being onboarded nobody told us what harassment looks like, nobody told us what racism looks like, nobody told us what microaggressions look like. And then you come into the real world and you're like, 'What the fuck is this?'"

Lakshmi pointed to multiple examples of White male micro- and macro-aggressions she experienced directly or witnessed. The experiences negatively affected her self-confidence and stymied her career advancement. These examples ranged from White male colleagues making comments about her smiling too much to asking her when she learned to speak English *to* her White male bosses promoting White colleagues instead of her or her African American colleague. "Why didn't she get promoted? It's just like constant suppression of growth and success within these institutions."

"When it was the one-year review time, she was given a raise or something of that sort. No, she was promoted to Program Coordinator 2, and I wasn't, but I'd been there longer than her. And in my review they didn't say I did anything wrong or that I didn't meet my requirements. But she was White. And so, I just think, again, because she was White, American, she wasn't bad or anything of that sort she just knew how to communicate with our White supervisors."

Lakshmi used the institution's human resources to complain about the new colleague getting a promotion and a raise greater than hers. However, "nothing came out of it because they talked to the supervisor, and the supervisor is a White man." Eventually Lakshmi was let go.

"I know I got laid off because of my race, my ethnicity. And in my exit interview they said, 'You did everything, but you just weren't a good cultural fit.' Like, you didn't fit in here. Or, 'You were a little bit personable when you had a beer in you.'"



However, Lakshmi felt powerless to publicly share the injustice she experienced because her organization provided her with a good severance package and because she did not feel safe doing so.

“How do I say this? This sounds really bad, but it's like you've been raped and then you're given money to deal with your trauma. [...]And I was trying to think of ways that I could let the world know of the injustice that had been brought upon me by putting a review on Glassdoor or something like that, but I just didn't feel safe enough to do something like that. Yeah, it's just the lack of safety for people of color to get some sort of justice for the injustices that have been brought upon them.”

Lakshmi turned to her current business as a form of therapy to help empower herself, to channel her anger and frustration into different activities, and to feel safe.

“And the business is helping. Is a form of therapy for me. I think it would be helpful to actually get a counselor or a therapist to help me with this. But yeah, I'm not in the workplace because I'm afraid of being ostracized, mistreated, like I have been over the past 10 years.”

Lakshmi's advice for people of color entering the environmental field was first to empower themselves and second to help empower allies.

“I think what needs to happen is that people of color, we need to wake up faster, and we need to start taking up space and not apologizing for it. And we need to create a support system for ourselves where when something traumatic has happened that we have somewhere to go to, to heal. And also I think that in our effort to empower ourselves that we also try to empower allies, potential and current allies, to kind of fight the good fight with us without taking up our space.”

### ***Porfirio Martinez***

“It's like, ‘Hey, man. It's part of my job.’ But I wish there was more of a, ‘Oh, good job.’ I don't know. I don't know.”

Porfirio Martinez, a Mexican-American male in his 40s, grew up in a migrant farmworker family in the South. His father and mother, who were still together, met picking tomatoes in Florida. His parents instilled in Porfirio and his five sisters the values of family and hard work. Porfirio's family struggled financially, living paycheck to paycheck. So the

summer before sixth grade, Porfirio also started working to help the family, which he did until he went to college.

“Started working in the fields. It was hot. So that was my summer camp. It was the fields and at a very young age, I learned like, hey man, if you want something, you got to work for it. I don't even think we were getting paid minimum wage, but, hey, whatever extra few hundred bucks I could bring, that was money for my parents to help pay electricity, water, buy us food, buy us clothes for the upcoming school year.”

Porfirio's parents played important roles in his environmental career choice. They often took the family camping near rivers, where Porfirio learned to fish and enjoy nature. After high school, his father gave him an ultimatum to either go to college or take a job driving a truck. Porfirio chose to go to a college where he got his undergraduate and graduate degrees in geography, a decision solely based on his father's stories of the different states where he had worked as a migrant farmer.

“So hearing these stories about, oh, the mountains in Idaho and up in Michigan and all of this, I was like, oh, man, that's like really neat to like oh, man, can't imagine how cool that is. So going to college, I was like, man, I think I want to do geography just solely from the idea of you get to learn about these places and maybe one day go.”

Before graduate school, his mother helped him find his first environmental internship at the environmental state agency, where he would later get a full-time job. "And next thing you know, I had a job there, which I really liked because I was like, 'Oh man.' It was almost ten dollars an hour. I was like, 'Oh my God, this is the most money I've ever made working anywhere.'"

In addition to the internship, Porfirio had many other positive experiences throughout his career and was proud of his accomplishments and career progression. Among Porfirio's most rewarding workplace experiences were when he felt like he belonged. When he worked for the university while attending graduate school, he "felt very at home. That was really neat. That was, I don't know, I really loved it. It was kind of neat." Porfirio

felt particularly rewarded when he was recognized for his work, when his colleagues sought his advice and expertise, and when he felt valued.

“So I kind of like when we finished on a big project or did something big, I was like, ‘Oh, my God. Somebody actually listened to what I said, and they actually followed that advice and it worked out.[...] I guess I do know what I’m talking about.’ I don’t know. It’s just weird to explain. Man from a very humble beginning, like nothing to ‘Oh, my God.’ I had a district engineer tell me thank you for the advice on getting his project, the construction. What I thought was like, ‘Oh, we just got to get a permit.’ It’s a big thing. It’s like, we’re done. A majority of the engineers are male Anglo. So it’s kind of like, maybe they’ll notice that, ‘Hey, this guy helped me.’”

Porfirio credited his working in the fields as a major driver for his success. He was also motivated by his need to prove that he could succeed to people who said he could not because of his race/ethnicity. “Like, ‘oh, really? I can’t do something just because of my ethnicity?’ That drives me a lot.” He pointed to a pivotal encounter with a high school teacher who made an overtly racist comment about Porfirio’s unlikely success in finishing college based on his race/ethnicity. “He was like, ‘Well, to be honest with you, Mexicans don’t finish college. You may go for a little bit, but you’re going to drop out. You’re going to be back home.’” For Porfirio, this experience both jarred him and drove him to prove him wrong.

“It’s like, What the...? Why would you say that to a young kid? You know, it’s like, ‘hey, I was just in your classroom a few weeks ago.’ So that kind of just stuck with me. I know to me, I kind of took that as like, all right, fine. So I remember when I graduated my undergrad, I almost wanted to go to his house and give him my graduation.”

Porfirio's most difficult workplace experiences were during his tenure at the environmental state agency where he had worked since he finished graduate school. Mirroring his positive work experiences, Porfirio noted that it had been challenging for him when he felt he was not valued for his contributions or expertise or when he was not recognized for his accomplishments. He found it difficult to understand and accept his

supervisors' explanations that the lack of recognition and financial compensation was part of the organization's culture.

Porfirio recalled that during a complicated project, he realized that a key environmental permit had not been completed. Rather than pay a consultant to do the work as had been the agency's practice, Porfirio learned how and did the work himself, saving the agency \$70,000 each time. When Porfirio asked if he would receive a raise, his supervisor declined and that it was part of his job.

“It was like, look, I'm saving the Department money, but does that equal a raise? No, it doesn't. It's just like, ‘Oh, that's a part of your job.’ And I was like, ‘Are kidding me?’ We pay consultants to do the same thing I did. We paid them \$70,000.00, but I'm doing it here in-house amongst everything else and don't even get a ‘Oh good job.’”

Porfirio did not feel that his race/ethnicity was a factor in his career because he did not experience overt racism. "Professionally, I've never felt threatened [...] solely based on my skin color or anything. I don't feel threatened." However, he observed that the environmental field was predominantly White and male and that he typically was the only person of color in classrooms, work conferences, and meetings. He noted that he felt an immediate kinship with his colleagues of color who could pronounce his name correctly, unlike his White colleagues. He questioned whether his White colleagues focused on his race/ethnicity rather than his expertise but hoped that it was the latter. He wondered why he was not involved in decision making and reflected that it was most likely because he lacked the required experience, rather than his race/ethnicity. He recalled that he was scared about traveling to a region of the state that had a reputation for being racist, but that he had his own stereotypes, and nobody had told him that they did not want to work with him because of his race/ethnicity.

“I was like, ‘Oh, my God.’ I was like, ‘This is a good place to get lost.’ But I mean, yeah, at the end of the day, it's like, I was talking with this gentleman.

We were talking about just about everything. I was like, 'Oh, my God.' It's like, maybe not everybody's like that. I mean, me, myself, I had my stereotypes of, 'Oh, my God, I have to go here?'"

Porfirio's future career advancement within the agency was limited. Although leadership encouraged program staff to apply for director-level positions, Porfirio observed that the agency never selected internal candidates. "I mean, I applied once and didn't even get an interview."

Porfirio's advice to his younger self was to not be afraid of trying something new, to speak up for himself, not be intimidated, and not be afraid to ask questions. If he had had this advice early on in his career, he believed that maybe he would have been involved in higher-level projects. "As my dad says, 'those that don't speak up, not even God hears.'"

### ***Paloma Lara***

"I felt like because I wasn't White, or had the same starting points of some of these kids, even if they grew up poor, they still grew up White. That was an advantage."

Paloma Lara, a Hispanic woman in her 30s, grew up in South America and moved to a large city in the U.S. with her family as a child. Her interest in the environment stemmed from frequently going to the beach, the zoo, and the mountains during her childhood. "Not like what Americans might experience, 'cause we never really went camping." In the U.S., however, Paloma felt disconnected from nature. She became depressed because her family had little money, no car, and only participated in church-related activities during the summer. Also, she did not have many peers to whom she could relate despite her desire to fit into White American culture and be accepted. For instance, Paloma went through a period where she attempted to be more White and did not want to speak Spanish. Inevitably, she realized that she "wasn't as accepted by them as I wanted to be." By the time she went to college, she studied business because she wanted to "make money or be able to do my own taxes."

Realizing that she did not like business, Paloma earned an undergraduate degree in anthropology and, later, a graduate degree in geography. Paloma credits her friend, who was interested in creating resilient ecosystems and invited her to attend a workshop, as her mentor and for inspiring her to pursue an environmental degree. "And in a way I was just like, 'Oh wow, this chick is so young and she just believes in all this stuff and it's really awesome,' right?"

After graduate school, Paloma found it difficult to find a full-time environmental job. So she worked at a fast-food restaurant, the university's recycling program, an environmental education program, a bilingual school, and in city permitting. Ultimately, it took a natural disaster for an opportunity to open up at an environmental nonprofit. Paloma reflected that what made her excited about this position was that she did not want to "be stuck in an office like I was at the city; I want to do something that's outdoors even though it doesn't pay much." The nonprofit hired Paloma for more than was advertised. "But in my head, I was still willing to do that job for less than what I was making just for the sake of getting that experience under my belt. And it's been rewarding."

The nonprofit's leadership valued Paloma, investing in her professional development, and giving her increasing responsibility and compensation. "They've been just nothing but phenomenal and amazingly supportive." Through her job, she was able to gain new skills, experiences, and professional credentials. "I became an Arborist last year, and so [nonprofit] has really helped my professional development. They've sent me to conferences." When the project she was hired to manage ended, her boss promoted Paloma to a Director position. "So when I expressed interest, my boss was like, 'Oh yeah, well let's talk, let's see how we can make this happen.' And so, that's what allowed me to move up so quickly. I think they trusted me and I had the organizational knowledge."

Paloma never felt that she had been discriminated against within her organization based on her race/ethnicity or gender. She noted that she was sensitive to class disparities she observed working with different communities. For instance, Paloma was outraged working with landowners from wealthy communities who did not value her restoration work on their lands (even mowing what she had just planted) compared to landowners from communities that were not as affluent who were appreciative.

“They're just so thankful that you brought trees to them, and they're patient, and they just wanna talk to you for hours and bring you tea. And they're such a different set of people. And I think my personal issues have always come from, I guess, class more so than it has with race or ethnicity.”

Paloma's race/ethnicity made her "disconnect a little bit from people," and coupled with her class, made her feel like an outsider both inside and outside her organization. For example, she became disillusioned holding workshops in places "where these people just had all this land, and they were very rich in so many ways, if it wasn't money..." As a result, she also felt disconnected from the plants because the plants were different from where she grew up, and "the kind of plants that exist here make the place and the people make the place."

“Every time I would go to one of these events where we're doing something amazing for nature, and it's really great, and I would always love to work out and the getting dirty and just doing it in a community with people, and I couldn't help but feel that I was an outsider. Even though I was there at the event, and we're all building community together, it was their community that I was helping. And so I've kind of stopped going to some of those events. I got a little bit jaded, or maybe disillusioned, after a couple of them, and especially after I had one at our place in [city] and not as many people came to all the ones that I have gone to, and so I became a little bit jaded. And just being around a bunch of White people all the time, I thought that maybe being around them, I would be more like them, and be accepted...”

Her feelings of being an outsider were compounded because she was often the only person of color at her workplace and did not feel she had peers or friends to whom she could relate. Paloma felt she could connect with colleagues that had grown up poor or were Latinas or other people of color. She expressed regret that her desire to fit in with White

America influenced the friends she chose because she did not have as many friends of color as she would have liked. “I thought I would fit in with the Whites, but it turns out, I'm neither White or Black. I'm literally Latino, I relate more to people, like I said, that are from the South, whether South America or South of the United States.”

Once she held a leadership position and made hiring decisions, Paloma intentionally hired people to increase diversity within her organization, whether it was based on race or gender.

“I always try to diversify the crowd. I think, for me, biodiversity and diversity in general, is the best thing ever. So in a sense, I'm always biased in that sense. I'm always biased in giving people of color a better chance or kind of the leg-up, 'cause maybe they don't have the same exact background as a White person does, but if it's close enough, and if it's what you need for the job, even if the White person has a little bit more experience, or is maybe a little bit more qualified, I think folks that are doing the hiring just have to give people a chance, because they're not gonna get experience unless they get the experience.”

Paloma's future job outlook was uncertain. She was at a crossroads with her career and was considering leaving the nonprofit due to several family-related events. “It's been very rough, because between the baby, the car accident my husband had, I've been rethinking a lot of what's important in life and what priorities are, and there are days where I don't care about trees at all.” She was conflicted between wanting a higher salary than what the nonprofit paid and staying at her job where she felt valued by her leadership, felt comfortable, was appreciated, could gain experience in her field, enjoyed the work, and had a Director role.

“I probably won't be able to enjoy that half field half office kind of life that I had. Now I might be more stuck in an office, maybe more than I want to, because I'm probably gonna have to find something where you are managing people, which is what my thing is, it's people. You have to manage people to manage the environment, and I've been doing that for almost five years now, and so I'm at that crossroads of, do I stay with [nonprofit], do I not? It's been tough, yeah.”



Paloma's advice to people with her background who were considering entering an environmental career was to take the time to reflect on what their interests were and try to marry it with their skills. Then to make little sacrifices, like paying for training or missing work to go to a workshop, that seem inconsequential, but that added up and could lead to new opportunities. "And that's the thing, you never know what's gonna happen until you try it."

## Leadership Professionals Counterstories

Seven leadership professionals participated in this study. In terms of race/ethnicity, one of the participants was Black, two were Asian American, and four were Latino/a. One participant was in their 30s, two were in their 40s, two were in their 50s, and two were in their 60s. Two participants made \$50,000-\$100,000 per year and five made more than \$100,000. Four of the participants were females and three were male (Table 7).

**Table 7: Leadership Career Professionals**

	Pseudonym	Self-described Race /Ethnicity	Organization (s) Sector Worked	Age Range	Income Range (thousands)	Gender (F/M/ Other)
1	Bob Wagner	African American	NGO, government, private	60	>\$100	M
2	Frank Sato	Asian-Japanese-American	NGO, government	60	>\$100	M
3	Kamala Singh	South Asian	NGO, private	40	>\$100	F
4	Nohemi Pacheco	Latina	NGO, academia	40	>\$100	F
5	Nico Perez	Hispanic	NGO, academia	50	\$50-\$100	M
6	Noelia Torres	Hispanic	NGO, government	50	>\$100	F
7	Paz Velazquez	Hispanic	NGO, government	30	\$50-\$100	F

### ***Bob Wagner***

"So the world is a different place today. I think it's important to recognize that racism is still a factor. It's not as intense. It's not as limited as it used to be."

Bob Wagner, an African American male in his 60s, grew up on a farm outside a small rural town in the South. "My dad's grandfather was a slave, and then my Mom and dad, he grew up on a plantation, so farming was all he knew." Bob felt that he and his siblings internalized the legacy of his father's fear of White people and set limits on themselves.

"We were impacted by his fear of White people. And the reason he was so afraid, is he had seen people hung and put in jail for no reason at all. When we were growing up, there was a little store in the neighborhood owned by a

White family. And my dad was 55 years old. And they had a six-year-old son. When they encountered him, he would refer to him as Mr. John. And we would be so mad. But we came to understand and appreciate the fact that he was trying to keep us alive and out of harm's way. But that did influence us in terms of some of the limits that we may have internalized.”

His father wanted Bob and his siblings to have a reputation of "being the best cotton pickers in [the county]. And we were. But it was hard. But it was the big motivation for us to go to college."

Bob was interested in politics and public service, so he studied political science, American history, and policy in undergraduate and graduate school. As he finished graduate school, he interned with a mayor's office and at a federal agency in Washington DC, where he was recognized and tapped to work for the White House.

After a few years, he returned to his home state, where he ran a successful federal political campaign. Afterwards, Bob leveraged his relationships and quickly moved into a leadership position within a state environmental agency. During his tenure with the agency, Bob realized that environmental policy was the field to which he wanted to dedicate himself.

