



“Black people don’t love nature”: white environmentalist imaginations of cause, calling, and capacity

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Abstract

I examine how white British members of a London-area environmental group conceptualize race in relation to ecological disasters. Based on a five-year (2018–2022) ethnographic study, members employed racialized narratives and symbolic boundaries to construct who was the *cause* of disasters, who had the moral responsibility or *calling* to remediate disasters, and who possessed the adequate resources and *capacity* to fix disasters. Together, these narratives formed a *tripartite racial imaginary* which functioned to demarcate the symbolic boundaries of an ideal, white racial identity that was intimately crocheted with notions of authentic guilt and remorse, responsibility and liability, work ethics, competent knowledge, resource mobilization, moral commitment, and racial paternalism and superiority. Through the pursuit of this White racial ideal, members frequently conceptualized ecological disasters throughout the non-white world as the fault of specific actions by non-White people, identified unique racialized actors as the proper responsible parties for working on the remediation of ecological disasters, and also assigned particular White people from Westernized, industrial, democratic states as the only people in possession of the appropriate knowledge, resources, and character to clean-up and manage a healthy environment.

Keywords Culture · Disasters · Environmentalism · Identity · Race · Whiteness

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In the late summer of 2018, extreme flooding in Nigeria displaced nearly 600,000 people, with over half that number needing temporary shelter, food, safe drinking water, household items and health care. The flooding destroyed or damaged over 13,000 homes, ruined 150,000 hectares of farmland along with 321 roads and bridges, and claimed over 200 lives (OCHA 2018). Discussing the floods, members of the greater London environmentalist group “Verdant and Peaceful Future”¹ debated the possible causes: over-average rainfall, dams that “bloated” rivers, a rapidly-expanding population funneled into unregulated housing built in low-lying urban areas, or street waste that clogged already substandard drainage systems (Olanrewaju, Chitakira, Olanrewaju, and Louw 2019). While no one environmental trigger was agreed upon, members found consensus in three narrative imaginaries. First, they settled on the *cause* of flooding as due to the cultural and political dysfunctions in Nigeria and Africa as a whole: “All the burning in Africa [...] it adds too much CO²” or “Local despots’ greed [...] they steal electricity from the dams.” Second, members agreed that a moral *calling* rests with local Nigerians to help the people affected by the flooding: “They should care the most [...] relief effort should come from Nigeria first” or “This is a test to see how much they truly believe in their nation.” Third, members decided that White people in Europe and North America had the most *capacity* to respond to the flooding: “We’re never too knackered to help the former colonies we’re the best-suited” or “It’s ‘ABC’: Americans, Brits, and Canadians [...] [Nigerians] will just muck it up more.”

Based on a five year (2018–2022) ethnographic study, I examine the relationship between White racial identity formation and engagement with environmentalism. Addressing this topic means attending to several gaps at the intersection of the sociology of environmental disaster, racial and ethnic studies, and cultural sociology. First, the bulk of sociology of environmental disaster research suffers from a color-blind approach. Race is rarely a first-order concern (Bolin, 2007:127; McKinzie, 2017:523). Second, when race is examined, it is often from a materialist lens that centers on the “vulnerabilities” of People of Color (PoC) / Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME)². As a consequence, the materialist focus often lends to confluences with class or using race as a proxy for accumulated socio-economic disadvantages exacerbated by disasters (Bolin, 2007: 115; Hewitt, 1997; Wisner and Walker, 2005). Third, when examined outside a materialist framework, the focus on race tends to replicate a “culture of poverty” approach. The varied worldviews, habits, and expectations of communities of color transform into impediments to equality and represent irrational if not dysfunctional coping mechanisms for disaster (Figuroa, 2004; Porter, 1991; Taylor, 1997). Fourth, the “race” concept is frequently treated as a static, categorical variable, rather than as a cultural process enmeshed in a co-constitutive

¹ Due to Institutional Review Board (IRB) conditions, all potentially identifying information was replaced with pseudonyms.

² In the British context, “BAME” (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) and “BME” (Black and Minority Ethnic) are commonly used to discuss non-White people in the United Kingdom. However, “PoC” (People of Colour) and “BIPOC” (Black, Indigenous, and People Of Colour) are increasingly used. While “BAME” derives from 1960s and ‘70s ethno-racial coalition movements to unite behind “political blackness” (a move for non-White people to recognize a common experience of discrimination) some now criticize this term (along with “POC”) as a vague and homogenizing term that has lost its political teeth.

relationship with disaster (Myers, 2005; White, 2002). Rarely is race treated as a simultaneous producer and product of inequality (cf. Bolin, Grineski, and Collins, 2005; Bullard, Johnson, and Torres, 2000; Omi and Winant, 1994). Moreover, when cultural sociology and the sociology of race are brought to bear on the study of environmentalism and disasters, there is a concentration on People of Color that often ignores Whiteness and rarely interrogates White racial identity formation as a mechanism in the reproduction of environmental disasters.

In this article, I examine how white British members of a greater London area environmental group conceptualize race in relation to ecological and environmental disasters. Members held distinct racialized visions, witnessed in their use of narratives and symbolic boundaries, to construct who was the *cause* of disasters, who had the moral responsibility or *calling* to remediate disasters, and who possessed the adequate resources and *capacity* to fix disasters. Together, these narratives formed a *tripartite racial imaginary* which functioned to demarcate the boundaries of an ideal, white racial identity that was intimately crocheted with notions of authentic guilt and remorse, responsibility and liability, work ethics, competent knowledge, resource mobilization, moral commitment, and racial paternalism and superiority. Through the pursuit of this White racial ideal, members frequently conceptualized ecological disasters throughout the non-white world as the fault of specific actions by non-White people, identified unique racialized actors as the proper responsible parties for working on the remediation of ecological disasters, and also assigned particular White people from Westernized, industrial, democratic states as the only people in possession of the appropriate knowledge, resources, and character to manage the environment.

Literature review

The bulk of sociological examinations of disaster often suffer from a color-blind approach; race is not explicitly analyzed (Bonilla-Silva, 2020; Gafford, 2010; Sweeney, 2006). Some have even theorized disasters as a “great equalizer” in which acute feelings of solidarity, civic belonging, and goodwill mark the immediate time after a disaster (Oliver-Smith, 1999), making racial analysis ersatz. This is not to say that work at the intersection of race and disasters is completely absent. Research on disasters often assumed the existence of pre-disaster levels of relative racial harmony or at least pragmatic and sensible levels of racial interaction. McKinzie (2017:523) writes, “disaster studies were often explicitly focused on a return to normalcy. This functionalist perspective unintentionally led to an assumption that things had been normal prior to the disaster.” Scholars of race and ethnicity frequently expose such assumptions as untenable.

Moreover, the sociology of race and ethnicity’s focus on systemic and enduring racial inequality was a bit of a mis-match with the *a priori* assumptions of in older disaster studies research. That was perhaps due to variants of “disaster” research’s implicit focus on episodic case studies and extreme events. In decade’s past, the sociology of race and ethnicity’s concern with inequality over both time and space lent to greater inroads within environmental sociology, given that field’s regular

examination of the risks and dangers of everyday life. “The problematic of disaster research,” as Bolin (2007:127) wrote, “... seldom targets race and class inequalities in disaster processes.” However, recent years indicate a turn within disaster studies. Research on disasters now emphasizes that all disasters are, to some extent, “man-made,” as Hartman and Squires (2006) titular work defiantly trumpeted: “There is no such thing as a natural disaster.” Consequently, increased attention to race and ethnicity within “disaster studies” catapulted these concepts into focus within “environmental sociology.” Now that both fields no longer emphasize “natural” or “one-time” disasters, scholarly approaches to racism and racial inequalities in the natural world have spawned the subfield of “environmental racism.” Such an approach often engages in detailed historical analyses of race in the production of urban spaces and the increased likelihood of contact with varied toxins by People of Color (cf. Bullard 2007; Schnaiberg Pellow, and Weinberg 2005).

Also, while race was largely ignored in disaster studies until the 1970s, the attention first paid to race was scattershot at best. While there has been a slow turn toward analyzing racial and ethnic differences in terms of “warning, emergency response, and evacuation behavior” (Bolin, 2007:12), Fothergill, et al. wrote that “. . . existing studies on racial and ethnic differences cover such a wide spectrum of time, disaster event, place and racial group, that it is difficult to identify patterns and draw conclusions” (1999:157). However, the racially disproportionate impact of the California earthquakes in the 1980 and 1990s, Hurricane Andrew (1992), and especially Hurricane Katrina (2005) together unsettled that trend by casting light on the racialized consequences of disaster (cf. Adams, 2013; Weber and Peek, 2012). Despite this recent focus, and while some scholars now note the racialization of disaster (Klinenberg, 2002; Steinberg, 2000), the lion’s share of research frames race as one of many dependent variables via the “vulnerability approach” (e.g., Hewitt 1997; Wisner and Walker 2005). Through this lens, people have assorted characteristics, such as race, “*that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a natural hazard*” (Wisner, Blaikie, Cannon, and Davis, 2003 2005:11, italics in original). When so engaged, the race concept becomes little more than a shorthand synonym for socio-economic accumulated advantages and disadvantages. As Bolin (2007:115) writes, “Racialized groups, for example, may be spatially segregated and forced to occupy unsafe and hazard-prone spaces. . . racially marginalized groups can also be denied access to necessary resources to recover from disasters, deepening their vulnerability to future hazard events.” Through this approach, race matters in a materialist sense—the unequal and sometimes widening stratification of resource allocation.

