ANTI-OPPRESSION SELF-EXPRESSION: AN A/R/TOGRAPHIC UNDERSTANDING OF BLACK AND BROWN YOUTH'S CONCEPTUALIZATION(S) OF ~~NATURE~~

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Experiential and Outdoor Education

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March 2022

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ANTI-OPPRESSION SELF-EXPRESSION: AN A/R/TOGRAPHIC UNDERSTANDING OF

BLACK AND BROWN YOUTH'S CONCEPTUALIZATION(S) OF ~~NATURE~~

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Western Carolina University (January 2022)

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As the world's population becomes increasingly urban (United Nations, 2019), there is an urgent need to design cities that facilitate nature connection for youth residents (Cox et al., 2017; Zuniga-Teran et al., 2019), particularly youth of color who experience disproportionate impacts of poor environmental quality and inequitable access to nature due to a history of racist policies in urban design (Jennings et al., 2017; Rigolon, 2016, 2017). Despite historic and current racist policies and experiences in the outdoors, Black and Brown[1] people do access and enjoy nature on their own terms in ways that may not necessarily assimilate into white cultural norms and preferences (Davis, 2018). In an effort to make whiteness, white ideas, and white preferences— which are usually translucent and "normal" in white supremacy culture—opaque, I use ~~nature~~ (with strikethrough) to indicate placing the concept of "nature" under erasure (Derrida, 2016). The ways people conceptualize, understand, and make relationship with/in/about ~~nature~~ drip with emotions and spirituality; our very humanity. These meanings are often hard to explain in words alone, our language falls short of representation. Making and experiencing art can promote non-traditional methods of expression, communication, and meaning-making reverberating into our souls in much the same way as ~~nature~~ can. For these reasons, I used art as a methodology and a method to uncover the meanings and relationships people have with ~~nature~~ at the intersection of racial identity. I sought to understand what ~~nature~~ means for Black and Brown youth in Asheville to ensure that efforts to improve equitable access to ~~nature~~ are the most authentic, relevant, and useful to the people impacted by this work. I used the arts-entangled methodology of a/r/tography (Schultz & Legg, 2019; Springgay et al., 2005) to conduct research in partnership *with* youth (rather than *on*) and to decolonize and interrupt extractive and reductive approaches to research. Youth responded to prompts by creating artistic pieces and making brief artist statements about their pieces. My role was "researcher as curator," organizing the collection and framing youth's art in Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Theory. This approach decentered the power I held as a white researcher and attempted to distribute power more equitably to the Black and Brown youth co-researchers. Additionally, I kept a personal reflexive journal in which I responded to my own prompts related to how my social identity influences my conceptualization of ~~nature~~ and my approach to environmental education as a white

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[1] "Black and Brown" is used throughout this study to describe the population. It is an emic term used by the organization I am partnering with: Asheville Writers in the Schools and Community.

artist/researcher/teacher. Using Creative Analytic Practice (CAP) (Parry & Johnson, 2007), I represented the results and discussion of this research as an art zine which challenges viewers to consider how the viewer's own social identities influence how they conceptualize ~~nature~~ and invites the broader community to participate in creating art around what ~~nature~~ means.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Close your eyes and imagine yourself spending time with nature. *Spend a moment allowing yourself to fully experience the sights, sounds, smells, textures, temperatures, and tastes of being with nature. Where are you? What physical features are present? What are you doing? Who else is there? How do you feel?*

Now think about who you are. Think of your past experiences related to nature. Where did you grow up? How did your family and friends introduce you to nature, if at all? How much time did you spend in nature a week? Where was nature in relation to your home? Did your socioeconomic status influence your ideas of and relationship to nature? Do your current conceptualizations of nature align with or stray from the "traditional" popular view of "nature?"

Think of your preferences. What do you consider not nature*? One might imagine nature as a place filled with lush green plants, but then, is the surface of the sea not nature? If you think of nature as a place, does that mean a bird is not nature? Is the nest a bird builds considered nature? What about the nests that humans build out of steel, concrete, and asphalt for our own safety and comfort? Do you think of nature as an object? Then, what about emotion? Spirituality? Art? If you find yourself drawing lines around some of these—why?*

As it is conceptualized in the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, "nature"—and particularly nature in urban environments—tends to refer to greenways, city parks, and other publicly accessed green spaces. Some ideas of "nature" in the literature include excursions out of urban environments into more "natural" areas of wilderness to escape civilization and technology (Doerr, 2018), like federal and state parks, protected forests, and scenic waterways. The benefits

of access to nature are numerous and well represented across scholarly literature (Chawla, 2015; Frumkin et al., 2017; Kondo et al., 2018; US Forest Service, 2018). These benefits include positive physical and mental health outcomes (James et al., 2016; Seltenrich, 2015), sustainable behaviors and environmental health (Otto & Pensini, 2017; Zylstra et al., 2014), positive youth development (Chawla, 2015; Williams & Dixon, 2013), improved academic performance (Chawla et al., 2014; Lieberman & Hoody, 1998), and social health, community cohesion and resiliency (French et al., 2019; Kondo et al., 2017; Tidball, 2012; Zelenski et al., 2015). Considering these vast and interconnected positive outcomes of human proximity to and time spent in nature (Frumkin et al., 2017; White et al., 2019), there is a real need to design cities that facilitate nature connection for children[2] living in urban environments (Cox et al., 2017; Zuniga-Teran et al., 2019). This need is compounded for children of color who experience disproportionate impacts of poor environmental quality and inequitable access to nature due to a history of racist policies in urban design (Jennings et al., 2017; Rigolon, 2016, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated long-standing inequities and injustices in American society, particularly among racial groups pushed to the margins and low socioeconomic groups (Gould & Wilson, 2020; van Dorn et al., 2020). Of the many complex and interrelated racial disparities and injustices that emerge from a long history of racist policies (Banzhaf et al., 2019; Gaskin et al., 2004; Noguera, 2001), safe access to nature has become a salient issue in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Parks are seeing near record-breaking attendance, yet people of color and low-income families have a harder time finding and accessing outdoor spaces close to home (Hwang, 2020). Lack of safe access to nature has long been an issue experienced by Black and Brown people living in the United States (Jennings et

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[2] For this paper, "children" and "youth" are interchangeable and left intentionally vague, can be synonymous with "young people," and generally refers to those under 19 years old.

al., 2016; Landau et al., 202cr0; Larsen et al., 2020; Schelhas, 2002). Disparities in the representation of Black and Brown people in nature are produced by a number of barriers in access, including real and perceived racial discrimination (Hudson et al., 2018; Kisiel & Hibler, 2020; Lee & Scott, 2016), clashing cultural biases, normalization of white cultural preferences (Doerr, 2018), limited socioeconomic resources (Scott, 2013), and real and perceived safety in outdoor spaces (Outley & Floyd, 2002). Despite the lack of representation in the outdoors, Black and Brown people do, in fact, seek out, use, and enjoy nature on their terms in ways that may not necessarily assimilate into white cultural norms (J. Davis, 2018; Finney, 2014). For example, Doerr (2018) described a racially mixed group of college students hiking up a mountain to watch the moon rise during an alternative spring break service trip. At the summit, the self-identified "not outdoorsy" Black and Brown students made phone calls to share about their experience with friends and family back home, which the self-identified "outdoorsy" white students complained was infringing upon their preference for experiencing the moonrise with spiritual reverence, in silence and without technology. The "not outdoorsy" students' preferences were framed as deficiencies against the dominant narrative of what is desirable in connecting with nature in that context. J. Davis (2018) traces racism in dominant narratives of nature or "the outdoors" back to the erasure of Black people's presence in and relationship to the outdoors that have been written out of federal policies, like the Wilderness Act.

I have designed this thesis to challenge the social construction of nature through a social justice lens with a particular focus on race and racism. I do this to ensure that any efforts which aim to increase racially equitable access to nature and its associated positive outcomes are not unconsciously reproducing hegemonic ideas of nature and thus further restricting access and inclusivity. My research was conducted in partnership with Black and Brown youth artists, ages

8-12, who participated in arts-based youth development programming centering the leadership and creativity of Black and Brown youth through the Black-led non-profit Asheville Writers in the Schools and Community (AWITSC). I partnered with a site already doing related work with this population to build on the site's established relationships, trust, and rapport with the communities the program and participants were a part of. Throughout my study, I reflected on my racially privileged positionality and how the knowledge co-created in this study could inform anti-oppressive practices in art, research, and teaching related to "nature."

Tensions of power and privilege emerged, even in the planning process, as members of my thesis committee, staff at the research site, and interested individuals I conversed with repeatedly asked me, "*Why?*" Why am I doing this work? Why am I the right person to do this work? These gentle probes into my axiology challenged me considerably, as I struggled with whether I *was* the right person to do this work. As a young queer white woman, I hold memberships in several dominant and marginalized identity groups. My own liberation (even as a white person) is bound up with the liberation of others from interlocking oppressive structures (hooks, 1994; McGhee, 2021), especially as they manifest in the outdoors. A feminist ethic of care (Collins, 2000) permeated my desire to take this project on, as I feel it is my responsibility as a white person to disrupt unconsciously reproduced racial oppression in my practice as an environmental educator and in efforts to increase equitable access to nature. I reject white feminisms which have historically only reproduced oppression in its many forms and left Black and Brown women behind (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 2007). Instead, I take up the teachings and guidance of Black feminists and critical race theorists to learn from/about our points of difference rather than reinforcing a necessity for overwhelming commonalities to build coalitions for our collective liberation (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 2007).

The Social Construction of Race

Race is a social construct that was created and is *re*created to produce power hierarchies of people (Delgado et al., 2017; Kendi, 2019), exploiting those who are placed at the bottom to privilege those who have placed themselves at the top. Race is an ever-shifting concept and the language used to discuss race also shifts with time. I am faced with many choices in how I use language to communicate about race and racial inequities in this paper. The choices I make in my language can either reproduce racial oppression or actively resist it (Kendi, 2019). Aligning with the language of the program through which I completed my research[3], I used "Black and Brown" to describe people who identify as being people of color living in the United States, including but not limited to people who are part of the African diaspora, Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, Latino/a and Chicano/a people, Asian people, and Pacific Islanders. I recognize that these racialized groups are not a monolith, neither collectively as "people of color" nor within any individual racial group. Each group and individual have unique experiences of oppression and resistance in their relationships to white supremacy culture and I am conscious that lumping together racialized groups under broadly encompassing terms like "Black and Brown people" and "people of color" risks erasing unique experiences of individuals and groups. Still, I was interested in highlighting the perspectives of individuals who identify as members of racialized groups that are othered by white supremacy and creating space in the research process for the unique insights and perspectives that a kaleidoscope of identities can create—both as individuals and as a collective brought together—to explore alternative conceptualization(s) of "nature." While I have done my best to use language to describe racial identities appropriately

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[3] I introduce my research site in further detail in Chapter Three. Unlike the program, I capitalize Black and Brown to align with American Psychological Association style guide. Conversely, I leave white lowercased in resistance to white supremacy culture.

and respectfully, the very concept of race is deeply interwoven with oppression. Race cannot be discussed in isolation from oppression. I am conscious that my choices may be/become inappropriate as society's relationship(s) to race and the language surrounding race evolves.

Decentering Nature

Ideas of what nature is and whose ideas of nature count have been critiqued before, particularly around the concept of "wilderness" as it was constructed in the 1800's amidst the romanticism movement and the backdrop of a closing American frontier (Cronon, 1996). Wilderness[4] is still widely conceptualized as sacred outdoor places in need of protection to maintain the illusion of remaining "untouched" by humanity (effectively erasing First People's relationships with the land they have stewarded since time immemorial) and serving as cure for the scourge that is civilization (Cronon, 1996). The myth of human-nature separation is codified in American relationships with nature both in and through the creation of policies like the Wilderness Act (J. Davis, 2018) and in hanging conservation efforts on "*save the ___*" campaigns which use an endangered animal of choice as the poster child and stand-in for "wilderness," ultimately reproducing the mentality that humans and nature are not only separate but also opposites (Cronon, 1996). Whereas Cronon's (1996) critique primarily focused on challenging the notion that "wild" nature is separate from "civilized" humans, I turn the coin to focus on challenging the idea that urban living is separate from nature which simultaneously challenges hegemonic white preferences around "wild" nature.

Nature means different things to different people. It is a concept that resists definition, or at the very least, changes with every person asked. Conceptualizations of nature and relationships with nature are shaped by an individual's context, including various socializing

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[4] "Wilderness" is now often referred to as "biological diversity" (Cronon, 1996).

forces related to identity, personal history, the opinions of others, education, culture, even language. This means conceptualizations of nature may overlap in areas of shared identity, with those having common experiences, and among those of the same culture. While dominant ideas of nature often refer to designated areas of publicly accessed green spaces and wilderness, I chose not to offer a definition of nature in this research, as my inquiry centers on understanding what nature *is*. To introduce this paper using my own definition would not only run counter to my purpose, it would also center my personal conceptualization of nature when I mean to understand that of others. Understanding the concept of nature through multiple perspectives is necessary to ensure that nature—in its many forms and definitions—can be accessed and enjoyed by all people in the ways that are most comfortable and culturally relevant, regardless of whether their definitions of nature align with dominant ideas or not. Centering dominant ideas of nature in conservation, recreation and leisure, urban design, etc. at the exclusion of all others only reinforces normalization of the dominant group's preferences. A limited definition of nature runs the risk of pathologizing ways of understanding, accessing, and experiencing nature that do not align with that of the dominant norm and ultimately limits who can access nature and the positive outcomes associated with time spent with/in nature. Because language shapes conceptualizations, even using the term "nature" already influences how one might begin thinking about what it is. Of course, it is not possible, nor do I desire to eliminate my personal conceptualization of nature from this research. I move forward in this paper without formally defining "nature." I do so intentionally to create an opening through which others can consciously insert their own personal conceptualizations of nature while holding these concepts loosely. I prefer ~~nature~~ (with strikethrough) to indicate that the term is under erasure (Derrida, 2016). Placing a term under erasure indicates not that the current understandings of the term are void, no, we need the current

understandings to be able to talk about it. But, putting the term under erasure acknowledges that these fall short, that there are power structures creating these understandings; we are interrogating these very structures and meanings with erasure and noting that the meaning of ~~nature~~ is in flux, contingent. The act of putting something under erasure destabilizes one standard, stagnant, firm definition of it. How might one communicate or express their ideas of something, like ~~nature~~, that is so personal, emotional, even spiritual? Art is one powerful way to understand and communicate conceptualizations of ~~nature~~.

Art as a Methodology to Understand Experiences with ~~Nature~~

The ways people conceptualize, understand, and make relationship with/in ~~nature~~ drip with emotions, spirituality, our very humanity. Doing art and experiencing art reverberates into our souls in much the same way as ~~nature~~ can. Art is a way of processing, synthesizing, and expressing our personal experiences. It can be used to reinforce and maintain social norms or challenge and transform them (Milbrandt, 2010). Art can move our emotions and sometimes move us into action. Social movements have used art "to carry out framing work, mobilize resources, communicate information about themselves, and, finally as a symbol of the movement" (Adams, 2002, p. 22). Used as a research methodology, art can disrupt patriarchal and colonial approaches to data collection, analysis, and representation (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018) which strip data from context, codes and condenses data into themes, and represents data reductively in bite-sized pieces through a written manuscript. Art evokes collaborative meaning-making even when languages, cultures, and personal experiences may differ. For these reasons, I used art as a methodology and a method to uncover the meanings and relationships people have with ~~nature~~ at the intersection of racial identity and city living.