For nearly a decade, state leaders, including the governor, had recognized Bob's work, which opened opportunities and led to increasingly responsible positions and more influential roles in state government. Bob eventually led the state's largest environmental agency for many years. However, as a political position, when a new governor was elected, Bob left the agency to start an environmental consulting firm. Later, he took a leadership position with a national environmental nonprofit.

Bob's most rewarding experiences were when he was the director of the most influential state environmental agency and had the power to make decisions and had the support of the state's governor and other state leaders. Most importantly, he was able to push the status quo without fear of repercussions. "I was the leader, and there were amazing

policy opportunities," where he was able to have a big impact on the way environmental agencies worked together, address huge environmental challenges, and pass significant environmental laws. "So we did it, we pissed off the world."

"But that was a time where I was challenged every day. I was in charge, but I tried to channel that in a positive way and not get crazy or big headed, but understanding that that gave me the opportunity to really do something significant. And what was gratifying after I left, [the new governor] was moderate on these issues, while he didn't really change anything, it stayed in place."

However, it was also challenging for Bob to be one of the only African Americans working in the environment — and in such a visible position. First, he had to come to terms with, "and not have it become a liability, [...] that 99.99% of the time, I was going to be in a room primarily with White males—very conservative White males. And that was the deal." Bob recalled asking a prominent speechwriter for help to figure out how to get "these conservative, some racist, White men to listen to me?" She advised Bob to confront the issue head-on and begin speeches acknowledging their suspicions. "And that's what we did, and they became my biggest supporters." At the same time, Bob was being criticized by other African American leaders who believed that his appointment to work in the environment was a wasted opportunity for African American causes.

"I came to understand the nexus between environmental issues and public health, and although there was not a focus on environmental justice issues at that time, it was immediately clear that that nexus existed. But nobody was talking about it so I actually was criticized. Some African American legislators, as [governor] appointed me, they commented that that was a wasted appointment because they didn't see environmental issues as important and had one of my challenges was to connect with them and begin to help to explain those issues to them. And I think one of the interesting things today, Hispanic and African American members of Congress and Legislature are the strongest, in terms of a voting record, they are the strongest supporters of environmental issues. So they've come around significantly. [...] But early on, there was more interest in the social welfare stuff, economic and welfare stuff, which is very important."

When Bob left state government to start his own environmental consulting firm, he felt betrayed by his “White liberal friends who did everything they could to stop me from getting business.” On the other hand, he received more support from White conservative colleagues because he was a small business owner. Bob believed that the White liberals felt threatened by his deep environmental policy expertise. “When they saw me as a competitor, they did everything they could to keep me from succeeding. So I came to recognize the power of money and prestige.”

“But I came to understand that the best White person, because of privilege, would have some elements of racism in his or her being and may not recognize it because of their upbringing and because they had always had what I would call privilege because of the fact that they were White. And so, I love [White environmental leader] — one of the best persons I ever met. But there are some things that [person] will do today that if I was a member of Black Lives Matter, I would be calling him out on.”

Even though Bob had a great career and job opportunities, he recognized that there “was a ceiling on what I could do.” For example, when other White environmental agency leaders left their positions, they were appointed to prestigious positions in the corporate or university sectors. Whereas Bob had to find his own path. Bob remembered a similar situation with his friend, who was also an African American man and had been in state leadership.

“That’s still part of the limitations that I think Hispanics and African Americans have to deal with. I mean, there is a ceiling on what we can do. And if we get frustrated by that, it will keep us from succeeding. So you almost have to come to grips with accommodating that, in order to remain at peace and able to navigate and still do well. But that ceiling is real. And Barack Obama being President didn’t change that ceiling.”

Bob’s advice to someone who had a similar background as he did entering into an environmental career was to have a work ethic, get an education, learn how to communicate, “embrace who you are, and very importantly learn how to play the game.”

“And let me explain what I’m talking about. If you encounter racism on the

job, you can't blurt out and say, 'This is racism,' and 'I hate you,' and all of that stuff. Because the next job you go to, you're gonna encounter the same stuff. And so, don't necessarily embrace it, but recognize it exists, and control how you respond to it. Because the worst thing you could do is intimidate the folks who control the economy. That will limit your opportunities. So playing the game is to becoming shrewd enough to know what's happening, know that you may be being treated in such a way that only because you may be a minority member, but don't explode. And you in time will be given opportunities to explain to people why they may have offended you, and they will embrace it. But that's part of coming to understand that it is what it is. It may place some limits on you, but it doesn't necessarily have to kill you professionally. And you make the decision."

### ***Frank Sato***

"Throughout my life, I just haven't seen things, that filter of seeing things based on race and ethnicity. [...] It was not part of my upbringing. So I didn't really see things that way. I see things that way more now..."

Frank Sato, a Japanese-American male in his 60s, grew up in a mid-sized metropolitan area in the West. He was a *Sansei*, a third-generation immigrant. Frank's father, who would take the family camping for all of their family vacations, sparked his love for the environment. "And I just, I loved it. And so, as a kid, those two weeks a year out in the mountains, and running around, fishing, kind of going feral. That was a great time."

Although he often felt most inspired by ideas, he admired the generations of Japanese immigrants before him.

"I would definitely say the generations of Japanese immigrants before me first generation (*Issei*) and second-generation (*Nisei*). I remember going to funerals and because I am a bit of a mutant at 6'1", being impressed by how strong to the core these small people are/were. Their lives were tough, and they had been through a lot, and some were hunched over from picking strawberries, but they weren't worn down at all. They just persevered and rolled with the punches."

By the time he went to college, Frank was a strong environmentalist—almost to the point of becoming depressed because of the impact that people were having on the environment. After graduating with an environmental degree, he dedicated his career to

getting young people engaged in the environment. “And that is true, those are the two things, youth and the environment, in combination that I find just great to work with.” He held several environmental education positions, went to graduate school for a year, did not finish, and eventually got a job with the state's conservation agency. Over more than a decade at the agency, Frank developed programs and moved up the ranks. Frank pointed to his experiences building trails as the most rewarding in his career. The “rare intensity of demand on a person” of doing manual labor for six months in the field with one crew was “truly transformational, and from a personal development and social point of view, it is exactly like blasting a crew of people off in a spaceship.” Those experiences directly influenced him to have a minimalist lifestyle, not play politics, and have a direct service ethic.

“[The field crew are] not very politic. Their whole attitude toward life is look at, ‘We work our butt off, so we are not gonna take any crap from anybody.’ Combine that with the '60s culture and they're really kind of anti-authoritarian. That carried with me. I really feel like the farther people are removed from where the action is, the less insight, the less credibility they should have. I have really carried that with me as a director.”

Frank’s next opportunity was to work on behalf of his state on national scale programs. Later, he worked on state policies through several administrations. Frank recalled that working directly with one state leader, who was engaged in his policy work, was one of the best working relationships he had. He felt that their down-to-earth relationship helped them get a lot done.

“...[the leader is] pretty amazing, I think, and [the leader] was so supportive of me as well. There couldn't be anybody that is less glamorous than me, so it is not a match that you would ever expect anything to come out of. That was just an amazing time.”

After a decade, Frank leveraged his relationships to land another governor-appointed position, this time leading the state's conservation agency where he had previously worked building programs. This job turned out to be one of his most challenging experiences of his

career. Immediately after he started, the late 2000s recession hit, and the governor zeroed out the agency's budget — meaning that he meant to close the agency. Frank offered his resignation "saying 'I didn't sign up to do this. You never told me. This is not a part of my job description, so don't expect me to go along with it.' So right from there, it was not a very politic thing I was doing. I was pretty upfront about it." Fortunately, he was able to save the agency. "Starting in August and then going into January with the budget fight, that one definitely was a test. That one definitely was a test. And I remember being able to announce it, 'We were saved,' we were. And I almost had no energy to say that at that point." A year later, Frank retired. Since then, he had been actively volunteering for environmental boards, including serving in several leadership positions.

Frank did not consider his race/ethnicity much throughout his career. He recognized that the reason why was because his parents raised him to "be really naïve about racism [...]. We are the model of acculturation."

"My mother and father, they were put in a concentration camp. My mother was in a concentration camp for five years. My dad served in the U.S. Army while his family's in a concentration camp. But later on, my mom and dad, they went to Washington DC. And my mom comes back and she goes, 'This is just the most beautiful, just the greatest country on the face of the planet.' And for me it was, 'Well, if that's what they're going...' and at that point, I was the next generation, a ton of them were saying, 'Well, the parents and I never talk about it. They must have PTSD or whatever.' To me, if that's the way our parents wanted to deal with it, that is just fine with me."

Early on in his career, he had witnessed instances of overt racism, but Frank felt removed from the incidents because he believed they were not directed at him.

"This group of young guys comes in in a pick-up truck into our camp. And I asked them, 'Can I help you? What are you guys here for?' And they go, 'We're here to shoot some niggers.' So I said, 'Well, I think I can help you out. Why don't you come into the office?' And they almost did it and then they took off."



However, the current political climate caused Frank to take a closer look back at some of his experiences throughout his career. Upon reflection, he became suspicious of having been the target of microaggressions. For instance, at one point, he felt that his career was not going in a good direction, and he was moved to another city so that his supervisor, who was White, could keep an eye on him. When there was a change in leadership, and a Black man replaced his White supervisor, Frank's relationships with leadership and job immediately improved.

“And when I look back on that time when I had a switch in regional directors and things immediately changed. I think there's a racial element to that. I also think that the person who came in as my new regional, is just a really fine person. Really honest and really kind, supportive. And even though he had a kind of a position of more formal power, that really wasn't what he was interested in exercising. But he really was interested in how all the parts of the organization under his command performed. Whereas the previous one was pretty much into the whole formal chain of command thing.”

Another example was when a colleague felt compelled to explain to Frank the benefits of an environmental strategy, even though Frank had expertise on the subject. "And so I listened to it, but I've always had a suspicion about that conversation, about why the person was so confident that I didn't know anything about it, the basics of it. It's suspicious." Also upon reflection, he believed that his race/ethnicity may have benefited him because people took notice of him. "So, I'd say that in a lot of cases, being a rarity, racially, in the field, was probably helpful in terms of opportunities. I got the sense when I was appointed to be director [of the agency], kinda got the sense that there's nobody from my... First of all, there's no diversity. I go to a directors meeting and there's none. There's I think so little that you don't even know there's no diversity.”

In spite of his new awareness of the underlying racism and hate that people in the U.S. still had, Frank remained in awe of nature and dedicated to the environment as ever.

“I'm really into landscape photography and I always find myself falling back to these photographs that start in the foreground with just this incredible intricacy of things that are close up. And then if you go even beyond what you can see, there is layers and layers of intricacy that you can't see, and then the view expands to include the whole landscape and then basically space beyond it. That is just the most, not only is it important for human survival, to me, it's absolute necessity for a quality of life. And if humans aren't there, it's still the most beautiful, it's still the greatest thing that there is. Whether it was created by a being, a sentient being or not, it is something that over an incredible length of time [...] it's just an incredible creation.”

### ***Nohemi Pacheco***

"The problem is that for people in positions of power who are predominantly White and predominantly of the same class, they have already defined what expertise looks like."

Nohemi Pacheco, a Latina female in her 40s, grew up in a suburb of a major metropolitan area in the South. Her parents were originally from a rural town along the coast but had moved closer to the city to provide more opportunities for Nohemi and her siblings. Growing up, Nohemi spent much time outside with her grandmothers, who taught her about plants and sparked her passion for the outdoors.

“...I think it was just thinking about my time spent with my grandmothers and how much I enjoyed time spent with them outdoors and learning about the various plants. I felt like I knew a lot about plants just from being with them. To me, I think that was sort of the inspiration behind it, and I just love being outdoors.”

Nohemi loved school and was the first in her family to go to college. "I loved school, but I think because I was a first generation student, the only thing I ever heard was that you go off to college to become a lawyer or a doctor." Nohemi majored in horticulture in college, even though she did not consider herself a "science person" because she was passionate about horticulture and excelled in the classes. After receiving her master's degree, Nohemi worked for a national education nonprofit and became interested in environmental education. She later pursued a Ph.D., where she studied the intersection of education and

natural resources and was selected for several research apprenticeships and fellowships.

When the economic recession hit, Nohemi felt fortunate to already have a postdoctoral fellowship that she could continue after graduation. Later, Nohemi landed a faculty position teaching environmental science at a small liberal arts college, where she was on a tenure track for the past decade. Most recently, Nohemi led a center on environmental justice and sustainability.

Nohemi's postdoctoral fellowship brought her to a ranch near her grandparents. This was a particularly important, formative, and positive time in Nohemi's life because it allowed her to connect with nature and, through nature, connect with her grandmother in a way Nohemi had not before, sharing stories and developing a deeper understanding of her family's history and their experiences.

“Every week, I'd have a story like, ‘Guess what happened to me on the ranch?’

She would just laugh and laugh, and she only speaks Spanish, and I only speak English, but that was our way to — she understood what I was saying, and she would laugh, and then she would make a joke that I partly understood or whatever, but she would teach me. She was like, ‘Okay. Well, if you get close to the javelinas, they travel in packs, and they don't have good eyesight, so they're going to run toward you.’ Also, she would tell me, ‘By the way, they can climb up trees.’ She was like, ‘If you see them, just turn around and run away.’ There was a lot of, I think, connecting to what my family had experienced maybe, and then also just learning so much about wildlife and how to take care of yourself in those areas. I think I just felt like I learned a lot.”

Nohemi's academic career trajectory was a lonely journey because of the traditional, rigorous tenure process that most universities require. “It's just a constant uphill battle of this notion of critique, which I think academics take very seriously, and so that's not often done in a way that's meant to help you with growth. It's actually done in a way to show you that you're not competent, frankly.”

Compounding this already difficult process, the White, male-dominated institution also created a challenging culture for Nohemi. She felt compelled to prove to her colleagues that she was not the racist/misogynist stereotype of an academic woman of color by overcompensating that she belonged within the academy.

“This notion that women of color are often seen as not as competent or often seen as being in academia because of some sort of special handout or something like that, and so the constant battle to try to overcompensate for that, I think is a real challenge. That, I would say at the core has been at the core of my biggest struggles probably.”

Despite Nohemi’s overcompensation, colleagues and students frequently questioned her expertise, disregarded those achievements, and assumed that any other White male colleague was an expert above her. “...[N]o matter what my position is and whatever, things, my degree, what I've done, I am rarely seen as an expert in that subject matter. There's constantly people, White men around me who are seen as the experts, despite the fact that they don't have a background in horticulture or haven't, whatever.”

The institutional structure created a hierarchy that left Nohemi feeling powerless to change the culture, let alone speak out about experiences where she was treated unfairly. She had witnessed colleagues who often made their voices heard and were "kicked out of the system." As a result, Nohemi was cautious about when, how, and to whom she voiced her concerns. She also focused on the service aspect of her work and helping students get through “the system.” However, she questioned her choice to stay within “the system,” even if her desire to stay was so that she could change it from within.

“I think the other way to look at it, we struggle with this a lot is if you want the system to change, who changes it from within if everybody's leaving. It's a constant battle. It's like you hate the system sometimes, you want it to change. Who's going to change it, if you leave? If you stay, are you contributing to the same systems that you're complaining about? I think it's just this constant battle.”

Nohemi credits a small group of faculty of color as a source of comfort that helped her through the academic process. "I mean, it's a place where we can speak openly about what we're going through, so it's both support and it's become advocacy too." Most importantly for Nohemi, the group was "a place where you understand people are experiencing the same things."

After she received tenure and thereby gained power, Nohemi felt more freedom in her work to be true to herself, to be creative, and to bring in unique voices and experiences outside of the White status quo. "I think maybe my personhood in my scholarship was diminished before, and then I feel like, after tenure, I was able to bring my personhood out in my scholarship." She went through an exciting period where she explored new methodologies, started getting published, and was asked to speak at conferences. For example, the connection she felt to her grandmother and her family's stories inspired Nohemi's current project: collecting oral histories from people of color and their families' experiences with nature to shed light on their knowledge and expertise in nature.

"...my grandmothers knew so much about plants and about the land, and if we recognize that expertise and that knowledge, then we see how many brown people are really scientists, right? It's just not a form of knowledge or expertise that's really recognized or valued, and so I think what we really have to do then is reframe our narratives so that we value that."

Although she finally had started enjoying her work, Nohemi had recently taken a new job and was leaving academia and was looking forward to starting the next chapter of her career. Reflecting on her past, Nohemi was proud of what she had achieved. "Well, I did it right, so that's good to know." However, if given the opportunity, she would have warned her younger self about how hard it would be to pursue an environmental academic career. "It was a lot of tears. Thinking about it now makes me sad that we put people through that. I would tell my younger self how hard it was." She also would have advised herself to find

mentors and to not be afraid to ask for help, with the caveat that "going back to the point I made about being a woman of color and seeming sort of incompetent, I think it's even harder to then go in and be, "Well, I don't know something."

***Noelia Torres***

“Everybody is different. Everybody comes to things from a different perspective. So, even if I had felt like an outsider, I don't think necessarily that that was intentional, you know what I mean? I don't feel like there was ever anything intentional. It's just kind of the way it is. Does that make sense? Kinda fatalist. Kinda fatalist.”

Noelia Torres, a Hispanic female in her 50s, grew up in a large metropolitan area in the Southwest. She and her family occasionally went to local parks, but “the outdoors was not our thing.” Driven by a desire to go to college and recognizing that she would have to do it on her own, Noelia excelled academically, got an internship, started college with a scholarship, then left school to work in communications full time. After getting let go for speaking up about a pay disparity between her and a male colleague, she sought and landed another communications position, where she created a network of politically powerful people and gained valuable mentors that she kept throughout her career. Her mentors, who were male and White, recognized her talent, encouraged her to finish her degree, and opened doors for her to move up the ranks.