Next, due to a slow shift in considering race in disaster studies, there has been some attention to lived experiences. For instance, varied scholars have examined how different ethnic, religious, and racial communities responded to the aftermath of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in Northern California (e.g. Bolin and Stanford, 1991; Laird, 1991; Phillips, 1993; Schulte, 1991), the tsunami in Southeast Asia in 2004 (Aldrich, 2011; Gaillard et al., 2008; Kobayashi and Peake, 2008), the 2008 earthquake in China (Hsu, 2017; Wang, Zhu, and Sui, 2017), and the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear disaster in 2011 (Farber, 2011; Funabashi and Kitazawa, 2012; Pritchard, 2012). A majority of these studies do well to demonstrate the aforementioned mate-

rialist or structural causes as fundamental reasons for the environmental degradation and disasters in racial, ethnic, and religious communities that already possess a long history of local and national social marginalization if not legal repression.

Yet, when the larger discussion of race and “disasters” turns away from materialist analysis, references to cultural “barriers” or “deficiencies” among communities of color remains common. That is, while structural inequalities—from inequities in insurance settlements to proximity to geographic areas more prone to risk—are regularly highlighted, it all too common to read (often in the absence of evidence) how already extant cultural characteristics supposedly constrain marginalized populations’ enduring disadvantages both prior to the disaster and in the disaster recovery process. For example, Danaan (2018:26) wrote that “cultures in certain areas lack access to opportunities for wealth creation. . . This theory is applicable in the Nigerian context where poverty is prevalent in some geographical locations: rural areas, slums and areas prone to natural disasters such as floods, draught and desert encroachment.” In another instance, Philips (2018: 16) wrote “People can be poor because of (1) indolence, laziness, and other controllable behaviors, (2) limited skills or mental abilities, (3) tragic circumstances such as a family death or natural disaster... In the end, poverty is driven by cultural behavior, both the behavior of the individual as well as the behavior of the bureaucracy.” Additionally, after the Oakland, California firestorm of 1991 (and revived in the wake of California Bay Area fires in 2020) some identified the cause of destructive fires as reckless racialized “others” who knew no better. Maldonado (2016:56) surveyed the discourse, writing:

This “other” shifted according to the time; for example, during the early 20th century it was portrayed as an Indian, shepherd, or tramp; in the 1930s as farmworkers; and in the 1990s as terrorists, gays, and liberals ... This process continues today as articles and reports following disaster events tend to reify and homogenize the culture of a place and its people, linking the disaster event to terrorism, the culture of poverty, or the culture of the country where the event occurred—perpetuating victim-blaming and stripping of any notion of the heterogeneity of culture and cultural practices and the survivors’ agency.

Many of these studies and news-reports draw from “culture of poverty” arguments, in which varied worldviews, habitual responses, and cultural expectations are highlighted as impediments to equality (cf. Mercer et al., 2012; Pulido, 2016; Voorhees, Courte, Vick, and Perkins, 2007). While I do not wish to overstate the case, it remains normative to read accounts of “race” as little more than collectives of dysfunctional people whose ill-equipped toolkits are to blame for an array of environmental disasters.

Lastly, in other scholarship on the environment and disaster, “race” is treated as a categorical variable. From this approach, race is static and lends to demographic measurement and prediction. The concept of race thus functions as a defined and known entity that varies only by categorical type (“Asian”, “Black”, “Hispanic/Latino”, “White”, etc.). Hence, scholars can map the distribution of resources across racialized populations, thereby illuminating vast inequalities. While valuable, this approach tends to treat “race as an essence, as something fixed, concrete, and objec-

tive” (Omi and Winant, 1994:54). However, within the larger sociological approach to race, it is now necessary to study race as “an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle. . . *race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies*” (Omi and Winant, 1994:55, italics in original). Simply put, “race is a biological fiction with a social function” (Hughey, 2017:27). In this light, race can no longer serve as only the dependent variable of disaster, but is rather enmeshed in a co-constitutive relationship as simultaneous producer and product of disaster. For instance, the creation and growth of US suburbs—as supposed “safe havens” from many urban environmental risks and disasters which shifted environmental, economic, and social burdens onto disproportionate percentages of People in Color in toxic and decaying inner metropolises (cf. Bolin, Grineski, and Collins, 2005; Bullard, Johnson, and Torres, 2000)—have shaped the meanings and locations of Whiteness as a racial category. Racial categories are instantiated in and shape the political economies, social meaning-making, and the unequal likelihood of experiencing disaster. Within this approach, few sociological studies of disaster adequately examine the place of “culture” in White racial formation. In what follows, I suggest how to address this gap.

Narratives, symbolic boundaries, and race

The sociological concepts of “narratives” and “symbolic boundaries” guide my approach to understanding the shared imaginations of race, environmental disaster, and culture. People interpret their lives as a set of narratives (an ever-evolving story) with a beginning, a middle, and an end which are linked in a temporal set of sequenced events (cf. Somers and Gibson, 1994; Polletta, 2006). Through narrative, people make meaning of their lives, and the lives of others, by using personal experiences and salient cultural concepts that are exchanged and enhanced, becoming “part of a stream of sociocultural knowledge about how structures work to distribute power and disadvantage” (Ewick and Silbey, 2003:1328) and linking salient aspects together in what Somers and Gibson (1994) call “emplotment.” In conjunction with narratives, symbolic boundaries function as conceptual distinctions between objects, people, and practices that operate as a “system of rules that guide interaction by affecting who comes together to engage in what social act” (Lamont and Fournier, 1992:12). People systematically arrange racial and environmental classifications to define the hierarchy and traits of ethno-racial groups which are then used to address, imply, and/or justify inequality and environmental pollution and disaster. Hence, both narratives and symbolic boundaries provide accounts of how individuals view their racial selves in relation to racial others and how the “race” concept remains central to how we construct identity and our place in a polluted world (cf. Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010). I here emphasize the role that inter-subjectively shared imaginations have in shaping objective relations of inequality and positions toward environmental disaster. This *verstehen* (Weber, 1949) approach to meaning-making is the foundation of interpretive sociology and is a fundamental insight into how and why people construct the world as they do (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1967).

My approach is well-suited to address the aforementioned gaps at the intersection of analyses of race, environmentalism, disaster, and culture. First, my study foregrounds the study of race as a key concept in how activists approach environmentalism; race is “always, already” a factor in how people conceptualize human engagement with pollution and disaster. Next, I avoid the episodic focus on individual environmentalist events or media spectacles to instead present an in-depth, longitudinal analysis of an organization’s engagement with environmentalism over a five-year period. Third, I do not reduce race to a placeholder for either socio-economic “privilege” or “disadvantage” but show how “race” has a semi-autonomous character with an intersubjectively shared meaning within an organization. Also, and piggybacking off the latter, I concentrate on the lived experiences and discourse of environmentalists in order to avoid a tripartite tendency: I go beyond structuralist approaches to racial inequality to observe racialized meaning-making; I avoid the scholarly inclination to treat race as a cultural tendency or trait to instead examine how and why activists use cultural concepts about race and; I approach race as a potent, morphing narrative and boundary for claims-making rather than treating race as an inert, categorical variable. Hence, this study affords insight into the lived experiences of activists—and namely how activists’ white racial identity formation—consistently takes the form of distinct discursive and social processes that constrain and enable both racial inequity and the stated goals of environmentalism. Moreover, this approach expands the concentration on environmental justice beyond the United States, both in terms of US dominance in the scholarly literature and the Americanist hegemonic capture of how many conceptualize and understand environmentalism.³ In so doing, this work serves those who seek to both better understand and engage modern environmentalism in order to maintain or strengthen the scientific approaches that lead to both scholarly and environmentalist claims.

Data and methodology

Ethnographic study of “Verdant and Peaceful Future”

Over 2018–2022, I studied “Verdant and Peaceful Future” (VPF).⁴ VPF is a greater-London area non-profit environmental group who, through the recruitment of experts, committed members, and volunteers, works to create and improve green spaces for local benefit and to “reconnect people with nature.” VPF provides training and support for those wishing to find employment in environmentally friendly or pro-nature conservation employment and promotes “greener living” by providing resources,

³ E.g., in the US, environmentalism draws extensively from the vocabulary and strategies of the US civil rights movement and is closely linked to community and neighborhood-based concerns among people with little to no political organizing experience, whereas UK environmentalism is marked by professional environmental organizations often with highly-educated members who have international expertise (cf. Agyeman 2002; Cole and Foster 2001).

⁴ In order to protect all participants, and to align with professional ethics, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from the University of Connecticut mandated that all potentially identifying information regarding this group would go either unreported or replaced with pseudonyms.

training, and public outreach for businesses, other groups, families, and individuals to reduce waste, save natural resources, and respond to environmental disasters.