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~~Nature~~ in Asheville, NC

With the understanding that safe access to ~~nature~~ is a human right and evidence demonstrating racial disparities in safe access to ~~nature~~ (Landau et al., 2020; Rigolon, 2016), this thesis made a case to begin examining equitable access to ~~nature~~ for Black and Brown youth in Asheville, NC by first asking, "What does 'nature' *mean* to youth in these communities?" Despite historic racist policies and experiences in the outdoors, Black and Brown people do access and enjoy ~~nature~~ on their own terms in ways that may or may not necessarily assimilate into white cultural norms (J. Davis, 2018). It is imperative that city officials, leaders, and organizations providing services related to ~~nature~~ access continuously examine and disrupt hegemonic cultural biases to design spaces and programs that honor the numerous ways people perceive, access, use, and create relationships with ~~nature~~. Art is a powerful method of social justice projects and provides a way for youth to self-express their meanings and ideas of ~~nature~~ as counter-stories to dominant white narratives in this research. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to highlight Black and Brown youth's conceptualization(s) of ~~nature~~ as counter-stories to dominant white preferences for ~~nature~~ in initiatives to improve racially equitable access to ~~nature~~ for Asheville, NC residents. The research question that guided this inquiry was How do Black and Brown youth living in Asheville define, access, and experience ~~nature~~?

I begin with a review of the literature on the benefits of equitable access to nature, the racial disparities in access to nature, the barriers that produce these disparities, and strategies to improve equitable access. I also offer a brief review of the theoretical approaches I used in this research: Critical Race Theory (Delgado et al., 2017) and Black Feminist Theory (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994; Lorde, 2007). Following the literature review, I discuss my methodology and methods of inquiry. I approached this study using the arts-entangled methodology of a/r/tography

(Schultz & Legg, 2019; Springgay et al., 2005), experiencing and writing about the process through the lenses of Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory. I represent the research results as a publicly distributed art zine using Creative Analytic Practice (Berbary, 2015; Parry & Johnson, 2007). I close with my reflections of the tensions and conflicts that emerged through this research as I navigated the often-conflicting needs of my institution's fixed patriarchal requirements for conducting research and the fluid needs of a community-based organization doing youth development programming and social justice work.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In keeping with the artful nature of my research, I open this chapter by representing the findings of my literature review in the form of a poem. I summarize my findings from the literature next to the corresponding verse:

	Humans are a part of nature and we are intimately connected to it. We need nature to live happy (Chawla et al., 2014; Pritchard et al., 2020), healthy (Chawla, 2015; Kellert, 2005; White et al., 2019), successful (Dadvand et al., 2018; Faber Taylor et al., 2002; Lieberman & Hoody, 1998), and community-oriented lives (Kondo et al., 2017; Otto & Pensini, 2017; Zelenski et al., 2015; Zylstra et al., 2014).
Touching earth.	
Breathing wind.	
Water flows in veins	
through landscapes of each body.	
Towers sprout.	The world is swiftly urbanizing (United Nations, 2019; US Census Bureau, 2010) and this process generally has not been thoughtful about maintaining human-nature connections (Cox et al., 2017; Zuniga-Teran et al., 2019), especially for youth (Aziz & Said, 2017; Cleland etal., 2010; Louv, 2008; Zhang et al., 2014; Zuniga-Teran et al., 2019).
Pavement creeps.	
Wheeled boxes rocket down the street.	
In the hustle, youth don't meet	
the dandelion at their feet.	
	Informed by Critical race theory (Delgado et al., 2017), my study examines the relationships of race, racism, and power and it contains an activist dimension. I reference the historic racist policy of redlining neighborhoods in Asheville (City of Asheville GIS Dept., n.d.), which contributes to racially inequitable access to nature. Paralleling this, I use the metaphor of white chalk outlines to represent the violent ways white people have protected spaces that have historically been explicitly or implicitly reserved for white people (Kisiel & Hibler, 2020; Lee & Scott, 2016).
Red lining. Homes.	
White tracing. Humans.	
A wall. Bars.	
Connection	
to abundance and each other.	

Painting futures,

Singing sobs.

Weaving threads of resistance

'round monument[al] sins

time cannot transcend.

My approach to this study is also deeply informed by Black Feminist Theory, specifically the writings of Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Audre Lorde (2007), Brittany Cooper (2018), and Nikki Kendall (2020). The artful approach of this study reflects the creative methods many Black feminist thinkers have used to create and represent their knowledge claims in resistance to white patriarchal institutions which have historically controlled knowledge claims (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018; Collins, 2000; Lorde, 2007). This verse also references the Vance Monument in Asheville's Pack Square which the city removed as one step towards racial equity.

Counting dimes…

not making "cents"

of distance, cost, and relevance

to safely go far from one's home

for green areas to roam.

Disparities in the representation of people of color in nature are produced by a number of barriers in access, including real and perceived racial discrimination (Hudson et al., 2018; Kisiel & Hibler, 2020; Lee & Scott, 2016), normalization of white cultural preferences and clashing cultural biases (Doerr, 2018), limited socioeconomic resources (Scott, 2013), and real and perceived safety in outdoor spaces (Finney, 2014; Outley & Floyd, 2002).

Sharing meals,

laughter spills.

Still persevere. Connections will.

Soles caress earth through Jordans

just as well.

Despite the lack of representation in the outdoors, people of color do, in fact, seek out, use, and enjoy nature on their terms in ways that may not necessarily assimilate into white cultural norms (J. Davis, 2018; Finney, 2014). Rather than having some "deficiency in connectedness to nature," what is *actually* lacking is white people making room for the presence of counter-narratives which honor how Black and Brown people might prefer to conceptualize, access, and experience nature in ways that might be different than dominant white preferences.

Life is cycling,	Youth can be powerful leaders driving initiatives to connect children to nature (Derr et al., 2016; Jennings et al., 2017; Rigolon, 2016, 2017). Because I was interested in racially equitable access to nature for children living in the city of Asheville, my study centered the perspectives of Black and Brown youth residents in our city.
fruits are ripening.	
Snow pea toes press soil	
in sown seeds of hope.	

With the world's population becoming increasingly urban (United Nations, 2019), cities must prioritize equitable access to ~~nature~~. There are numerous positive physical and mental health outcomes related to living near and engaging with ~~nature~~ (Chawla, 2015; Frumkin et al., 2017; Kondo et al., 2018; US Forest Service, 2018). The first section of this review focuses on the need to design cities that facilitate ~~nature~~ connection for children based on the positive outcomes associated with ~~nature~~ access and evidence demonstrating the existence of racial disparities in safe access to ~~nature~~. This is followed with a review of the theoretical approaches that influenced and guided this research: Critical Race Theory (Delgado et al., 2017) and Black Feminist Theory (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994; Lorde, 2007).

Outcomes of Access to ~~Nature~~

A vast and growing body of literature points to the numerous benefits that access to ~~nature~~ has on human health and well-being (Chawla, 2015; Frumkin et al., 2017; Kondo et al., 2018; US Forest Service, 2018). Besides the direct physical and mental health outcomes that lead health care providers to prescribe time in ~~nature~~ to their patients (James et al., 2016; Seltenrich, 2015), engagement with ~~nature~~ also supports students' academic performance (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998), improved cognitive function (Dadvand et al., 2018; Faber Taylor et al., 2002), and social cohesion and community resiliency (French et al., 2019; Kondo et al., 2017; Tidball, 2012; Zelenski et al., 2015). It is suggested that spending at least 120 minutes in natural spaces

each week opens access to many of the health and wellness benefits of being in ~~nature~~ (White et al., 2019). The benefits of ~~nature~~ are not just nice-to-haves. Access to ~~nature~~ and its benefits is of critical necessity. The positive outcomes of ~~nature~~ access are particularly salient during the COVID-19 pandemic, with many parks and outdoor sites seeing near record-breaking attendance as people look for safe ways to get out of the house (Hwang, 2020) and as schools look into outdoor classrooms to support student learning while mitigating viral transmission (Coyle & Bodor, 2020). In fact, the Centers for Disease Control (2020) and Prevention states that being in outdoor spaces is safer than activities taking place indoors with low ventilation of outdoor air. Structuring safe access to the outdoors is an urgent human necessity amid and moving forward following the public health crisis of COVID-19.

With these outcomes in mind, I write under the premise that safe access to ~~nature~~ is a human right. We depend on healthy environments for our own health and wellbeing. Access to ~~nature~~ is a human need that must be met with the same urgency and weight as access to affordable housing, healthcare, clean water and air. In fact, ~~nature~~ is inextricably intertwined with every human need. ~~Nature~~ is as much a part of humanity as the systems we have built within and around it. We draw goods and services from it. ~~Nature~~ heals, teaches, comforts, and provides a space for fun and love. In turn, humans must also respect the natural environment and engage in its sustainable use so that future generations have access to quality natural resources to live healthy and fulfilled lives. For this reason, ~~nature~~ and humans are interdependent. While access to ~~nature~~ is beneficial across all life stages (Douglas et al., 2017), it is perhaps most critical during childhood.

A Need to Connect Children to ~~Nature~~

Children are at a point in development in which they are acutely aware of and susceptible to the influences of their environment. People who develop ~~nature~~ connection in childhood are more likely to feel connected to ~~nature~~ throughout their lives and achieve overall wellbeing, such as feelings of autonomy, vitality, meaning, and personal growth (Pritchard et al., 2020). Lack of ~~nature~~ engagement in childhood has significant and long-term developmental consequences (Kellert, 2005). ~~Nature~~ provides a space to play, learn and thrive. Children can test their limits in ~~nature~~ and find out what they are capable of (Brussoni et al., 2015). ~~Nature~~ facilitates healthy learning and development (Chawla, 2015; Williams & Dixon, 2013). It provides a dynamic space for bodies to get physically active (Chawla, 2015; Christian et al., 2015; Hartig et al., 2014), it reduces stress in students (Chawla et al., 2014), and creates opportunities for children to develop social and cognitive skills, problem solving and creativity (Chawla, 2015; Dadvand et al., 2018). ~~Nature~~ connections in childhood also help instill a lifelong appreciation for the environment which can lead to sustainable behaviors (Otto & Pensini, 2017; Zylstra et al., 2014). In addition to the positive outcomes on children's development and environmental protection, Strife and Downey (2009) further outline children's particular vulnerability to environmental health hazards and the link to subsequent declines in children's health trends. Despite the glaring need to facilitate ~~nature~~ connection at this critical point in development, common discourse suggests that children continue to spend less time outdoors than they have in previous years (Cleland et al., 2010; Louv, 2008), especially residents of urban environments (Cox et al., 2017).

Structural Disconnection from ~~Nature~~

By the year 2050, about 68% of the world's population is expected to live in urban areas compared to 55% in 2018 (United Nations, 2019). In the United States, 80.7% of people lived in

cities in 2010 (US Census Bureau) and if historic trends continue, this number will only grow. These statistics, combined with a vast and growing body of literature that points to the benefits of ~~nature~~ in urban areas, emphasize the need to increase the capacity of cities to support human health and wellbeing through safe access to ~~nature~~. In addition to increasing urbanization, childhood has also moved indoors. Children living in cities have fewer experiences in ~~nature~~ than their rural counterparts and decreasing connection with ~~nature~~ is seen even among children living in rural areas (Zhang et al., 2014). Space for green areas is limited in urban environments with many plots being developed into buildings. Parents' concerns for safety and poor neighborhood walkability may also contribute to children's restricted access of ~~nature~~ in cities (Aziz & Said, 2017; Zuniga-Teran et al., 2019). This is especially true for children growing up in Black, Brown and low socioeconomic households (Rigolon, 2016).

Racial Disparities in Access to ~~Nature~~'s Benefits

The burden of poor environmental quality and inequitable access to ~~nature~~ disproportionately impacts Black, Brown, and low-income communities (Aziz & Said, 2017). Residents of these communities experience numerous disparities in quality of life, including public health and mortality (Assari, 2018; Feagin & Bennefield, 2014; Larsen et al., 2020), wealth and employment (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Margo, 2016), and education (Lee, 2002). As outlined previously, parks and green spaces offer benefits that can help improve outcomes in these areas, but safe access to those spaces is yet another inequality for these communities (Jennings et al., 2016; Landau et al., 2020; Schelhas, 2002). These injustices stem at least partly from historic public policies created in the United States to keep Black and Brown communities from accumulating wealth and to segregate them from higher quality land and investments that whites, particularly of high socioeconomic classes, reserved for themselves

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(Feagin, 2006). The effects of these historic policies continue to this day and Asheville is no exception.

Asheville's Racist History

The city of Asheville, North Carolina is located on the occupied land of the ᏣᏡᎵᏍᎦᏚᏂ Tsalaguwetiyi, or the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (Native Land Digital, n.d.), in the Southern Appalachian region of the United States. Nestled in a region that is renowned for its world-class outdoor recreation opportunities, Asheville is well-recognized for its proximity to ~~nature~~ as well as its cultural art scene. In addition to the many positive outcomes for human health and wellbeing associated with ~~nature~~, ~~nature~~ also holds significant economic value for the city related to the area's well-established and still growing outdoor industry and in attracting people to visit and move here. At the time of this writing, the population of this western North Carolina mountain city is about 92,000 people (US Census Bureau, 2019) and is becoming increasingly white. From its appropriation of traditional Cherokee land and trading of enslaved people at the Buncombe County courthouse (Buncombe County Register of Deeds, n.d.) to decades-long civil rights activism (Parker, 2016) and the recent move to make reparations to its Black communities (N. Davis, 2020), Asheville cannot escape its rich, deep, painful, and too often unacknowledged racial history. Like other cities in the United States, Asheville experiences racial disparities emerging from historic local and national policies that continue to have lasting impacts on residents today, including housing discrimination and urban renewal projects (City of Asheville GIS Department, n.d.). City leaders must prioritize restoring Asheville's Black and Brown communities while also disrupting historic patterns of displacing these communities.

Environmental Gentrification

Green initiatives are typically adopted claiming intentions of moving towards sustainability and solving social issues. Yet, a look at the broader scope of plans in a municipality often reveals they are filled with contradictions on these points (Checker, 2011) and generally overlook or altogether exclude considerations for the homeless population (Dooling, 2009). Some green initiatives, whether intentional or not, have resulted in the displacement of low-income urban residents and people experiencing homelessness through a process called environmental gentrification or ecological gentrification (Checker, 2011; Dooling, 2009). This occurs when municipalities improve or expand green space and related amenities, thereby attracting wealthy white people who move in and increase the cost of living to the point that existing low-income residents can no longer afford to remain there. While not specifically looking at the phenomenon of environmental gentrification, Asheville has already placed second in a list of top 10 fastest gentrifying cities in the U.S. (Boyle, 2017) and thus Black and Brown and low-income city residents are already vulnerable to displacement. Among the strategies to resist environmental gentrification that scholars have identified (Pearsall & Anguelovski, 2016) is for city and park planners to use the concept of "just green enough" in green space improvements (Curran & Hamilton, 2012). The idea being that improvements should be just green enough to improve the quality of life for long-term residents but not so green as to trigger gentrification. It should be noted that this practice fails to address the deeper underlying issue that there is a lack of policies to protect Black, Brown, and low-income residents from displacement by high socioeconomic households. This perpetuates inequalities in accessing ~~nature~~. City officials should use an environmental justice framework to carefully consider *who* actually benefits from initiatives to improve urban green space and implement strategies to avoid

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displacing the very residents who were meant to be served. With this in mind, city planners can begin breaking down barriers to accessing ~~nature~~'s benefits for the most vulnerable communities.

Barriers to Accessing ~~Nature~~

Most literature available on barriers to ~~nature~~ access experienced by racially marginalized groups typically focuses on leisure activities taking place in public parks and green spaces (Floyd et al., 2008; Powers et al., 2020). For these settings, barriers can be physical, financial, social and cultural, among other things (Floyd et al., 2008; Powers et al., 2020; Stodolska et al., 2019) and these barriers can be experienced at individual, interpersonal, contextual, and systemic levels (Stodolska et al., 2019). It is important to note that some barriers emerge from clashing cultural preferences in the ways Black and Brown communities access and recreate outdoors compared to the normalized preferences of the dominant white culture that infrastructure and programming are typically designed for (Arai & Kivel, 2009; Doerr, 2018). Therefore, it is essential that those working towards racially equitable access to ~~nature~~ consider ideas of ~~nature~~ beyond public parks to get a more accurate and encompassing measure of equitable access to ~~nature~~. It is necessary to center Black and Brown communities' ideas of ~~nature~~ in these efforts. The barriers I will discuss in this section are: 1) proximity and quality of ~~nature~~, 2) safety, 3) cost, 4) culture, and 5) racism.