A push within the industry to become more diverse provided Noelia an opportunity to meet other communications professionals of color for the first time. "I was star-struck." Noelia credited this industry shift for her being recognized and tapped for prestigious job opportunities, one of which she took in a major metropolitan city. As a new mother, Noelia found it was challenging to manage the job and her family's demands, so she decided to leave the position, move closer to family, and find a job. However, she could not find a position because employers thought she was overqualified and could not afford to pay her,

even though she would have taken a pay cut. Eventually, she landed a position at an environmental organization, was quickly promoted into leadership, stayed until she retired, and most recently was consulting.

Two people, who were White men, were instrumental in her successful environmental career. One for taking a risk to hire her even though she did not have an environmental background. The other, who was in leadership, for taking "a shine to me, and he saw something in me that I didn't even know was there, and I would not be where I am in my career if it wasn't for [him]." After working at the environmental organization for many years, Noelia learned that she had been hired because there "was a huge push for minority hiring." However, she remained resilient in the face of the information, confident in her expertise and work.

"So don't get me wrong, I don't have any doubt about my effectiveness in the position that I was in when I was hired, or when I moved up. I don't have any doubt of my competency. None. But I feel pretty sure that the number one reason I was hired was because I was a Hispanic female."

It was while working at the environmental organization that Noelia first connected with nature through her passion for storytelling. "And [the environmental organization] is full of incredible people, incredible [...] conservation stories, human interest stories. So from that perspective, I felt right at home. There was a lot of stories to tell." She felt as if the position had been made for her and recounted that in its totality, it was one of the most positive work experiences she had had. "It was like that position was made for me. I just, I loved being [in my position]. I loved that job."

"And along the way, what developed was an absolute passion for conservation. I don't hunt and fish, I don't. I've been hunting, but I don't consider myself a hunter. [My husband] loves to fish, I find it incredibly boring, but I love being outdoors. We love visiting national parks, we love hiking, we love birding. And that passion for that is directly correlated to my experience at [the environmental organization]. I used to say that I'm the type of person that we're trying to reach at [the environmental organization]. And

I'm also an example of, with exposure to it, if you learn to love it, you're gonna wanna protect it.”

She took pride in her drive, positive attitude, work ethic, and accomplishments at the agency. “When I think back on my body of work, someone has asked me about that, ‘What are you most proud of?’ And it's ‘Well, [the environmental organization]. It's building a team that's still going strong.’ An incredibly competent group of passionate people, many of whom are still there, I'm very proud of that.” Noelia reflected on the many positive experiences she had while working in the environment. One example was when the governor, with whom she had worked in her previous communications positions, recognized her at an event with the agency's leadership. “I walked in, [the governor] says, ‘Noelia, what are you doing here?’ The entire [environmental organization leadership] kinda looks at me and I said, ‘Well Governor [name],’ I said, ‘I work for [person] now. I work at [the environmental organization].’ [The governor] says, ‘Well they're lucky to have you.’”

Noelia intentionally focused on the lessons she learned at each job, whether the experiences were positive or negative, and on applying those lessons into practice. For example, when she was fired early in her career for speaking out, she learned that “one, that life is not fair, that things are different for women than for men, and that you should always take the high road.” Another difficult lesson was when she was first hired at the environmental organization. Her supervisors requested that she publicly announce a politically sensitive decision, but failed to instruct her to inform governmental leadership. When the environmental organization's leadership found out, she was almost fired. The supervisors scapegoated her. In the end, however, she was able to convince the organization's CEO that it was not her fault because “there was enough of a trail that everybody confirmed my account...”



The lessons helped Noelia navigate the challenging "good ole boys" work culture within the organization. Early on, she recognized that the organization's top leadership favored White male employees whose interests, especially those with rural backgrounds, fit within the traditional White dominant culture of the Southwest. These employees benefited from higher pay, more opportunities to advance, more influence on decisions, more time with leadership, and being included on hunting and fishing trips. "As a Hispanic woman who isn't necessarily ingrained in that culture, in a lot of ways I felt like an outsider." She accepted that she could not change the organizational culture, noting that the favoritism was probably not intentional. She stressed that the organization's executive team valued her, and the culture could have been much worse as she had seen in other places. "That's just the way it is. That's just the way it was."

Once Noelia was in a leadership position herself, she focused on where she thought she had power. "And so that's one thing that I kinda got my head around pretty early on is that I only concern myself with my sphere of influence." She pointed to one exception where she risked her career to confront the CEO after she learned that the "good ole boys" network was pushing through a pay increase for an underperforming employee who was part of the network. Meanwhile, because of budget cuts, one of Noelia's most valued employees was at risk of being laid off. She connected this experience to hers early in her career — the differences being that she was punished for speaking out before. In contrast, in a leadership position, she had the social capital to stop this from happening to someone else.

"I mean, I stormed in there, and I was like, '[CEO], this is wrong, wrong, wrong. This is so wrong on so many levels, and this is for me a fall on the sword thing, you need to back me up on this. This is not right. This is not an appropriate deal to do.'"

Noelia's future career outlook was positive. Her reputation for work excellence and her ability to create meaningful, long-lasting relationships helped her throughout her career

and, most recently, in her current consulting work. "So after I retired, people called me. I've been very fortunate." Her advice to her younger self was to "Go for it."

"My life has been enriched beyond measure, and it's opened my eyes to things to care about that wasn't even on my radar screen before. We live in a beautiful world and we all have — I'm gonna cry — we live in a beautiful world and we all have a responsibility to care for it, to make sure it's there for those little kids that are barging in your office, and my grandchild, and my future grandchildren, all that hokey stuff we say, future generations, generations to come."

### ***Nico Perez***

"So when I go to areas where my peers are, where the conferences that I attend, then I'm definitely in my elements. So here I'm just surviving, here I'm just working away quietly."

Nico Perez, a Hispanic male in his 50s, grew up in a major metropolitan city in Latin America. Attending a university in his home city, Nico studied biochemical engineering before pursuing graduate and doctoral degrees in the U.S. to become a marine biologist. His family's love of nature and his many childhood experiences camping and scuba diving influenced Nico's interest in the environment. Despite his parent's relationship to nature, they discouraged Nico from pursuing an environmental career in favor of something more lucrative. But Nico was driven to become a marine biologist.

"And my parents' love for camping and nature has always been in my blood, similar with my siblings, but I got turned into marine biology at a very young age and ever since, regardless of a lot of people deterring me from it not being a very lucrative career, I pursued, and I became a marine biologist."

After some time in academia as a marine biologist, exploring different apprenticeships and traveling internationally for field positions, he became disillusioned with the academic focus on publishing. Instead, Nico found that environmental grassroots organizing, working with communities, and sharing knowledge was more fulfilling and would have more impact on saving animals and habitats. He pivoted away from academia, became involved in environmental activism, landing a coordinator position at a prominent

nonprofit. Nico left this position when there was no room for advancement but leveraged his relationships into a leadership position at another nonprofit. He also founded and became the first board president of his own environmental nonprofit in the Midwest. In the latest chapter of his career, Nico focused on developing new environmental leaders of color.

“So that's why I'd really decided that it was up to me to share my knowledge and to work side by side with the people that were most impacted by it, rather than people that just read about this or rather than people who just criticize what you're writing, which is what Academia favors more now.”

Nico landed some of his jobs by luck, whereas other positions were created for him based on his experience and his ability to network. Most important were the many older people whom Nico leaned on and who guided him. Nico pointed to several mentors throughout his life: a high school biology teacher, a biologist who supervised his internship and helped him find his graduate research focus, and his graduate school advisors because they all helped him learn discipline and to problem solve.

Nico's most rewarding experiences were when he interacted directly with wildlife, which he described as being easier than interacting with humans. "So that romantic side of field work was amazing." He recalled the many instances where he helped rescue sea life that had been trapped in nets. Even more frightening experiences, like being followed by wolves or stepping on alligators, left deep impressions on his memory.

“And, I mean I will never forget the day that my boat is 22 feet long and surrounded by seven blue whales, each of them 90 feet long. So, feeling like a mosquito amongst giants. And following that day, just finding another pod of whales of a different species but just almost as large.”

He was proud of these experiences and his achievements as a marine biologist, including being featured in an issue of *National Geographic* and in a popular published book.

“So, all of these things are just, again, fairy tale-like. Any time I say that I'm a former marine biologist, people are, ‘I wanted to grow up to be that but I didn't. I wanted to.’ And I always say in the back of my mind, ‘Well, I did. I did do that. I did pursue it.’ And it's now just what my kids call daddy

adventures, my stories of that.”

Because mentors played such an important role in his own career development and because he recognized the limitations put on people of color within the environmental field, Nico’s current work focused on mentoring young professionals of color, creating a pipeline for leadership positions, and connecting them with jobs or with boards looking for people of color. This work was both rewarding and challenging because he realized that he was trying to change the environmental field's culture, one organization at a time.

“So we're now training the whole board on what it means to be equitable, to be diverse, what it means to be welcoming, and what it means to, not just have one token person, in your board, but more of that real desire to listen to other points of view. It's not smooth and it's not as fast but it's, again, that change of culture that we're trying to influence.”

Nico wrestled with feelings of exclusion throughout his entire career based on stereotypes people had about his race/ethnicity, education, and country of origin. He often felt that he had to justify his mastery of English or even being in the environmental field.

“...and another White person was like, ‘So how come you speak good English if you are not from here?’ I’m a grad student. You kind of have to dominate the language if you wanna...So that ignorance has been...I’ve seen it many years, often. The initial reaction of people to me being a Hispanic in the environmental world and not a Hispanic doing landscaping or restaurant work is very unique.”

These feelings of exclusion were not just when Nico worked in the U.S. For example, when doing fieldwork and interacting with fishing villages in his country of origin, he "was still the educated, more White person than them. I was still an outsider even being [from the same country]." However, while in the U.S., he felt the isolation more intensely because he was one of the few Hispanics in the part of the state where he lived. "I live in an island in [my state], not literally an island but compared to the population centers of Hispanics, I'm not in LA, I'm not in Florida, I'm not in Texas. So there's very, very few Hispanics here." At the same time, Nico noted that his race/ethnicity had opened

opportunities, like teaching bilingual sciences. "So I have been identified as unique or rare in the area. My ethnicity shows throughout."

Nico's drive and passion for the environment were often at odds with his family's priorities. In the culture of his country of origin, the environment was "more of a hippy thing, more of a, 'yeah, that's just what rich folks are worried about now.'" He noted that the environment was politicized and viewed as a luxury or as a hobby for affluent people in the U.S. This realization led him and his wife to open an outdoor education center to connect children to nature. However, the reception of the center in their Midwestern community was not enthusiastic.

"So I've been criticized. I've been, I wouldn't say marginalized, but I have been set aside as like, "Okay, you are doing that thing, and that's because that's what is your calling, but it's really not the traditional thing to do here in [the state] or anywhere."

Nico relied on his "discipline and stubbornness" to persevere in the environmental field. He managed his feelings of isolation by attending national conferences, including conferences focused on engaging people of color in environmental leadership, where he could connect with peers. He also pointed to his outgoing personality, his humor, his being non-confrontational, and his ability to "brush aside ignorant comments" that allowed him to be resilient and connect with other people.

He reflected that he had no regrets on his chosen career path and was happy with his decisions. "So I am definitely, compared to other men that I grew up with, not as well off in my salary range but definitely very, very fulfilled. I'm very, very... I'll always feel that I'm rich with life experiences with this career decision." His future career outlook was positive, and he was open to exploring new ways to engage as a representative of his race/ethnicity within the environmental field. "Maybe I'll aspire to political office in the future. Because I do have the citizenship, I'm able to and again represent my ethnicity and represent the interest that I

could bring in the area of environment." His advice to a person with his background who was thinking of entering an environmental career centered around his own career path — to pursue their passion, overcome deterrents, be flexible, and try their best.

### ***Kamala Singh***

“Those first two years, I was obsessed. I realized even, and my kids were younger then, I was always half thinking about work. I worked ridiculous hours all the time. I would get up at 4:00 AM to work. And I know a lot of people of color do that not just in the environmental space but just in general, that you have to be better in order to be seen in the same way.”

Kamala Singh, a South Asian female in her 40s, was a renowned national environmental leader. She spent much of her early childhood in a rural village in India with her grandmother and later moved back to "White suburban America." The stark differences that Kamala observed between her lifestyle in the U.S. and those of her female cousins in India set the stage for her commitment to understanding and changing the "structural and economic factors that lead to different outcomes for people, that it's not 'cause I'm so special or so amazing..."

She attended an Ivy League school, during which time she began volunteering in the local community on youth development. She became interested in environmental justice but decided to pursue a public policy graduate degree. After moving to the West Coast and working on several social justice issues, Kamala realized how "the built environment and cities and development patterns, and how that sort of shapes opportunity." After graduate school, she worked in various positions on urban infrastructure issues, eventually being tapped for a mid-leadership position in environmental justice and community benefits at a governmental organization. After several years, Kamala moved into the nonprofit space to lead a national environmental campaign during which time she learned about, sought, and landed a prestigious job opportunity to lead a national environmental nonprofit where she

was currently working.

As evidenced by her career path, Kamala's interest in the environment was through a social and economic justice lens. She referred to herself as an "accidental environmentalist" because she could not relate to the mainstream environmental movement. She believed that the environmental movement was not about people, "even though it is about people, right?" She also could not relate to traditional environmentalists. "It's sort of like, 'Oh, if we need some Black and Brown people to show up at a meeting, we'll do that.' But whether it's a sort of core value that's guided priorities, I don't think so. So that's why I think it's for the people who wear Patagonia, right?" She was critical of the environmental community not valuing, centering, or prioritizing equity in its work.

"In all honesty, the environmental movement and environmentalists drive me crazy. It's that eye-roll feeling about them, like 'Let's save the polar bears and the icebergs.' And so I think I have a prejudice against environmentalists and the environmental movement."

Much of Kamala's early environmental work necessitated that she build relationships with other environmental organization leaders who were "mostly all older, White men, some of them were men of color" across the country. The leaders respected her work and followed her lead in "just getting stuff done." Her expertise and ability to build trust with these leaders and others in the field helped open the door for her current nonprofit leadership position. Much later she realized that the community she had built was a source of her power because they loved her.

Kamala struggled with self-doubt even though her career trajectory into her current leadership role was relatively fast, she had created and developed many successful programs, and colleagues recognized her as a leader. One of the most challenging experiences in Kamala's career was when she was being considered for her current position, which fed into her self-doubt. The clear front runner for the position was a White man who had the right

pedigree and wielded much power within the organization. "So there's all these conflicts of interest, like the whole White-boy network of like, 'I'm on the board, but then I'm gonna be interim and still be on the board in selecting who's gonna get the position.'" It was at the urging of her network of colleagues that encouraged Kamala to pursue the position. The influential network also signaled that they wanted the nonprofit to hire Kamala.

“...it wasn't like I ever saw myself as like, ‘You should run the [nonprofit],’ right? It was really because these partners around the country that I had been working with were like, ‘Oh you are the type of person we need to transform this organization.’ And frankly, the organization was really broken, and I don't know that if it was like a super thriving organization, would I have even been picked...”

When the board offered Kamala the position, they paid her several tens of thousands of dollars less than the previous director, who was White and male, even though the board had hired her to fix the organization. In spite of this disparity, Kamala set out to prove to herself and others that she deserved the position. She also felt that she had to prove to her board and the funding community that the organization had merit despite being in a terrible financial situation. At the expense of her family life and her health, she dedicated herself to fixing the organization within a year. "And yeah, I mean, I do think that my coping strategy was like, 'I'm just gonna work harder. Everything is gonna be excellent. There's no slippage.' Those first two, three years, I took a pretty big health hit." Once the nonprofit was on track, she felt she had the social capital to negotiate a raise.

She was proud of what she had achieved, especially in light of the “White-boy network” that had discouraged her from pursuing the position in the first place. They wanted her to fail and actively tried to sabotage her reputation. Because, they contended, it was “disrespectful of me to apply for the position, because it was [the other White male candidate’s] turn.”

“And then I came in and I worked my ass off from fixing the finances to



putting every organizational system in place. I hustled. It was a crazy amount of work. Went from a staff of two to what we have now, etcetera. Built out all these programs in less than five years. I think we really have put the [nonprofit] on the map in a way.”

Kamala was also proud of what being hired into this prominent national role meant for the future of the broader environmental field—both because she was a woman of color entering a White male-dominated field and because of her background in social and environmental justice. Reflecting on what another environmental leader told her, "...her view of it was interesting [...] 'what are they signaling by hiring a woman of color who was coming out of the social justice world?' And 'Wow! What a bold decision by the board as far as the strategic direction that they're taking...'"

Kamala felt fortunate about where she stood in her current position, the community she had built, and what she had accomplished so far. Her future career outlook was positive, and she was motivated to continue to work hard and be creative, even though she recognized that it might not be a healthy motivation.

“And it's hard to say how much of this is me as just how I'm wired versus conditioned because I'm a person of color in a White dominated [field], or that I'm a woman in a male [dominated field.] I do always feel like you can't rest on your laurels. It could go away quickly. That you've gotta always be on the edge of innovating.”

Kamala's advice to her younger self was to know her worth, have thicker skin, and "don't let the haters—fuck the haters. Like what would Taylor Swift say? ‘The haters are gonna hate, hate, hate [...]’ And lean into your community, you know? ‘Cause I have to say that has been such a source of strength and ideas.”

***Paz Velasquez***

“When I think about what other barriers there are for minorities to get into these professions, I feel like maybe we're limited from the get-go because especially if they're coming from a demographic like mine, you're already poor to begin with and your elders and your family don't know enough about what's out there to guide you into it.”