VPF rides a wave of growing support for locally-based planning and organization. In the wake of the Planning Act of 1968, local organizations have been increasingly hailed as a linchpin for democracy (see Cherry, 1974; Cullingworth and Nadin, 2002; Sandercock, 2005). By the early 2010s, the entrance of the ideologies of “Big Society” and localism⁵ into British politics further accentuated that local community groups like VPF should function as important elements of social life. Yet, concerns also emerged as such civic organizations play significant roles in recruiting, retaining, and/or marginalizing or excluding people thought detrimental to the unique value of place because of supposedly negative characteristics associated with their religious, national, ethnic, and/or racial backgrounds (Cf. Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Agger, 2012; Haumann, 2011). As applied to VPF, while no overt or formal racial restrictions for group membership or participation exist, the consistent membership over my five year study whom I met and interviewed all identified as White (either as “White-Irish,” “White-British,” and/or “White other”). In an era of supposedly subtle or even “color-blind” racism and discrimination, examining the participants in *de facto* all-White British civic organizations, such as VPF, offers a useful vantage point for understanding how people’s ongoing identity formations affect their conceptualization, evaluation, and response to their subject matter, such as environmental disasters. In many ways, VPF is a “case” (Ragin and Becker, 1992) of educated, White, liberal organizations.

VPF engages in a “coming together” (James and van Seeters, 2014: 11) around collective goals and broadly, if not vaguely construed, shared methods for achieving those goals. Members of VPF wish to change the status quo related to pollution, which they consider a paramount environmental disaster and pressing issue of modernity, and they implement regular activities to promote that change. They frequently engage in campaigns to draw attention to their group and the larger cause of environmentalism, rarely shying away from debate or even mild confrontation. Such a strategy can be understood as the implantation of “repertoires of contention” (Tilly, 2004) (e.g. public meetings, rallies, protests, demonstrations, and media statements) from savvy actors who perform their front-stage selves as members of a committed, worthy, unified group sustained through collective dedication to a moral cause.

I conducted ethnographic analysis, in-depth interviews, and content analysis of documents. In specific, over three months in the spring of 2018, several weeks the fall of 2018, several months in the spring and summer of 2019, and six continuous months over the summer and fall of 2022, I collected written material inclusive of monthly newsletters ($n=58$), flyers ($n=17$), textual information such as emails and letters ($n=717$), and attended VPF meetings ($n=44$) and events ($n=16$). I also conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with members and regular volun-

⁵ A political ideology, emerging under the leadership of British Prime Minister David Cameron, advocates the merger of individualist and free market principles with an attempt to build social solidarity through hierarchy and voluntarism. This ideology was expressed through support of “localism” (and passed in 2011 under the Localism Act) which prioritizes local production and consumption of goods, local control of government, and the promotion of local history, culture, and identity as a supposed defense against “big” and “centralized” government (Cf. Hewitt and Pendlebury 2013).

Table 1 VPF Consistent Membership (2017–2022)

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Education	Membership (years)
Ada	35	Teacher	Bachelors Degree	9
Addison	46	Editor	Bachelors Degree	9
Anaya	31	Store Manager	No College	3
Aurora	30	Teacher	Bachelors Degree	6
Belle	27	Receptionist	Some College	6
Ben	41	Accountant	Bachelors Degree	13
Charlie	38	Sales Manager	Bachelors Degree	10
Chase	54	Dentist	Medical Degree	16
Conner	35	Sales Manager	Bachelors Degree	17
Daphne	42	Teacher	Bachelors Degree	13
Deacon	43	Data Analyst	Masters Degree	15
Denis	47	Landscape Architect	Masters Degree	15
Ella	27	Marketing Assistant	Bachelors Degree	7
Emmeline	24	Retail Worker	No College	4
Ethan	28	Sales Manager	Bachelors Degree	6
Flynn	32	Graphic Designer	Bachelors Degree	12
George	34	HR Advisor	Bachelors Degree	6
Haris	39	Auditor	Bachelors Degree	13
Harry	40	Electrician	Some College	5
Isla	30	Data Analyst	Bachelors Degree	20
Ivy	35	Solicitor	Bachelors Degree	13
Kayla	27	Personal Assistant	Some College	9
Keegan	49	Homemaker	Bachelors Degree	13
Jacob	38	Groundskeeper	Some College	6
Jamie	43	Sales Executive	Masters Degree	7
Josiah	31	Teacher	Bachelors Degree	6
Lacie	26	Data Analyst	Bachelors Degree	2
Lillie	32	Finance Manager	Bachelors Degree	6
Mason	59	Barrister	Law Degree	11
Melody	51	Lecturer	Masters Degree	11
Mia	34	Sales	Bachelors Degree	9
Miles	48	Teacher	Bachelors Degree	16
Olivia	29	Secretary	Some College	6
Oliver	39	Teacher	Bachelors Degree	14
Ophelia	26	Web Designer	No College	4
Phoebe	53	Farmer/Homemaker	No College	16
Reece	36	Software Developer	Bachelors Degree	14
Sophie	37	Nurse	Bachelors Degree	13
Zach	47	Engineer	Masters Degree	9

teers ($n=39$). Additionally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, I also attended virtual VPF meetings ($n=9$) and conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews via video-conference ($n=7$). My relationship with VPF and members was as a known researcher and sociologist. A listing of the consistent VPF membership is available in Table 1.

VPF localism and British civil society

Recent decades in England witness a broad and growing emphasis on participatory place-making, which often cut across traditional political and ideological divisions. The contemporary agendas of “localism” and “Big Society” both signal interest in the decentralization of decision-making and a renewed emphasis on English “civil society.” Hence, local community associations and groups are an increasingly significant element of social life. In the wake of the Planning Act of 1968, local civic participation is often discussed as a welcome movement towards democratizing place-based policies (see Cherry, 1974; Cullingworth and Nadin, 2002; Sandercock, 2005). Hewitt and Pendlebury’s (2013) review of British civic participation indicate that the concepts of amenity (resources) and heritage (identity) are of core importance to both historic and modern models of civic participation.

However, concerns over civic participation have emerged (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Agger, 2012; Haumann, 2011). Modern civic associations place heavy accent on the quality of place and the value of local distinctiveness. Civic groups—either through networks and overlapping memberships or through direct opposition and conflict—shape both local worth and peculiarity through both formal governance and informal political and social affairs. Because of their influence, civic organizations are a significant factor in recruiting, retaining, and/or marginalizing or excluding people thought detrimental to the unique value of place because of supposedly negative characteristics associated with their religious, national, ethnic, and/or racial backgrounds. Now, in an era of supposedly subtle or even “color-blind” racism and discrimination, examining the participants in *de facto* all-White British civic organizations, such as VPF, offers a useful vantage point for understanding how people’s ongoing identity formations affect their conceptualization, evaluation, and response to their subject matter, such as environmental disasters.

Findings: the tripartite racial imaginary

Members of VPF regularly discussed environmental disasters that touched on issues of ethnicity and race. Together, these discussions reveal a *tripartite racial imaginary*. Members discursively identified who was the *cause* of environmental disaster, who had the moral responsibility or *calling* to remediate disaster, and who possessed the adequate resources and *capacity* to fix such disasters. I below present examples of each.

Who “causes” environmental disasters?

Environmental disasters were frequently conceptualized as ontological problems. VPF members approached racial identity through implicit assumptions about biological, cultural, and social difference. These distinctions were often assumed essential properties of self-contained racial identities, rather than mutable relationships between the people observed or between the observer and observed. For members, their racial imaginations were rationally intuitive: racial differences became plainly

empirical through causal attribution. Varied racialized responses to environmental disasters were read as evidence of essential, basic differences in various racial groups' very nature, a state of being that could only be articulated in distinction from other groups' supposed traits and characteristics.

Take for example, an online VPF discussion on the summer 2020 gas and oil leak in Assam, India, which resulted in evacuations and varied oil, gas, and smoke pollution. Members frequently attributed the causes of the disaster to the "culture" of India and the post-colonial responses to British rule. During this discussion⁶ Flynn stated that "after British rule, uh, there has been a significant negative reaction to standards [...] it is somewhat understandable, when order, regularity, a sense of timing and schedules is coded as 'White' ... it's a backlash to the colonial presence [. . .] the baby's out with the bathwater now!" In response, Lillie stated, "That makes sense. I read online that the accident was caused by lack of regular maintenance... Indian culture is so laid back or, even, I'd say, hostile to rules, I mean, other than caste of course, but toward modern technology [...] now that we're [British imperial control] gone, there's no stopgap."

After a few minutes of back and forth, members began to draw parallels with other Indian disasters of recent years. Miles mentioned the "Bhopal disaster" (a methyl isocyanate gas leak at a pesticide plant in Bhopal, India in 1984) that resulted in thousands killed and over half a million injuries, over which VPF members debated who was at fault:

Miles: "I read it was corruption amongst the public officials charged with regulating and, uh, you know, ensuring standards and safety."

Ivy: "Well, sure, what do you expect? It's not that Indians are just "laid back" as you said earlier. Rather, well, corruption's bog-standard there, it is [...] that's Indian culture. You bribe, cheat, steal [...] That's normative there. It's all mucked up."

[...]

George: "Culture is relative. So, I think we should be careful not to judge, but at the same time, their culture makes, you know, creates problems, these are real problems, for people not just in India, but all over the world [...] we're all interconnected so, I'm sorry, but we can't simply chock this up to cultural relativity or global diversity, or something like that [...] this is a time for tough global environmental standards, and so, look you know, the culture of corruption [in India] has to change [...] colonialism had its problems, but someone was in charge [...] who's going to go in there now and clean-up the country? [...] We're all paying for their selfishness."