Proximity & Quality

Perhaps the most obvious barrier to accessing ~~nature~~ is physical proximity to natural areas. Many studies have examined proximity of parks and public green spaces to neighborhoods of varying socioeconomic statuses and racial makeup (Duncan et al., 2013; Rigolon, 2016, 2017; Wen et al., 2013; Zuniga-Teran et al., 2019). According to The Trust for Public Land's (n.d.) ParkServe® tool, about 45% of Asheville's residents live within a 10-minute walk of a park—interestingly, about 49% of Asheville's low-income residents live within a 10-minute walk of a

park (compared to 43% and 40% of high- and middle-income residents, respectively). When broken down by race/ethnicity, the percentage of residents of color living within a 10-minute walk of a park (Black, 57%; Native American, 52%; Pacific Islander, 49%; 2 or more races, 47%) is actually higher than that of white residents (44%), with the exception of Latino/a (35%) and Asian (35%) residents (The Trust for Public Land, n.d.). Black, Brown, and low socioeconomic neighborhoods in some cities are closer in proximity to public parks and green spaces, however, these parks typically have less land area and are of lower quality than parks located in close proximity to affluent white neighborhoods (Rigolon, 2016, 2017). Further, many studies show that it is not necessarily proximity or physical distance that predict visitation, but rather the neighborhood's walkability (Zuniga-Teran et al., 2019). Walkability of a neighborhood often has a great deal to do with residents' perceptions of safety.

Safety

Another barrier is the perceived and actual risks in traveling to a natural space as well as those present within outdoor environments. Children's self-guided and autonomous play in ~~nature~~ provides significant benefits for youth development, yet parental concerns for safety can significantly restrict children's independent access of natural environments (Aziz & Said, 2017; Outley & Floyd, 2002; Sefcik et al., 2019). The specific nature of safety concerns varies by location, but often has to do with parents' fear of violence, drugs, and crime, both out of desire to protect children from becoming victims as well as to shield them from potential influences of deviant behavior (Adams et al., 2019; Outley & Floyd, 2002; Stodolska et al., 2019). Safety is also a concern on the minds of youth (Teixeira & Zuberi, 2016). In community listening sessions, Black and Brown residents of Asheville and Buncombe County voiced safety concerns related to problematic culture and conduct of law enforcement officers entering their

communities (Buncombe County Government & The Safety + Justice Challenge, 2019a, 2019b) which could discourage or prevent accessing public spaces. Concerns for safety often lead parents to choose either travelling greater distances outside of the neighborhood to access safer parks or to have children stay home altogether and play indoors or within the boundaries of a yard (Aziz & Said, 2017; Sefcik et al., 2019). This is not to say that ~~nature~~ *cannot* be found or that it is not as valuable *when* found indoors or in yards; an expanded and inclusive definition of ~~nature~~ creates openings for ~~nature~~ to permeate every aspect of human life, not just when seeking recreational opportunities in designated publicly accessed greenspaces. Rather, this points to a restriction of children's independent mobility in seeking ~~nature~~, wherever and in whatever way children might prefer to find and create relationship with ~~nature~~. There is also a financial cost associated with travelling greater distances to safely access ~~nature~~.

Cost

Costs associated with travel to parks and green spaces beyond walkable range can include fare for public transportation or expenses associated with purchasing and maintenance of personal vehicles. In addition, fees associated with facilities or programming that connects children to ~~nature~~ can also be significant barriers for families. Costs of programming and performing certain activities can also include purchase of equipment, clothing, or gear necessary to participate (Scott, 2013). Even at reduced cost or with assistance from scholarships and other financial aid programs, families must carefully prioritize how to spend limited income (Stodolska et al., 2019). Financial assistance programs may become a barrier in themselves if they are only offered in the dominant language or if insensitive processes in applying or receiving the aid deny dignity to potential recipients (Scott, 2013). If Black and Brown families

are to invest time and money in activities that connect children to ~~nature~~, the programs must be culturally relevant.

Culture

Normalization of white preferences regarding what ~~nature~~ is and how ~~nature~~ should be accessed and used marginalizes the many ways that Black and Brown communities may prefer to access and spend time in ~~nature~~ outside of white cultural norms norms (J. Davis, 2018; Doerr, 2018; Finney, 2014). Built on a long history of white male domination, outdoor recreation spaces and programs intended to "connect people to the outdoors" are often unconsciously biased towards white cultural definitions of the outdoors that place high value on wilderness settings and seeking escape from civilization and technology (Doerr, 2018). Views of ~~nature~~ that do not align with the dominant group's views can be seen by the dominant group as a deficiency or in opposition to the "correct" view (Doerr, 2018). Further, the capital held by the dominant group can lead institutions to shift service towards the preferences of the dominant group at the exclusion of other groups (J. Davis, 2018; Powers et al., 2020). This clash of cultural preferences coupled with the power of the dominant culture can ultimately lead to discrimination, overt or otherwise, against Black and Brown communities and individuals in outdoor spaces and related services.

Racism

Racism was woven into the fabric of the US from its very inception, and it permeates through each of the previously described barriers. Although some progress has been made towards equity, racism continues to be a major part of Americans' daily lived experiences (Kisiel & Hibler, 2020; Lee & Scott, 2016). Centuries of backlash and violence directed towards people of color who enter spaces that were explicitly or implicitly reserved for white people, including

outdoor spaces, have significant influence on how and what outdoor activities Black and Brown families participate in (Kisiel & Hibler, 2020; Lee & Scott, 2016). These patterns persist in the present day, notably in the form of white people weaponizing police against Black and Brown people recreating in parks. While members of the dominant white culture convey outdoor spaces and programs as "neutral," available, and desirable to all, historic and current outcomes provide strong evidence otherwise (Doerr, 2018; Outley & Floyd, 2002; Scott, 2013). For this reason, cities must evaluate how current practices support or resist domination of marginalized groups and prioritize implementing strategies that pursue justice and improve equitable access to ~~nature~~ for children of color.

Strategies for Equitable Access to ~~Nature~~

Cities across the US have implemented various strategies and initiatives to evaluate and increase equitable access to ~~nature~~ for their residents (Derr et al., 2016; Jennings et al., 2017; Teixeira & Zuberi, 2016). Initiatives often focus on serving children and families, but the benefits can be felt throughout the community. Some strategies include developing ~~nature~~ access equity maps for neighborhoods and cities (Teixeira & Zuberi, 2016), creating green schoolyards (Chawla et al., 2014; Ray et al., 2016), park prescription programs (Zarr et al., 2017), and improving park accessibility (Park, 2017; Zuniga-Teran et al., 2019). For any strategy, it is important to seek input directly from the communities served, especially from the children, to inform every stage of the process (Carnahan et al., 2020; Derr et al., 2016; Derr, 2017; Teixeira & Zuberi, 2016). Cities can and often do use their own established methods of community engagement to inform policies and services that increase equitable access to ~~nature~~. These efforts can be amplified when cities also participate in nationally coordinated initiatives to create systemic change.

Cities Connecting Children to ~~Nature~~

The Children and Nature Network (C&NN) and the National League of Cities (NLC) have partnered to provide support to cities across the US that are committed to increasing children's equitable access to ~~nature~~ through an initiative called Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN; Children & Nature Network, n.d.-b; National League of Cities, n.d.). The CCCN initiative advances multiple research-supported strategies that take a systems approach to creating holistic solutions through community activation and capacity-building (National League of Cities, 2017). Successful strategies that cities have implemented with support from CCCN include green schoolyards, ~~nature~~-smart libraries, youth development in ~~nature~~-based programming, ~~nature~~ play spaces, and more (National League of Cities & Children & Nature Network, 2017). While cities can apply to join the CCCN cohort for technical assistance and funding, the initiative also provides a library of publicly available resources to aid city leaders in making the case for this work, measuring access, implementing strategies, and evaluating progress (Children & Nature Network, n.d.-a). The literature review to this point serves to make the case for children's equitable access to ~~nature~~ in the City of Asheville. The final sections of this review describe the quantitative and qualitative data to be considered in evaluating equitable access to ~~nature~~.

Mapping

~~Nature~~ access equity maps are an incredibly useful tool for city leaders and community members to visualize spatial data for planning and decision-making. Data points relating to natural environments in cities (i.e. parks or percent tree canopy), can be juxtaposed over neighborhoods along with social data (i.e. racial makeup and socioeconomic status) to identify disparities in ~~nature~~ access and make equitable decisions about which neighborhoods to prioritize

(Heckert & Rosan, 2016). Mapping green space is an essential first step, but it is crucial to layer

additional elements, like transportation infrastructure and health data, on a ~~nature~~ access equity

map to fully capture what areas are most in need and identify barriers to access (National League

of Cities, 2017). The City of Asheville GIS Department (n.d.) has already created racial equity

maps highlighting historic disenfranchisement of Black and Brown neighborhoods (see Figure 1)

which can be modified for this purpose using the CCCN tool, *Infrastructure Components to*

Connect Children and ~~Nature~~ (National League of Cities, 2017, p. 8). As versatile and useful as

GIS maps are, spatial data can only go so far to understand how Black and Brown communities

are already accessing and using ~~nature~~ or how they would like it to be improved moving forward.

Cities must also collect qualitative data through public input for a more complete understanding

of the quantitative data shown on maps (Heckert & Rosan, 2016). Involving communities in

decision-making at each stage of evaluation and implementation ensures cities are making

equitable and transparent decisions that truly benefit priority communities.

Figure 1

Racial Equity Map Showing Lasting Effects of Red Lining in Asheville, NC
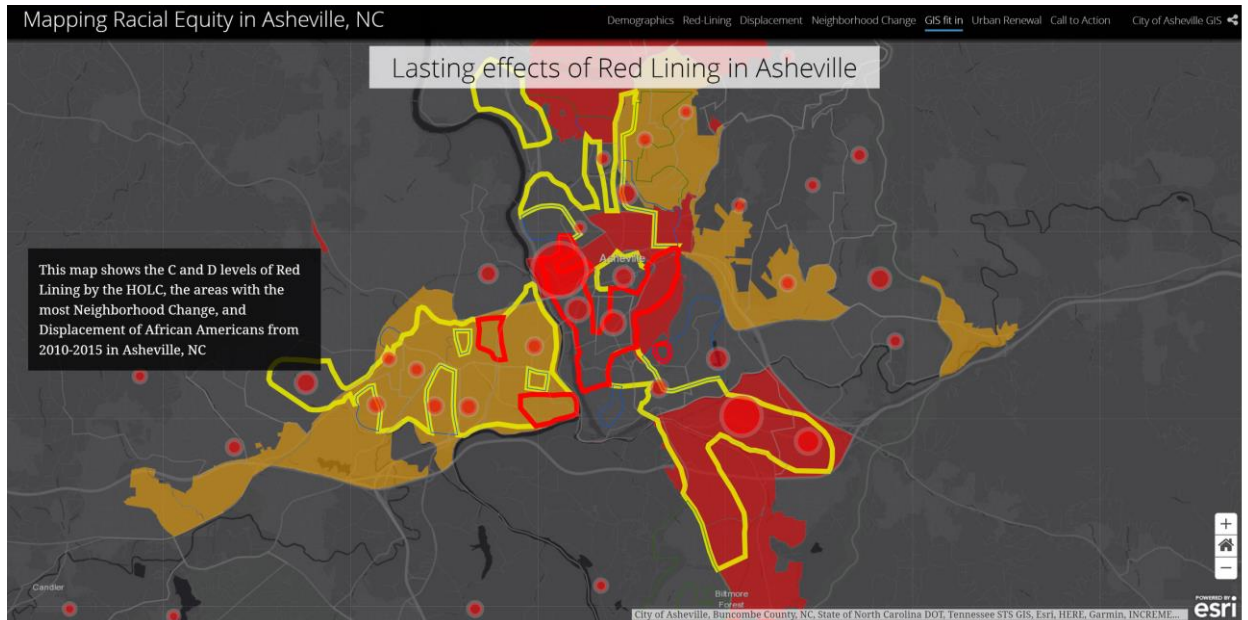
Note. The City of Asheville GIS Department (n.d.) overlayed data to demonstrate the lasting effects that the racist policies of red lining have had on African Americans in Asheville. The map outlines neighborhoods that the Home Owner's Loan Corporation valued the lowest in the 1930's and 1940's at C (yellow lines) and D (red lines) levels. Red and orange areas indicate the greatest neighborhood change between 2010-2015. Red circles show population decreases for African Americans by census trac between 2010-2015.

Community Participation

Programs and services should be developed based on the needs of the community and in collaboration with the community being served. Without inclusive decision-making that prioritizes community participation, greenspace and park planning projects can fail to meet community needs, or worse, can create harm and perpetuate injustices (Carnahan et al., 2020). Of critical importance is determining *if* and *how* communities in question are interested in increasing equitable access to ~~nature~~. It is an assumption throughout this review that access to

nature is a human right and that the benefits of equitable access to nature are universally desired and should be available to all. However, it could be that other human rights and social justice issues (which may or may not directly relate to accessing nature) are more prevalent issues for Asheville's Black, Latinx and communities of color. If other needs are identified as more salient issues for residents, it may be useful to consider if and how increasing equitable access to nature can be an effective solution for addressing those issues. For example, in the community listening sessions that Buncombe County Government and The Safety + Justice Challenge (2019a, 2019b) conducted related to racial equity in safety and justice, community members identified and prioritized need for improved access to community centers (like the Boys & Girls Club), programs, and resources through which people could be connected with positive role models and mental and medical health resources. While the inquiry behind these listening sessions was focused on improving racial equity in the justice system and reducing the jail population, it speaks to a need for valuing and improving community assets that can disrupt pipelines to prison, especially for youth. Recalling the previously mentioned positive outcomes of access to nature related to human health and wellbeing (Kondo et al., 2018; US Forest Service, 2018), youth development (Chawla, 2015), and community cohesion (Kondo et al., 2017; Zelenski et al., 2015), improving community access to nature could be part of a solution to addressing community members' concerns about justice and safety. Ultimately, the needs of the community determine the strategies implemented. The long-term success of any initiative depends on how well city leaders engage residents in decision-making throughout the process, including evaluations and maintaining relationships following implementation. For this, youth can be powerful advocates for their communities.

Youth Leadership

Initiatives addressing youth issues should center youth voices to create solutions. Procedural practices in the US do not typically give youth under 18 years old much power to influence policies, despite the numerous policies that are created to specifically impact youth. Even at an individual level, children growing up in the US lack the autonomy afforded to adults to make decisions and effect change in their own lives or in their communities. Decisions are generally made on behalf of children by adults who deem themselves as knowing better or as having better processes for identifying and addressing issues. This means decisions continue to be made in similar ways based on adult perceptions, preferences and processes which could ultimately hinder progress towards addressing youth issues. Including youth voices and youth leadership in decision-making disrupts these patterns and creates opportunities for perspectives and insight to emerge that adults may not have otherwise considered (Derr, 2017). While methods of participation vary, many cities have created policies to ensure youth voices are considered as part of city planning processes (Derr et al., 2016). In addition to advocating for issues, youth and young adults can also be powerful leaders driving initiatives to connect children to ~~nature~~ (Jennings et al., 2017).

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Critical Race Theory

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Critical race theory (CRT) influenced my approach to this study, beginning with my research purpose and question. CRT engages in "studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 3). Delgado and colleagues (2017) describe the basic tenants of CRT as follows:

- Racism is ordinary, normal, and difficult to address due to lack of acknowledgement.

- Racism serves important purposes for the dominant group.

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- "Race" is a social construction that shifts with the dominant group's needs.

- Identities are intersectional.

- Racial minority status makes one uniquely competent to speak on race and racism—i.e. white people should listen to the voices of people from racially marginalized groups.

Growing from its roots in critical legal studies and radical feminism, CRT critiques flawed liberal ideas of "equality," "reason," "rationalism," and "neutrality," and research that uses CRT contains an activist dimension (Delgado et al., 2017). While many previous studies aimed to measure racial inequities in access to ~~nature~~ or identify the barriers creating these inequities (both of which are important), my research aimed to advance knowledge in racially equitable access to ~~nature~~ by challenging scholars, activists, practitioners, and everyday people to take a step *back* and consider what ~~nature~~ even means in the first place. My research also contained an activist dimension as I aimed to use the knowledge created/gathered to address racial disparities in access to ~~nature~~ in my city through and following the research process.