Paz Velasquez, a Hispanic female in her 30s, grew up with her mother and sister in a rural suburb outside of a major metropolitan area in the Southwest. Her mother's family lived in a border city near Mexico where, during the summers, Paz and her sister stayed with their grandmother. Paz credited her mother for her love of nature. "Our family vacations, all we could afford were camping at state parks. So we went all over [the state] doing the camping thing, and that's what was a part of our memories. And so I know that that's where we, I, my sister, got our appreciation for being outdoors and caring about the environment."

Paz was the first in her family to go to college. She was apprehensive about attending a nearby university because she thought it was a "very conservative, White person, country school." She reluctantly agreed to attend the university because she received a scholarship and it was close to home. In college, Paz did not have a support network, so she mainly had to figure things out for herself. She recalled a conversation with an advisor in college as a pivotal moment after being placed on academic probation. "He was supportive. He's like, 'You can do this. This is gonna be okay,' and kind of made me see there was other options, like I didn't have to give up." Paz did not know that internships could have helped her open doors, she did not know how to network, and she did not know how to look for a job.

After college, she applied for every entry-level environmental position she could find. By chance, the hiring manager at a large municipal public utility had also graduated from her university and "gave preference to [my university] students." The utility position helped Paz realize the breadth of possibilities in the environmental field and that she did not

like living in a large city. Eventually, she found a position at an environmental nonprofit in a small city, then moved into a state environmental agency position, and then a mid-career position in a local government environmental agency. Over several years, Paz moved up the ranks in the agency and had recently been promoted to general manager.

Paz pointed to her first supervisor, who was an African American woman, as setting “the example for me because she was the only maybe African American, first of all, to be in the environmental side of the [public utility], and then second of all, to be in leadership.”

Her supervisor was in charge of “old crotchety White guys” and took Paz under her wing.

“And so that's who I had to work with in the very beginning, a close-knit group of one minority woman in charge and then everyone else were an array of men. And so some didn't think much of me or her, and others were a big family. Like, we're all one big family, a bunch of hard working guys and a few women, and some of them were protective in that way.”

Paz's most rewarding experiences were those where she was tasked with a challenging project and overcame obstacles to achieve success and when leaders recognized her contributions to the organization. For instance, Paz was surprised by how much responsibility she was given in her first job and “what I was able to pull off at that time without a lot of guidance or anybody to help me.” After successfully completing the project, the utility director recognized Paz as an employee “with a lot of potential.”

“And so, that was always a good feeling, a good accomplishment, even though it's relatively on of my smaller accomplishments in the whole career from the beginning of my smaller accomplishments in the whole career from the beginning, because maybe it allowed me to see like, ‘Okay, I can do these things, I can organize. I can manage projects and people, and someone's probably gonna recognize that.’”

Paz noted another accomplishment for which she was particularly proud. While she worked at the state environmental agency, Paz was tasked with providing comprehensive reports to the state legislature. The reports required hard work, and she questioned whether anyone recognized her efforts. It was not until she left the position that she realized that

many people, including her boss, the agency's leadership, and the legislative committee, appreciated her efforts.

“When I left, they later followed up on me, sent me a certificate of recognition, like how important my role was to them. And even after I left the agency, [my boss] called me months later, like, ‘How's it going? We miss you.’”

These positive experiences built Paz's confidence in her abilities even as she moved into more challenging positions. “I think every job I ever applied for I really wasn't qualified for, or I felt I wasn't, so it was always just a kind of a leap, a stretch to at least try. But I've been fortunate to be offered jobs, and ultimately prove myself with my work and my work ethic.”

Paz was disappointed that she never pursued a master's degree, realizing that it had limited her career ascension. At first she thought graduate school was not an option because she could not afford it. After working for several years, Paz seriously considered going back to school “and I even knew the programs that I wanted to maybe apply for.” However, she discovered she was pregnant with her first child.

“And we did get pregnant, and I was like, “Okay, there goes my idea. I'm definitely never going back because I can't make that work.” And even today, people still ask me, “You can do it.” I'm like, “No, I can't. What makes you think I could actually pay my bills, go to school, and raise kids?””

Paz recalled another difficult decision she made because of her obligations to her growing family that significantly affected her career. Paz was frustrated at the state environmental agency because she wanted more challenging work. So, she asked her supervisor for more responsibility and a promotion. However, the agency had placed financial constraints on salary increases, and her manager did not make an exception. She decided to leave the state agency and take a higher paying job at the local environmental agency. “I feel like I left to take a job that I wasn't really excited about, but I did it for the

right reasons, 'cause it paid more, it had good benefits, it was closer to home.”

Paz found the new position to be challenging because “the employees who work [in this kind of agency] and the [managers] who ran the districts, [...] had a very certain look and feel to them. [...] There were not a lot of women. I was probably the only minority [...] or maybe [one] of five Hispanic people in a room of a couple hundred [agency] employees.” She was disappointed that she would not have people to whom she could relate. Since she started, Paz noted that the demographics of the local environmental agency were changing to include more women. However, “the minority thing is always gonna be just there.”

“She's like, ‘P, you are the only Hispanic person here. Doesn't that bother you? Do you notice that?’ And I'm like, ‘I don't notice it anymore. I'm just used to it. But when you point it out, I do notice it. It is crazy to see.’ Like, ‘Yes, there's one Black person over there, and like one Hispanic person over here, and two maybe Hispanic guys from [a region], and that's it.’”

While Paz experienced microaggressions in the older White male dominated work culture, she tried not to make her “outward identity an issue or make myself out to be a minority.” She had experienced overt racism growing up but had not “had any extreme experiences like that in the working professional world.” Also, Paz recalled that when she first started at the local agency, she mistakenly thought her new manager was being racist towards her, only to find out that he was married to “the darkest Hispanic Mexican.” As a result, Paz thought that the microaggressions she experienced had more to do with her gender and her age, rather than her race/ethnicity.

“But there's some times where either I'm treated or talked to a certain way that I can't help but think that maybe it is. And maybe I'm just a little defensive or I will make those assumptions, but some of it could be because I'm a woman, some of it could be 'cause I'm younger than some of these other colleagues and people I work with. And I bet very rarely is it really because I'm Hispanic. So I think it's more because I'm probably younger and a woman than being Hispanic.”

Paz had mixed emotions about her future job. Although the job was challenging, she

planned to stay in her new position for at least the next few years. Because the transition from the previous general manager to Paz had been difficult and because it was occurring during the global pandemic, Paz had been expending a tremendous amount of energy and time at work. She was also “a little bit scared and hesitant about what lies ahead because it is my first big management role.” As a result of the tremendous pressure she was under, Paz took breaks to get back into nature. “It reminds me that maybe I really do truly love what I do. It’s just painful, like a love-hate relationship.”

Paz’s advice to a person with her background entering into the environmental field focused on finding networks. She also reflected that her career would have greatly benefitted if she had been exposed to more opportunities early in her life, including having a mentor or internships.

“When I think about what other barriers there are for minorities to get into these professions, I feel like maybe we're limited from the get-go because especially if they're coming from a demographic like mine, you're already poor to begin with and your elders and your family don't know enough about what's out there to guide you into it. And so I think people in my position, if you're lucky enough to be able to get to college, it still doesn't make you have a whole lot of more resources. I didn't have enough money I think to go and get a master's. [...] If we can't get master's[...] it's gonna be more challenging for us to get into the environmental field because basically the field almost requires that these days.”

## V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to cultivate a deeper understanding and to tell the stories of the personal and professional experiences of people of color who worked in the environmental field. Using a critical race theory lens, I explored how the experiences of 32 professionals shaped their career paths and their future career outlooks.

Through the counterstories in chapter four, some participants in this study revealed the considerable personal, financial, and intergenerational barriers they had to overcome to enter into, and persist in, the environmental field. Whereas others shared stories of privilege, good fortune, and opportunities in their environmental career journeys. Participants challenged previous research findings, including that people of color lacked positive images of nature and were less concerned about the environment than White people (Quimby, Wolfson, and Seyala 2007; Haynes and Jacobson 2015; Haynes, Jacobson, and Wald 2015). Participants also challenged the dominant narrative of how people of color interact, and value, nature (Sheppard 1995; Taylor 2007, 2008, 2014; Lee 2008; Pearson et al. 2018) and the dominant narrative that environmental institutions are post-racial workplaces (Taylor 2007, 2008; Balcarczyk et al. 2015; Haynes and Jacobson 2015; Haynes, Jacobson, and Wald 2015; Doane 2017; Johnson 2019).

In this chapter, I examine and discuss the salient themes revealed in the participants' stories to answer research questions R2 and R3:

- R2: What systemic barriers to equity, inclusion, and belonging do professionals of color perceive in environmental jobs?
  - How do perceptions of systemic racism influence environmental professionals of color's careers?

- How do intersectionalities amplify the experiences and perceptions of systemic racism?
- R3: What strategies do environmental professionals of color develop in response to the systemic barriers they encounter?

This analysis revealed that, among my participants, professionals of color encounter five predominant thematic barriers to equity, inclusion, and belonging (rooted in systemic racism) in environmental jobs, including:

1. Microaggressions (a.k.a. *The microaggressions and the unconscious bias is just astounding!*);
2. This is (not a) Meritocracy (a.k.a. *That is the kind of shit that people would say to me*);
3. Whose Environmentalism? (a.k.a. *who cannot be interested in that?* );
4. Race plus Gender (a.k.a. *when we are in the same room with men, and particularly White men, they sort of are immediately seen as experts*); and
5. Emotional Burdens (a.k.a. *I was kind of, like, suffering in silence*).

An additional three themes stood out as strategies that participants developed to cope with —and fight against—the systemic racism they encountered. These strategies tell an additional counterstory about the participants’ strength, including:

1. Courage and Resilience (a.k.a. *as long as you are comfortable in who you are, people can’t knock you off your feet*);
2. Connecting to Nature and People (a.k.a. *a mix of community and things that ground me*); and
3. Playing the Game (a.k.a. *becoming shrewd enough to know what’s happening*).

In the description of the themes that follow, I used participants’ quotes to exemplify the theme.



**Theme 1: Microaggressions (a.k.a. *The microaggressions and the unconscious bias is just astounding!*)**

“It's not that I work with anyone who is inherently racist, but the microaggressions and the unconscious bias is just astounding!”

– Breonna Harris, 2020

After the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, researchers noted that acts of racism began to transform from overt aggressive behavior (Dovidio et al. 2002; Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder 2008; Sue et al. 2008) to more subtle, subversive, and insidious acts that convey underlying hostility (Sue et al. 2007b).

“So the world is a different place today. I think it's important to recognize that racism is still a factor. It's not as intense. It's not as limited as it used to be. And my siblings and I are very close and we can now talk about it. Our dad was always — We were impacted by his fear of White people. And the reason he was so afraid, is he had seen people hung and put in jail for no reason at all.”

— Bob Wagner, 2020

A major theme in the study was the prevalence of microaggressions experienced by participants in this study, irrespective of the personal or professional setting, stage of participants' career, personal identifiers, and aggressors' motives. Microaggressions make racism and other forms of discrimination difficult to interpret (Sue 2010) and have harmful consequences on the targeted person (Sue et al., 2007a). This finding corroborates the growing body of literature that highlights the regularity with which people of color are targets of microaggressions. (Yosso et al. 2009). It also supports a central CRT tenet – that racism and other forms of discrimination (or “isms”) are ordinary occurrences. As Esme Ho put it, “I guess it's more like microaggressions now versus blatant racism, but it's still very much sort of present.” Interestingly, several participants did not recognize microaggressions

even as they described them happening because they had experienced or observed overt racism (or other forms of oppression or inequity) in their lives.

All of the participants had endured at least one of the three defined forms of microaggressions (microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations) in their personal and professional journeys (Sue et al. 2007b, Sue 2010). Microassaults are when the aggressor intentionally tries to hurt someone, as in when a teacher told Porfirio Martinez that ““Mexicans don’t finish college. You may go for a little bit, but you’re going to drop out.”” Participants who had experienced microassaults most frequently had done so in their personal lives. However, several participants had endured this form of overt racism at work. As Fiona Huang recalled, “So it’s also been cases like that where there’re microaggressions and I’m not sure how much to escalate as opposed to just go along with it. And then there are the other cases where the client says, some kind of racial slur. We went to a hotel that was called the Conch Hotel and then the client was like, ‘Oh you mean the Chink Hotel?’ Small funky things like that.”

Many participants experienced microinsults, which are typically perpetrated unintentionally, but are often rude and insensitive interactions that “demean a person’s racial heritage or identity” at work (Sue et al. 2007b, 274). For example, Veronica Feng explained that she was going to “bring in HR now because [my boss will] just have outbursts when she’s triggered she’ll scold me in front of people but then not take responsibility for her actions.” Participants in this study most often experienced microinsults as tokenism or being othered. Participants experienced workplace microinvalidations that “exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of people of color”(Sue et al. 2007b, 138). This most insidious form of microaggression often resulted in participants internalizing the experiences, including questioning expertise or being silenced.

Despite the prevalence of microaggressions, participants did not always have faith in their leadership to hold the perpetrators of those microaggressions to account (Sue et al. 2007b, Sue 2010). As Breonna Harris stated, “It's been a challenge to get any kind of direct messaging out to the organization about behavior and microaggressions. And it's challenging to hold the executive team to any kind of action as far as consequences to people's behaviors. So, anything short of calling me the N-word, are they really going to do anything?” Also, participants did not always recognize microaggressions in the moment and were left wondering afterwards whether the microaggressions had happened at all or did not have the vocabulary to articulate what they were experiencing. Other participants rationalized the motivations behind microaggressions.

### ***Tokenism***

Tokenism was one of the major sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis. Participants frequently felt tokenized or questioned whether they were being tokenized. For example, some participants questioned White boss' motivations for hiring them. As Nina Espinoza explained, “So I always had that kind of here — that they're going to have me as the token person. Even now, it's kind of a little bit difficult sometimes because I don't see myself different from everybody else.” Or as Dahlia Chiba shared, “I feel like they're making diversity hires, which is good and bad, because then if you're that person getting hired, you're thinking, ‘Was I just the diversity hire? Am I not actually the most qualified person to run this organization?’” Other participants questioned their boss' motivations for including them in strategic conversations. As Daniel Gonzales remarked, “I also see that as like, ‘Well, let's bring in DG. He's part of our diversity initiative. He's part of diversity.’” Participants even questioned their role within the organization, and Zaynab Marashi stated, “I've become this token woman of color working as the environmental justice person.”

White colleagues took notice of the participants for “being a rarity, racially, in the field” (Frank Sato). As Aaliyah Johnson put it, “The White progressives being open and accepting and wanting to have more diversity, it's positive in that they put me places. It's not positive as in they don't have any idea of what it would take to actually get equality or equity in the environmental field.” While participants were often noticed, they also encountered occasions when they felt interchangeable with other people of color within the organization. For example, Daniel Gonzales’ leadership team replaced one person of color who was leading an initiative with another person of color. He recalled that although there were no hard feelings, “the White CEOs and general, like, C-suite, they’re like, ‘Oh, here's this, our new director of HR who's also a person of color, she's gonna lead this. Thank you for holding the torch for this initiative.’” Other examples were when participants were mistaken for the only other person of color within their organization. As Reina Gomez put it, “The getting called the one other Brown woman's name, like, ‘No, I'm not [other employee’s name] actually,’ which is annoying.” Or as Aaron King shared. “But the running joke, when I got hired, is that, ‘Oh, they hired [boss’ name] the second,’ my boss. And within my first week, I can't tell you how many people thought I was [boss’ name].”

In addition to personal experiences of being tokenized, several participants pointed to the regularity with which the environmental field used people of color in general. As Kamala Singh commented, “But I also just don't think that the environmental community has been good on equity. Or valued and prioritized equity as sort of central to the work. It's sort of like, ‘Oh, if we need some Black and Brown people to show up at a meeting, we'll do that.’ But whether it's a sort of core value that's guided priorities, I don't think so. So that's why I think it's for the people who wear Patagonia, right?”

## ***Othering***

Another major sub-theme that emerged was othering. Participants commonly experienced feeling othered throughout their lives although these experiences were not always negative. As Veronica Feng reflected, “I had a very positive experience growing up where even though people were like, ‘What are you? We don't really get it. You're not this or that, and we know that.’”

However, in a work context, participants described the numerous circumstances in which they felt othered in a negative light, including being the only person of color in a workplace setting. For instance, Lianni Joshi recalled, “And then I ended up at a company that was super White, and it was like... It was just... I just felt alone. I just felt like... And it's hard... It was also... I just grew up so different.” In addition, despite many participants having had experiences of othering in their personal lives, they were unprepared for the impacts in their environmental jobs. As Cyrus Carter explained, “I think a challenge that I think is not necessarily unique to me as a person of color, but I think it's more highlighted or it's just a stronger effect that I think going into [the] environment[al field], where you're one of a few that look like [you and] have a background that you do. And even if it's real or not, feeling like you fit in. [...] I think is something that I don't know how you prepare for that or what to do.”

Othering also included the way in which White colleagues communicated with participants. Nina Espinoza noted that her White female colleague “was trying to relate, but it seemed more as a, ‘I'm rubbing my privilege in your face. I've been to all these places, and I've done this and that,’ instead of just saying, ‘yeah, this is what I've done.’” Or as a Veronica Feng described, “And when we talk about race, there have been so many conversations, I literally can't count on two hands how awkward or not productive all the

times that they wind up being.” Whereas some participants, especially Asian American or multi-racial/ethnic participants, noted that because of their “model minority” status, they were often privy to racist conversations among their White colleagues. As Esme Ho put it, “it’s like I’m not White, but Asians are often White-adjacent, and I feel like the things that people say to me about Black and Brown people—because they think that it’s okay—is incredibly jarring.”

