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The Art of Academic Writing

December 13, 2017

The Environmental Movement: From the Privileged's Romanticization to the Marginalized's Necessity

Eliza Griswold wrote in the New York Times that Rachel Carson, author of the 1962 popular science book *Silent Spring*, which warns against the dangers of unregulated pesticide use, ignited the environmental movement (Griswold, 2012; Carson, 1962). The article credited Carson as the founder of modern ecology due to the nationwide reception of her book that and the policy changes that followed its publication (Griswold, 2012). But Griswold's claim seems wrong. Asserting that *Silent Spring*'s publication was the key factor in popularizing the modern environmental movement discredits Carson's predecessors like John Muir, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau whose environmental admiration and literature resemble Carson's. It would seem easy, then, to discredit Griswold's claim by arguing that modern environmentalism began before Carson's book, proposing the inclusion of these people in the movement. Yet, the work of Muir, Emerson, and Thoreau is different from the main environmental narratives today that Carson helped inspire, including the protests at Standing Rock; the water crisis in Flint, Michigan; and the movement against environmental racism. Muir, Emerson, and Thoreau's motivations for environmentalism came from an idealized view of nature which their social privilege allowed. Motivation in the main sector of today's movement derives from an immediate need for environmental action due to cultural or health

problems caused by the societal oppression of a group of people. It is unfair to include the male environmental writers of the 19th and 20th century in the movement that today represents protesters in marginalized communities. Rather, there are two major phases of environmentalists within the movement: first, the privileged Muir, Emerson, and Thoreau inspired by a romanticized idea of nature and second, the oppressed Sioux tribe, Flint residents, and black communities motivated by immediate cultural or health needs. Between these two states is a liminal phase marked by Carson who exhibited traits that resemble the movements before and after her.

John Muir, a famous environmentalist in the late 1800s and predecessor of Carson, benefited from some circumstantial assets that led him to value nature in a romanticized and aesthetically based way, qualifying his experience with environmentalism as different from the experiences of many environmentalists today. Muir immigrated from Scotland to rural Wisconsin, both locations far from the polluted and industrializing American cities of the time period (Muir, 1987). Muir notes the ease of his immigration by mentioning in his autobiography that people in the U.S. accepted his poor immigrant family with the kindest welcome (Muir, 1987). He additionally attended the University of Wisconsin in 1860, a higher education privilege that only 0.00024% of the U.S. population obtained at that time (Muir, 1987; Snyder, 1993; Department of the Interior, 1872). Moreover, in his later years, Muir was able to travel all around the Americas, a privilege many working Americans at the time would have lacked due to maintaining job security (Fox, 1985). But this argument is not to say that Muir did not face hardship in his life. In Muir's autobiography, he describes how his teachers in Scotland and his father would "whip" or "thrash" him for misbehavior or academic failure and how he worked

long, physically exhausting days on the farm in Wisconsin, (Muir, 1987). While this grueling labor and physical abuse could certainly have motivated his travels, Muir's identity as a free white male allowed him the privilege to leave his domestic circumstance to travel, an ability that women and people of color at that time lacked. By the time Muir had graduated, the idea of the Cult of Domesticity had pervaded American society, imposing restrictive roles on women to make them confined to the home, submissive, and devoted only to family (Smith-Rosenberg, 1998). Meanwhile, black people in the U.S. were still enslaved (Smith-Rosenberg, 1998). Thus, Muir, despite facing substantial and valid hardships, benefited from a social status due to his identity that allowed him to live far from factories and pollution, receive higher education, and explore the world. Much different from environmentalists today, Muir could fight for the environment because of its sheer beauty. Muir's advocacy for protecting Hetch Hetchy's natural landscape because of its aesthetic and healing qualities in the 1908 controversy over the valley's fate symbolizes this characterization of his activism (Righter, 2005). Just like the other environmentalists of his time, Muir cultivated his love for the environment consequent of identity privileges he had in life that allowed him to see the world, and so he became an environmentalist out of appreciation for nature, not out of any pressing health or cultural necessity.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau both additionally fall into this category of privileged mid-1800s environmentalists motivated by nature's beauty. Emerson and Thoreau both went to elite, private high schools in Massachusetts before attending Harvard University: Emerson graduated from the Boston Latin School and Thoreau graduated from Concord Academy (Arkle, 1900; Schneier, 2015). Although neither man was particularly wealthy, their

education and statuses as free white men allowed them to have a greater variety of social abilities than black people and women at the time, two groups that faced significant societal and systematic oppression due to gender roles and enslavement (Smith-Rosenberg, 1998). This mobility let the two men spend extended amounts of time hiking and writing at Walden Pond (Schneier, 2015). It is clear through Emerson's "Nature" and Thoreau's "Walden" that the two developed idealized feelings about the environment that motivated their sentiments and literature about the issue (Emerson, 2008; Thoreau, 2005). These environmentalists, like Muir, had romanticized views of nature, and their privilege allowed them to not be directly threatened by the consequences of environmental destruction. The common perspective of this era of environmentalists is quite different from a view among many environmentalists today.