My research built on the previously reviewed empirical evidence of systemic disparities in ~~nature~~ access along racial lines and sought not only to further understand but also to *address* these inequities through transformation of racist policies and the racist ideas that are created to justify those policies (and outcomes). Using CRT's counter-storytelling to challenge dominant narratives which reproduce oppression (Delgado et al., 2017, pp. 49-52), I reject the common racist narrative that Black and Brown people "don't like going outside" and/or "lack connection to the environment" and that this (assumption) is a deficit of Black and Brown people that white people, namely white environmental educators and those doing related work, need to "fix." I approach this study with the understanding that Black and Brown people currently and have

always fostered deep and complex connections to ~~nature~~ despite the effects of systemic racism that can manifest (violently) in the outdoors. Using CRT, and particularly counter-stories, as one of my tools, I placed the concept of ~~nature~~ under erasure (Derrida, 2016) in an effort to make whiteness, white ideas, and white preferences—which are usually translucent and "normal" in white supremacy culture—opaque. Rather than Black and Brown people having some "deficiency in connectedness to ~~nature~~," what is *actually* lacking is white people making room for the presence of counter-narratives which honor how Black and Brown people prefer to conceptualize, access, and experience ~~nature~~ in ways that might be different than dominant white preferences. In this way, CRT was embedded in my approach to this research.

Black Feminist Theory

My research was deeply informed by Black feminist theory (BFT), also referred to as Black feminist thought. BFT is the name given to the intellectual and theoretical traditions of Black feminist thinkers, a tradition with "no name" (Collins, 2000, p. 21). In her book, *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) resists defining BFT and instead offers six distinguishing features:

- U.S. Black feminist thought exists (still today) to empower Black women in a dialectical relationship with Black women's oppression (by race *and* gender) and Black women's activism through ideas and practices of resistance.

- While U.S. Black women as a group face common challenges, not all individual Black women have had the same experiences and there are many diverse responses to these experiences.

- Black feminist thought is interconnected in dialogical relationship with Black feminist practice—Black women's experiences inform Black women's thoughts and changed thinking may produce changed actions.

- Black feminist thought also exists in dialogic relationship between and among everyday Black women engaged in "taken-for-granted knowledge" and Black women intellectuals who form specialized knowledge.

- Black feminist thought and Black feminism as critical social theory must remain dynamic to continue resisting changing social conditions.

- Black women's liberation is part of a holistic vision for *human* liberation.

These distinguishing features of BFT informed my thinking through this research. As a white woman, I cannot produce BFT, as it is the theoretical work of Black women intellectuals[5] (Collins, 2000). However, I listened to and learned from the truths of Black feminists and engaged in dialogue with Black feminists for guidance in this work. I acknowledged, respected, and attempted to understand our differences and to identify our points of connection in working towards social justice. It is not only appropriate for me as a white woman to do so, it is necessary to dialogue and build coalition with Black feminist thinkers (Collins, 2000, p. 37-38). It is also important that I remain self-conscious in how I show up in such dialogues with Black feminists. In a heartfelt letter, poet and Black feminist Audre Lorde published her response to the work of white feminist Mary Daly[6] challenging the under- and misrepresentation of Black women and Black women's work in Daly's analysis (Lorde, 2007, pp. 66-71). Lorde (2007) asks Daly a sincere question, which I apply to myself as I engage in my own work:

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[5] Collins (2000) deconstructs the concept of *intellectual* to include Black women intellectuals outside of academia who engage in a "process of self-conscious struggle on behalf of Black women, regardless of the actual social location where that work occurs" (p. 15).

[6] *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Beacon Press, 1978).

Do you ever really read the work of Black women? Did you ever read my words, or did

you merely finger through them for quotations which you thought might valuably support

an already conceived idea concerning some old and distorted connection between us? (p.

68)

Taking Lorde's probing question to heart, I have included a review of some works by Black

feminist intellectuals who guide my approach to the research, including Collins (2000), Lorde

(2007), and hooks (1994). However, much more exists beyond the scope of this paper. I review

these works to further describe BFT and the ways in which I used it as a conceptual lens in this

research, being careful not to tokenize and misrepresent the work of Black women intellectuals

to further my own agenda. As Collins (2000) noted, BFT sees thinking and action—theory and

practice—as inseparable. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) spoke to the necessity of

educators connecting theory and practice inside and outside the classroom, "Theory is not

inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask it to do

so and direct our theorizing towards this end" (p. 61). I have continuously examined *both* my

thinking *and* my actions (both directly related to the research and indirectly outside of it) to

critically evaluate whether and how I am *resisting* or *reproducing* oppression in and through this

work.

Collins (2000) calls for the deconstruction of the concept of "intellectual" and the

institutions in which "intellectuals" can be found. Because Black women have been historically

excluded from and continue to be suppressed in white patriarchal institutions, like academia,

Black feminist theory has been produced, validated, and disseminated in diverse alternative

formats. In addition to theory produced by Black women intellectuals in academic settings,

Collins (2000) also includes the works of Black women blues singers, storytellers, poets, and

other intellectuals who contribute to Black women's empowerment, often through reinforcing the importance of Back women's self-definitions. This concept of self-definition is evident in Lorde's (2007) famous quote, "[I]f I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive" (p. 137). In BFT, self-definitions refer to the individual and group assertions of Black women's conceptualizations of Self in the context of their connectedness to community (not separation from others) as liberation from popular images applied to objectify and control Black women (i.e. the mammie, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the hoochie; Collins, 2000). Collins' inclusion of intellectuals and the knowledge created and shared in forms that do not fit within white patriarchal standards (i.e. in forms of bodies, knowledge, dissemination, etc.) is evidence of the "both/and" conceptual lens that Black feminist thought uses (Collins, 2000). This is in contrast with white patriarchal "either/or" thinking in which there is one-sided privilege at the cost of a denigrated Other. For example, consider the different process of thinking needed for—and the potential associated outcomes of—analyzing social conditions that people experience based on *either* race *or* gender, versus analyses that can examine *both* race *and* gender. In *Poetry is Not a Luxury*, Lorde (2007) points out how women can use poetry to connect *both "*ideas," which are precious to white patriarchy, *and "*feelings," which are suppressed in white patriarchy:

> At this point in time, I believe that women carry within ourselves the possibility for fusion of these two approaches [ideas and feelings] so necessary for our survival, and we come closest to this combination in our poetry. I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of our experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean – in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight. (p. 37)

BFT can be *both* poetry (and blues, and prose, and film…) *and* critical social theory. In fact, it is in these forms that BFT can be most accessible to everyday Black women—part of the process for validating knowledge claims through BFT that Collins (2000) puts forth, which I discuss later in this section. Art in its various forms and other alternative forms of knowledge claims have been a powerful and necessary method of producing, practicing, and sharing BFT and other social justice projects. This is due in no small part to the exclusion and suppression of Black women from/within institutions of scholarship controlled by white men who hold the power to then reject this knowledge as legitimate (Collins, 2000). Lorde (2007) also speaks of the uses of the erotic as power, the erotic which comes from a deeply feminine place and can be channeled through creative power and harmony:

> Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning in our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe. (p. 57)

It is through the power of the erotic that self-definitions—that essential ingredient in the pursuit of Black women's liberation, of *human* liberation (Collins, 2000)—can be expressed. Art is a way of facilitating connection to the erotic as power—that is, to the connections between our Self and the erotic through the creative pursuits of our senses (music, dancing, writing, building, cooking) and through our Self shared with others in deep connection (Lorde, 2007). Because of BFT's inclusion of alternative and artful forms of knowledge claims, emphasis on self-definitions, and embracing *both* thinking *and* feeling in critical social theory, I used a/r/tography (Schultz & Legg, 2019) as a powerful and well-aligned methodology and method of

producing/gathering knowledge on conceptualizations of ~~nature~~ in research that works to liberate people from oppressive white colonial patriarchal control in ~~nature~~ and the academy.

Previous studies related to racially equitable access to ~~nature~~ have provided important insights regarding disparities in ~~nature~~ access between white people and people of color through empirical evidence. This can be seen in Landau et al.'s (2020) work measuring high levels of human modification of the environment in communities of color and in Rigolon's (2017) work measuring proximity to and quality of green space in urban neighborhoods. This evidence is valuable in demonstrating a clear need for safe access to ~~nature~~ among communities that are marginalized in white supremacy culture. This work "speaks the language of the oppressor" (hooks, 1994); it speaks to and can be understood by the white men colonizers who continue to control spaces of decision-making and many resources that are necessary in correcting these injustices. But as poet and Black feminist Audre Lorde (2007) states so powerfully, "the master's tools will not dismantle the master's house" (p. 112). Meaning that white patriarchal colonial idea(l)s of what can be *knowledge* and *truth* are not sufficient to dismantle those same systems which produce these inequities. Collins (2019) explains, "subordinated groups know that epistemology has never been neutral, and that epistemic power is part of how domination operates" (p. 122). While works relying on post-positivism (and other paradigms aligning with white patriarchal idea(l)s of truth) make important contributions and have their place, they cannot be the only approach that we take to dismantle patriarchal colonial white supremacy culture in research and application. Those interested in advancing feminist, antiracist, justice-forward work must see the validity in ideas of *truth* and ways of knowing that may not align with white patriarchal preferences. Collins (2019) goes on to explain that epistemic resistance best comes from within the exclusionary institutions that control knowledge claims, i.e. academia.

This is part of the power I bring to this thesis as an institutional "insider" building epistemic resistance in coalition with Black women.

Still, like other theories, BFT is a partial perspective—unfinished (Collins, 2000). I am not suggesting that BFT is the only lens capable of this work or that it is the lens through which academics should examine all work related to racism. This would be to fall into the *either/or* thinking of white colonial patriarchy. Rather, I use the *both/and* conceptual approach of BFT to emphasize that we need to examine racial disparities in access to ~~nature~~ *both* through empirical studies that aim to quantify it *and* through alternative approaches that recognize other ways of knowing as credible and legitimate. Because alternative knowledge claims, like BFT, have been (necessarily) developed outside of institutions in which knowledge claims are validated by people in such positions of power to designate them so, it is important that alternative approaches—like the approach used in this study—be evaluated by their own set of criteria[7]. Here, I outline Collins' (2000) distinguishing features[8] regarding the credibility of knowledge claims using Black feminist epistemology as it is understood through its own concerns:

- **Lived experience as a criterion of meaning** – Individuals making knowledge claims are rendered more credible if they have lived through the experience(s) in which they are claiming to be experts—more so than individuals who have merely read or thought about such experiences.

- **The use of dialogue –** Connectedness (not separation) through dialogue (not debate) are essential in knowledge validation.

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[7] I offer the criteria with which to evaluate the methodology of this research in Chapter Three.
[8] Collins does not refer to these as "criteria" for validating BFT, but rather distills the distinguishing features of the knowledge validation process in Black feminist epistemology.

- **The ethic of caring** – Three interrelated components make up an ethic of caring in which truth emerges through collective care: 1) Emphasis on uniqueness of individuals, 2) the use of appropriate emotion in dialogue[9], and 3) developing capacity for empathy.

- **The ethic of personal accountability** – An individual's moral and ethical connections to their personal beliefs and viewpoints are examined, in addition to their knowledge claim.

These four dimensions of Black feminist epistemology can be politicized and attached to a social justice project to form a framework for Black feminist thought and practice (Collins, 2000). I politicized and attached these dimensions to this research in the following ways:

- While I do not have the credibility that comes through lived experiences of racial oppression, part of the knowledge in this thesis is produced through the lived experiences of Black and Brown youth in my city who speak for themselves and their own experiences in this work. I *do* have the lived experience of being a white woman environmental educator engaging in justice-forward work for racially equitable access to ~~nature~~, and this is the part of the knowledge claim that I produced.

- Knowledge was created/gathered through dialogue that took place in and through this research, connecting me in the process to the youth participants, AWITSC staff, my thesis committee, and the broader community who were asked to touch this work.

- An **ethic of caring** was entangled in my capacity for empathy in the research process, the emphasis on individual uniqueness of participants and their expressions, and in

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[9] Not "appropriate" as in the muted separation of emotion that is familiar to white patriarchal "respectability," but rather emotion deeply connected to, elicited, and expressed through dialogue.

creating space in the research process for emotional engagement in artistic

expressions and dialogue. Because of my position as a white woman, I had to be

consciously careful of the thin line between cultivating an ethic of caring and white

saviorism. An ethic of personal accountability was essential in this point.

- With an **ethic of personal accountability** to this work, I recognized that not only will

    the knowledge claim in my research be examined, but also the moral and ethical

    dimensions of the paradigms and processes through which I approached the

    creation/gathering of this knowledge. To protect from my tipping over into white

    saviorism and its entanglements, I met weekly to debrief with the (Black) primary

    program leaders. This dialogue became especially important as I ended up

    (necessarily) stepping into the role of program administrator. It was during one of

    these debrief sessions that I expressed not wanting to show up as a "bossy white

    woman," but that stepping into the role of program administrator led me to showing

    up in that way. I recognized that my social position as a white woman combined with

    my role as a program administrator created a power differential that I was

    uncomfortable with—a conflict I ultimately just had to sit with.

Knowledge claims using BFT are validated through acceptance by everyday Black women and

the community of Black women scholars, *and* they must also be acceptable to the group

controlling the institutional validation of knowledge claims (Collins, 2000). The acceptance of

this thesis by my academic institution determines the "validity" of the knowledge claimed in one

sense. In terms of my use of BFT as a guide in my approach to this research and the work that is

produced, everyday Black women and Black women scholars who read and judge this work,

directly or indirectly, will be the ones to determine its validity through Black feminist epistemology's own knowledge validation process.

Conclusion

Much has been written about the positive health outcomes and increased wellbeing associated with access to ~~nature~~ (Chawla, 2015; Frumkin et al., 2017; Kondo et al., 2018). Besides supporting physical and mental health (Seltenrich, 2015; White et al., 2019), access to ~~nature~~ improves community cohesion (Kondo et al., 2017; Zelenski et al., 2015), academic success (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998), and is necessary for children's healthy development (Chawla, 2015; Williams & Dixon, 2013). However, there is evidence of racial disparities in accessing ~~nature~~ and its associated positive outcomes (Jennings et al., 2016; Landau et al., 2020; Schelhas, 2002). While there is a growing body of literature examining barriers to accessing ~~nature~~ for racially marginalized groups (Floyd et al., 2008; Powers et al., 2020; Stodolska et al., 2019), studies generally focus on access to ~~nature~~ through parks, greenways, and other publicly accessed green spaces (Floyd et al., 2008; Powers et al., 2020). Future studies could measure the extent of equitable access to ~~nature~~ using an expanded definition that goes beyond what is publicly accessible to include backyards, schoolyards and other areas that may not be traditionally thought of as ways to access ~~nature~~. Additionally, the literature often focuses on the deficits experienced by marginalized racial groups rather than the overabundance of resources and normalization of preferences experienced by racially privileged whites (J. Davis, 2018; Doerr, 2018; Powers et al., 2020). Future studies examining racial disparities in ~~nature~~ access should critically examine the effects of white supremacy culture in creating and perpetuating injustices related to ~~nature~~ access. This includes examining how cities can increase safe and abundant access to ~~nature~~ by centering the needs and ideas of racially marginalized groups while

also preventing the gentrification that often follows "greening" efforts (Curran & Hamilton, 2012; Pearsall & Anguelovski, 2016). To address this, I brought together this need to examine racially (in)equitable access to ~~nature~~ using an expanded definition of ~~nature~~ that centers the ideas and needs of communities of color *and* actively resists unquestioned hegemonic white preferences related to ~~nature~~ access efforts which can often trigger gentrification. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to seek understanding of Black and Brown youth's conceptualization(s) of ~~nature~~ which can inform future efforts to improve racially equitable access to ~~nature~~ for Asheville city residents.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY & METHODS

This research was inspired by a desire to ensure racially equitable[10] access to ~~nature~~ for Black and Brown youth living in the City of Asheville. As I considered how to begin exploring this—thinking first of quantitative ways to measure access to ~~nature~~ and qualitative ways of capturing how Asheville's Black and Brown residents might like to improve it—I realized that I was missing a critical first step: what does "~~nature~~" even mean to these communities? My privileged racial identity shapes my conceptualization, access, and experiences of ~~nature~~ in ways that may and *may not* be different than that of populations targeted by racist policies. I needed to ensure that I was exploring access to ~~nature~~ for children of marginalized racial groups in ways that align with their conceptualization(s) of ~~nature~~. Understanding what ~~nature~~ means for Black and Brown youth helps ensure that efforts to improve equitable access to ~~nature~~ are the most authentic, relevant, and useful to the people impacted by this work. To address racial inequities in accessing ~~nature~~ while also recognizing and honoring the ways Black and Brown children living in Asheville already access and experience ~~nature~~, I proposed an a/r/tographic study in which I asked: How do Black and Brown youth living in Asheville define, access, and experience ~~nature~~?