Othering also took the form of the participants feeling they were the only person in their organizations that cared about non-traditional environmental values such as social or environmental justice or working with communities of color, even when they were hired to do this work. Soledad Iglesias described, “I do feel like it’s been hard to find a career home, so to speak, because I think in the last three places that I’ve been, I felt like the really radical person for either suggesting that we talk about race or suggesting that we ground students’ experiences in the history of the city and understanding inequities. So I think for all those reasons, it’s felt hard to figure out where I fit, I guess, essentially.”

### ***Questioning Expertise***

Participants shared countless examples of White colleagues and supervisors questioning or criticized their expertise, skills, or experience. Situations included those in which White colleagues assumed participants did not have expertise. For example, Nohemi Pacheco remarked that “no matter what my position is and whatever things — my degree, what I’ve done — I am rarely seen as an expert in that subject matter. There’s constantly people, White men around me who are seen as the experts, despite the fact that they don’t have a background in [the subject].” Or as Tessa Chung described, “One particular [White] guy would question everything I said, for of that ‘Is that true? Is that accurate?’” Frank Sato recalled a conversation with a White colleague who proceeded to explain to the participant

“the benefits of a prescribed burning. And you know I had studied that in college, I had burned a forest with the person that's considered to be [the expert] of prescribed burning. And so I listened to it, but I've always had a suspicion about that conversation, about why the person was so confident that I didn't know anything about it, the basics of it. It's suspicious.”

Often, White colleagues diminished participants' expertise, experiences, or the role they had in the organization. As a result, some participants felt compelled to defend their expertise. For example, one participant described a meeting in which a senior level director introduced him “to the other person in the room as someone working on low-income issues. [...] And I had to clarify that. But that's all he thought I did. That happened more times than I care to even talk about. But that was a very regular recurrence. Yeah, that was just how it was” (Aaron King). Other participants took notice and remained silent or took notice and questioned themselves. Frank Sato described that even though he was in a leadership position, when he was in meetings with other directors who were all White, that “there was a feeling that I couldn't have been appointed because I knew anything about the environment or anything.” Pilar Castillo recalled a situation where her boss called into question her abilities, stating “this is my boss that told me, ‘When are you gonna work hard enough to be good enough?’ [...] Well, the hard part about it was that I took that to heart and I thought maybe I'm not good enough [...].”

The consequences of White environmental professionals making assumptions or diminishing participants' expertise, were particularly dire when the White professionals were in positions of power. Participants described situations where the assumptions directly affected their ability to do their jobs — such as accessing organizational resources. Participants also cited the negative impacts on job opportunities — such as when they were

being considered for a position or promotion. Esme Ho explained, “And sometimes when I do make it in the door and people are looking at my resume, I’ve had comments of, ‘You have a lot of working experience. I wouldn’t have expected that.’”

### ***Being Silenced***

The analysis revealed a fourth sub-theme of White colleagues and supervisors silencing participants’ voices. Several participants described instances where their contributions were ignored, but their White colleagues’ contributions were acknowledged. Or situations where White colleagues interrupted, talked over, or spoke for them, hence, rendering their voices silent. For example, Breonna Harris described noticing that in meetings, she would “say something and they’ll be silence or no acknowledgement of what I’ve said. And a White woman will repeat what I’ve just said, and everybody is like, ‘That’s a great idea. That’s a good point.’ And so it does affect how much I speak up in meetings, ‘cause I’m like, ‘Why bother? I’m just feeding them my ideas.’” Or as Fiona Huang put it, “and when somebody monologues over you, it’s really hard to interrupt them, right? And so the few times I did that, [my White male colleague] just doubled down.” Tessa Chung described similar situations, “And so sometimes when you would try and insert a new idea or something like that, it’s sort of like, ‘You’ve cut me off, I’m offended.’ And then it’s sort of like, ‘How do I reinsert back my opinion again?’ So it diminishes what you’re trying to do.”

Silencing took on other, less obvious forms as well — such as supervisors scolding or calling-out the participants in front of their coworkers, ignoring requests, or not acknowledging their contributions. For example, Breonna Harris described how her boss ignored her as she tried to advance in her career: “And I have talked to her several times about a possible career growth for me, different career paths, different ideas that I have. And I noticed that when I bring this up for the next two weeks our check-ins will be cancelled.”



**Theme 2: This is (not a) Meritocracy (a.k.a. *That is the kind of shit that people would say to me*)**

“I remember one person told me that it was disrespectful of me to apply for the position, because it was [White male’s] turn, [...] and that he deserved to have that position for five years so that he could retire and have this platform before his retirement. [...] That is the kind of shit that people would say to me the first year or two I was in this role.”

— Kamala Singh, 2020

The second major theme in this study challenged the dominant narrative that environmental organizations are colorblind and that professional advancement or other opportunities in the environmental field are solely based on merit (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). As I noted in chapter two, institutionalized disparities that favor White people and disadvantage people of color have been well documented in the legal and educational systems. Certainly, environmental organizations are not immune to similar inequities. Corroborating Taylor’s (2011b) survey findings of 265 environmental professionals, participants often observed discrepancies between their salaries and their White counterparts’ salaries. Participants in this study also noted discrepancies between how quickly, or how far, White professionals advanced compared to their own or other colleagues of color’s, career trajectory. For example, Lakshmi Kumar commented, “how I saw other people being treated that were in a similar professional position was something that was sort of like my control test. Right? I’m like, ‘Okay, why is that happening to you and it’s not happening to me as well even though we’re on the same level playing field?’”

Participants’ counterstories uncovered several ways in which the myth of a meritocracy was laid bare, the most prominent of which included: Being undervalued, Needing White champions, and DEI (Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing).

### ***Being Undervalued***

Participants frequently felt undervalued within their organizations as well as being undervalued compared to White counterparts from hiring decisions, level of effort, promotions, and to recognition for their work. Many participants recounted instances where they were not fairly compensated for their work, including job titles and pay. After Athena Baker had taken on her (White male) supervisor's job duties in addition to her own temporary job, the organization's all-White leadership only offered her a lower-level position and pay than in what she had been doing. "I was hired as an associate, but I was coordinating. And, I was forced to do that under a very unfair time constraint." Or, for example, one participant realized she had been offered a substantially lower salary than the previous person (White male) who held the job. "I have so many stories of even how they paid me \$30,000 less than the guy who got the job before me...They just refused not [sic] to pay me the same" (Kamala Singh).

Participants also noted the significant salary gaps between departments within an organization, or between positions that were mostly held by the staff of color (e.g. program coordinators or community outreach) and traditionally White positions (e.g. fundraising). As Athena Baker explained, "our department's predominantly of color. And the other departments are predominately White. And it seems like the White women get more of an edge up, and get their promotion faster than my colleagues in my department, and me, myself, and even my manager."

Participants recognized the premium mainstream environmental leaders placed on pedigrees — whether it was based on where people attended university or the type of degree they earned. Many participants went to great lengths, including going to Ivy League schools, just to be eligible for the same job opportunities as their White counterparts. Pedigrees,

however, did not guarantee the participants would be paid what they were worth. An example of this situation was when Daniel Gonzales negotiated his salary, “And I tried like hell to negotiate, to figure out like, ‘Okay. I have a master's. I have all this experience. Can you move more?’ They're like, ‘We can only do a thousand more.’ I'm like, ‘What are you talking about?’ I guess, ultimately, it was fine. It was not fine, but I made it work. But I shouldn't have to make it work, especially if an organization is trying to diversify its workforce and also bring in another generation of folks into this very kind of needed sector.”

Several participants described the *green ceiling* between their current positions and opportunities to advance into leadership positions. “So it's like, ‘Okay, we can enter the field, but we can't be management.’ Like, you are not management material. And it also felt really competitive, so it's like you are fighting for that space with other people of color. It doesn't feel like it's that open to us” (Grace Chen). Another participant shared an example of when her CEO told her she was not ready to be a manager after he hired a White woman as her supervisor, even though the participant had been managing the program successfully. “He was basically saying, ‘she might be this temporary person that you can eventually become that person, but right now, you're not ready’” (Zaynab Marashi). Even when that green ceiling was shattered, participants felt compelled to work much harder and provided excellent quality of work compared to White counterparts. “[M]y coping strategy was like, ‘I'm just gonna work harder. Everything is gonna be excellent. There's no slippage’” (Kamala Singh).

### ***White Champions***

A second sub-theme was the importance of having *White champions* to vouch for participants' competence, to legitimize their worth, to gain entry into White spaces, to help code-switch, or to expand participants' opportunities. White champions were often bosses, mentors, or role models who took special interest in helping the participants overcome internalized and structural barriers as they navigated their career. For instance Kamala Singh recalled, "And so it's like actually, frankly, a bunch of older White guys who were running [the governmental organizations], saw in me the kind of leadership, the kind of [...] environmental leadership. And so then I was like, 'Well, maybe I could do this.'" Noelia Torres described a similar scenario. "[H]e just took a shine to me, and he saw something in me that I didn't even know was there, and I would not be where I am in my career today if it wasn't for [him]." Athena Baker recalled the support she received from a White colleague when she first started her job, "[O]ne of the women, she's really spunky; she's great. She works in [another county], and she's the naturalist there. And she was talking about how she got into the industry, and she gave me some really great pointers on how to engage students, and basics of language."

While White champions were most often viewed in a very positive light, some participants recognized that their support to overcome institutionalized barriers including racism only went so far. Fiona Huang illustrated that duality when she recalled seeking help from her boss to navigate microaggressions, "There have been times where the other person was not receptive and so I talked to my boss about [the microaggressions], which has been a difficult thing because my boss himself has also said these types of things. So sometimes there's not a really clear champion, but I think over the past several years, my boss who is, he's an older White man, he has really grown, actually, he's fired somebody for saying

something racist and so recognizing that he also has a learning curve, he's learned to be a champion.” She explained further how her concerns and her boss’ interests had to converge in order for him to champion her cause, “[T]here are very clear cases where it's something that damages the reputation of our business. If it's something that damages our reputation or has some more material implication, he'll definitely be the champion. I think if it's something a little bit more ambiguous or could be construed as just being too PC, sometimes he's like, ‘Oh you don't need to be so judgmental’ is basically his response. So it's been mixed.”

Other participants recognized that White champions’ support for their career advancement was limited. As Aaliyah Johnson observed, “[M]ostly race has helped me because the environmental field is mostly progressive White people and so they're like ‘Oh my God! There's a Black girl. Get in.’ And so I think that's been helpful for me. It's also frustrating because they are progressive White people but are still so endeared to keeping the current structure and not asking complex questions or thinking of things in a critical way that it makes it frustrating for me, but I'm still in that space.” A few participants also recognized that champions would sometimes actively work against their advancement if the participants began to outperform. Fiona Huang shared that she “use[d] my boss as a crutch, right? He is not super charismatic but he's well liked. He's this older White dude. And there have been cases where he's been very generous. I don't really get invited to conference panels much but he got invited to one, and he let me speak on his behalf and said there are many, many proposals where he is the team leader because that's what's gonna bring in a contract, even though I'm the person doing most of the work and that is, I'm not gonna lie, it can be hurtful.”

In terms of recruiting and hiring beyond entry level positions, participants noted that without White champions, people of color were often excluded from hiring pools. For

example, Greg Kim observed that even in his relatively progressive organization, racial/ethnic diversity was mainly within junior staff that did “not extend yet to the leadership level.” Although the company did hire from within “once you get to mid-career, it's very infrequently [...] a totally open-call business position. It's usually your referrals, it's sort of approaching people of certain repute. And who are the folks that have access to all of the speaking opportunities, to other, I don't know, moments when they have high visibility?”

Many participants also described the role of White champions' environmental work in a negative light. In particular the disconnect between how White champions viewed their traditional environmental approaches compared to how the communities of color perceived those methods. As Soledad Iglesias observed, “But I think a lot of folks also saw the work that they were doing from more of a savior complex, and didn't understand why community members were responding in the way that they did. They didn't understand why somebody might be turned off by the way that they're framing a program or an event, and there was an... I think an unwillingness to learn and unwillingness to be humble and remember that it's just so much deeper.” Another example was when Aaron King recalled his shock at the lengths he had to go to reframe how his White colleagues' communications about their work could come off to the communities of color in which they worked. “I basically had to reframe the story to kind of point out my concern, and I said, ‘Okay, so you want to come in as the hero riding in on the horse. Imagine an environmental advocacy group says, ‘[environmental organization] stops much needed investment in critical infrastructure in low-income community.’ Imagine that headline, or imagine, ‘[environmental organization] wishes to experiment on low income community.’ Which headline do you think sounds better? Because either one of those are possible.’ The entire room was just crickets, right? I mean, technically, they were all right, but they didn't get the bigger picture.”

### ***DEI (Wolf in Sheep's Clothing)***

Another sub-theme that emerged in this study included the ramifications of organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. This finding aligned with the CRT tenet of interest convergence (Delgado and Stefancic 2007). Many environmental organizations in which participants worked had undergone, were undergoing, or were planning to begin DEI training or initiatives. Indeed, after Taylor's (2014) groundbreaking report about the state of diversity in environmental organizations and mounting pressure to become more transparent in reporting diversity data, traditional environmental organizations across the country began to actively address the lack of diversity within their organizations (Bonta 2019; Green 2.0 2019; Johnson 2019). Not all DEI efforts were equal, however. In a 2019 report that examined the ways in which environmental organizations approached DEI capacity-building found that "in some instances, when approaches are exclusive, make it worse" on employees of color (Bonta 2019).

Several participants in this study were hopeful and excited about the positive impacts that DEI training could have in the environmental field. For example, Esme Ho observed, "Everybody should do [go through DEI training] because everyone who's in the minority has had to live your experience. Because I think that that would just reduce the day-to-day microaggressions and degrading and gaslighting that I think can be really hard because it doesn't feel like there's space for anybody else's experiences or feelings or needs sometimes in the environmental space." Or as Breonna Harris put it, "I'm joining the [DEI] steering committee, and I'm getting more involved because I'm tired of screaming into the wind. At some point, somebody has to listen, and I just wanna be part of the solution." But others had seen real progress toward their organization's DEI goals.

However, DEI initiatives could also be problematic. Many participants noted that because the majority of the employees engaged in their organization's DEI efforts were mainly people of color, the burden of fixing the White organization's problems were placed onto the employees of color. For example, Daniel Gonzales described, "[My organization's White leaders are] looking to the DEI committee who are predominantly folks of color because we care about this. Right? There are allies in there, that's great. Other folks that represent different aspects of diversity, but especially when it comes to the topic of how do we get more diversity in these programs or whatnot, and you know. You just always look to the Black and Brown folks. It gets tiring and wearing. I wanna keep doing it, even though it's tiring and wearing, but it's so hard." Or the burden was placed on a single individual, for example a diversity officer, who was also a person of color. For example as Zaynab Marashi described her taking on the DEI work for a governmental agency, "One person doing that is not gonna lead to success. So I keep trying to tell them that. I'm just like, 'The fact that there's only one of me is — Just know the implementation of these policies is — It's gonna be super slow. 'Cause there's no way one person can do all this.'"

Participants acknowledged that the DEI initiatives were often performative and disingenuous. Many of the participants' organizations and their White leaders, were not fully invested in, or committed to, the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion, even if they said they were. Cyrus Carter observed, "I think, sometimes, I don't know if people take it as serious that aren't bought in. It's like, 'Oh.' This is like a token kind of gesture." Bob Wagner recalled that "the CEO of [a large mainstream environmental nonprofit has] been talking about diversity forever since I've been there. But we've never really had an internship program where we targeted communities of color. But that's how, I think that's how you really can change that whole dynamic." Or as Breonna Harris noted, "[My organization] has



recently, in the past three years, made a big push to put diversity, equity and inclusion work at the forefront. What I am not seeing is the actual passion behind that. So everybody wants to say, 'yes we're onboard. Everybody should feel comfortable and included,' but then when it comes to investing in that work, I don't know if I've seen it yet.”

Because leaders were not always fully committed to changing the organizational culture, DEI initiatives or recommendations were sometimes launched, halted, retooled, and reinstated over and over again. As Dahlia Chiba described, “and then a lot of the conversations around DEI started happening. And I'm like, ‘Oh my God, we're starting this conversation again?’ And it always starts the same, of, ‘This is an important issue but we don't know what to do about it.’ And then you don't see a lot of things happening about it, and you just talk in circles, and you're all trying to be very sensitive and aware of things.” Other times DEI initiatives were simply stopped and shelved. As Daniel Gonzales observed, “[The DEI initiative has] been through several fits and starts over the years apparently.”

### Theme 3: Whose Environmentalism? (a.k.a *who cannot be interested in that?*)

“I mean, clean air, healthy environment, clean water. Yeah, who cannot be interested in that?

— Aaron King, 2020

Another major theme that emerged through the participants’ experiences countered the myth that people of color do not value nature or the environment as much as White people — a misconception that has persisted among scholars, traditional environmental organizations, and the general population (Bonta and Jordan 2007; Glave 2010; Taylor 2014; Pearson et al. 2018). All of the participants in this study had strong connections to nature and the environment — with some participants making the distinction between the two terms. As Aaron King described:

“I do not live in a natural environment living in [a large city]. [...] Where I grew up in [the Caribbean], I could step outside, and I would be in a natural environment. I wouldn't know what animal was lurking underneath that rock or what bird that was chirping in the sky. [...] So, the environment is what's around us. Nature is not it, sadly.”

Or as Lakshmi Kumar shared from her perspective growing up in an African country:

“[[T]he way the geography was organized is you have the city and then you have nature and both are kept separate. And that was a design as a result of colonialism. So we were always kept separate from nature, and those who were able to go out into nature were privileged...”