Now, cultural necessity and imminent health problems motivate many environmentalists' work as shown by environmental issues such as the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, and fossil fuel divestment. In late 2016, the United States government contemplated allowing a Texas-based energy company to build the DAPL's route to transport 570,000 barrels of crude oil daily through the Mississippi River from North Dakota to Illinois (Worland, 2016). This proposed route ultimately exposed environmental injustice issues imposed against indigenous Americans. In this case, the marginalized group was the Standing Rock Sioux tribe of about 10,000 people who reside on a reservation in North and South Dakota (Worland, 2016). Not only did the route traverse the primary drinking water source for the tribe thereby risking the cleanliness of their water supplies, it additionally disregarded treaty rights and traveled underneath communities, farms, tribal land, sensitive natural areas, wildlife habitat, and a sacred burial ground (Kennedy, 2017; Naylor 2017). Standing Rock tribe activists, as well

as many other American environmentalists in solidarity, protested the construction of the pipeline for weeks (Purdy, 2016). The environmentalists in this scenario battled their case not necessarily because of nature's beauty but because the land carried significant cultural values and because the health of the community was at stake (Worland, 2016). The Obama administration announced a stance against the pipeline and said officials were looking for ways to reroute the project which gave hope to the protestors, yet the Trump administration came into power quickly after and stated its approval of the pipeline, pleasing supporters who believed the pipeline would lead to lower energy costs and create jobs (Plumer, 2016; Naylor, 2017). The U.S. government's neglect to honor both the land's cultural significance and the Standing Rock Sioux tribe's health further enforced the centuries-long mistreatment and marginalization of Native Americans in the country. Many of the activists fighting at Standing Rock did not have the same privileges as Muir, Emerson, and Thoreau, so their advocacy was not rooted in romanticism but rather, as seen through their protests, in their own rights and justice.

This idea of necessary environmentalism appears as well in the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. In 2014, the city with a majority of black citizens and poverty rate of 40% experienced a financial state of emergency, making all budgetary decisions the responsibility of the state of Michigan rather than of Flint's City Council or mayor (Ganim, 2016). In this crisis, officials in Flint explored options for less expensive water and decided to switch from Lake Huron water from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department to building and using Flint's own pipeline (Kennedy, 2016; Ganim, 2016). Despite the residents' almost immediate complaints that the water looked, smelled, and tasted unusual, city and state officials refused to acknowledge the problem (Kennedy, 2016). In this case, the effects of Michigan's incorrect implementation

and weak enforcement of the Safe Water Drinking Act on this oppressed community resulted in high levels of lead in Flint's drinking water (Butler, Benson, & Scammell, 2016). This instance of dangerous, lead-contaminated tap water in an economically depressed community composed mostly of racial minorities is not uncommon and in fact highlights an environmental injustice trend of risking the health of marginalized groups through environmental maltreatment (Butler, Benson, & Scammell, 2016). Michigan Congressman Dan Kildee noted at the time that the problems many industrial towns and cities similar to Flint report are often ignored and forgotten in favor of economic gains elsewhere (Ganim, 2016). When the Flint community advocated for justice and proper treatment of Earth's natural resources, it was due to the immediate impact on the community's health, not necessarily because the community found nature aesthetically pleasing. Flint's issue paired with Standing Rock shows how this group of modern environmentalists is motivated by necessity and not by beauty like their environmental predecessors were.

A recent movement by black Americans in favor of fossil fuel divestment demonstrates similar ideas. Due to persistent discriminatory housing, education, and employment issues, communities of color and people with lower incomes face a disproportionate amount of immediate threats from climate change including drought, reduced air quality, illness, and hazards for construction workers, farmers, and fishers (Colon, 2016). In August of 2016, a coalition of over 50 activist groups for people of color entitled the Movement for Black Lives released a platform that demanded environmental justice for the black community (Bogado, 2016). The statement detailed how black people are among the most affected by climate change, lack of access to breathable air, and control over our food system with black, poor, and trans

people of color affected at even more disproportional rates ("Invest-divest," n.d.). The statement additionally explained how landfills and incinerators have historically been built near black communities in the United States, putting these groups at higher health risk rates consequent of pollution (Bogado, 2016). Similar to the Standing Rock Tribe and the residents of Flint, this group of marginalized Americans argued for environmental activism out of necessity for the health of the oppressed black community, a motivation starkly contrasted to the inspirations for Muir, Emerson, and Thoreau.