A/r/tography

The "a/r/t" in a/r/tography reflects the researcher's multiple roles of **a**rtist, **r**esearcher, and **t**eacher (Schultz & Legg, 2019). It is an arts-based research methodology that defies definition and is, instead, best understood through its "loss, shift, and rupture" (Springgay et al., 2005, p.

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[10] Importantly, *equitable* access to nature is not the same as *equal* access to nature. Equality is about everyone getting the same access to resources regardless of need. Equity considers need and acknowledges that not everyone is starting from the same place.

898)—its *process* rather than its product. Cuerden (2010) used a/r/tographic bricolage to blend eco-art, eco-pedagogy, technology, and urban schoolyard gardening; ultimately, leaving the reader to glean their own meanings and usefulness from her photo-filled narrative thesis and accompanying blog. Through an alternative form of "landscape art" whereby the landscape itself is the artist and the canvas is a white cotton sheet, Pente (2008) uses a/r/tography to consider pedagogical implications of art education and asserts "[t]he importance of this research rests in its process as findings because it is in the dynamic event of writing and making art that understanding about subjectivity can occur, and that pedagogical thresholds can be explored" (p. 4). Ostertag (2015) uses a/r/tography to explore the meanings of gardens, gardens as classrooms (literally and metaphorically through garden design symbolizing a classroom), and the process of student teachers 'becoming teachers together.'

My own inquiry emphasized the processes of art-making and art-viewing to prompt reflection into how social identities, particularly around race, shape our meaning(s) of ~~nature~~. Coming to understand what ~~nature~~ *is* for Black and Brown youth in Asheville can normalize those meanings and inform improvements to accessing ~~nature~~ in ways that honor those meanings. In a similar vein, this research also helped me become a better environmental educator by coming to understand how my own identity as a white environmental educator shapes the way I think about what ~~nature~~ is and my approach to environmental education and related research. The *process* of reflecting on Self and ~~nature~~ in this way was as much a part of the findings as the final product.

A/r/tography blurs the lines between art and research—artistic creation and knowledge creation. It is inquiry through art-making *and* writing, whereas these processes work in symbiosis to create meaning (Springgay et al., 2005). Rather than attempting triangulation or

pursuing a reductive understanding of participants' art and underlying meanings, the merging of

art and writing allowed me to compound and crystallize understanding of these multiple voices,

perspectives, and creations (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Incorporating the arts into research

helped focus participants' ideas, feelings, and conceptualizations, which created opportunities for

rich data and deeper meaning (Derr et al., 2018, pp. 67-68). It also took pressure off participants,

allowing them to share more freely, as the object of focus becomes their creative pieces rather

than themselves (Derr et al., 2018, p. 68). There are no steps to this methodology, as it resists

criterion-based prescription of method (Springgay et al., 2005). However, Schultz and Legg

(2019) outline Springgay and colleagues' (2005) six methodological concepts, or intermingling

and simultaneously performing *renderings* of a/r/tography:

1. *Contiguity* implies the coming together of art and text. The two elements

   complement and extend each other rather than one extracting meaning from the

   other.

2. *Living inquiry* acknowledges that research is an embodied process, continuously

   subjectively performed and co-produced (with participants and readers) with no

   true beginning or end.

3. *Metaphor and metonymy* are used in the meaning-making process to make the

   meanings accessible to our senses…. The play we see between signifier and

   signified in both metaphor and metonymy as well as in the slashes (/) of

   a/r/tography spark tension and cause us to pause and reconsider normalized

   meanings.

4. *Openings* are what allows the artist/researcher/teacher/reader to enter the text… but openings often come with discomfort. The goal of the a/r/tographic product, then, is to provide openings for the reader to join in the conversation.

5. *Reverberations* are the movements that make the openings happen.

6. *Excess* is about embracing a loss of control over our research, over the meaning-making process. This research lets go of "explaining data" neatly (or at all), putting anything into a fact or figure, or coding into neat reportable themes. (pp. 3-4)

The ways in which I addressed these six renderings in my research design are contextualized in the methods section.

I became entangled in the roles of artist/researcher/teacher—as a/r/tographic methodology calls for—in multiple ways throughout the research process. Similarly, the youth in this study were artists/researchers/teachers of their meanings of ~~nature~~. The ways in which I fulfilled the roles of artist and researcher are evidenced through my use of arts-based methods to answer my research question. The ways in which I fulfilled the role of teacher emerged and shifted as I progressed in the research. I originally envisioned my role as teacher to be fulfilled by my practice, before and beyond the AWITSC program, as an environmental educator. However, I unexpectedly became further entangled in the role of teacher as I became more involved in the development and administration of the program that I conducted this research with. I also consider the contribution of my second journal manuscript (see Chapter Five) as another way I fulfilled the role of teacher in this methodology. I shared my lessons-learned from using Black Feminist Theory as a white woman for other scholars and practitioners to consider as they may also feel compelled to learn, apply, and uplift Black feminism as a lens for social

justice but may simultaneously feel uncertain about the "appropriateness" of doing so without having the lived experience of navigating Black womanhood. Relevant to this matter, I offer a final role that I fulfilled in/through this research: Researcher as curator.

My Role as A/r/tographer: Researcher as Curator

Arts-based methodology disrupts oppressive patriarchal approaches to research (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018; Cuerden, 2010) which strips data from its context, codes and condenses it into themes, and represents it reductively through a manuscript. Using a/r/tography, I rejected patriarchal commodification of data representation and embrace *excess* in Black and Brown youth's meanings of ~~nature~~ which can be deeply layered and emotionally saturated. Arts-based methodology can also be used to decolonize research (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018). This made it a powerful approach to decolonizing dominant white conceptualizations of ~~nature~~. Art can transcend rifts in language, creating opportunities to communicate even when languages differ. Combining the arts and research helped mitigate the problematic sentiment that I, as the researcher, could "give voice" to the participants in the study (Alcoff, 1991). The notion that I, as a white researcher, could "give voice" to Black and Brown youth participating in the study would be problematic in assuming that 1) I was in a position to speak for or "give voice" to people with marginalized racial identities and 2) that I could understand and then communicate their meanings and their truths (Alcoff, 1991). I did not "give voice" to the participants in this study; they spoke for themselves through their art. Instead, I was researcher as curator, *gathering* voices responding to the research question and creating an opening(s) through which viewers may feel moved to consider their own identity-entangled meanings of ~~nature~~.

Research Design

To answer my research question, I assisted with a series of art sessions engaging a group of Black and Brown youth residing in Asheville. The sessions were embedded in the programming of the research site, Asheville Writers in the Schools and Community, which I describe in further detail later. During these sessions, youth created art pieces in response to prompts that helped answer the research question. These prompts were developed in collaboration with the artist mentor facilitating the sessions so that they folded in as a natural part of the programming. Some examples of the kinds of prompts used were, "What comes to mind when I say 'nature?'" and "Draw your dream space in 'nature.'" The art methods varied, depending on the other program activities of the day and the youths' preferences. This added a participatory element to the study that decentered researcher control and distributed more power to the youth and the art. In this artist-group setting, I asked participants to share a brief artist statement about the piece they created. Some youth declined to make a statement about their pieces, others offered a brief "idea" behind the art which I noted in my journal. These statements generated rich qualitative data to understand how these youth conceptualize ~~nature~~ and their relationships to/with it—although I have chosen to resist coding and interpreting this data for the viewer.

I recorded observations and reflected on my experiences following each meeting in a self-reflexive journal. In this journal, I responded to additional prompts that provoked reflection related to my whiteness and how it intersected with my multiple roles as artist, researcher, and teacher—roles that are reflected in the methodological approach of a/r/tography (Schultz & Legg, 2019; Springgay et al., 2005)—in the context of this program and research. Some of the prompts I used to guide my journal are adapted from Khalifa's (2018) questions for personal

critical self-reflection to help school leaders move towards leading culturally relevant and anti-oppressive learning with students who experience racial oppression. While these questions are proposed for school leaders with school contexts in mind, they are also appropriate (with slight modification) for my context as a white artist/researcher/teacher working with a youth-development program that centers the leadership, development, and racial liberation for Black and Brown youth. These modified prompts include:

- How have I enjoyed privilege over other groups, especially those close to this research?

- How do I continue to benefit from systemic privileges that I did not earn?

- How do I contribute to the oppression of groups close to this research?

In addition to these, I wrote a few of my own prompts to guide my reflections specifically related to my roles of artist, researcher, and teacher of environmental education:

- What power do I hold as a white artist/researcher/teacher in spaces for Black and Brown youth?

- What are my intentions in being here? Doing this work?

- What value does my presence add in this space/program for youth involved? For the community? For society?

- What practices of resistance can carry over from this experience/reflection/learning into my work as an environmental educator?

These prompts guided my reflexive journaling as I reflected on myself, this work, conversations with the youth, and dialogue with Black feminists connected to this work. Ultimately these rich journal entries helped produce my second journal manuscript (see Chapter Five), titled *Can (or*

should) white women do Black feminist theory: Exploring tensions, contradictions, and

intersectionalities while performing justice-focused research.

Renderings of A/r/tography

I addressed Springgay and colleague's (2005) six renderings of a/r/tography (*contiguity*, *living inquiry*, *metaphor and metonymy*, *openings*, *reverberations*, and *excess*) in this research in the following ways. *Contiguity* merges text and art to extend the meanings of each, rather than one extracting meaning from the other (Schultz & Legg, 2019). Through the process of creating art, youth could connect with their emotions and focus their intentions in responding to the prompts. The meaning of/within the art that youth created was extended through their artist statements about the pieces. In my role of researcher as curator, I gathered and arranged the pieces with the associated artist statements. As I journaled reflexively throughout the research, I also extended the meanings and knowledge created in my own art as I responded to my personal prompts. *Living inquiry* is research embodied in the researcher's, participants', and viewers' artful performance of and continuously co-produced subjective meanings of ~~nature~~ (Schultz & Legg, 2019). As the participants and I created art, we also created knowledge. As the reader now experiences this art, the reader also produces knowledge on what ~~nature~~ *is* and how the reader's social identity influences their own conceptualizations of ~~nature~~. *Metaphor and metonymy* are devices for engaging senses in meaning-making to make explicit what we tend to implicitly connect (Schultz & Legg, 2019). In my research, participants and I could use metaphor and metonymy in our art as we expressed our knowledge and meanings. *Openings* are rips and tears through which the researcher, participants, and readers can enter the text and join the conversation (Schultz & Legg, 2005). Those viewing the product of this research will find openings through which they can begin to consider multiple meanings of ~~nature~~ from various

perspectives—including their own—and how personal identities and experiences can shape that meaning. *Reverberations* are what creates these openings. Producing and viewing the art that was created through this study may cause emotional reverberations and, I hope, move people into examining their own assumptions around what ~~nature~~ means and why it takes that meaning for them. Embracing *excess* in research entails the researcher letting go of control over the research and the meaning-making involved (Schultz & Legg, 2005). Assuming the role of researcher as curator, I abandoned coding, triangulation, and interpretation of the data. I relinquished control over the meaning-making process to the participants and, ultimately, the viewers of the research to create more opportunities for reverberations through which the viewers can (continuously) contribute to the knowledge created through this research.

Analysis & Representation: Art Zine

Creative Analytic Practice (CAP) refers to the creative representation of data in a study (Berbary, 2015; Parry & Johnson, 2007; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Research does not necessarily need to include arts-based methods of data production or analysis to use CAP (Berbary, 2015). However, an arts-based study might seriously consider CAP in the dissemination of research, as it may be more suitable and in onto-epistemological alignment to representing arts-based data—such as drawings, music, even performance pieces—than a traditional qualitative research manuscript. My research generated a variety of arts-based data, which was visual, auditory, and otherwise engaged the senses. To represent art-entangled data solely through traditional qualitative textual descriptions and interpretations would dismally under- if not *mis*represent the data. At the very least, it would do an injustice to both the artists and the audience. Art, and particularly a/r/tography, is an experience that makes the audience as much a part of the process as the creator(s) by asking the audience to participate through

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viewing, meaning-making, and creating their own artful additions (Schultz & Legg, 2019) of ~~nature~~ entangled in identity. Creative Analytic Practice is emerging in research related to leisure (Parry & Johnson, 2007), outdoor recreation (Morse & Morse, 2020), education (Cahnmann, 2003), and even urban planning (Edge et al., 2020). Parry and Johnson (2007) describe Richardson's (1997, 2000) five criteria for creating and judging CAP, and this is the criteria that can be used to judge this thesis:

1. The text must make substantive contribution to a deeper understanding of social life, including being grounded or embedded in a human perspective which informs the ways in which the text itself is constructed. For example, an author who processes life through music might construct the text in the form of a song.

2. The text should be judged by its aesthetic merit. It should entice the audience to form their own interpretation of the social world presented and it should be complex, interesting, and engaging.

3. The author should be reflexive about how the text was created, including their role as researcher, bringing adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the readers to just the author's point of view. The author is held accountable for the knowledge presented and discloses any ethical issues surrounding the creation of the text.

4. The text should have an emotional and intellectual impact that generates new questions and motivates the reader towards new inquiry or practice.

5. The text should invoke an expression of reality—an embodied sense of lived experience that is believable and conveys a credible account of the sense of something "real." (pp. 125-126)

I used CAP to resolve my own three-fold crisis of representation (Alcoff, 1991; Berbary, 2015; Parry & Johnson, 2007): 1) my intent to research the perspectives of youth in marginalized racial groups of which I am not a member (Alcoff, 1991); 2) honoring self-definitions in my use of BFT (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 2007); and 3) my use of arts-entangled data (Berbary, 2015; Parry & Johnson, 2007). By using CAP in representing my thesis research, I am able to more completely share (with permission) and authentically celebrate participants' artistic contributions. In keeping with a/r/tographic methodology (Schultz & Legg, 2019), I was also interested in providing an *opening* for other Asheville community members to participate in sharing their conceptualizations of ~~nature~~ which can make a positive impact through community placemaking[11]. To accomplish these ends, my use of CAP allowed my thesis to take the form of an art zine with youths' artful interpretations of ~~nature~~ in Asheville. My limited timeframe meant I could not work with youth to develop the zine. Instead, I selected and arranged the artwork and artist statements into the zine and shared it with youth for a final check before it was printed for physical exchange between hands throughout Asheville. The art zine is presented in the results section as one of three final products emerging from this research—the second being a publishable manuscript of this research and the third being a reflexive paper in which I contemplate the lessons learned in and tensions related to my use of Black Feminist Theory as a white woman.

Research Site

Given my outsider racial identity related to the population that I worked with, it was important to me to identify and partner with a site that was already doing related work with this population. My research was conducted with Black and Brown youth artists (ages 8-12) who

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[11] Derr and colleagues (2018) describes placemaking as "the participatory act of imagining and creating places with other people."

participated in arts-based youth development programming that centers the leadership development and creativity of Black and Brown youth through the Black-led non-profit Asheville Writers in the Schools and Community (AWITSC). I want to acknowledge that the majority of youth in my study did identify as Black, however other racial and ethnic identities were also at play, so I used "Black and Brown" to reflect and honor the multiple racial and ethnic identities represented in the program. My research was folded in as a component of the fall semester out-of-school programming taking place at the program's home site, the Arthur R. Edington Education & Career Center and the Southside Community Garden in Asheville, NC. This allowed me to build on the site's established relationships, trust, and rapport with the surrounding community. Although the participants themselves were new to the program, the Edington Center, in which AWITSC programming takes place, is a trusted community resource. Many of the youth living in affordable housing across the street regularly visit to take part in programs at the Edington Center and Southside Community Garden.