⁶ Verbiage cut from discourse are denoted by ellipses within brackets "[...]" whereas natural pauses in the conversation are denoted by ellipses without brackets "...". Also, italicized words and bracketed descriptions such as "[laughter]", "[said with elongated emphasis]" and "[long pause]" are used to reflect tone and timbre.

From there, the conversation shifted to how VPF could lobby their representatives to try to enact global pressure on India to “raise their standards”, but many were pessimistic that this would result in lasting change, as put by Ethan:

How do you change a people who are selfish and when, it comes down to it, because we’re all paying the price, have some kind of cultural understanding of the world that disregards the environment, which is, somehow, right, like it has to be, it’s connected, culturally, to how they make decisions? How do you change culture? [...] those are qualities basic to the Indian culture [...] You can’t make people change or want to change.

As witnessed by the discussion, both “India” and “Indian culture” were framed as essentially “laid back”, “hostile to rules”, “corrupt”, “selfish”, and marked by bribery, cheating, and stealing. When asked, VPF members rarely conceptualized “England,” “White people,” or “Western Europe” as parallel to India or other nations racialized as non-White. Rather, as Daphne told me, “White people seem to care more about the environment. Especially the British. We have a protective relationship with nature [. . .] I don’t think you can say that about African or West Indian people, about BAME people, maybe with some of your American Indigenous perhaps, but on the whole, Brits are the *de facto* stewards of the environment.” The conflation of Whiteness and Britishness serves the logic of environmental exceptionalism and racial essentialism. VPF discourse continually demarcated the contours of proper environmentalism in both subtle and overt racial terms, implicitly assembling a vision of Whiteness as environmentally innocent. In an even more overt instance, Melody stated:

It’s a touchy subject, because, okay, let me take up devil’s advocate. What if it’s racial? People don’t want to admit that, because this is the slippery slope to racism, but I mean ... you study this, right? You know, but you probably won’t say publicly, that there’s a racial component to decision-making. [Author: What do you mean?] Some out there might say things are nonracial, you know, say color-blind things and buzzwords and whatnot, but that’s all codswallop. Look at what sub-Saharan, yeah, Black, right, Black Africans regularly do to the environment. Every other day there’s some environmental disaster they cause whilst the rest of the world pays the price. That’s not racist, that’s just a fact. We have to talk about this, because we’re killing the earth and political correctness makes it worse. Look, there’s a toxic waste dump in Ivory Coast right now. It started back in 2005⁷. The BBC was sued over reporting on it and even covered up their own story because it made Africans look bad. It’s all bollocks. [...] White people are different. [Author: What makes White people different?] Good question, but I don’t know, it’s probably culture, and tradition, habits, right? And biology, too, but that’s controversial to talk about.

⁷ They referred to 2006 toxic waste dumping in Côte d’Ivoire in which a Panamanian-registered ship (the *Probo Koala*), chartered by a Singaporean-based oil and commodity shipping company Trafigura Beheer BV and in conjunction with a local contractor, offloaded and dumped toxic waste around the port city of Abidjan.

In conversation with Jamie and Denis, we explicitly addressed what role if any, race played in the cause of environmental disasters:

Jamie: “It’s impolite to say, I know, but we need to admit that most Africans have fuffed about ... dumping, fires, toxic waste Africa is probably most responsible for global warming and the floods and then violent storms around the world. [Author: Europe has not contributed its fair share? How do you square the industrial revolution in this?] Sure, Europe was been a major contributor to pollution, global warming, but it now pales in comparison to Africa or India.

Furthermore, Denis remarked:

It’s not as though White people don’t pollute or ever have a hand in making environmental disasters, but there’s a key difference in that, well, that British culture is a bit more, for lack of a better term, a bit more refined. That’s a stereotype, but I believe it has some truth. But, perhaps “educated” is more couth [...] We’ve learned about what we can and can’t do to protect the environment that most BAME people just, well, I don’t think they quite understand [...] we have “Recycle Now”⁸ or the “Leeds by Example”⁹ campaign [...] I don’t know of a single environmental group run by BAME people, do you? White people, we, I think, we, just have a different orientation to the environment [...] So, at least for me, but I think within [VPF] too, there’s a bit of an understanding that environmental disasters are mostly because of what ethnic minorities do, I mean, mostly Africans and Asians in third world countries, Latinos too, I would gather.

In addition to the identification of BAME people’s “culture” as a cause of environmental pollution and catastrophe, the very existence of those people—in the form of “overpopulation”—was occasionally targeted. The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 saw VPF members move almost entirely to virtual meetings and discussion, the latter of which took place mostly on the Instant Messaging and voice-over-IP service application “WhatsApp.” There they discussed environmental-related news and shared information they felt was pertinent, funny, and inspirational. For example, in March 2020, one member shared a story from *The Guardian* about the link between COVID-19 and climate change, which included a quote from Inger Anderson (the United Nation’s environment chief) that read: “Our continued erosion of wild spaces has brought us uncomfortably close to animals and plants that harbour diseases that can jump to humans [. . .] nature is sending us a message. And as we hurtle towards a population of 10billion people on this planet, we need to go into this future armed with nature as our strongest ally” (Carrington, 2020). Members quickly

⁸ Recycle now is a marketing campaign run by the UK charity “Waste and Resources Action Programme” (WRAP) to increase recycling.

⁹ “Leeds by Example” was a 2018 campaign to model out what the city of Leeds did to combat climate change.

seized on the “10 billion” population projection, which morphed into a discussion on how to deal with “overpopulation”. One VPF member wrote:

Too many other environmental groups retreat to political correctness [...] they don’t want to address that overpopulation is perhaps the biggest problem, and immigration is part of that, that must be addressed. [Author: “How so?”] Overpopulation, too much human activity, expands. People move into an area, they have children, even the traveling part of migration makes a large carbon footprint [...] people devour space. Pollution increases and species go extinct.

Days later, another member shared a passage from Paul Eirich’s 1968 book *Population Bomb* that proposed “compulsory birth regulation” or “the addition of temporary sterilant to water supplied or staple food” with the caveat that the “option isn’t even open to us, thanks to the criminal inadequacy of biomedical research in this area” (Eirich 1968: 135–36). Discussion quickly turned toward the “ethics of limiting birth rates” as VPF members opined that Eirich made his observation “more than half a century ago [...] there’s bound to be biomedical rationales for this by now.” Days later, discussion turned to immigration and birth rates with one member opining, “One way to tackle this issue, would be to restrict immigration from Africa, the Caribbean, the Middle East [...] UK-born women birth rates are about 1.5 whereas some of these women have birth rates as high as 4.0!” Such discussions waxed and waned for weeks, with limiting the demographic growth of non-White, non-British people as a “key” to both decreasing global populations and protecting the environment in “the UK and Western Europe”.

VPF members seemed earnest in their attempts to ground their discussion in verifiable facts and figures. Yet, they were also duped by mis-information related to race, migration, and the environment. For example, during the same time as the above conversation (March–April 2020) members shared screen shots from social media about “nature healing itself”. Two posts shared over WhatsApp chat concerned the supposedly newly clear and clean water of the Venice canals. One post, copied from elsewhere, read: “Here’s an unexpected side effect of the pandemic – the water’s flowing through the canals of Venice is clear for the first time in forever. The fish are visible, the swans returned.” Another copied post read: “Venice hasn’t seen clear water in a very long time. Dolphins showing up too. Nature just hit the reset button on us.” While such social media posts were later debunked¹⁰, VPF members used them to rationalize the ongoing discussion of race, migration, and overpopulation. One VPF member wrote, “African migration to Italy has been halted [...] nature rebounds.” Another VPF member wrote, “Native Italians can now enjoy the unspoilt [sic] beauty of their land and water. Che Bello!” Members regularly attributed environmental benefits to COVID-19 and the subsequent halt to African immigration to Europe. Their statements reveal an assumption that African people and a sound ecosystem exist in

¹⁰ Many social media posts about environmental recovery were soon debunked. For example, the March 2020 *National Geographic* story “Fake animal news abounds on social media as coronavirus upends life” detailed that “the swans in the viral posts regularly appear in the canals of Burano, a small island in the greater Venice metropolitan area, where the photos were taken. The ‘Venetian’ dolphins were filmed at a port in Sardinia, in the Mediterranean Sea, hundreds of miles away” (Daly 2020).

a zero-sum relationship. Such a logic opens up VPF to the “ecofascism” predicated on the eugenic reduction of non-White, non-Western people. Accordingly, months later in the fall 2020, some members shared stories that were originally penned by the Pine Tree Gang, an “environmentalist” group that advocates a protected reserve for fauna and flora in the Northwestern United States, which would also function as the genesis of a White-only ethno-state. One such Pine Tree Gang article shared by VPF members demanded an immediate reduction in carbon emissions and the creation of hard national borders in Western Europe and the United States. “As climate refugees grow due to drought, lack of food, and poisoned land, they will attempt to invade our lands,” the article read before ending with the dramatic pronouncement: “Save trees, not refugees”. While some VPF members balked at the anti-immigrant message, others rationalized the message. “A tad racist, innit? But they have a point”, said one VPF member before continuing. “One of the quickest ways to reduce carbon emissions is to halt migration and stop the people who cause the bulk of pollution from polluting other areas.” Another member replied later that day, “The earth is splitting into habitable and inhabitable spaces [...] for some places, it’s too late. We can save select places or try to save every space and probably kill us all.” When I identified the Pine Tree Gang as a White Nationalist group, the original poster apologized and deleted the post. However, VPF members continued to discuss whether the article had “merit” for weeks thereafter. “We have to work with whoever we can to save the earth, even if their mental,” one VPF member told me.