These two chapters in the environmental movement are evidently dissimilar as illustrated by the environmentalists' motivations and means of advocacy, leaving Carson somewhere in the middle. Carson had similar privileges to her predecessors that allowed her to avoid personal, immediate hardships caused by environmental degradation and consequently value nature's beauty. Yet, she relates to today's environmentalists in that she began to turn the movement toward a focus on the negative effects environmental destruction has on human communities, making Carson the symbol of a transition between these two phases.

Carson had the privilege of affording and attending Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham University) in 1924 as well as Johns Hopkins University for graduate studies in Zoology (Lear, 2015). Although Carson's family struggled to afford college, it was at least in economic circumstances during the Depression to allow a child to attend college and gain an education rather than work (Lear, 2015). This ability to go to receive higher education placed Carson well academically above her female peers. The U.S. Census states that in 1940, about 20 years after Carson attended Penn College for Women, the percentage of women who obtained four or more years of college was a mere 3.8, almost half the percentage of men in the same

category (U.S. Census, 1999). The percentage of black women specifically was smaller, at about 1% (Snyder, 1993). The census lacks data on this topic from before 1940, but it can be reasonably assumed that the percentage of college-educated women was even less, making Carson a truly rare woman of her time consequent of both her race and unique academic path. This advantage to pursue specific academic interests is perhaps what allowed Carson to gain a very idealized view of nature. Carson's romanticism shows in her 1961 book that poetically sentimentalizes the environment for its aesthetic value entitled *The Sea Around Us* (Carson, 1962). Additionally, the opening chapter of *Silent Spring* ornately describes an ideal world in which humans and nature live harmoniously (Carson, 1962). Carson was thus able to value saving the Earth because of her appreciation for its beauty and, due to her education and eventual success, did not need to advocate for the Earth out of imperative as many groups part of the modern environmental movement do today.

Carson still cannot be so easily grouped with the environmentalists that predated her. While Carson did have the unique ability to attend college unlike many of her white female peers and even more unlike many black females, she had qualities that separated her from the romanticized environmentalism that Muir, Thoreau, and Emerson exhibited. In *Silent Spring*, Carson raised a key aspect of ecology unmentioned by the men before her: environmental degradation's negative effects on human health and communities (Carson, 1962). The first chapter of the book describes a grim future for American neighborhoods that features diseased families, dead wildlife, and a lack of food all consequent of the people's destructive actions toward the environment (Carson, 1962). Although Carson did romanticize and idealize the Earth in her books, this warning about the negative effects to humans that mistreating nature would

bring relates her to the environmentalists today. Today, due to anthropogenic ecological degradation, communities do face hardships similar to those Carson predicted. These communities fighting for their justice lead the way in many of our environmental news stories and conversations today (Clarke, 2016). Carson did not face any of these hardships herself, and she could not have predicted how these consequences would more harshly affect marginalized communities; yet, Carson still was the first to raise awareness of the topic, shifting the environmental conversation away from romanticism and toward the consequences on humans. This shift is clear in the kind of policy present before and after Carson: antecedent to Carson's success, environmental laws were mostly focused on national parks and nature's beautification (Andrews, 2006). In the aftermath of Carson's success came environmental laws concentrated on managing humans' relationship to natural resources like the 1970 Clean Air Act and the 1972 Clean Water Act that both administer national goals for pollution standards (Andrews, 2006; Purdy, 2016).

In our times where social justice and privilege are becoming more popular conversations, it is important to recognize the societal advantages many early environmentalists had and to consider what people were left out of the dialogue because they lacked similar privileges. John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Rachel Carson were all white, educated individuals who cultivated an appreciation for the aesthetic of nature. While of course these people all faced hardships, they experienced a series of specific benefits due to their identities that allowed them to be successful and live lives that many marginalized people during their times simply could not. Muir, Thoreau, Emerson, and Carson successfully worked to educate the larger community about the importance and beauty of the Earth, and their effect on the country

should not be discredited. Carson took this environmental activism a step further by bringing human community health aspects of environmentalism into the conversation, making way for awareness of environmental justice issues to develop as environmental destruction has continued to more negatively affect marginalized communities. The environmental movement prevalent today is entirely different from the movement to which these 19th and 20th century authors contributed. Now, the most popular environmental news stories are those that feature environmentalists motivated by necessity, as activists in Standing Rock, Flint, and the Movement for Black Lives were (Clarke, 2016). Although Rachel Carson paved the way for the discussion of these kinds of issues, she did not face environmental discrimination and did not advocate for environmentalism because of immediate cultural or health concerns. Therefore, Eliza Griswold is false in crediting Rachel Carson as the founder of the environmental movement; in fact, Carson was more the bridge between an environmental movement before her that focused on aesthetic value and an environmental movement that followed her that focuses on justice and health.

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