I made a few preliminary site visits before the program began in the fall to meet with staff and discuss ideas for folding the research organically into the programming. In my initial conversations with program staff leading up to the start of the program, it was intended that I would simply drop in to attend the program meetings in which art sessions related to my research were taking place. However, AWITSC experienced staffing changes leading up to the beginning of the program and I was asked to assist with programming as they sought a new facilitator. I was later asked to stay as a mentor for the remainder of the program, even after my data collection was complete, to continue being a consistent adult in the lives of the youth and to continue supporting the ongoing development of the program. During the program, artist mentors of color and myself facilitated art workshops for youth. I worked collaboratively with the

program's facilitating mentors to develop prompts and select arts-based methods that answer the research question. The program took place on Sunday afternoons beginning in October and continuing until May. Data collection began in November and ended in mid-January, with a few breaks for holidays, providing five meetings in which I attempted to collect data. With challenges in collecting signed parent/guardian consent, varying levels of interest in participating from the youth, and the overwhelm I experienced struggling to balance my own roles as artist/researcher/teacher in the program, ultimately, two sessions provided useable data for the research.

Recruitment

I recruited youth participating in the 2021-22 afterschool garden market program with AWITSC. Youth had the freedom to choose to participate in one or more of the multiple sessions and activities related to the program, although the program incentivized youth to attend regularly through small stipends for attendance. Over the months that I assisted with the program, I obtained signed consent from the participants' responsible adults and verbal assent from the youth to contribute data to my research. Participating in the research was not mandatory to participate in the program.

Reciprocity

Asheville Writers in the Schools and Community provided me with access to AWITSC program space, access to youth participants, and allowed me to incorporate my research into their program. As part of the AWITSC programming, AWITSC supplied art materials and compensated additional mentors to support the program meetings. Youth participants produced and shared their artwork—and by extension, their (counter)stories and perspectives—as part of their program activities and to help answer the research questions. Considering the incredible

generosity extended to me, I wanted to ensure reciprocity for the program, participants, and larger community connected to my research. I accepted the director's invitation to stay as a mentor (one of the ways I fulfilled the role of "teacher" in a/r/tography) and committed to maintaining my participation in the program, even after completing my research. I won a small grant to offset costs associated with running the sessions related to my research. I also considered how this work could make a significant and lasting impact in the communities my research was connected to. Representing the arts-based data and disseminating this research in the form of an art zine created a unique opportunity for community participation in this work. With youths' permission, I compiled and distributed the art zine as a community placemaking art project. I also included a link in the form of a QR code on the zine cover through which readers can donate to AWITSC to generate funds to revitalize Asheville's Black & Brown communities through AWITSC's social justice programming.

Reflexivity

My privileged identity as a white (adult) artist/researcher/teacher in the context of a program created specifically for Black and Brown youth artists to develop under Black and Brown leadership necessitated ongoing critical reflection related to my purpose for being there, how my presence might have impacted program participants (both positively and negatively), and how I was intentional in the way I showed up in the space and in my research. I name and attend to the power and privilege of my whiteness in the context of this research process, topic, site, and purpose. Beyond being a "confession, catharsis, or cure" to release myself from the subjectivity of my whiteness and "get better data" (Pillow, 2003), I have identified my whiteness and my white privilege as part of my reflexive practice to strengthen alignment with my research purpose of increasing racially equitable access to ~~nature~~. I sat with the discomfort of my

whiteness in Black and Brown spaces; with the power I held as researcher and the way it reflects the power I hold in my whiteness. If racially *in*equitable access to ~~nature~~ entails underrepresentation of Black and Brown people in ~~nature~~, the completion of this logic must acknowlegde an *over*representation of white people in ~~nature~~. Whiteness, particularly *my* whiteness in the context of this research, and all that it comes with and represents, was as much a subject of my research inquiry as the ways Black and Brown youth conceptualize ~~nature~~. Embedded in my research approach was a recognition that Black and Brown people *do* access and create relationships with ~~nature~~, and that ideas of what ~~nature~~ is may or may not align with white cultural idea(l)s of ~~nature~~. In my efforts to increase access to ~~nature~~ for people with marginalized racial identities, it was critical for me to make conscious how my own privileged racial identity influences my ideas of ~~nature~~ and how it 'should' be accessed and used, in order to then understand, emphasize, and normalize other ways of knowing and being with ~~nature~~ in my work as an environmental educator and researcher.

It is my responsibility as a white person to dismantle white supremacy culture. I do this in my personal life by actively (un)learning the socialization I have received as a beneficiary of white supremacy, practicing anti-racist thinking and living, and regularly reflecting on the ways in which I (re)produce oppression or actively resist and disrupt it. As a white person, becoming anti-racist is a permanent aspiration. It is a never-ending process of learning, action, and reflection that is fraught with good intentions, mistakes, and shortcomings. In my role as an artist/researcher/teacher, I work to dismantle systems of oppression through art as a form of knowledge creation, through pedagogical shifts in my teaching practice, and through research that is boldly political and grounded in anti-oppression. I wrote the research question to honor the multiple ways people of various backgrounds and cultures might define and experience

nature while also acknowledging and seeking input to correct racial disparities in safe access to nature. I have thought and will continue to think critically about my reasons for engaging in this research, the intention behind my approach and selection of methods, and the outcomes that it may produce. The responsibility of maintaining awareness and being thoughtful about my conduct as a white person in the context of Black and Brown spaces lies squarely with me. I remained receptive to the guidance given and expectations set by the program leaders and participants related to the terms of engagement surrounding this research.

Responsibility

While the purpose of my study was to explore racially equitable access to nature for children living in the City of Asheville, it was limited to gathering conceptualization(s) of nature specifically for the youth participating in the study. While the findings cannot be used to generalize about how all Black and Brown youth conceptualize nature—or even for those living in Asheville—the study provided an *opening* for practitioners of the arts, research, and teaching to begin considering the assumptions we may hold around what nature is, where that understanding of nature comes from, and how we can make our conceptualization(s) of nature conscious, so that nature is intentionally incorporated into practice in multiculturally relevant ways.

Collecting parent/guardian consent forms proved to be a challenge. Not necessarily because of parent/guardian concern about the research, but because the process and structure of requiring signed paper forms written to satisfy IRB was itself a cultural barrier to the research. When I expressed relief on finally receiving signed parent/guardian consent forms, AWITSC Executive Director Sekou Coleman (personal communication, December 17, 2021) suggested that because the project was embedded in a local program based in trusted community resources

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(the Edington Center and Southside Community Garden), it is likely that I already had

"community consent" for the youth to be there and participate. Meaning that adults and youth in

the community trusted that youth were safe in whatever activities they may be engaging in with

this community resource without needing to know all the particulars or feeling compelled to read

and return a signature on a dense document with a university letterhead. Parents and guardians

quickly expressed verbal consent as soon as I was able to make a personal connection with them.

I was still required to ask them for a signature. They gladly provided it without so much as a

glance at the paragraphs in which I had painstakingly detailed the study, expectations, and

potential risks for IRB. To successfully navigate IRB's official procedures, I had to break my

own feminist paradigm to rewrite my intentionally messy alternative approach in a precise and

unambiguous way. Researchers are forced to write condensed versions of potentially nuanced

procedures for academic reviewers to make risk-averse evaluations on its "ethics" and

"appropriateness" without familiarity with the context of the discipline and/or the methodology

involved. Reviewers hold the authority to approve whether the research can move forward or not.

Yet, they may not be equipped to understand—much less offer guidance in—developing the

ethics of the research or researcher. Whereas IRB's focus is on mitigating risk (and arguably

prioritizing risk to the institution) through its official procedures and formal documentations,

community consent is based in trust established over time and with respect for community

members' methods of approval. IRB's patriarchal (and paternalistic) structure ultimately

hindered good research with the very people that it was designed to protect. Ultimately, IRB will

need to change its structures to be able to consider alternative forms of consent, like community

consent. Until then, future research with Black and Brown communities could consider ways to

incorporate community consent (which looks different for each community) into the IRB

approval process. This could look like completing the full board review process to seek verbal consent (a process that may be inaccessible for many graduate students due to time restraints) or learning and emulating successful methods of seeking parent/guardian permission that community-based programs use (recognizing that these methods still may not be perfect).

Completing this research within the finite and condensed timeline of a master's program meant less time to build relationships and establish trust with the youth. The short timeline also created some tension in the use of program time for my research versus programmatic activities. While my research was relevant to and supported the program's general goals, program activities that more directly related to the garden entrepreneurship focus of the program often took precedence. Youth also had their own motives and personal projects for participating which sometimes did not align enough with my research project for either research or programmatic activities to occur as planned (Lohmeyer, 2020). On two occasions, this looked like participants abandoning activities altogether and running away or hiding from adults in what could be seen as a test of the adults' care for youth. One youth, upon discovery from an impromptu and unannounced 30-minute game of hide-and-seek confided to us (the adults running the program) that he "just wanted to see if you cared about us." These tests became less common over time and youth showed a growing trust in the authenticity of the adults' interest in the youth. However, the slow return of signed consent forms combined with the short time to build trust and rapport with youth and the occasional misalignment of youth and adults' projects (Lohmeyer, 2020) meant that program sessions dedicated to artful data collection were delayed by several months and limited the number of sessions in which art could be produced and used in the research.

A final responsibility to consider is my outsider identity as a white person. This positionality brings an important perspective in increasing anti-racist knowledge and practice—an endeavor that can and should be taken up by more white people. While I have first-hand experience living in a culture steeped in white supremacy, my identity places me in the position of oppressor through un/conscious complicity in and benefit from racist policies, behaviors, and thinking—both my own and at a systemic level. In fact, part of my privilege within white supremacist culture is that I have not been required to—and therefore have only later in life started to—understand and dismantle race and racism on a deeper conceptual level. I will not understand the artful data of this research in the same way that someone who experiences racial oppression might. It is my responsibility to try to understand anyway. Through my own process of listening to honor and understand the experiences of people who experience racial oppression, I become a better artist/researcher/teacher of environmental education and I contribute to anti-racism in these practices at a systems level through the lens and position of the racially responsible.

Conclusion

I have chosen the manuscript thesis format option (outlined in the EOE student handbook). That option requires chapters one, two, and three plus a full-length manuscript aimed at a specific journal and formatted as such. In alignment with the guidelines presented in the EOE handbook, the next two chapters will be my two completed manuscripts. The requirement is one full length manuscript as chapters four and five, but I have chosen to write two full-length manuscripts. The first manuscript, titled Anti-oppression Self-expression: An A/r/tographic Understanding of Black and Brown Youth's Conceptualization(s) of ~~Nature~~, describes my research project and highlights the merit and trouble of using of a/r/tography as a methodology in

leisure research. I have chosen to submit that manuscript to *Leisure Studies*, which requires authors to submit an article manuscript that is between 7000-8000 words (including reference list and abstract) and is written in APA format. The second manuscript, titled Can (or Should) White Women do Black Feminist Theory?: Exploring Tensions, Contradictions, and Intersectionalities While Performing Justice-Focused Research, explores my reflections on using Black Feminist Theory as a white woman in my social justice research project. This manuscript is currently being reviewed for publication in a special issue of *Leisure/Loisir* dedicated to Deconstruction of the Academy. The editors have requested that the manuscript be around 5000 words, written in APA format, and will be reviewed through collaborative dialogue with the editors and other submitting authors.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANTI-OPPRESSION SELF-EXPRESSION: A/R/TOGRAPHIC UNDERSTANDINGS OF BLACK AND BROWN YOUTH'S CONCEPTUALIZATION(S) OF ~~NATURE~~

Anti-Oppression Self-Expression: A/r/tographic Understandings of Black and Brown Youth's Conceptualization(s) of ~~Nature~~

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Anti-Oppression Self-Expression: A/r/tographic Understandings of Black and Brown Youth's Conceptualization(s) of ~~Nature~~

As the world's population becomes increasingly urban (United Nations, 2019), there is an urgent need to design cities that facilitate nature connection for youth residents (Cox et al., 2017; Zuniga-Teran et al., 2019), particularly youth of color who experience disproportionate impacts of poor environmental quality and inequitable access to nature due to a history of racist policies in urban design (Jennings et al., 2017; Rigolon, 2016, 2017). Despite historic and current racist policies and experiences in the outdoors, Black and Brown[1] people do access and enjoy nature on their own terms in ways that may not necessarily assimilate into white cultural norms and preferences (Davis, 2018). In an effort to make whiteness, white ideas, and white preferences—which are usually translucent and "normal" in white supremacy culture—opaque, I use ~~nature~~ (with strikethrough) to indicate placing the concept of "nature" under erasure (Derrida, 2016). I sought to understand what ~~nature~~ means for Black and Brown youth in Asheville to ensure that efforts to improve equitable access to ~~nature~~ are the most authentic, relevant, and useful to the people impacted by this work. I used the arts-entangled methodology of a/r/tography (Schultz & Legg, 2019; Springgay et al., 2005) to conduct research in partnership *with* youth (rather than *on*) and to decolonize and interrupt extractive and reductive approaches to research. Youth responded to prompts by creating artistic pieces and making brief artist statements about their pieces. My role was "researcher as curator," organizing the collection and framing youth's art in Critical Race Theory and

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[1] "Black and Brown" is used throughout this study to describe the population. It is an emic term used by the organization I am partnering with: Asheville Writers in the Schools and Community.

Black Feminist Theory. Using Creative Analytic Practice (CAP) (Parry & Johnson, 2007), I represented the results and discussion of this research as an art zine which challenges viewers to consider how the viewer's own social identities influence how they conceptualize ~~nature~~ and invites the broader community to participate in creating art around what ~~nature~~ means.

Keywords: nature, racial equity, Black Feminist Theory, a/r/tography, youth

Anti-Oppression Self-Expression: A/r/tographic Understandings of Black and Brown

Youth's Conceptualization(s) of ~~Nature~~

Close your eyes and imagine yourself spending time with nature. *Spend a moment allowing yourself to fully experience the sights, sounds, smells, textures, temperatures, and tastes of being with nature. Where are you? What physical features are present? What are you doing? Who else is there? How do you feel?*

Now think about who you are. Think of your past experiences related to nature. Where did you grow up? How did your family and friends introduce you to nature, if at all? How much time did you spend in nature a week? Where was nature in relation to your home? Did your socioeconomic status influence your ideas of and relationship to nature? Do your current conceptualizations of nature align with or stray from the "traditional" popular view of "nature?"

Think of your preferences. What do you consider not nature*? One might imagine nature as a place filled with lush green plants, but then, is the surface of the sea not nature? If you think of nature as a place, does that mean a bird is not nature? Is the nest a bird builds considered nature? What about the nests that humans build out of steel, concrete, and asphalt for our own safety and comfort? Do you think of nature as an object? Then, what about emotion? Spirituality? Art? If you find yourself drawing lines around some of these—why?*

"Nature"—and particularly nature in urban environments—tends to refer to greenways, city parks, and other publicly accessed green spaces. Some ideas of "nature" in the literature include excursions out of urban environments into more "natural" areas of wilderness to escape civilization and technology (Doerr, 2018), such as the types of excursions often sought at federal

and state parks, protected forests, and scenic waterways. The benefits of access to nature are

numerous and well represented across scholarly literature (Chawla, 2015; Frumkin et al., 2017;

Kondo et al., 2018; US Forest Service, 2018). These benefits include positive physical and

mental health outcomes (James et al., 2016; Seltenrich, 2015); sustainable behaviors and

environmental health (Otto & Pensini, 2017; Zylstra et al., 2014); positive youth development

(Chawla, 2015; Williams & Dixon, 2013); improved academic performance (Chawla et al., 2014;

Lieberman & Hoody, 1998); and social health, community cohesion and resiliency (French et al.,

2019; Kondo et al., 2017; Tidball, 2012; Zelenski et al., 2015). Considering these vast and

interconnected positive outcomes of human proximity to and time spent in nature (Frumkin et al.,

2017; White et al., 2019), there is a real need to design cities that facilitate nature connection for

children[2] living in urban environments (Cox et al., 2017; Zuniga-Teran et al., 2019). This need is

compounded for children of color who experience disproportionate impacts of poor

environmental quality and inequitable access to nature due to a history of racist policies in urban

design (Jennings et al., 2017; Rigolon, 2016, 2017).