In repeated fashion, whether online or face-to-face, individually or in group settings, many of the backstage discussions of VPF articulated ethno-racial ontological causes for environmental disasters. Members discussed Whiteness as largely inculpable for environmental disasters while they attributed blame to both BAME people’s either learned or innate supposed cultural dysfunctions or their very existence as an “overpopulated” demographic.

Who has a moral “calling” to address environmental disasters?

Connected to attributions of cause, VPF members also frequently discussed who possessed a moral duty to tackle environmental disasters. Often discussed in value-laden language, members defended labor in the service of preventing and remediating environmental disasters as deeply moral endeavors. Yet, neither were all equally called to do such work nor were the reasons uniform. Rather, such a vocation was constantly refracted through the interacting prisms of race and a form of spiritual or ethereal environmentalism akin to what Letcher (2006:177) identifies as “diverse spiritualities” circulating within British environmentalism: “detraditionalized. . . elective and affectual. . . sources including Buddhism, Hinduism, 1960s psychedelia, practices from the New Age and Human Potential movements, shamanism, British folklore, feminism and Goddess Spirituality.” In particular, VPF members employ a dynamic notion of divinity as both external (God acts upon nature) and internal (God exists in nature) to the environment. Such deism was deeply racialized and paradoxically conceptualized. On the one hand, divinity is external to nature; the divine calls and enables White people to fix the environmental problems caused by BAME people. Yet, simultaneously, divinity is internal to nature; White people are able to respond

appropriately to environmental issues because they understand the inherent divinity of nature that BAME people do not recognize. Such racial-spiritual logics manifested in two discursive threads which were often tangled and used in contradictory and paradoxical ways.

First, BAME people—already deemed the primary causes of environmental disasters the world over—were spoken of as morally responsible for literally cleaning-up their messes. Moralizing judgement marked this mode of discourse. As Anaya told me in a private interview:

[...] your Black Americans in the ghettos of your cities have dumps in vacant lots, petrol and oil runoffs, battery acids and toxin in the water-tables [...] American ghettos are basically what you call “superfund” sites [...] disaster zones! [...] Can you explain to me why your taxes, your dollars, let’s say that you live there, yeah, should be earmarked toward cleaning-up the land and water? [Author: I suppose some people would say we are all connected and have shared responsibilities?] I understand that, but that’s not a very moral response [...] that’s a kind of liberal political rhetoric, but it’s not ethical, because, you have to understand this is, if we want to change things permanently, it’s a matter of where people’s values lay. Do people clean-up their mess or do others do it for them? [...] If you’re never made to clean it up, will you ever learn? [...] are Black Americans ever held responsible for their own waste? [...] I’ve read all the reports on environmental racism, and sure there’s plenty of discrimination, but at the same time, if they’re not made responsible, would you expect them, or anyone, really, to ever stop polluting?

Similarly, Isla stated during a group discussion:

[...] we’re in the midst of a green movement. People are starting to wake up the realities of what we’re going to the planet [...] this is [VPF’s] mission, in sorts, or it’s calling really, because at the heart of environmental issues is a moral question—what do you value? What do you care about? [...] I’ve come to see people’s stance on the environment as a fairly accurate litmus test to their character, to their soul, their heart [... . .] Now look, yes, we’ve had plenty of discussion here, and really year after year there’s another Home Office report on environmental racism, but what the Conservatives and Labour both miss is the ethical component [...] The state can’t make you care, so, I mean, it’s delicate, yeah? But, listen, don’t get me wrong, I’m not a racist, you know? I mean, the BNP¹¹ is a few sandwiches short of a picnic to put it mildly. They’re stark mad, but no one is talking about how gentrification in South London comes with environmental clean-up, more safety [...] that’s not because of regulations, that’s because there’s a culture of caring that most of the West Indians

¹¹ “British National Party.” A party often labeled far-right and fascist, it was created in 1982 by members of the fascist “National Front” party. While the BNP declined in relative significance in the late 2010s, during the 2000s BNP members won over 50 local government seats, 1 seat in the London Assembly, and 2 seats in the European Parliament.

and Asians, the Bangladeshis and Romani, and whatnot, they, they, you know, honestly, they, they don't bring any care, any concern, they don't have that ethical orientation toward the environment that we, uh, well, that's not PC.

Suddenly Ophelia interjected, "It's not PC but it's true! Migration and xenophobia is one thing, but we must reach the place where we publicly can admit that most BAME people do not care about the environment for whatever reason, and then, we can start to have a honest conversation about morals and nature, what they value, or don't, in their own neighborhood environments."

Through leveling moral judgment, VPF's discursive strategy effectively positions White native-born British as the arbiters of the intersection of ethics and environment. In framing BAME people as dispossessed of any moral compass or recognition of nature's divinity, environmental disasters and crises in majority non-White communities become inevitable. No longer can the state or elected authorities solve the problem, but rather local groups such as VPF position themselves as selfless actors who labor not for power or authority incentivizes, but simply because of their moral character and citizenship, making them seem above moral reproach.

Second, members often framed White people—especially White Americans, Brits, and Canadians—as unfairly burdened with environmentalist labor due to BAME people's relative lack of investment in preventing environmental disasters. While members expressed this charge as a divine calling, members also frequently expressed this environmental covenant as an encumbrance in their lives. This took the form of ethno-racial moral resentment, whereby White lives were constrained by BAME people's (especially Black people's) evasion of eco-friendly actions and their (mis)recognition of divinity as outside of nature. For example, after a VPF meeting, I witnessed the following discussion over a 2017 report on high concentrations of air pollution in the historically Black area of Brixton in South London:

Reece: "[...] I'm just, really, I'm just, I'm frustrated [...] whatever we say, doesn't matter. We could stand in the roundabout screaming about toxic air and they wouldn't give us a second glance"

[...]

Mia: "We held those meetings [in Brixton] and for what? Honestly? It matters for naught [...] none of the borough Councillors showed [...] Eshalom¹² didn't return a single enquiry. If she [Eshalom] and the rest of Brixton don't care, why, should we?"

[...]

Olivia: [laughing] "In Brixton, look, it's Brixton alright. We're not going to pull any blinders there. We know there's not much afterthought so we have to get over that."

Reece: " 'Get over it?' Are you mental? [yelling] Do you have any idea of how long I've been doing this work? [...] Those people, they don't. .. look, we've

¹² They refer to Florence Dauta Eshalom, a Black resident of Brixton and an elected Councillor for the London borough of Lambeth in which Brixton is located.

been investing in ‘target areas’¹³ for years and they never listen [...] It’s all lip service.”

Mason: “I can’t say I don’t resent the work we do in there, especially, I mean, it’s about the challenges we have in Black neighborhoods, yeah [...] there’s the Black churches, but this blinds them to the sacred element of nature. “God” is nature, you know? [...] But you just wait until, I don’t know, yeah, some lads get lung infections and that makes Channel 4. Then we’re get a call from the Councillors to do some education, we give some lectures, post our details [...] but they won’t help make it a LEZ,¹⁴ or tell their residents to stop burning rubbish in their bins.”

Members rationalized their continued devotion to environmentalism, and coped with their moral resentment against BAME people, through a ethno-religious synthesis of racial paternalism and ecological deism.

In the former, members often voiced variants of the “White Savior” trope, whereby they believed it their moral duty to protect the environment from BAME people’s supposed systemic disregard and to simultaneously teach and instruct BAME people on how to properly take care of and peacefully co-exist within, a healthy and clean environment. This was, as one member told me matter-of-factly, “the white man’s green burden” because “Black people don’t love nature.” However, because this logic was often coupled with a pessimistic, if not nihilistic, assumption that BAME people were beyond educating or fundamentally lacked the moral rectitude to protect against environmental disasters, these same members constructed nature or the environment as a Divine-like force or quasi-deity worthy of their fealty. Their methodical activism—in the face of being unfairly burdened by BAME people and regardless of outcome—became a sign of their rigorous and unquestioned devotion to “nature” and the “environment” and raised the apostolic standing of White people within the environmentalist movement while simultaneously placing BAME people outside of nature’s providence and grace. For instance, after Conner expressed the sentiment that “. . . it feels hopeless sometimes. It’s lonely. Like we’re the only ones who care”, I asked if he ever felt like giving up, to which Zach interjected:

No, I can’t just give up. I’d feel like I betrayed nature, like I betrayed God. [Author: What do you mean?] I mean that, that’s all there is. The environment. It, or, I guess, some people say “Mother Nature”, so it, she you see, created us, sustains us, so, we owe our loyalty. [Author: What if we’re past the point of no return? Some scientists say the earth is irrevocably harmed]. Yeah, well, I guess that doesn’t matter [...] But really, it’s more than that. It’s, uh, well, it’s spiritual. We have to try, even if trying is not logical [...] I guess that’s why I try with people who don’t even care. Because I just feel I have to. The way we try

¹³ Overtly, a “target area” is an area VPF designates as particularly polluted and in need of immediate remedy. I came to realize that members used this term almost exclusively for non-White and poor communities as a way to signal race and class without explicitly mentioning either.