Whereas others participants discussed nature and the environment as a singular concept. Soledad Iglesias shared her inability to separate the nature from the environment:

“I think the separation that I've seen is maybe part of the challenging piece too. And it's why I go back to our most vulnerable people when we're talking about this work, 'cause yes, it's about our ecosystems, it's about our wildlife and it's also about the people and understanding all of the challenges and the systemic and institutional racism that people experience, and that's not something that I can separate in my vision of the outdoors.”

### ***Hold Your Pearls - People of Color are (shockingly!) Not All the Same***

It is important to pause for a moment and recall America's racialized history and relationship to nature. As I discussed in detail in chapters one and two, dominant environmental narratives and racial/ethnic stereotypes have contributed to ensuring that White decisionmakers controlled the creation, and administration, of institutions (Crenshaw et al. 1995, Doane 2017) and molded how Americans define, interact with, and perceive their sense of place and belonging in nature and the environment today (Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003; Finney 2014a; Brahinsky, Sasser, and Minkoff-Zern 2014). The inextricable relationship between the nation's racialized history, the institutions that govern the environment, and media portrayals of people of color in the environment, manifests in how people from different racial/ethnic backgrounds interact with nature and the environment (Finney 2014a; Zimring 2017; Pearson et al. 2018).

Poignantly, Athena Baker reflected on the ways in which different communities of color relate to nature. She explained that people in her largely Black, urban and socio-economically depressed community "lacks stewardship and a positive regard with nature. And, I noticed that some Latino communities, there's just a different association to nature." She expressed those differences were because "Black people have a unique experience to nature, that isn't often talked about because of lynching, and stuff like that." Aaliyah Johnson often wondered "what would I be if I were White?" and believed that she would have come to similar conclusions that she had about the environment, "but I wouldn't have had first-hand experience of how much I think Black communities in particular could benefit from being closer to the environment and how much White communities are just given so much power over the environment and how harmful that has been, that imbalance has been."

### ***People of Color Have Unique Connections to Nature and the Environment***

Many participants recalled connecting to nature and the environment through their childhood experiences. Often these experiences were the reasons participants chose to work in the environmental field. For example, Paloma Lara recalled growing up in South America and going to the beach with her father and family and reflected, “So my connection with nature started early. [...] Not like what Americans might experience, 'cause we never really went camping, [...] but we would go to the beach often and stay in little areas nearby.” Greg Kim recalled that his interest in the environment started at school, “I think it was sort of instilled in me as a child through early environmental education from my elementary school days and adopting responsible practices.”

Some participants found their passion for nature and the environment once they entered into the environmental field. For example, Athena Baker described that where she grew up was “pretty desolate” and some of her first experiences with nature were at work, “Like, for example, we would go out, and we would go on a bird walk. And, for the first time I would see a trumpeter swan. And, it was a sight to see, and it made my day.” Bob Wagner described becoming interested in the environment after working in public policy, “[My boss] who was the [public lands state agency head] saw environmental issues as something the [agency] needed to get involved in as part of the stewardship of state-owned land, so that was when I was introduced to those issues and came to recognize that that was a policy area that I wanted to focus on.”

Some participants’ interest in an environmental career was sparked through their relationships with their families and with other people. For example, Trinity Anderson remembered being interested wildlife and her father taking her to the zoo and a big cat refuge. She also recalled that her father “grew up in the backwoods of [the state and] he

would just tell me about how he would just go squirrel hunting, and farming, and stuff. We'd go down to my grandmother's house. Out in the pasture, we'd pick blackberries[...].” Or as Nohemi Pacheco described, “[T]hinking about my time spent with my grandmothers and how much I enjoyed time spent with them outdoors and learning about the various plants. I felt like I knew a lot about plants just from being with them. To me, I think that was sort of the inspiration behind [my career], and I just love being outdoors.”

Several participants recounted that their connections to nature and the environment came through urban lenses or because they had experienced or witnessed the negative impacts of environmental injustices. For instance, Soledad Iglesias described her neighborhood growing up and “the oil tank farms that I had walked by. I just thought it was something that was there.” Once she learned that her city’s leadership had made the decision to place the tanks in her neighborhood because they were politically powerless, “I think a lot of that fed some rage that I had, as a result, and just understanding that decisions were being made that affected my community without community members even having a say or really knowing what was happening.” Often these participants were drawn to environmental justice and worked in the environmental field in pursuit of making the quality of life better for their communities. Reina Gomez recalled what got her interested in the environmental field, “And both sides of my family grew up in parts of [a large city] that are identified quantitatively as environmental justice communities, so near freeways, near rail yards, those types of industrial uses that we have. A lot of right next to Black and Brown communities in [the large city], and so that sort of has been part of why I went into the environmental field.” Veronica Feng described entering the environmental field in the city where she grew up because, “it was like grounding in this big, urban, sprawling city with all these issues of pollution and poverty. That’s what made it really attractive to me as an activist.”

## *People of Color Give Nature Meaning*

Most of the participants explained what nature and the environment meant to them — often in intangible or spiritual terms. As Frank Sato shared:

“I always find myself falling back to these photographs that start in the foreground with just this incredible intricacy of things that are close up. And then if you go even beyond what you can see, there is layers and layers of intricacy that you can't see, and then the view expands to include the whole landscape and then basically space beyond it [...] And if humans aren't there, it's still the most beautiful, it's the greatest thing that there is.”

Dahlia Chiba described nature and the environment as “freedom, as corny as it sounds. It's like open space, doesn't feel as enclosed and entrapped.” Athena Baker described nature as “an escape. I like to go out, and work out outdoors. For me, it feels relieving. Refreshing. Like, the smell of a Lindor tree. You know? Like, refreshing.” Whereas Esme Ho distinguished the two terms, “when I think about going to nature, it feels more like an open expanse of space, and a happier place, I guess, whereas the environment for me is everywhere, right? It's both in cities. It's in our rural areas. It's the Earth, and the matter, and the ecosystem services, and whether or not they're operating.”

Many participants tied meanings of nature and the environment to human survival. Some through traditional concepts of nature as Nico Perez explained that “[nature and the environment] means everything. It means survival for me. And there's a very well-known proverb, ‘When people are more concerned about money and oil, I mean try and eat that,’ right? I mean, it is our survival, animals, plants and clean air. For me, I'm the happiest when I'm out there in nature and I'm not in the office, so I'm in tune with it.” Others through the complexities of human-environment interactions. As Bob Wagner described, “I would define [nature and the environment] as the place we live and work. And how do we manage issues pertaining to it so that we're safe and healthy. Because the air we breathe, the water we drink, the neighborhood we live in, have so much to do with what happens to us.”

Many participants also discussed how they currently interacted with nature and the environment. For example, Trinity Anderson recounted that she enjoyed nature to “escape from reality, in some ways. To be able to go out and relax, and just enjoy simple things, honestly. I love to go hiking, I love to go birding, and just tune out the news, especially right now. Get away from people, and just be by myself and with my own thoughts, and just be able to enjoy nature as it is.” Porfirio Martinez explained, “Yeah, I’m very passionate about the environment, from working to do our part to protect it, preserve it, to enjoy, going hiking, getting up early in the morning or running through mountains or hills, it’s very peaceful, it’s quiet. It’s like, ‘Man, I can get up and man, there’s nobody out here and it’s just me. [...] ‘Hopefully a snake doesn’t come out or a mountain lion come out, attack me,’ but it’s just that, ‘Man, it’s just you out here, by yourself.’ It’s really neat. I love it.”

### ***People Ruin Everything, But Some Might Hold the Solutions***

Most of the participants described the negative impacts that people have had on nature, whether from a traditional environmental perspective or from an environmental justice perspective. As Frank Sato described, “I think things like COVID-19 should teach human beings not to mess with mother nature. And climate change [...] I don’t know what it’s gonna take for humanity to be able to gain more respect. Be more careful. They have to hand this all off to — I don’t know how many more generations. It’s only taken like three generations to just scare the crap out of everything. So I don’t know what it’s gonna take, but it definitely deserves that care and respect.”

Contrary to the dominant narrative of conserving nature from people (of color) as the solution to environmental degradation, several participants noted that the solutions rested with people, specifically people of color. Aaliyah Johnson said that relying on “current power structures to provide the environmental solutions would have to change.” She also

explained that “people are the problem, so people have to be the answer. It's just so simple to me [...]. If we're doing that and it's causing problems for the environment and low-income people of color, then that means we should center the environment and low-income people of color for the solutions. Which will be ‘stop doing what you're doing and figure out another way.’” According to Esme Ho, “everybody's work is diversity, equity and inclusion regardless of whether you name yourself an environmental organization or you're a social justice organization or whatever. This is like in order for us [to] conserve resources, we need broad constituencies of support that both have the resources and energy to speak their voice about things they care about like the environment.”

Building on the concept of looking to people for solutions, several participants described how they approached their environmental work. For example, Reina Gomez said that she did not “do environmental work in and of itself. I don't work on biodiversity or what might be called traditional environmental work. I work on how the environment interacts with people, and bring a people-oriented lens, and I think that that is reflective of my personal story.” Or as Aaliyah Johnson described that she felt “most fulfilled in the endeavors where I could bridge environmental justice and traditional environmentalism but that's never been a part of my job.”

However, several participants noted becoming disillusioned with environmental organizations that only held traditional notions of environmentalism. As Soledad Iglesias put it, “I think the toll emotionally, psychologically can feel a lot bigger 'cause I think in some of the settings, it's about trying to convince people that lives are at stake and when that can't be captured or understood it feels like there isn't care for people like my family or people like the ones that are in my community. And that feels really damn frustrating.” Others pointed to the transactional nature of the traditional environmental community's relationship with



communities of color. As Kamala Singh described, “I also just don't think that the environmental community has been good on equity or valued and prioritized equity as sort of central to the work. It's sort of like, ‘Oh, if we need some Black and Brown people to show up at a meeting, we'll do that.’ But whether it's a sort of core value that's guided priorities, I don't think so. So that's why I think it's for the people who wear Patagonia, right?”

Several participants were also contemplating leaving or had left their traditional environmental jobs because of the tension they felt between their organizations’ entrenchment in traditional environmental practices and the participants’ desire or job function to integrate equity or low-income and communities of color into their work. Veronica Feng shared that she was looking for another job where “the culture and the values align.” She explained further, “[C]an I actively work on racial justice issues without it being seen as a liability? I don't wanna go to somewhere where I have to beg someone to do that. [...] And I'm purposely trying not to apply this somewhere that would be replicating my current experience.”

**Theme 4: Race plus Gender (a.k.a. *when we are in the same room with men, and particularly White men, they sort of are immediately seen as experts*)**

“I feel like probably for most women of color or most women, we probably all feel this, that when we are in the same room with men, and particularly White men, they sort of are immediately seen as experts, especially in academia.”

— Nohemi Pacheco, 2020.

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality to help explain the unique ways in which Black women faced oppression in the legal field (Crenshaw 1989). Crenshaw argued that while Black women sometimes experienced discrimination in the same ways that White women did and sometimes they experienced discrimination in the same ways that Black men did, Black women *also* experienced the combined effects of gender and racial discrimination along with discrimination simply because they were Black women (Crenshaw 1989). Since then, Crenshaw and others have theorized intersectionality and applied it to other intersecting personal identities including race, gender, class, and ethnicity (Lorde 1991; Collins 2000a,b; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). While there were many intersectional personal identities and life circumstances among the participants, gender — specifically being a woman of color — stood out as the most consequential barrier to participants achieving equity and inclusion in the environmental field. The majority of women in this study described their gender and race/ethnicity as being central to their identities and their life experiences. At the same time, all of the women acknowledged the importance of other aspects of their lives. As Aaliyah Johnson exclaimed, “Hell yeah! Yes. If I had to quantify it, I feel like 85% of my perspective is because I'm Black. Mostly I'm Black, secondly, woman. Well Black, I come from a working class background and then a woman. In that order.” Whereas other women identified more with being a woman than their race/ethnicity. “[B]ecause I've grown up with privilege, the person of color thing has come

secondary to being a woman, and so I feel like the hurdles that I face, I feel I identify more with being a female than it is of being Asian” (Grace Chen).

Several participants mentioned that they did not often dwell on whether their race/ethnicity, gender, and other personal identifiers contributed to the challenges they had experienced at their environmental jobs. As Noelia Torres observed, “So as a woman —as a Hispanic woman who isn't necessarily ingrained in that culture, in a lot of ways I felt like an outsider. You know me, I am an optimist. My glass is always half full. Always. Always half full. I'm gonna look on the best part of any situation.” Other women revealed that they believed White male colleagues regarded them based on their merits and not on their race/ethnicity or gender. As Pilar Castillo shared, “For the most part, my experience has been most of the people working in the environment industry, especially around me, have been White, and especially White males. I try not to let it bother me. I try not to think too much about it because I also hope that people don't think too much about me being Hispanic or female.” While one participant explained that she wanted to break racial/ethnic and gender stereotypes so that she would be seen for her worth. “Because it's not fair. Because there's always going to be somebody that says something about ‘oh, well you're just a girl so you don't know what you're talking about.’ Or ‘for a Brown person, you know a lot of stuff,’ which is super insulting.[...] But just that I'm able to do what I want to do because I'm the person that I am excluding gender, excluding race, that I'm able to do this because I think I can” (Nina Espinoza).

And yet nearly all the women in the study described how they navigated working within a White-dominated, male-dominated, White male-dominated, or older White male-dominated culture. For example, Lakshmi Kumar remarked that, “each and every workplace, I've faced discrimination just as a woman or as a woman of color or as somebody who just

didn't understand the culture.” Or, as Reina Gomez recalled, “A lot of the [...] professionals in [my city] are of color, but it's still very male-dominated. So that's always been another [...] factor there.[...] Of course the classic like, ‘Well, I literally just said that idea, and somebody else said that and now it's a good idea. Okay.’”

Women who had experienced microaggressions at the hands of White (often male) colleagues and supervisors, sometimes assumed the motivations behind the behaviors were based on their gender *and* other identifiers, rather than *only* their race/ethnicity. As Paz Velasquez asserted, “I try not to always make that, like my outward identity, an issue or make myself out to be a minority, but there's some times where either I'm treated or talked to a certain way that I can't help but think that maybe it is. And maybe I'm just a little defensive or I will make those assumptions, but some of it could be because I'm a woman, some of it could be 'cause I'm younger than some of these other colleagues and people I work with. And I bet very rarely is it really because I'm Hispanic. So I think it's more because I'm probably younger and a woman than being Hispanic.” Or, as Kamala Singh recalled, “I think that there was a lot of people who did not think I would succeed, and the profile of the type of person who should be running a [national environmental organization] was not me. And I think that comes partially to gender, partially to race I think, but partially to age and I think partially to the sort of pedigree, right? That expectation.”

### **Theme 5: Emotional Burdens (a.k.a. *I was kind of, like, suffering in silence*)**

I'm channeling that anger, frustration, lack of empowerment into the different activities in my business.

– Lakshmi Kumar, 2020

“And so, I was kind of, like, suffering in silence, and doing things that I thought that I had to do, that kind of wasn't in my job description, but that needed to be done, that he wasn't doing.”

– Athena Baker, 2020

The personal burdens that each participant carried (e.g., having to support their families, being the first person to go to college, wanting to save their communities, wanting to right injustices) and professional burdens that were placed on them at their environmental jobs (e.g., having to outperform, not being paid their worth, feeling compelled to participate in ambivalent DEI initiatives), shaped participants' career paths and future outlooks. Most professionals have their own duties, responsibilities, and challenges irrespective of their industry or race/ethnicity or any other personal identity. However the emotional strain experienced by the participants as a result of microaggressions, institutionalized racism, and other forms of inequities cannot be understated. Even though microaggressions are often subtle, over time, they can cause even lower self-esteem, more self-doubt, and more unhappiness than overt acts of racism or sexism (Sue et al. 2007b).

As the counterstories in chapter four revealed, participants in this study bore the weight of both personal and professional burdens and the emotional consequences of microaggressions. Negative emotional responses varied widely. Some participants had general feelings of discomfort in work settings as Porfirio Martinez described, “We have our environmental [...] conference. Not a lot of Hispanics or any minority at all, but [...] it's an uneasy feeling.” Others felt burdened with having to teach their White colleagues how not to be racist. As Breonna Harris expressed, “And so, yeah, that burden of the teachable moment

is with me every single day. [...] And so, I always kind of walk into work being like, ‘What stupid shit is somebody gonna say today?’ Do you know what I mean? It's like I'm already defensive about what's gonna happen or what somebody's gonna say.”

Many participants, especially the women, described how these burdens affected their performance at work. For instance, Breonna Harris said that she did not “feel, like, psychologically safe when I walk into work. And so I think that it does create some barriers in communication, about who I'm really willing to work with or how open I am in meetings, when I already come in with this thought of like, ‘Oh, here we go, X person is in this meeting,’” Participants described how microaggressions chipped away at their self-confidence at work. “I feel like that also plays on the whole confidence thing, feeling like you don't belong or you're not confident in yourself in your field. That's going to have a lasting effect even after you get into your career, being able to speak up. I feel like I struggle with that a lot” (Trinity Anderson). Aaliyah Johnson described feeling “vulnerable to speak up about my opinions and about what needs to change.” Others shared feelings of disillusionment, exhaustion, and a lack of motivation at work. A few women described having to leave their place of employment to recover. For example, Lakshmi Kumar shared that she was no longer “in the workplace because I'm afraid of being ostracized, mistreated, like I have been over the past 10 years.”

In spite of these emotional burdens, at the time of the interviews, most of the participants intended to stay in the traditional environmental field. However, some were considering moving into environmental justice or other social justice work while others were considering leaving the environmental field altogether, and a handful had already left the environmental field.