Aligning with the language of the program, Asheville Writers in the Schools and

Community, through which I (a white woman) completed my research[3], I use "Black and

Brown" to describe people who identify as being people of color living in the United States,

including but not limited to people who are part of the African diaspora, Indigenous peoples of

Turtle Island, Latino/a and Chicano/a people, Asian people, and Pacific Islanders. I recognize

that these racialized groups are not a monolith, neither collectively as "people of color," nor

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[2] For this paper, "children" and "youth" are interchangeable and left intentionally vague, can be synonymous with "young people," and generally refers to those under 19 years old.

[3] I introduce my research site in detail later. Unlike the program, I capitalize Black and Brown to align with American Psychological Association style guide. Conversely, I leave white lowercased in resistance to white supremacy culture.

within any individual racialized group. I am conscious that lumping together racialized groups under broadly encompassing terms like "Black and Brown people" or "people of color" risks erasing the unique individual and group experiences of oppression and resistance in relationship to white supremacy culture. Still, I was interested in highlighting the perspectives of individuals who identify as members of racialized groups that are othered by white supremacy. In particular, I wanted to create space in the research process for the unique insights and perspectives that a kaleidoscope of identities can create—both as individuals and as a collective brought together— to explore alternative conceptualization(s) of "nature."

Of the many complex and interrelated racial disparities and injustices that emerge from a long history of racist policies (Banzhaf et al., 2019; Gaskin et al., 2004; Noguera, 2001), safe access to nature has become a salient issue in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Parks are seeing near record-breaking attendance, and yet, people of color and low-income families have a harder time finding and accessing outdoor spaces close to home (Hwang, 2020). Lack of safe access to nature has long been an issue experienced by Black and Brown people living in the United States (Jennings et al., 2016; Landau et al., 2020; Larsen et al., 2020; Schelhas, 2002). Disparities in the representation of Black and Brown people in nature are produced by a number of barriers in access, including real and perceived racial discrimination (Hudson et al., 2018; Kisiel & Hibler, 2020; Lee & Scott, 2016), limited socioeconomic resources (Scott, 2013), real and perceived safety in outdoor spaces (Outley & Floyd, 2002), and clashing cultural biases intensified by normalization of white cultural preferences (Doerr, 2018). My research aimed to disrupt this last point—normalization of white preferences—by both highlighting Black and Brown youth's conceptualization(s) of "nature" as well as challenging viewers, especially white

people, to consider how social identities can influence not only the ways we access and experience, but how we even think about what "nature" is.

What is nature?

Ideas of what nature is and whose ideas of nature count have been critiqued before, particularly around the concept of nature as "wilderness," as it was constructed in the 1800's amidst the romanticism movement and the backdrop of a closing American frontier (Cronon, 1996). Wilderness[4] is still widely conceptualized as sacred outdoor places in need of protection from people to maintain the illusion of remaining "untouched" by humanity (effectively erasing First People's relationships with the land they have stewarded since time immemorial) and serving as cure for the scourge that is civilization (Cronon, 1996). The myth of human-nature separation is codified in American relationships with nature both in and through the creation of policies, like the Wilderness Act (J. Davis, 2018), and in hanging conservation efforts on "*save the ___*" campaigns which use an endangered animal of choice as the poster child and stand-in for "wilderness," ultimately reproducing the mentality that humans and nature are not only separate but also opposites (Cronon, 1996). Whereas Cronon's (1996) critique primarily focused on challenging the notion that "wild" nature is separate from "civilized" humans, I slightly shift the focus to challenge the idea that urban living is separate from nature which simultaneously challenges hegemonic white preferences around "wild" and distant nature.

Nature means different things to different people. It is a concept that resists definition, or at the very least, changes with every person asked. Conceptualizations of nature and relationships with nature are shaped by an individual's context, including various socializing forces related to identity, personal history, the opinions of others, education, culture, even

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[4] "Wilderness" is now often referred to as "biological diversity" (Cronon, 1996).

language. This means conceptualizations of nature may overlap in areas of shared identity, with those having common experiences, and among those of the same culture. While dominant ideas of nature often refer to designated areas of publicly accessed green spaces and wilderness, I chose not to offer a definition of nature in this research, as my inquiry centers on understanding what nature *is* to Black and Brown youth. I move forward in this paper without formally defining "nature" to create an opening through which others can consciously insert their own personal conceptualizations of nature while holding these concepts loosely. Understanding the concept of nature through multiple perspectives is necessary to ensure that nature—in its many forms and definitions—can be accessed and enjoyed by all people in the ways that are most comfortable and culturally relevant, regardless of whether their definitions of nature align with dominant ideas or not. Centering dominant ideas of nature in conservation, recreation and leisure, urban design, etc. at the exclusion of all others only reinforces normalization of the dominant group's preferences. A limited definition of nature runs the risk of pathologizing ways of understanding, accessing, and experiencing nature that do not align with that of the dominant norm and ultimately limits who can access nature and the positive outcomes associated with time spent with/in nature. Because language shapes conceptualizations, even using the term "nature" already influences how one might begin thinking about what it is. I prefer ~~nature~~ (with strikethrough) to indicate that the term is under erasure (Derrida, 2016). Placing a term under erasure indicates not that the current understandings of the term are void, no, we need the current understandings to be able to talk about it. But, putting the term under erasure acknowledges that these fall short, that there are power structures creating these understandings; we are interrogating these very structures and meanings with erasure and noting that the meaning of ~~nature~~ is in flux, contingent. The act of putting something under erasure destabilizes one standard

stagnant firm definition of it. Art is one powerful way to understand and communicate

conceptualizations of ~~nature~~.

Meaning making through art

Doing art and experiencing art reverberates into our souls in much the same way as

~~nature~~ can. Art is a way of processing, synthesizing, and expressing our personal experiences. It

can be used to reinforce and maintain social norms or challenge and transform them (Milbrandt,

2010). Used as a research methodology, art can disrupt patriarchal and colonial approaches to

data collection, analysis, and representation (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018) which strip

data from context, codes and condenses data into themes, and represents data reductively in bite-

sized pieces through a written manuscript. Art evokes collaborative meaning-making even when

languages, cultures, and personal experiences may differ. For these reasons, I used art as a

methodology and a method to uncover the meanings and relationships people have with ~~nature~~ at

the intersection of racial identity and city living.

This research made a case to begin examining racially equitable access to nature for

Black and Brown youth in Asheville, NC by first asking, "What does 'nature' *mean* to youth in

these communities?" With the understanding that safe access to nature is a human right and

evidence demonstrating racial disparities in safe access to nature (Landau et al., 2020; Rigolon,

2016), it is imperative that city officials, leaders, and organizations providing services related to

nature access continuously examine and disrupt hegemonic cultural biases to design spaces and

programs that honor the numerous ways people perceive, access, use, and create relationships

with nature. Despite historic racist policies, experiences, and (lack of positive) representation in

the outdoors, Black and Brown people do access and enjoy nature on their own terms in ways

that may or may not necessarily assimilate into white cultural norms (J. Davis, 2018; Finney,

2014). I designed this research to challenge the social construction of ~~nature~~ through a social justice lens with a particular focus on race and racism. I did this to ensure that any efforts which aim to increase racially equitable access to ~~nature~~ and its associated positive outcomes are not unconsciously reproducing hegemonic ideas of ~~nature~~ and thus further restricting access. Specifically, the purpose of this research was to highlight Black and Brown youth's conceptualization(s) of ~~nature~~ as counter-stories to dominant white preferences for ~~nature~~ in initiatives to improve racially equitable access to ~~nature~~ for Asheville, NC residents. The research question that guided this inquiry was How do Black and Brown youth living in Asheville define, access, and experience ~~nature~~?

I begin with a review of the literature on the benefits of access to ~~nature~~, the racial disparities in access to ~~nature~~, the barriers that produce these disparities, and strategies to improve equitable access. I also offer a brief review of the theoretical approaches I used in this research: Critical Race Theory (Delgado et al., 2017) and Black Feminist Theory (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994; Lorde, 2007). Following the literature review, I discuss my methodology and methods of inquiry: I approached this study using the arts-entangled methodology of a/r/tography (Schultz & Legg, 2019; Springgay et al., 2005), experiencing and writing about the process through the lenses of Black Feminist Theory (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994; Lorde, 2007) and Critical Race Theory (Delgado et al., 2017). Using Creative Analytic Practice (Berbary, 2015; Parry & Johnson, 2007), I represent the results of this research as a publicly distributed art zine, leaving the viewer to determine for themselves the meaning(s) of/within the youths' art and statements. I close with my reflections on the tensions and conflicts that emerged through this research as I navigated the often-conflicting needs of my institution's fixed patriarchal

requirements for conducting research and the fluid needs of a community-based organization's

youth development programming and social justice work.

Literature Review

   With the world's population becoming increasingly urban (United Nations, 2019), cities

must prioritize equitable access to ~~nature~~. There are numerous positive physical and mental

health outcomes related to living near and engaging with ~~nature~~ (Chawla, 2015; Frumkin et al.,

2017; Kondo et al., 2018; US Forest Service, 2018). The first section of this review focuses on

the need to design cities that facilitate ~~nature~~ connection for children based on the positive

outcomes associated with ~~nature~~ access and evidence demonstrating the existence of racial

disparities in safe access to ~~nature~~. This is followed with a review of the theoretical approaches

that influenced and guided this research: Critical Race Theory (Delgado et al., 2017) and Black

Feminist Theory (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994; Lorde, 2007).

Outcomes of Access to ~~Nature~~

   A vast and growing body of literature points to the numerous benefits that access to

~~nature~~ has on human health and well-being (Chawla, 2015; Frumkin et al., 2017; Kondo et al.,

2018; US Forest Service, 2018). Besides the direct physical and mental health outcomes that lead

health care providers to prescribe time in ~~nature~~ to their patients (James et al., 2016; Seltenrich,

2015), engagement with ~~nature~~ also supports students' academic performance (Lieberman &

Hoody, 1998), improved cognitive function (Dadvand et al., 2018; Faber Taylor et al., 2002),

and social cohesion and community resiliency (French et al., 2019; Kondo et al., 2017; Tidball,

2012; Zelenski et al., 2015). While access to ~~nature~~ is beneficial across all life stages (Douglas et

al., 2017), it is perhaps most critical during childhood.

A Need to Connect Children to ~~Nature~~

People who develop ~~nature~~ connection in childhood are more likely to feel connected to ~~nature~~ throughout their lives and achieve overall wellbeing, such as feelings of autonomy, vitality, meaning, and personal growth (Pritchard et al., 2020). Lack of ~~nature~~ engagement in childhood has significant and long-term developmental consequences (Kellert, 2005). In addition to the positive outcomes on children's development (Chawla, 2015; Chawla et al., 2014; Christian et al., 2015) and environmental protection (Otto & Pensini, 2017; Zylstra et al., 2014), Strife and Downey (2009) outline children's particular vulnerability to environmental health hazards and the link to subsequent declines in children's health trends. Despite the glaring need to facilitate ~~nature~~ connection at this critical point in development, common discourse suggests that children continue to spend less time outdoors than they have in previous years (Cleland et al., 2010; Louv, 2008), especially residents of urban environments (Cox et al., 2017).

Structural Disconnection from ~~Nature~~

In the United States, 80.7% of people lived in cities in 2010 (US Census Bureau) and if historic trends continue, this number will only grow. Urbanization combined with a vast and growing body of literature that points to the benefits of ~~nature~~ in urban areas emphasizes the need to increase the capacity of cities to support human health and wellbeing through safe access to ~~nature~~. Children living in cities have fewer experiences in ~~nature~~ than their rural counterparts and decreasing connection with ~~nature~~ is seen even among children living in rural areas (Zhang et al., 2014). Parents' concerns for safety and poor neighborhood walkability may also contribute to children's restricted access of ~~nature~~ in cities (Aziz & Said, 2017; Zuniga-Teran et al., 2019). This is especially true for children growing up in Black and Brown and low socioeconomic households (Rigolon, 2016).

Racial Disparities in Access to ~~Nature~~'s Benefits

The burden of poor environmental quality and inequitable access to ~~nature~~ disproportionately impacts Black, Brown, and low-income communities (Aziz & Said, 2017). Parks and green spaces offer benefits that can help improve quality of life, but safe access to those spaces is yet another inequality for these communities (Jennings et al., 2016; Landau et al., 2020; Schelhas, 2002). These injustices stem at least partly from historic public policies created in the United States to keep Black and Brown communities from accumulating wealth and to segregate them from higher quality land and investments that whites, particularly of high socioeconomic classes, reserved for themselves (Feagin, 2006). The effects of these historic policies continue to this day and Asheville is no exception.

Asheville's Racist History

The city of Asheville, North Carolina is located on the occupied land of the ᏣᎳᎫᏪᏘᏱ Tsalaguwetiyi, or the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (Native Land Digital, n.d.), in the Southern Appalachian region of the United States. Nestled in a region that is renowned for its world-class outdoor recreation opportunities, Asheville is well-recognized for its proximity to ~~nature~~ as well as its cultural art scene. ~~Nature~~ holds significant economic value for the city related to the area's well-established and still growing outdoor industry which attracts people to visit and move here. From its appropriation of traditional Cherokee land and trading of enslaved people at the Buncombe County courthouse (Buncombe County Register of Deeds, n.d.) to decades-long civil rights activism (Parker, 2016) and the recent move to make reparations to its Black communities (N. Davis, 2020), Asheville cannot escape its rich, deep, painful, and too often unacknowledged racial history. Like other cities in the United States, Asheville experiences racial disparities in wealth and quality of life emerging from historic local and national policies that continue to have lasting impacts on residents today, including housing discrimination and

urban renewal projects (City of Asheville GIS Department, n.d.). City leaders must prioritize

restoring Asheville's Black and Brown communities while also disrupting historic patterns of

displacing these communities. Green initiatives are typically adopted claiming intentions of

moving towards sustainability and solving social issues, yet some initiatives, whether intentional

or not, have resulted in the displacement of low-income urban residents and people experiencing

homelessness through a process called environmental gentrification or ecological gentrification

(Checker, 2011; Dooling, 2009). This occurs when municipalities improve or expand green

space and related amenities, thereby attracting wealthy white people who move in and increase

the cost of living to the point that existing low-income residents can no longer afford to remain

there. While not specifically looking at the phenomenon of environmental gentrification,

Asheville has already placed second in a list of top 10 fastest gentrifying cities in the U.S.

(Boyle, 2017) and thus Black and Brown and low-income city residents are already vulnerable to

displacement. City officials should use an environmental justice framework to carefully consider

who actually benefits from initiatives to improve urban green space and implement strategies to

avoid displacing the very residents who were meant to be served. With this in mind, city planners

can begin breaking down barriers to accessing ~~nature~~'s benefits for the most vulnerable

communities.

Barriers to Accessing ~~Nature~~

Most literature available on barriers to ~~nature~~ access experienced by racially marginalized

groups typically focuses on leisure activities taking place in public parks and green spaces (Floyd

et al., 2008; Powers et al., 2020). For these settings, barriers can be physical, financial, social and

cultural, among other things (Floyd et al., 2008; Powers et al., 2020; Stodolska et al., 2019).

These barriers can be experienced at individual, interpersonal, contextual, and systemic levels

(Stodolska et al., 2019). It is important to note that some barriers emerge from clashing cultural preferences in the ways Black and Brown communities access and recreate outdoors compared to the normalized preferences of the dominant white culture that typically guide infrastructure and programming design (Arai & Kivel, 2009; Doerr, 2018). Therefore, it is essential that those working towards racially equitable access to ~~nature~~ consider ideas of ~~nature~~ beyond public parks. Additionally, it is essential to center Black and Brown communities' ideas of ~~nature~~ in these efforts.