¹⁴ LEZ or “Low Emission Zone” is a London traffic pollution plan applied to all commercial, diesel-powered vehicles. The ULEZ or “Ultra Low Emission Zone” introduced in 2019, applies to all vehicles in Central London.

to save the earth is just as important as saving it ... call it the ‘gospel of green’ if you like.

Given the bulk of discussion over members’ frustrations with BAME people’s supposed lack of concern for the environment, I explicitly broached the topic of race individually with members, who were more forthcoming in interviews than in group settings. For instance, Oliver told me:

I’m not sure that nature really speaks to Black people. For example, I mean, it’s anecdotal, but I’ve hiked and camped all over Europe, North America, even some in South America and Africa. And I can count on one hand the amount of Black hikers and campers I have seen—yes, before you even ask, in Africa too! There is something about how White people are, I don’t know where it comes from, but we have a deeper relationship with nature. I think we feel a connection to the earth that is somehow different

Additionally, Keegan argued that:

[...] there is no way Black people are going to convert to environmentalism. I don’t think there’s anything I could do. It’s not in their culture [...] But, can I just turn my back and single out just white people as environmental allies? I think that would be racist [...] I do primarily work with other White people, because they just care more, but, to your question [long pause] I am frustrated that more Black people, BAME aren’t waking up to our environmental catastrophe [...] I have to keep trying to raise their consciousness. I have a connection with, a love of, with, uh nature, and I owe it to nature to the environment, I just owe it to spread that love to others [...] sometimes I feel like having faith is enough. [laughing] I know how I sound, but that’s how I feel. [...] So, yes, for whatever reason, I find that love with White people more than others.

The liberal and sometimes politically left leanings of environmentalism, coupled with the unspoken rule of agnosticism in VPF, engendered outright discussion of an anthropomorphic Christian God ersatz. Moreover, conventionally and overt racist language and sentiment is generally, and particularly, unwelcomed in group settings. Yet, together, members synthesized White racial paternalism and particularly vulgar forms of racial essentialism into an ethos of environmental spirituality. With such a narrative intact, spreading the “gospel of green”, regardless of acceptance, conversion, or pragmatism, was their test of faith.

These spiritually-infused, Janus-faced logics of cause and effect—BAME people as the source of environmental pollution and White people as saddled with the responsibility to remedy such pollution—were on overt display during a summer 2022 meeting that many VPF members lightheartedly called “church in the woods”. With no formal agenda, and meeting in a forest outside of London, the Sunday morning gathering included “stimulating conversation”, “political strategy”, “fellowship”, “meditation”, and the chance to “commune directly with nature” as well as serve as

a “safe space for entheogens.”¹⁵ At one point, conversation turned to the “post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework”¹⁶ and the need to expand “protected areas of natural land” across the globe. Members were adamant that the “best place” to put nearly “30% of the world under protection” would be in Africa, Australia, South America, and parts of South Asia where either “people don’t live” or “the natives muck it up” because of they’re “becoming modern.” Members discussed how “all the earth is sacred” and needs “warriors to defend her.” As one member of VPF told me as we sat under a leafy canopy:

We are charged with saving the earth ... if we don’t no one else will. [Author: Who is the “we” here?] “Us. It’s, look, upper-class, upper-middle class, you know, White English. .. we don’t have criminal records, we have respectable employ [...] we have education [...] it’s like when you have the right people in charge of city planning, to keep the ‘village’ feel of places. [long pause] City planning is too often based on a class and race integration agenda [...] nothing wrong with integration, but you can’t force it, especially with the environmental crisis being the pressing issue of life as we know it [...] we need a conservative approach, rather than building council houses, or building shopping centers that sell garbage to people who consume against their interests [...] we can build parks or keep or plant or expand forests, like this one [...] It’s likely not going to happened in England, but in other places in the world if we could just control and conserve thirty percent of the lands.

VPF members’ retreat into the wooded outskirts of London reflects the larger environmentalist movement’s “Romantic heritage of a set of ideas that sanctified natural space, finding in the woods and fields a transformative locus of (re)enchantment that worked against the deadening effects of secular modernity, that was also interwoven with diffuse, difficult-to-define forms of ‘spirituality’” (Zuber, 2021: 564). This meeting served as a simultaneous racial and soteriological project; a theological concern for the salvation of the earth’s peoples and the hierarchical arrangement of souls in that endeavor.

Case in point: A few days after “church in the woods” another VPF member was excited to recount her “beautiful vision” about “race and the environment” she said she experienced that day. She related that while meditating that her “mind was suddenly flooded with pictures” in which she “saw all the different races of the planet cooperating to repair the environment.” In this reverie, she saw how “each race” used their “unique traits and skills” to form an “agricultural-based new order.” She relayed to me how varied darker-skinned people across the global south both worked the land

¹⁵ Derived from the Greek word *entheos*, and first introduced by Ruck, et al. (1979), “entheogen” means “god within.” The term serves as a neologism among some British environmentalists to refer to the consumption of psychoactives to induce alterations in perception, mood, cognition, etc. in order to facilitate spiritual development and/or connection with nature. For VPF members, this manifested in the use of psilocybin mushrooms or “mushies.”

¹⁶ A United Nations sponsored (through the UN Convention on Biological Diversity) with targets, such as: “By 2030, protect and conserve through well connected and effective system of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures at least 30% of the planet” (United Nations 2020).

to grow crops and preserved the land for forests. When I asked her about the place of White people, Europe, and North America in her vision, she looked stunned replied, “I mean, I think there was more green space, but no farming [. . .] except the American Indians, they were farming”. She summed up, “I think we [White Brits] were the behind the scenes [. . .] that’s our calling.” When I questioned her on the racialized division of labor that seemed the animating core of her “vision” she replied, “We’re all different [. . .] the races have strengths and weaknesses [. . .] that’s not racist, that’s just nature [. . .] we can save the planet when we recognize the biological facts and nature as divine.”

VPF members regularly reified the global south as either land bereft of people or full of the wrong kind of people. That is, land is free for the environmentalist taking or, through the discourse of indigenous alterity, BAME peoples are constructed as pathologically opposed to nature conservation through their supposed fetish for an artificial modernity that is environmentally unsustainable. VPF’s attention to this matter and its strategy was not borne whole cloth from its members, but stems from the “30 by 30” plan (a widely-debated point among academics and activists to protect 30% of the globe by 2030). As Kashwan, et al. (2021: 7) explained:

These calls give a boost to a similar proposal made by a group of academics who wrote a working paper showcasing the positive economic benefits of putting 30% of global land under protected areas. This working paper, led by academics from North America and Europe, offers no accounting for the number of people who will be affected by this significant expansion of protected areas in the Global South . . . this working paper reads like “a proposal for a new model of colonialism,” as it offers no safeguards for indigenous peoples and local communities. Moreover, these academics show that the land value calculations presented in the working paper are based on “the *terra nullius* approach that underpinned settler colonialism.”

VPF members construct a conspicuous White-racial aesthetic in which they are the administrators in charge of non-White laborers who will transform the land into sustainable spaces—a remarkable neo-imperialist, if not race-based chattel slavery, vision of their brave new green world. The pragmatic and material contradictions within VPF’s racial cosmology are a symptom of this two-faced logic of environmentalist calling, but are also a product of their ephemeral spirituality that blends pop-psychology, outmoded sociobiology, and racist folklore. A reason for VPF’s success rests in their seductive pastiche of ideologies, beliefs, and worldviews that allows for an accommodating space, but also a mottled area in which racial inequality, racist oppression, and even the rationalization of global racial slavery is papered over and rationalized through appeal to social cooperation, “natural” racial differences, and the environmental salvation of the planet. Combined with the promise of reinstalling White folks as benefactors and brain-trusts, the opaque flexibility of VPF’s spirituality serves to re-enchant a world they see as too rational, modern, and politically correct when it comes to race.

Who has the capacity to repair environmental disasters?

While ontological and axiological logics were at play, so were epistemological concerns. VPF members habitually framed solutions to environmental disasters in terms of racialized knowledge. That is, specific White populations were often spoken of as particular types of environmental knowers. They possessed both the ability to discern fact from fiction and could apply knowledge in nuanced ways in order to meet a utilitarian end—an environment free of human-made disasters. First, the right type of White environmentalist could engage in epistemological constraint. This was the avoidance of “bad knowledge” or faulty information that some incorrectly believed would repair environmental disasters. Second, White people possessed epistemological nuance. They could take the aforementioned knowledge and avoid “blanket solutions”, but rather employ subtle, calculated, and refined methods to avoid or repair environmental disasters. Appeals to both knowledge possession and practice reified both inter- and intra-racial identities and boundaries.

In the fall of 2017, a five-year analysis of the World Risk Index was published and discussed at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (“COP23”). Among the findings, the report showed that “disaster risk global hotspots are in Central America, West and Central Africa, Southeast Asia and Oceania. In a comparison of world regions, the disaster risk is at its highest in Oceania and at its lowest in Europe” (World Risk Report: Analysis and Prospects 2017). By spring of 2018, many environmental groups discussed the report. VPF was no exception. At a VPF meeting members stated:

Ben: Any decision should be guided by who is the worst-off and where our knowledge can help most [...] My read [of the World Risk Report] is that Africa is where we concentrate.