**Theme 6: Courage and Resilience (a.k.a. *as long as you are comfortable in who you are, people can't knock you off your feet*)**

“The key is, Emily, is you come to peace and to terms with who you are. And as long as you are comfortable in who you are, people can't knock you off your feet.”

— Bob Wagner, 2020.

The analysis showed the many ways in which the participants were courageous in their lives and in their work and resilient to the challenges they experienced. The most telling aspect of the counterstories was that in spite of the challenges the participants faced, all remained committed to the environment, their communities, or to social and environmental justice.

Participants demonstrated their courage in several key ways. For many participants, courage took the form of being mindfully courageous and taking daily risks, such as speaking up when they experienced or witnessed inequities even when it made the White colleagues uncomfortable. Or speaking about topics related to social equity, justice, inclusion, or diversity that made others uncomfortable. Audre Howard described having to motivate herself daily to be bold and overcome some of the discouraging experiences she had faced. “But yeah, those boldness [sic] — That's a daily thing. That's a daily thing. It's like waking up, like, ‘Am I gonna be courageous today? Am I gonna be bold today?’ That's a decision, that is a daily morning journal entry.” A few participants took risks just by choosing to work in the environmental field. For instance, Aaron King weighed the risks in his decision to take a position at a traditional environmental nonprofit and commented, “Basically, I looked at my life, I said, ‘I can take a risk,’ and I took the [nonprofit] job knowing it was a risk. It was a risk with hopefully a bigger reward. [...] But yeah, knowing what I know now, would I have gone back and done that job again? Probably not.”

Several participants showed courage in simply having dignity or remaining faithful to their values. As Bob Wagner stated, “But that goes back to coming to a place where or growing to a place where you are comfortable in your own skin.” Soledad Iglesias shared that being true to her environmental justice values was worth it, “even though I was ultimately let go, I think sticking by what I believed in and to not be willing to give that up is really important because otherwise I think I could still be there and my mental health would also be struggling a lot more.” Pilar Castillo shared that being true to herself also resulted in having richer job experiences for which she was excited to explore more.

These daily courageous acts often influenced the participants’ ability to be resilient. Audre Howard described her resilience stemming from her taking risks and being able to be more authentic. “[N]ow I’m finding that me being bold and me being my full self and showing up as my full self. Almost - I have a long way to go for real. Gradually has actually given me the words that I need for my own self, in Audre, and my love for myself. But also the people who need to hear it. I always say I think the community or people are waiting for you to be your fullest self.”

In a similar vein as those participants who had to actively motivate themselves to be courageous, some of the participants also had to mindfully be resilient. Pilar Castillo observed that because of her background, it “helped me to practice resilience. Maybe even sometimes, resilience to a fault where I can be stubborn but for the most part I’d say that, that resilience is a big key word for me, especially for all of the tools that I use to overcome those obstacles.” Athena Baker shared that working in the environmental field was “pretty tough because I feel like there’s a part of me who’s like, I have to show them what I’m made of. You know? Stand my ground. It can be intimidating. It’s not just sunshine and rainbows, that you would think, ‘Oh, you’re just outside.’ I’m like, ‘No, there’s more.’” Additional



resilience strategies participants employed included having an optimistic outlook towards many of their peers, careers, and the future of the environmental movement, practicing compassion, and being grateful.

Many of the participants realized the role that their own personalities played in their ability to be resilient to the challenges they faced. Several participants recognized that both their inherent personality traits — whether being outgoing, extroverted, or friendly — and their upbringing, families, or financial and other supports created the foundation for their resilience. Audre Howard reflected that her success in her career was also due to her adaptability and “a combination of personal resilience and just being able to bounce back to things that I hear, experiences that I have, the daily grind. Also, my family structure that has allowed me to sustain myself in this career trajectory, 'cause it would not have happened without them.”

**Theme 7: Connecting to Nature and People (a.k.a. *a mix of community and things that ground me*)**

“I garden a ton, and we love our house plants. And I think gardening and plant care and cultivation always reminds me of my grandma. And so just having a mix of community and things that ground me and sort of investing in that, I think is sort of what helps build resilience for sure.”

— Esme Ho, 2020.

Another major theme was connecting to nature and people as insulating connections to persevere in the environmental field. As I detailed above, the participants' personal connection to nature and the environment was often the reason many chose their careers. Others found their passion for nature once they entered the environmental field. In terms of a strategy employed in the face of systemic racism and other barriers, many participants revealed that they connected to nature and the environment as a way to remind themselves why they chose their environmental job. As Paz Velasquez related, “It reminds me that maybe I really do truly love what I do. It's just painful, like a love/hate relationship.” Or as Soledad Iglesias shared, “[I]t's like our world, our globe and I feel like we're all connected and it's important to remember those connections in the work that we do so that it feels meaningful.”

Several more participants expressed how being in nature helped them set aside thinking about their work. For example, Breonna Harris shared, “[It] is such a sense of calming and really being present and not thinking about what I have to do tomorrow, what meeting I have on Monday. It really just centers me and brings me back to the moment.” Or as Nina Espinoza stated, “[E]ven though there are certain days that you're just so annoyed or tired, that there's always hope and just, you're outside and just enjoying, it sounds really cheesy, but like what nature has to offer, and just enjoy having sun on your skin kind of

thing.” Several participants also described the healing qualities of nature. As Audre Howard explained, “But all I know, right now, environment, nature, science, it's pure and it's healing.”

Participants viewed the meaningful relationships they built with other people, especially with other people of color, as a significant strategy for their perseverance and resilience in the environmental field. The relationships participants often cherished the most were with their mentors of color. “I'm grateful to have my at-work mentors, who encouraged me to fight for more [...]. People are just been tired of things going on for a while. So we've been speaking up more. [...] And so, it's inspired me to be more assertive, and to stand my ground at the end of the day. But, to do it in a professional manner” (Athena Baker). Veronica Feng described how she instantly connected to her mentor, who was also her boss, “because we're both Asian American, she was also very social justice-minded, and we both wanted to center people of color's experience in our work whenever possible” Veronica Feng also recounted how important it was for her to have mentors of color, “I just coincidentally had really great women of color supervisors [...] and all of them were incredible mentors and inspirations and I definitely wouldn't be where I am today without their guidance. Also just kind of taking notes on what they did. And being able to talk frankly about culture and experience but also, they were also just very rigorous in their work.”

In addition to mentors of color, many participants described the significance of having networks of peers, in particular peers of color, both inside and outside of their organizations as a strategy or source of support. For instance, Nohemi Pacheco shared how a group of faculty of color within her university were her “source of comfort [...] through the whole academic process.” Aaliyah Johnson talked about her, “gang of women who are social

justice oriented and environmentalists” who buoyed her and who were “not just friends but people that I see going forward if I wanted to do some shit. Can I curse on here?” Grace Chen shared that she, “had this support network among all of us that were people of color and working in the environmental field, and we would have that network with one another and talk about how it was frustrating to be a person of color in that.”

Often, participants shared that even having just one other person of color in their network or on their staff was enough to make their experiences within the environmental organization better. For example, Paloma Lara shared that “I think every time I come across another Latina like myself, I definitely feel a connection and solidarity.” Or as Lianni Joshi shared that when she moved to a new office location she had a co-worker who was “half Asian, and we just started talking and we were like, ‘Hey, it’s just me and you here at this company.’” Finding a person of color on staff was especially important when the participants were looking for someone to trust. Veronica Feng described it this way, “And so I actually talked to our HR director, who’s African American and she’s great, she’s one of the only people at my job, who understands all this.”

## **Theme 8: Playing the Game (a.k.a. *becoming shrewd enough to know what's happening*)**

There may be some limitations on you, but in terms of professional growth and opportunity, you can still far exceed what you think you can accomplish if you embrace who you are, and very importantly learn how to play the game.

– Bob Wagner, 2020

The final major theme was “playing the game” as a strategy to cope with systemic racism and other forms of inequities participants faced in the environmental field. The strategy was best articulated by Bob Wagner, but was echoed in full or in parts by many other participants in the study:

“So playing the game is to becoming shrewd enough to know what's happening, know that you may be being treated in such a way that only because you may be a minority member, but don't explode. And you in time will be given opportunities to explain people why they may have offended you, and they will embrace it. But that's part of coming to understand that it is what it is. It may place some limits on you, but it doesn't necessarily have to kill you professionally. And you make the decision.”

The most important antecedent of playing the game was knowing there was a game to be played. Other antecedents included participants recognizing their power, (re)gaining their confidence and their voice, and recognizing their agency albeit limited. For instance, a few participants realized that comparing themselves to their White colleagues would only hurt themselves. Athena Baker shared that “it took a lot out of [her]” when she first started working in the environmental field because she would compare herself to her White colleagues, who had been there longer and gone to private schools. However, she eventually realized that “it's not right to myself to be doing that so harshly. I have to be a little more forgiving with myself.”

Although most of the participants described some aspect of the game, participants in leadership and upper management positions more often described playing the game.

Whereas early and mid-career professionals more often talked about not realizing there was a game or not having the confidence to play the game. For example Athena Baker described a situation when she felt like she was not being fairly compensated for her work, “I kind of was like, ‘Okay, you know, you got to play the game. You got to play the whole back and forth game a little bit.’ But, I feel like I didn’t know if I was worthy enough to say that, “This is not enough for me to be part-time, because of the deliverables, and what you expect from me.”

One rule of playing the game was: pick your battles. Nohemi Pacheco described it as her having to be “political in terms of thinking about how I talk to people and when I raised certain issues and how I choose battles that I’m ready to so stand up for.” Audre Howard also shared how she decided when to engage in certain battles, “I ask myself the question pretty regularly, ‘Like when should I speak, in what way do I speak, and how is this gonna benefit not only me but who I’m speaking to?’ [...] There’s just different battles, there’s just different conversations that are worth engaging with” She explained further, “it definitely comes to boldness and speaking up for myself, and speaking to the things that I literally just having the option to speak or to not speak, the ability to say, ‘No, I don’t wanna speak on that right now.’”

A second rule of playing the game was: act like you have a thick skin at work. As Veronica Feng characterized it as “putting on my trademark Obama bulletproof vest now. Because you have to be able to take a bullet and not, like, look like that angry person of color that’s lashing out. You gotta be like, ‘Okay, let’s live to fight another day.’”

A third rule of playing the game was: be exceptional. Being exceptional took several forms, including educational achievement and work ethic. Several participants described that they felt compelled to go to more expensive Ivy League schools because, as Esme Ho put it,

“I wanted to have the... pedigree, because I felt like I needed to. So I think I feel like I'm lucky that I do have that pedigree 'cause I think that helps mitigate some of the opportunities that I could have missed otherwise.” Or in Aaliyah Johnson’s case, she was planning on going back to school to get an advanced degree because she thought “most large environmental non-profits value education, advanced degrees.” Other participants described feeling compelled to work harder and better than their White counterparts. As Nohemi Pacheco described, “Overcompensate...I would say is you feel like you'd have to, I think. Or maybe overperform, I don't know what the right word is.” Or as Kamala Sing put it, “I do always feel like you can't rest on your laurels. It could go away quickly. That you've gotta always be on the edge of innovating.”

A fourth rule of playing the game was: use the power you have. Several participants were able to choose where they worked based on criteria they valued most, typically diversity. Lianni Joshi shared that she was “reminding myself of my self-worth and remembering that I deserve to be at a place where people respect and appreciate me. And would I go and work where I'm the only minority again? Probably not.” Cyrus Carter explained that “one of the reasons I chose that [office] was the diversity of the office” but recognized that not everyone is in a position “where you can always pick who you work with.” Esme Ho also shared that she had “been able to, in the different workplaces [...] when I've had a choice, I've often tried to work for a female boss or make strong connections with any people of color really.”

The final rule of playing the game was: use your power wisely. Many participants who were in mid-career, upper management, or leadership positions frequently discussed how once they achieved success, they had done things differently than their White counterparts, including becoming mentors, being more inclusive, changing the workplace

culture, or making the biggest environmental and social impact they possibly could. The participants who were mentors took their roles very seriously. As Veronica Feng shared, “So we've had little moments where I don't speak about what I'm experiencing here, but I tell her, ‘Look, I need you to learn to be assertive in meetings.’[...] Because women of color's voices aren't typically heard.” Participants were often dedicated to helping early career professionals of color. As Paloma Lara described, “I'm always biased in giving people of color a better chance or kind of the leg-up.” Even seemingly small acts of inclusivity were important for participants as a way to change the status quo. For example, Greg Kim described how he made it a point to try to assemble diverse panels whenever it's within my power. I certainly have turned down panels that are all men, which happens quite a bit in this field as well.”

### **Chapter Summary**

In chapter five, I used critical race theory to analyze the interviews of the 32 participants in this study. Guided by CRT tenets (Bell 1992, 1995; Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000; Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, Solórzano 2009; Delgado and Stefancic 2013, 2017), I discussed the major themes revealed in the participants' stories to answer research questions R2 and R3. The analysis revealed that the systemic barriers to equity and inclusion that participants in this study encountered in the environmental field were often as a result of their race/ethnicity and were further amplified by their gender. The analysis also revealed the participants' strength, courage, and resilience in response to systemic barriers they directly experienced or witnessed. Additionally, analysis revealed several meaningful strategies that participants developed to subvert institutional forces working against them and find relative success and peace working in the environmental field or leaving the environmental field altogether.



## VI. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

### Reflections

When I was a junior in college, I was considering switching majors from pre-med to political science after I read the book *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (Brown 1972). Around that same time, one of my biology professors gave a lecture about how after Indigenous Americans had been forced into reservations, the American settlers had hunted bison to near extinction. It was almost too much for my young, bleeding heart and idealistic mind to contemplate. Based on that one class —and because my friend Maria, who was super outdoorsy even though she was from Chicago, would be taking similar classes — I decided to go into the environmental sciences to make the world a better place. The culture shock (and regret) about that decision began in graduate school. It was the first time I had ever been around so many White Americans in my life — a fact that I would occasionally blurt out and would be met with weird looks in return. I tried to fit in with this very White American elite hiking and camping crowd, but I secretly hated it. Many of my fellow students had been in the Peace Corps, and I remember wondering why anyone in the right mind would willingly live in a hut in the middle of a jungle and get malaria. *White people, am I right?* I had done my time in Venezuela.

When I began working in natural resource conservation in Texas, I was shocked at how many people loved hunting and fishing. How on earth was that still even a thing? Also, why was *everyone so White?* Thank god for my friends Maria, Sameera, and Firuzeh, even though they didn't live in the state. I worked hard. But I would sometimes find myself questioning for whose world I was working so hard? Was it the world of that wealthy (*psssst..White*) community we were helping to clean their river? Was it that rancher's world,

whose family had owned their land for nine generations? It didn't feel like my world. So I tried to work on low-income community environmental projects, but that's not where funders wanted to invest. I tried to work on increasing diversity in this field, but it wasn't what my colleagues were interested in doing with me (with one important exception). And on the rare occasion I'd meet a person of color (usually a woman) in this field we would almost instantly connect. It was thrilling to talk with people who saw the environmental-social world in the ways I did. People who gave me words to express what I had been experiencing. People to whom I did not have to explain myself or defend my views. There's a certain amount of hiding who you really are in any professional setting, and, through those moments of connection, I would realize just how much of me I had to stuff away.

So I was not surprised by Dorceta Taylor's *State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations* findings or the content of Carolyn Finney's book *Black Faces, White Spaces* when they each came out. I had been having conversations with people of color in this field and with my family and friends about these issues for years. As I mentioned in chapter three, the reason I decided to pursue a PhD was to understand the disconnect between what I considered to be reality and the false narratives of the environmental field - narratives that Taylor and Finney both captured masterfully in their work. I wanted my research to be reflective of my experiences, so I purposefully included anyone who self-identified as a person of color and who considered their work as an environmental job. As a result, I got to meet 32 incredible individuals who had dedicated themselves to working in the environment at some point in their lives. I was not surprised that each person I spoke with uniquely challenged dominant narratives about how people of color interact with the environment, define nature or the environment, value the environment, and experience "colorblind" institutions. I was also not surprised that participants described structural barriers including

racism, sexism, and ageism that directly or indirectly affected their careers and their career outlooks.

I did not, however, expect the many ways that environmental organizations perpetuate and reproduce historical (racial) inequalities within the institutions themselves and through their work. The personal and professional price that many of the participants paid was sometimes hard to hear. One participant told me about her work at a conservation organization in the same city in which she grew up. She had been hired to help the organization on increasing diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice in their work. She had grown up in an “environmental justice neighborhood” and had never had access to the organization’s nature preserves because they were next to the wealthy neighborhoods. She said that her efforts to help the organization to work on community-level issues (communities similar to the one where her parents still lived) for which she was hired were met with resistance at all levels of the organization. Her colleagues would argue with her that conserving land was more important than working at the community level. Even though she tried to explain that from her perspective people — her people — were dying as a result of not being the center of focus. After a short time, she was asked not to talk about her heritage in public. And then she was let go from her position.

I have carried this and the other stories participants shared with me over the course of the past year. If there were ever a year to point to the fallacy of a colorblind and post-racial society, 2020 was it. We had a pandemic caused by COVID-19, a virus whose origin was in China. We also had a president who used racially-charged terms by referring to the virus as the “Chinese virus” or the “Kung flu” (Moynihan and Porumbescu 2020). Hate crimes against Asian people skyrocketed. Several of the participants talked to me about their fears for their safety. We saw more unarmed Black men and women murdered, adding to so

many others. But this time, unlike previous years, there were massive protests against police brutality and calls for systemic changes to treat people as though Black Lives Matter. Some of the protests were violent, and the president at the time pointed to that violence to delegitimize those protests. Several participants in this study talked about how the murders and protests had been affecting them. Others talked about how suddenly issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion were at the top of everyone's minds at their environmental organizations, and it was placing a burden on them. While I was analyzing the participants' stories, the president issued an executive order to end trainings on white privilege and critical race theory, calling them "divisive, anti-American propaganda" (Dawsey and Stein 2020). While I was writing my results, we had an election that was vociferously contested especially in Black and Brown communities. While my advisor reviewed my first draft in 2021, there was an insurrection against our government, encouraged and at least partially motivated by White supremacy and racism. And we also got a new president who has put racial equity front and center in his administration. That backdrop to these stories is hard to ignore - nor should it be. The context matters.