[...]

Aurora: right, right, if we’re talking purely education. [Africa] is the clearest need. [...] local myth-making and local religious belief has got to be replaced by some level of scientific reasoning. [...] there’s too much bad knowledge in these places [...] I don’t think they can separate environmental fiction from fact so easily.

[...]

Addison: What I know is, public health issues, such as disease epidemics, infectious disease spread, it’s all inevitable after disasters [...] the social pressure of upset norms brings out the lower bases of human nature [...] looting, riots, there’s a drain on local policing [...] locals are shell-shocked and can’t be burdened with managing their own crisis. They’re in survival mode [...] you’re not going to think clearly.¹⁷

[...]

Ben: This is the same problem [...] at some point we will be accused of being white saviors, and then what’s our recourse? [...] at some point, somehow, you

¹⁷ Cf. Binu, Mawsonm Payton, and Guignard (2008) on common myths and facts about responses to disaster.

know someone has to admit that Black Africans simply don't know as much, you know, comparatively, to what we do [...] we know what works and what doesn't. [...] most Africans don't go to uni, you know?

VPF's frustration was palpable. They were well aware of the racial politics in which a group of White Britons were proposing to instruct Black Africans how to address environmental disasters. Rather than avoid discussions of race (many members told me they were well aware that they could be critiqued for being "color-blind" by failing to address race), their strategy was often a color-conscious positioning of themselves as knowledgeable experts precisely because of their location in the heart of a racialized Empire. As George told me:

Yes, by virtue of my race and nationality I do have access to knowledge others don't. But, should I be penalized for White privilege? [...] shouldn't people listen to our expertise *precisely because* [said with emphasis] we are White and British? If you're looking at this purely on the basis of knowledge. Pure information, yes? Well, the spoils of Empire, if you will, sure, yes, that uh, that does uh, afford us access to resources most of the world doesn't have.

And as Reece apologetically stated, "This is Empire in the service of Africa, isn't it? We're just making amends [...] this is environmental reparations [...] We're giving knowledge to Black people, to Africans [...] We have to do something to make up for colonialism, and, uh, uh, ... and, and we, we uh, we have something they don't. They just uh, don't." In these instances, VPF members appealed to race as the mechanism for possessing and discerning truth.

Over the years I witnessed the regular discussion of Africans as "uneducated" or in the possession of "bad knowledge." When I would ask VPF members about this in private interviews, the racial implications came to the fore. For example Phoebe stated:

[...] it's obvious even if it's a touchy subject. Africans, particularly in sub-Saharan, so, yeah, Black Africans, that's who, are uh, really, what or who, I'm talking about, are on the average, are, yeah, are much more of an unscientific, less-educated population. That's just the statistics. They are more traditional and ensconced in local religious lore [...] my experiences show me they are more hostile to science because they see it as "European" or "White" and so they're hostile and reject it [...] we need cooler heads to prevail that won't throw away information because it comes from a White face [...] without our help, they just take abstract environmental talking points and make these blanket solutions that actually make things worse.

Similarly, Miles told me:

Among my mates, we used to tell this joke, when I was doing environmental education in Botswana, we used to say "White nuance." [Author: What is "White nuance"?] [laughing] Just this thing we, you know, other White Euro-

peans and Americans make this observation about cultural differences that if you taught Botswanians¹⁸, they would take the lesson as this hard and fast rule and not think about how to apply it within context [...] we called that ability to contextualize, I guess, “White nuance.” [Author: You said this around people from Botswana?] Oh no, that would be racist!

While VPF reifies racial boundaries between Whiteness and various BAME groups, they frequently concentrate on the distinctions between White and Black people. The product of centuries of racist pseudo-science as well as modern cultural discourse, Black bodies signify defect and pathology—an *a priori* negative symbolic value in VPF’s normative discourse. This racialized valuation becomes a social utility for VPF members through abstract, zero-sum racial comparisons. The repetition of supposed Black deficiencies serve as an honorific device for Whiteness; Whiteness becomes the repository of what Blackness lacks. As a floating racial signifier then, Whiteness requires continual grounding in specific social and cultural terms, necessitating VPF’s members unremitting reification—through both intimate and group mediations—of Black moral absence, epistemic closure, and social exoticization.

BAME Members in VPF

Over 2018–2022 I was aware of only seven BAME people (four South Asians, two Black Brits, and one East Asian) who joined, and then left, VPF. For instance, one South Asian woman, then pursuing a masters in environmental science, attended a meeting and presented a sophisticated argument about how the group could intercede with global pollution on the local level. In response, some White members simply ignored her thesis, a few insisted her analysis was “too complicated”, while others expressed that the wide-reaching scope of her analysis made them feel “hopeless”. After she left, several others dismissed her contribution as “naïve” and “idealistic.” She did not return to another VPF meeting. The other six BAME members attended VPF meetings over summer months. Some were university students and the break from course modules afforded time for volunteerism. Over summertime, VPF would regularly cooperate with local parks and gardens by donating their labor to engage in weeding, brush-removal, and tree-planting. On a Saturday morning in June, VPF engaged in a tree-planting initiative. A young Black Brit man, for which such an outing was only their third meeting with VPF, seemed irritated. After the event, he approached me, telling me that I needed to have his experiences recorded “for your sociological study”. After detailing how his grandfather was a part of the Windrush generation¹⁹ (1948 to 1971) from Jamaica, he stated:

¹⁸ Someone from Botswana is “Motswana” (singular). The plural is “Batswana.”

¹⁹ The moniker refers to the ship HMT Empire Windrush, which brought large numbers of workers from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and other West Indian islands to England to help fill post-war labor shortages. In 2017 *The Guardian* broke the “Windrush scandal”, revealing that many of the Windrush generation and their children had regularly experienced wrongful detainment, deportation and deportation threats, and the denial of legal rights.

I'm not with this bruv [...] I tried with [VPF] last year [...] when I come around they want to plant. Plant trees! They plant when the *Negroes and Coolies* [said with a snarl] are present [...] I'm all for planting trees, but I'm no one's slave. [...] Why come they don't get their hands dirty, too?²⁰

His take was neither unique nor hyperbolic. I observed how many White VPF members repeatedly directed him and two other South Asian individuals on the minutia of digging depth and width, looseness of soil, how to properly place roots, and more. These same members never engaged in manual labor themselves. Despite that fact that a South Asian man arranged and coordinated that particular planting, he was effectively treated as a physical, rather than an intellectual, resource. All three BAME members left the group weeks later, not to return.

When I spoke with White VPF members about my ethnographic observations pertaining to racial inequalities, segregation, and exclusion among the group—what Ruffin (2010) has called “environmental othering”—they rarely acknowledged that “race” was an issue. Some White members of VPF viewed my attention to race with deep suspicion. For example, after one discussion, a White VPF member became defensive at my “insinuation” that VPF excluded BAME people, and began to regularly send me literature defending environmentalists from charges of racism, including a 1995 presentation at the Environmental Studies Association of Canada that stated: “The broad charge of environmental racism against environmentalists is really a form of psychological warfare [. . .] to put people on the defensive.” The overarching Whiteness of the group was either dismissed as a coincidence, or upon my insistence to discuss the group’s Whiteness, was explained-away with appeal to the racist logic such as “Indians are more concerned with religion than material pollution” or that simply “Black people don’t love nature.”

The variegated roots of tripartite racial imaginaries

It is important to acknowledge that VPF members did not germinate the *causes* of environmental disaster, who experiences a *calling* to remediate environmental disaster, and who has the *capacity* to fix environmental disasters in ethno-racial terms. Rather, they inherited this three-sided racial imagination. The spread of such imaginaries remains deeply rooted in European and British imperialism, science, and environmentalism and is nurtured by continued appeal to the racialized logics within them.

Causality

First, over the 18th and 19th centuries, White British orientations to ethno-racial “others” on the periphery of Empire were predicated on belief that such others could not properly use either their own natural products and land or their own, reason, intellect, and knowledge of the relationship to the environment. As Drayton (2000: 234)

²⁰ See Carter (2018: 45) for an eerily similar dynamic in a White environmentalist group.

wrote in *Nature's Government*: “The idea of scientific agriculture had sustained what we might call a myth of the Profligate Native ... The Profligate Native justified the ‘conservation’ of plants and animals, as well as their exploitation Conservation, while apparently contradicting the ethic of exploitation, was premised on the same paternalistic ideology of command” (Drayton, 2000: 234). Second, during the same era, “orientalism” served as a potent tool to moralize assumptions about racial difference. These were not always, or even normatively, pejorative notions. As Mukerji (2017: 74) argues, “If a group was defined as having good character but not cultivating all its land, this was an excuse for taking the land. In this sense, race—even when treated with respect—were never simply natural kinds but rather elements of political analysis.” Such orientalist tropes did not die with the decline of the British Empire, or even with “Brexit” in the 21st century. Rather, they persist through the scientific approaches to environmentalism in such organizations like VPF. Mukerji (2017: 89) puts it well: “to make race an effective tool of geopolitics and sustain the global order, generation after generation tried to make race discursively real through science.”

Calling

From the time of the Enlightenment, many Europeans considered non-White people to possess a special essence or character that morally obligates their behavior in relation to the environment. Consider Linnaeus, who rewrote Sweden’s pharmacopoeia based on indigenous and “wild nations” herbs as well as married medicine to a return to older and more “natural” mores. For Linnaeus, these herbs and pre-modern people held:

the power of eradicating what he saw as a single whole: poverty, disease, ignorance, and sin. It was thus a materio-moral enterprise, conflating mind, body, and spirit. Broadly speaking, he envisioned a great chain, or universal scale, of health Linnaeus thus spend his 1732 Lapland voyage convincing himself, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that he had “discovered” noble savages living in a natural state and a belated Ovidian Golden Age In Linnaeus’s hands, then, the noble savage became a token of a proximate salvation. Or, as he put it, “The Lapps are our teachers” (Koerner, 1996: 158–59).

Moreover, in the utopian work *New Atlantis* Francis Bacon argued that imperialism could properly shape humanity’s use of the environment. Bacon’s stance that “concrete action that modifies and improves nature lies. . . [with] the possibility of connecting imperialism and colonialism” (Scalercio, 2018: 1078). Quoting Bacon, Scalercio (2018: 1078) outlines the construction of a spatially defined subjectivity:

We can properly count only three revolutions or periods of learning: the first with the Greeks; the second with the Romans; and the third with us, the Western European nations.” Of course, this is not only a geographical definition: “Western Europe” does not precede the formation of a “scientific rationality”, it is rather an identity developing within the process of advancement of learning.

Western Europe, as a set of imperial powers, sorted what kinds of people would be charged with the doing of environmental work. This brings to the fore the relationship between empire (i.e., colonialism), knowledge (i.e., science and knowledge), and the lumping and splitting of humanity into categories reflecting moral and intellectual hierarchy (i.e., race). These merged, as they did with Bacon and many other 17th century thinkers, in a new identity for the burgeoning “White” people of Western Europe (particularly England)—what Scalercio (2018: 1076) calls “imperiality”: “human dominion over nature, implies the necessity of improving the conditions of the whole mankind, in a manner that opens the way of thinking in which ‘backward’ peoples are subject to this action of improvement” (2018: 1076). Imperiality matured into the 19th century. In places like Germany, it merged with the populist concept of “Volk” that offered modern alienated people a link to nature and lost spirituality.

The green or ecological part of the Volkisch movement was carried forward in the late-1800s by Ernst Haeckel, a successor to Arndt and Riehl. Haeckel coined the term “ecology” in 1867 and in the process he brought together “aggressive nationalism, mystically charged racism, and environmentalist predilections Haeckel joined right-wing social and political ideas to ecology. In this case it was his modification of the already reactionary ideas embodied in Social Darwinism. These he merged with the worshipping of nature.” (Gibson, 2002: 12)

Imperiality emerged as the proto-identity for VPF’s modern British expansionist interventions into nature. VPF’s embrace of a modern liberal political orientation, and their adherence to “equality” (as both a moral principle and social goal) compels them to reject overt renderings of BAME people as biologically inferior. However, they often traffic in a synthesis of ideologies of empire, knowledge, and race; that BAME people occupy a separate moral universe from themselves as White Britons.

Capacity

There is a historical precedent for the VPF’s denial of capacity (whether moral or intellectual) among people of color. First, and by way of example, the moral philosopher Thomas Reid stated in 1764 that “wild men” living in “primitive societies” (referring largely to darker-skinned people on the outskirts of English Empire) were unable to benefit fully from humankind’s natural capacity to learn. This hindrance stemmed from “their largely solitary habits prevent them from acquiring the use of artificial, as opposed to natural, language. Without an artificial language, Reid maintained, savages cannot employ the rational or moral faculties of the mind, and hence the cognitive and emotional horizons of the primitive state were extremely limited” (Wood, 1996: 209). Even the formation of the Kew Gardens in London—a site that VPF members described as “perfect” and as “a green heaven”—owes to such racist assumptions. Janet Brown (1996: 306) thus argued:

British botanist, explorer, and the first official director of the Kew Gardens (the Royal Botanic Gardens), Joseph Hooker (1817–1911) argued that indigenous people “were not equipped to understand their own plants: they frequently

believe species to be new, when research in the extensive collections at Kew reveals them as geographical variants of a single, widespread form; they had inadequate reference works; they inconvenienced other naturalists (Hooker was thinking of himself) with a proliferation of local geographic or personal names. His message was simple. Plants were to be sent to Kew – the hub of the colonial scientific network. Hooker instinctively saw himself as the linchpin of a centre-and-periphery situation where freedom on the boundaries was strongly discouraged.”

Second, many White Brits saw themselves as the guardians of the natural world via colonialism. Such settler saviorism became an everyday fact of their own selfhood through their continued commitment to particular environmental information and knowledge systems. As Drayton (2000: 230) argues, “Science and technology. . . provided an identity. . . evidence of the progressive and altruistic virtues of the conquerors.” Colonial endeavors to conserve the environment became sites where a White British identity could emerge as the paramount, if not only, wielders of environmental knowledge, what Raj (2007: 166–67) refers to as “images of knowledge. . . the place knowledge holds inside the value system of a social group at any given time of its history”. Continuing, Raj (2007: 226) asserts that “hierarchies of power and the historically and geographically situated nature of encounter marked the processes of appropriation, resulting in a differential grounding of that knowledge in difference localities.” Viewed through this lens, the organizational identity of VPF come into sharp focus; as descendants of a White British environmentalist movement they inherited particular narratives to describe their world, themselves and others. They are heirs of a distinctly racialized cultural logic.

Conclusion

These tripartite racial imaginaries play out in three distinctive steps. First, environmental disasters at the hand of BAME people’s dysfunctional behavior is a *fait accompli*. Second, while both BAME people and White people are deemed responsible for addressing environmental disasters, BAME people are judged accountable due to their original environmental sin, while a moral calling to fix the environment speaks to a specific, ethically-attuned White population in America and England. Third, those same White European and American actors are understood as the only ones in possession of the right physical, mental, and symbolic resources to stop or fix environmental disasters. Within this tripartite schema, race, as both prediction and preclusion of environmental disaster, is the omnipresent rising action of a narrative in which members of VPF are simultaneous victim, by-stander, and reluctant hero. Together, the three storylines of *causality*, *calling*, and *capacity* are marshalled to construct (and reveal the operation of) an ideal, White racial identity intimately crocheted with racialized notions of guilt and remorse, responsibility and liability, work ethics, competent knowledge, resource mobilization, moral commitment, and paternalism and superiority.

VPF's activities, interactions, and discourse together indicate the easy utility of the tripartite racial imaginaries for making sense of their world and for guiding their actions. But such racialized paternalism is nothing new. What is original here is to show how White people can so seamlessly gloss over the inherent contradictions in their discursive moves in pursuit of an unique form of White racial identity. Without such understanding, one might be dumb-struck at the ease by which supposedly "liberal"-leaning members can merge support for capitalism, environmentalism, and racial superiority. The answer rests in the recognition that people's stories are neither fixed nor reducible to atomized actors. Rather, we can approach narratives with attention to the identity performances and social context in which they are voiced—"discourse is constitutive of the identities that bespeak them and the contexts that host them" (Hughey, 2022: 2). Race functions not only as a stratification force in the distribution of resources, but as a fundamental factor shaping the interjectively-shared discursive schema about the environment. In this vein, Foucault (2003: 61) argued that discourse does not merely describe "race," but creates it; discourse describes people as belonging to either dominant and subordinate "superrace" and "subrace" categories. Moreover, Feagin and O'Brien (2003), Hill (2008), Myers (2005), Eliasoph (1999) and many others have examined the narrative strategies that enable White actors to "... make their world more coherent and comprehensible ... and promote their sense of privilege and well-being" (Hill 2008: 34). Howard (2000: 371–72) put it plainly by writing that identities "are thus strategic social constructions created through interaction, with social and material consequences ... At the most basic level, the point is simply that people actively produce identity through their talk."

Such talk, within the organizational setting of VPF, enables members to together hold aloft an idealized story about Whiteness, often built in distinction to BAME people. Yet, members' ability to attain that ideal was tenuous. They continually told and retold stories that made meaning of their and others' lives through evoking salient racial boundaries. These narratives reinforced members' own sense of what has been called "hegemonic whiteness" (Lewis, 2004; Hughey, 2012, 2010): racial ideals that function as a "seemingly 'neutral' or 'pre-cultural' yardstick against which cultural behavior, norms, and values are measured. . . . Undoubtedly, hegemonic whiteness is not merely an ideological or cultural artifact but carries material rewards" (Lewis, 2004: 634). The notion of ideal or "hegemonic" Whiteness traces to Connell's (1995) work on "hegemonic masculinity" which denotes how specific social performances of identity become dominant. While the concept of hegemonic identities have been critiqued (cf. Demetriou 2001; Wetherell and Edley 1999), I do not use the term as a proxy for measuring static ideologies or abstract values. I instead refer to both explicit and implicit narratives about *who* authentic White people are and expectations for *how* they should behave in relation to specific topics (e.g. nature, pollution, environmental disaster, etc.). While this research demonstrates that a particular ideal of Whiteness is regularly evoked to guide "proper" modes of engagement with environmental disasters, it is now an imperative for scholarship on environmentalism to examine the extent to which racialized narratives and boundaries shape and guide the identities and behaviors far beyond VPF.

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