### **Research Summary and Conclusion**

People of color's experiences with, and sense of belonging in, nature and the environment in the United States have been shaped by race and racism – through policies, institutions, research, and erasures (Finney 2014a; Taylor 2014; Zimring 2017). In chapter two I provided insights into the historical contexts, the contemporary challenges, and structural and the institutional barriers that many people of color have faced in the environmental field. A growing number of scholars, especially scholars of color, have exposed how White hegemony and White narratives have dictated how people of color have interacted with nature, reinforced institutional structures of exclusion, and created racialized

spaces (Cronon 1996, Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003; Brahinskey, Sasser, and Minkoff-Zern 2014; Finney 2014; Taylor 2016; Zimring 2017). Dominant narratives whitewashed people of color's history, glossing over land extractions, relocations, and exclusions of people of color while absolving White people and institutions from responsibility (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Connon 1996; Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003; Blank, Dabady, and Citro 2004; Kosek 2006; Glave 2010; Finney 2014a; Harvey 2016; Taylor 2016; Zimring 2017).

Dominant narratives have perpetuated and reinforced ideas that people of color intrinsically lacked an interest in nature and the outdoors (Taylor 2007; Taylor 2008; Taylor 2011b; Finney 2014a; Taylor 2014). The dominant American culture coupled with dominant environmental narratives have had cascading effects on the environmental field — embodied in the underrepresentation of people of color in traditional environmental pursuits and organizations (Taylor 2014; Bonta 2019; Green 2.0 2019; Johnson 2019).

Using critical race theory as an overarching lens for this research (Bell 1992, 1995; Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000; Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Yosso et al. 2009; Delgado and Stefaniec 2013, 2017), I attempted to foster a deeper and more complex understanding of the personal and professional experiences of people of color who work or have worked in the environmental field. I interviewed 32 professionals of color at various stages of their careers to illuminate and understand their journeys as they navigated their jobs and careers in the environmental field and to address the following research questions:

- R1: What are the lived experiences of people of color who have chosen to work in the environmental field?
- R2: What systemic barriers to equity, inclusion, and belonging do professionals of color perceive in environmental jobs?

- R3: What strategies do environmental professionals of color develop in response to the systemic barriers they encounter?

Coupling critical race theory and narrative research, I facilitated participants' counterstorytelling to shed light on their experiences in the environmental field. Using the participants' own words, I revealed how racism and other inequities continue to impact people of color's lives, livelihoods, careers, and experiences with nature and the environment. Through their counterstories in chapter four, participants shared their experiences working in the environmental field, bolstering challenges to the dominant narratives that people of color intrinsically lack an interest in nature (Bullard 1993a,b; Cronon 1996; Jones 2002; Jones, Castellanos, and Cole 2002; Mohai 2003; Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003; Whittaker, Segura, and Bowler 2005; Jones and Rainey 2006; Bonta and Jordan 2007; Taylor 2007, 2008; Glave 2010; Taylor 2011a,b,c; Brahinsky, Sasser, and Minkoff-Zern 2014; Finney 2014; Taylor 2014; Mora-Trejos 2015; Taylor 2016; Zimring 2017; Pearson et al. 2018; Taylor, Paul, and McCoy 2019). The counterstories further challenged the dominant narrative that people of color have negative images of nature and are less concerned about the environmental problems than White people (Quimby, Wolfson, and Seyala 2007; Haynes, Jacobson, and Wald 2015; Haynes and Jacobson 2015). The counterstories also challenged the narrative that people of color do not value nature as much as White people (Taylor 2008; Taylor 2014; Taylor 2007; Pearson et al. 2018).

In chapter five I discussed the major themes that emerged from the participants' counterstories. The counterstories challenged previous findings in the literature about the lack of diversity in the environmental field where personal agency was the most influential factor (Lent, Brown, and Hackett 1994; Quimby, Wolfson, and Seyala 2007; Zunker 2011; Haynes and Jacobson 2015; Haynes, Jacobson, and Wald 2015). Instead, the findings

revealed that systemic barriers to equity and inclusion in the environmental field were often the result of institutionalized racism or racism amplified by sexism, bolstering challenges to the dominant narrative of post-racial environmental institutions (Bullard 1993a,b; Taylor 2007; Taylor 2008; Balcarczyk et al. 2015; Johnson 2019). The findings further revealed that environmental institutions are not colorblind, are not meritocracies, and highlighted the interest convergence of fraught DEI initiatives.

The counterstories highlighted the participants' strength, courage, and resilience in the face of the systemic barriers they directly experienced or witnessed. The counterstories also demonstrated the many ways that people of color fight against racialized institutional barriers, subvert institutional forces working against them, persevere, and find relative success and peace working in the environmental field.

This study filled gaps in the literature about the causes of underrepresentation beyond barriers to entry or recruitment practices (Finney 2014; Bonta 2019; Johnson 2019). First, the counterstories exposed the frequency with which participants became disillusioned with their jobs or their career choice, were contemplating leaving, or had already left their jobs or the environmental field after experiencing racialized institutional barriers to equity, inclusion, and belonging. Institutional barriers included microaggressions, being undervalued compared to White counterparts, and being burdened with fixing the organization's institutional racism without power to implement those changes. These findings strengthened challenges to the dominant narrative of post-racial environmental institutions (Bullard 1993a,b; Taylor 2007; Taylor 2008; Balcarczyk et al. 2015; Johnson 2019). Second, the counterstories highlighted that participants sometimes became disillusioned with the environmental field because of their perception that environmental organizations only held traditional notions of environmental work and did not authentically engage with people. In

addition, the counterstories also revealed that participants were sometimes contemplating leaving or had left traditional environmental jobs because of the tension they felt between their organizations' entrenchment in traditional environmental practices and the participants' desire or job function to integrate equity into their work focusing on low-income and communities of color.

Finally this study exposed how environmental institutions and leaders actively recreate and perpetuate socially constructed concepts of race, nature, and space, knowingly reproduce historically racialized inequities, and consciously discount realities that challenge conveniently held dominant narratives.

**Implications: “*you have to do your own homework.*”**

“There’s no one single bullet. There’s a thousand things that need to happen.”

— Greg Kim, 2020

If traditional environmental leaders and institutions are committed to meaningfully changing internal organizational practices to only increase diversity and become inclusive, they will have to accept that the dominant environmental narrative is incomplete at best. They will have to acknowledge and act on environmental professionals of color’s experiences with nature, the environment, and within the environmental professional field. They will have to use their positions of power to support their new-found awareness about people of color’s experiences also becoming part of the mainstream conversation and shaping the future of environmentalism in the United States. Furthermore, leaders and staff will have to create organizational cultures of inclusivity and belonging for professionals of color and the communities that they serve.



On the other hand, if traditional environmental leaders and institutions are also committed to racial/ethnic equity and justice as many leaders professed in 2020, they will have to take significant and difficult additional steps towards dismantling the racist structures inherent within their organizations. These steps include ceding control over environmental decision-making, stepping back from leadership positions and making space for leaders of color, integrating traditional environmental work and environmental justice, and sharing environmental decision-making power with representatives from communities most affected by environmental injustices (Bullard 1993 a,b).

I chose not to provide a list of specific policy or managerial recommendations in this dissertation — not from lack of ideas or lack of motivation (to be fair this is a long read!). Through the conversations with the individuals who participated in my study, the analysis, and the backdrop of the reawakened racial justice movement in 2020, I recognized that providing a “how-to” would perpetuate the idea that there is a quick fix to a problem that was 500 years in the making. It would perpetuate what so many participants described experiencing with their organizations’ performative diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts — with leaders not being truly invested in the process, stepping on the backs of their employees of color to find the solutions, and further fortifying their power by being the final decider whether the recommendations would be adopted or shelved. As Audre Howard said, “if you wanna be relevant, yes you need me or other people who are from vulnerable communities or minority communities to speak up on this work. But you also can't give us the burden to always speak on the work, you have to do your own homework.”

An obvious limitation of my study was the relative small sample size compared to quantitative studies. In addition, the sample included a narrow segment of the population, which included environmental professionals of color with at least an associate’s degree and

many with advanced degrees, and most of whom were currently employed. Therefore my findings are not generalizable to all people of color working in the environmental field. However, given that I intentionally chose to include a wide representation of people of color from all over the country and at all stages of their careers, the transferability of findings to other contexts can provide insights in other careers and can serve as the basis for future research. Another sample related limitation — and opportunity — in my study was that I did not make comparisons within or between racial/ethnic groups or within or between other personal identifiers. Because I intentionally chose to include people with different backgrounds, much could be gleaned from each of the subgroups. A final sample-related limitation was that I did not collect all demographic or personal information from the participants, for example the highest level of education achieved, sexual orientation, ability status, or religion. Several participants discussed such personal information as being important to shaping their experiences in the environmental field. Future researchers could collect additional information to explore how these intersectionalities affected people of color's experiences in the environmental field.

Lastly, the findings I presented were not the only themes I found in my analyses. What I presented in this dissertation was focused on answering my three research questions. Therefore, I did not explore broad topics outside of the scope of this research including, how people of color form concepts of nature, intergenerational connections to nature, or internalized racism. I also made a call to highlight the themes that participants most frequently mentioned to answer the research questions. As a result, I did not include additional themes that emerged from the participants' counterstories. For example, I did not include findings related to the intersectionality of participants' race/ethnicity and socio-economics, or race/ethnicity and where participants worked (urban versus rural), or how

gender intersects both of these intersectionalities. Aside from their counterstories, I did not explore findings about participants who shared they had not experienced barriers to equity or had not experienced any racism in their careers. All of these topics merit further exploration.

### **Last Thoughts**

I am humbled by the trust that the 32 individuals who chose to participate in this study placed in me. I hope I have done their stories justice.

## APPENDIX SECTION

### Appendix 1: CITI Program Course Certification

		Completion Date 31-Aug-2019 Expiration Date 30-Aug-2021 Record ID 29683037
This is to certify that:		
<b>Emily Warren</b>		
Has completed the following CITI Program course:		
<b>Human Research</b>	(Curriculum Group)	
<b>Social and Behavioral Research Students</b>	(Course Learner Group)	
<b>2 - Refresher Course</b>	(Stage)	
Under requirements set by:		
<b>Texas State University</b>		
Verify at <a href="http://www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w3278a346-cb64-4519-976b-24d66db83430-29683037">www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w3278a346-cb64-4519-976b-24d66db83430-29683037</a>		

## Appendix 2: Letter of Support



November 18, 2019

To Whom it May Concern:

This letter serves as indication of The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment's support for Emily R. Warren's proposed research, "Professional Advancement of People of Color in Environmental Careers". As further indication of our support, The Meadows Center will distribute the invitation to participate letter through our internal email distribution list.

Should you have any questions or need additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me at 512-245-4476 or at [carriethompson@txstate.edu](mailto:carriethompson@txstate.edu).

Sincerely,

Carrie Thompson  
Director of Operations  
Meadows Center for Water and the Environment - Texas State University



THE MEADOWS CENTER  
FOR WATER AND THE ENVIRONMENT

601 University Drive | San Marcos, Texas 78666-4616 | *phone* 512.245.9200 | *fax* 512.245.7371 |  
[www.meadowscenter.txstate.edu](http://www.meadowscenter.txstate.edu)

*Texas State University-San Marcos, founded in 1899.*  
MEMBER THE TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

## Appendix 3: IRB Approval



*The rising STAR of Texas*

In future correspondence please refer to 7007

January 22, 2020

Emily Warren  
Texas State University  
601 University Drive  
San Marcos, TX 78666

Dear Emily:

Your IRB application titled "Professional Advancement of People of Color in Environmental Careers" was reviewed and approved by the Texas State University IRB. It has been determined that risks to subjects are: (1) minimized and reasonable; and that (2) research procedures are consistent with a sound research design and do not expose the subjects to unnecessary risk. Reviewers determined that: (1) benefits to subjects are considered along with the importance of the topic and that outcomes are reasonable; (2) selection of subjects is equitable; and (3) the purposes of the research and the research setting is amenable to subjects' welfare and producing desired outcomes; that indications of coercion or prejudice are absent, and that participation is clearly voluntary.

1. In addition, the IRB found that you need to orient participants as follows: (1) informed consent is required; (2) Provision is made for collecting, using and storing data in a manner that protects the safety and privacy of the subjects and the confidentiality of the data; (3) Appropriate safeguards are included to protect the rights and welfare of the subjects. (4) Compensation is not provided for participation.

**This project is therefore approved at the Exempt Review Level  
Category 2 Surveys, Interviews, or Public observation**

2. Please note that the institution is not responsible for any actions regarding this protocol before approval. If you expand the project at a later date to use other instruments, please re-apply. Copies of your request for human subjects review, your application, and this approval, are maintained in the Office of Research Integrity and Compliance.

**Report any changes to this approved protocol to this office. All unanticipated events and adverse events are to be reported to the IRB within 3 days.**

Sincerely,

Monica Gonzales  
IRB Specialist  
Office of Research Integrity and Compliance

CC: Dr. Ronald Hagelman

OFFICE OF THE ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH

601 University Drive | JCK #489 | San Marcos, Texas 78666-4616

Phone: 512.245.2314 | fax: 512.245.3847 | WWW.TXSTATE.EDU

*This letter is an electronic communication from Texas State University-San Marcos, a member of The Texas State University System.*



## INFORMED CONSENT

**Study Title:** Professional Advancement of People of Color in Environmental Careers

**Principal Investigator:** Emily Warren Armitano

**Email:** ea16@txstate.edu

**Phone:** 512-791-4997

**Co-Investigator/Faculty Advisor:** Ronald Hagelman, III

**Email:** rh46@txstate.edu

**Phone:** 512.245.8847

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

### PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

You are invited to participate in a research study to cultivate a deeper understanding of the barriers and opportunities that people of color experience in their environmental careers. The information gathered will be used to shed light on the lived experiences of people of color that have demonstrated a commitment to working in the environment. You are being asked to participate because you have indicated that you are a person of color who has worked in the environmental field.

### PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in one interview lasting approximately 90 minutes. During the interview, you will be asked about what led you to choose an environmental career, your experiences in your environmental job(s), what you have done to persist (and make progress), what barriers you have encountered, and what you have done to overcome those barriers. The interview will be audio-recorded, and the researcher may take notes as well.

### RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

The combined answers to the interview questions may make an individual person identifiable. We will make every effort to protect participants' confidentiality. However, in the event that some of the interview questions make you uncomfortable or upset, you are always free to decline to answer or to stop your participation at any time. Should you feel discomfort after participating, you may contact BetterHelp for counseling services <https://www.betterhelp.com/contact/>. This is an online counseling platform and can be contacted directly at [contact@betterhelp.com](mailto:contact@betterhelp.com).

### BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide can challenge dominant narratives steeped in stereotypes that have been presented in environmental participation and environmental career literature. If environmental organizations do not keep pace with our nation's evolving demographics as well as people of color's environmental interests or concerns, their missions will become irrelevant to the majority of the population, our future national environmental challenges will not be adequately addressed, and environmental justice concerns will continue to be marginalized.

**EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team and the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is completed and then destroyed.

**PAYMENT/COMPENSATION**

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

**PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY**

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Emily R. Warren at 512-791-4997 or [ea16@txstate.edu](mailto:ea16@txstate.edu).

This project was approved by the Texas State IRB on January 22, 2020. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert at 512-716-2652 ([dgobert@txstate.edu](mailto:dgobert@txstate.edu)) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager at 512-245-2334 ([meg201@txstate.edu](mailto:meg201@txstate.edu)).



**DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT**

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time.

Your participation in this research project may be recorded using audio recording devices. Recordings will assist with accurately documenting your responses. You have the right to refuse the audio recording. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to audio recording:

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Printed Name** of Study Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature** of Study Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



## Appendix 4: IRB Amendment COVID-19

FW: IRB Protocol Approved

Hagelman, Ronald R <rhagelman@txstate.edu>

Fri 6/5/2020 10:10 AM

To: Warren, Emily <emilyw@txstate.edu>

Just letting you know this arrived in my inbox.

Best,  
Ron

Ronald R. Hagelman III, PhD  
Associate Professor  
[Texas State University](#)  
[Department of Geography](#)  
[TxST Ally](#) / he, him, his

---

**From:** no-reply=kuali.co@mx3.kuali.co <no-reply=kuali.co@mx3.kuali.co> **On Behalf Of** Kuali Notifications

**Sent:** Thursday, June 4, 2020 10:33 PM

**To:** Hagelman, Ronald R <rhagelman@txstate.edu>

**Subject:** IRB Protocol Approved

Dear Hagelman, Ronald R

The Amendment submission protocol number 7007 titled "Professional Advancement of People of Color in Environmental Careers " (PI: Hagelman, Ronald R) was approved on Friday, June 5th 2020.

The protocol will expire on no date provided unless the expiration date is extended in the continuing process.

**Please note face to face interactions are not approved for implementation until all other University COVID 19 conditions are approved if your project involves in person contact. Refer to the IRB website for updated information on IRB expectations and additional requirements to be met before implementation. It is the researchers responsibility to stay current on latest COVID 19 guidance and notify the IRB of any changes to protect participants within 5 business days if implemented to protect participants.**

Research Integrity and Compliance

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