Cultural relevancy

Normalization of white preferences regarding what ~~nature~~ is and how ~~nature~~ should be accessed and used marginalizes the many ways that Black and Brown communities may prefer to access and spend time in ~~nature~~ outside of white cultural norms (J. Davis, 2018; Doerr, 2018; Finney, 2014). Built on a long history of white male domination, outdoor recreation spaces and programs intended to "connect people to the outdoors" are often unconsciously biased towards white cultural definitions of the outdoors that place high value on wilderness settings and seeking escape from civilization and technology (Doerr, 2018). Views of ~~nature~~ that do not align with the dominant group's views can be seen by the dominant group as a deficiency or in opposition to the "correct" view (Doerr, 2018). Further, the capital held by the dominant group can lead institutions to shift service towards the preferences of the dominant group at the exclusion of other groups (J. Davis, 2018; Powers et al., 2020; Mowatt & Travis, 2015). This clash of cultural preferences coupled with the power of the dominant culture can ultimately lead to discrimination, overt or otherwise, against Black and Brown communities and individuals in outdoor spaces and related services. Mowatt and Travis (2015) highlighted the disenfranchisement and displacement of Black and Brown communities associated with

Chicago's bid as a 2016 Olympic City—an outcome that contradicted the claims that Chicago's being selected for this giant leisure-event would increase socio-economic outcomes for its residents. Mowatt and Travis demonstrated that substantial increases in power and wealth related to the event were reserved for those (affluent whites) who already held much of both.

Racism

Centuries of backlash and violence directed towards people of color who enter spaces that were explicitly or implicitly reserved for white people, including outdoor spaces, have significant influence on how and what outdoor activities Black and Brown families participate in (Kisiel & Hibler, 2020; Lee & Scott, 2016; Samdahl & Johnson, 2004). These patterns persist in the present day, notably in the form of white people weaponizing police against Black and Brown people recreating in parks (for example, in 2020 when a white woman, Amy Cooper, called the police on a Black man birdwatching in Central Park). While members of the dominant white culture convey outdoor spaces and programs as "neutral," available, and desirable to all, historic and current outcomes provide strong evidence otherwise (Doerr, 2018; Outley & Floyd, 2002; Scott, 2013). For this reason, cities must evaluate how current practices support or resist domination of marginalized groups and prioritize implementing strategies that pursue justice and improve equitable access to ~~nature~~ for children of color.

Strategies for Equitable Access to ~~Nature~~

Cities across the US have implemented various strategies and initiatives to evaluate and increase equitable access to ~~nature~~ for their residents (Derr et al., 2016; Jennings et al., 2017; Teixeira & Zuberi, 2016). Initiatives often focus on serving children and families, but the benefits can be felt throughout the community. Some strategies include developing ~~nature~~ access equity maps for neighborhoods and cities (Teixeira & Zuberi, 2016), creating green schoolyards

(Chawla et al., 2014; Ray et al., 2016), park prescription programs (Zarr et al., 2017), and

improving park accessibility (Park, 2017; Zuniga-Teran et al., 2019). For any strategy, it is

important to seek input directly from the communities served, especially from the children, to

inform every stage of the process (Carnahan et al., 2020; Derr et al., 2016; Derr, 2017; Teixeira

& Zuberi, 2016). Cities can and often do use their own established methods of community

engagement to inform policies and services that increase equitable access to ~~nature~~. Without

inclusive decision-making that prioritizes community participation, greenspace and park

planning projects can fail to meet community needs, or worse, can create harm and perpetuate

injustices (Carnahan et al., 2020). Initiatives addressing youth issues should also center youth

voices to create solutions (Derr, 2017; Jennings et al., 2017).

Theoretical Approaches to the Research

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) engages in "studying and transforming the relationship among race,

racism, and power" (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 3). Growing from its roots in critical legal studies

and radical feminism, CRT critiques flawed liberal ideas of "equality," "reason," "rationalism,"

and "neutrality," and research that uses CRT contains an activist dimension (Delgado et al.,

2017). While many previous studies aimed to measure racial inequities in access to ~~nature~~ or

identify the barriers creating these inequities (both of which are important), my research aimed to

advance knowledge in racially equitable access to ~~nature~~ by challenging scholars, activists,

practitioners, and everyday people to take a step *back* and consider what ~~nature~~ even means in

the first place. My research also contained an activist dimension as I aimed to use the knowledge

created/gathered to address racial disparities in access to ~~nature~~ in my city through and following

the research process.

Using CRT's counter-storytelling to challenge dominant narratives which reproduce oppression (Delgado et al., 2017, pp. 49-52), I approach this study with the understanding that Black and Brown people currently and have always fostered deep and complex connections to nature despite the effects of systemic racism that can manifest (violently) in the outdoors. Using CRT, and particularly counter-stories, as one of my tools, I placed the concept of nature under erasure (Derrida, 2016) in an effort to make whiteness, white ideas, and white preferences— which are usually translucent and "normal" in white supremacy culture—opaque. Rather than Black and Brown people having some "deficiency in connectedness to nature," what is *actually* lacking is white people making room for the presence of counter-narratives which honor how Black and Brown people prefer to conceptualize, access, and experience nature in ways that might be different than dominant white preferences.

Black Feminist Theory

Black Feminist Theory (also known as Black Feminist Thought; BFT) is the name given to the intellectual and theoretical traditions of Black feminist thinkers (Collins, 2000, p. 21). Previous studies related to racially equitable access to ~~nature~~ have provided important insights measuring disparities in ~~nature~~ access between white people and people of color through empirical evidence (Landau et al., 2020; Rigolon, 2017). This work necessarily "speaks the language of the oppressor" (hooks, 1994)—that is, it speaks to and can be understood by the priorities of white colonial patriarchal systems which we are required to navigate (and resist) to correct these injustices. But "the master's tools will not dismantle the master's house" (Lorde, 2007, p. 112). Because of historical exclusion and suppression of Black women in academic spaces, BFT calls for a deconstruction of the concept of "intellectuals" and the institutions in which "intellectuals" can be found (Collins, 2000). Black women blues singers, storytellers,

poets, and other critical social thinkers are considered intellectuals who contribute to Black

women's empowerment, often through reinforcing the importance of Back women's self-

definitions. BFT's emphasis on the importance of self-definitions was a major influence in

designing methods of data collection and representation in this research through which Black and

Brown youth could speak for themselves through their art and artist statements. Art and other

alternative forms of knowledge claims have been a powerful and necessary method of producing,

practicing, and sharing BFT and other social justice projects. I used BFT as a knowledge

generator in this research. In keeping with its traditions, I politicized and attached the four

dimensions of BFT's epistemology (Collins, 2000) to my social justice research in the following

ways:

- **Lived experience as a criterion of meaning** – While I do not have the credibility
  that comes through lived experiences of racial oppression, part of the knowledge in
  this thesis is produced through the lived experiences of Black and Brown youth in my
  city who speak for themselves and their own experiences in this work. I *do* have the
  lived experience of being a white woman environmental educator engaging in justice-
  forward work for racially equitable access to ~~nature~~, and this is the part of the
  knowledge claim that I produced.

- **The use of dialogue** – Knowledge was created/gathered through dialogue that took
  place in and through this research, connecting me in the process to the youth
  participants, AWITSC staff, my thesis committee, and the broader community who
  were asked to touch this work.

- An **ethic of caring** was entangled in my capacity for empathy in the research process,
  the emphasis on individual uniqueness of participants and their expressions, and in

creating space in the research process for emotional engagement in artistic

expressions and dialogue. Because of my position as a white woman, I had to be

consciously careful of the thin line between cultivating an ethic of caring and white

saviorism. An ethic of personal accountability was essential in this point.

- With an **ethic of personal accountability** to this work, I recognized that not only will

  the knowledge claim in my research be examined, but also the moral and ethical

  dimensions of the paradigms and processes through which I approached the

  creation/gathering of this knowledge. To protect from my tipping over into white

  saviorism and its entanglements, I met weekly to debrief with the (Black) primary

  program leaders. This dialogue became especially important as I ended up

  (necessarily) stepping into the role of program administrator.

As a white woman, I cannot produce BFT, as it is the theoretical work of Black women

intellectuals (Collins, 2000). However, I listened to and learned from the truths of Black

feminists and engaged in dialogue with Black feminists for guidance in this work. It is not only

appropriate for me as a white woman to do so, it is necessary to dialogue and build coalition with

Black feminist thinkers (Collins, 2000, p. 37-38). BFT is inclusive of alternative and artful forms

of knowledge claims, emphasizes self-definitions, and embraces *both* thinking *and* feeling in

critical social theory (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 2007). This made a/r/tography (Schultz & Legg,

2019) a powerful and well-aligned methodology and method of producing/gathering knowledge

on conceptualizations of ~~nature~~ in research that works to liberate people from oppressive

structures in ~~nature~~ and the academy. Alternative knowledge claims, like BFT, have been

(necessarily) developed outside of institutions in which knowledge claims are "validated."

Therefore, it is important that alternative approaches—like the a/r/tographic approach used in

this study—be evaluated by their own set of criteria. I outline the criteria by which my

a/r/tographic study can be evaluated in the methodology and methods section.

Methodology & Methods

This research was inspired by a desire to ensure racially equitable[5] access to ~~nature~~ for

Black and Brown youth living in the City of Asheville. As I considered how to begin exploring

this, I realized that I was missing a critical first step: what does "~~nature~~" even mean to these

communities? My privileged racial identity shapes my conceptualization, access, and

experiences of ~~nature~~ in ways that may and *may not* be different than that of populations targeted

by racist policies. I needed to ensure that I was exploring access to ~~nature~~ for children of

marginalized racial groups in ways that align with their conceptualization(s) of ~~nature~~.

Understanding what ~~nature~~ means for Black and Brown youth helps ensure that efforts to

improve equitable access to ~~nature~~ are the most authentic, relevant, and useful to the people

impacted by this work. To address racial inequities in accessing ~~nature~~ while also recognizing

and honoring the ways Black and Brown children living in Asheville already access and

experience ~~nature~~, I proposed an a/r/tographic study in which I asked: How do Black and Brown

youth living in Asheville define, access, and experience ~~nature~~?

To better understand my use of a/r/tography as a methodology and method, it may be helpful to

first describe the context and particulars of my research design.

Research Design

To answer my research question, I assisted with a series of art sessions engaging a group

of Black and Brown youth living in Asheville. My research was folded in as a component of the

---

[5] Importantly, *equitable* access to nature is not the same as *equal* access to nature. Equality is about everyone getting the same access to resources regardless of need. Equity considers need and acknowledges that not everyone is starting from the same place.

fall semester out-of-school programming taking place at the program's home site, the Arthur R.

Edington Education & Career Center and the Southside Community Garden in Asheville, NC.

This allowed me to build on the site's established relationships, trust, and rapport with the

surrounding community. Although the participants themselves were new to the program, the

Edington Center, in which AWITSC programming takes place, is a trusted community resource.

Many of the youth living in affordable housing across the street regularly visit to take part in

programs at the Edington Center and Southside Community Garden. In my initial conversations

with program staff leading up to the start of the program, it was intended that I would simply

drop in to attend the program meetings in which art sessions related to my research were taking

place. However, AWITSC experienced staffing changes leading up to the beginning of the

program and I was asked to assist as they sought a new facilitator. I was asked to stay as a

mentor for the remainder of the program, even after my data collection was complete, to

continue being a consistent adult in the lives of the youth and to continue supporting the ongoing

development of the program. During the program, artist mentors of color and myself facilitated

art workshops for youth. I worked collaboratively with the program's facilitating mentors to

develop prompts and select arts-based methods that answer the research question. The program

took place on Sunday afternoons beginning in October and continuing until May. Data collection

began in November and ended in mid-January, with a few breaks for holidays, providing five

meetings in which I attempted to collect data. With challenges in collecting signed

parent/guardian consent, varying levels of interest in participating from the youth, and the

overwhelm I experienced struggling to balance my own roles as artist/researcher/teacher in the

program, ultimately, two sessions provided useable data for the research.

I recruited youth participating in the 2021-22 afterschool garden market program with AWITSC. I want to acknowledge that the majority of youth in my study did identify as Black, however other racial and ethnic identities were also at play, so I used "Black and Brown" to reflect and honor the multiple racial and ethnic identities represented in the program. Youth had the freedom to choose to participate in one or more of the multiple sessions and activities related to the program, although the program incentivized youth to attend regularly through small stipends for attendance. Over the months that I assisted with the program, I obtained signed consent from the participants' responsible adults and verbal assent from the youth to contribute data to my research. Participating in the research was not mandatory to participate in the program. During these sessions, youth created art pieces in response to prompts that helped answer the research question. These prompts were developed in collaboration with the artist mentor facilitating the sessions so that they folded in as a natural part of the programming. Some examples of the kinds of prompts used were, "What comes to mind when I say 'nature?'" and "Draw your dream space in 'nature.'" The art methods varied, depending on the other program activities of the day and the youths' preferences. This added a participatory element to the study that decentered researcher control and distributed more power to the youth and the art. In this artist-group setting, I asked participants to share a brief artist statement about the piece they created. Some youth declined to make a statement about their pieces, others offered a brief "idea" behind the art which I noted in my journal. These statements generated rich qualitative data to understand how these youth conceptualize ~~nature~~ and their relationships to/with it—although I have chosen to resist coding and interpreting this data for the viewer. I recorded observations and reflected on my experiences following each meeting in a self-reflexive journal. In this journal, I responded to additional prompts that provoked reflection related to my

whiteness and how it intersected with my multiple roles as artist, researcher, and teacher—roles

that are reflected in the methodological approach of a/r/tography (Schultz & Legg, 2019;

Springgay et al., 2005)—in the context of this program and research.

A/r/tography

The "a/r/t" in a/r/tography reflects the researcher's multiple roles of **a**rtist, **r**esearcher, and

teacher (Schultz & Legg, 2019). I became entangled in the roles of artist/researcher/teacher—as

a/r/tographic methodology calls for—in multiple ways throughout the research process.

Similarly, the youth in this study were artists/researchers/teachers of their meanings of ~~nature~~.

The ways in which I fulfilled the roles of artist and researcher are evidenced through my use of

arts-based methods to answer my research question. The ways in which I fulfilled the role of

teacher emerged and shifted as I progressed in the research. I originally envisioned my role as

teacher to be fulfilled by my practice, before and beyond the AWITSC program, as an

environmental educator. However, I unexpectedly became further entangled in the role of teacher

as I became more involved in the development and administration of the program that I

conducted this research with. I also consider the contribution of my sharing the lessons learned

from my using Black Feminist Theory as a white woman in another publication for scholars and

practitioners to consider as they may also feel compelled to learn, apply, and uplift Black

feminism as a lens for social justice but may simultaneously feel uncertain about the

"appropriateness" of doing so if they, like me, do not have the lived experience of navigating

Black womanhood. Relevant to this matter, I describe a final role that I fulfilled in/through this

research in a later section Researcher as curator.

A/r/tography is an arts-based research methodology that defies definition and is, instead,

best understood through its "loss, shift, and rupture" (Springgay et al., 2005, p. 898)—its *process*

rather than its product. My inquiry emphasized the processes of art-making and art-viewing to prompt reflection into how social identities, particularly around race, shape our meaning(s) of ~~nature~~. Coming to understand what ~~nature~~ *is* for Black and Brown youth in Asheville can normalize those meanings and inform improvements to accessing ~~nature~~ in ways that honor those meanings. In a similar vein, this research also helped me become a better environmental educator by coming to understand how my own identity as a white environmental educator shapes the way I think about what ~~nature~~ is and my approach to environmental education and related research. The *process* of reflecting on Self and ~~nature~~ in this way was as much a part of the findings as the final product.

A/r/tography blurs the lines between art and research—artistic creation and knowledge creation. It is inquiry through art-making *and* writing, whereas these processes work in symbiosis to create meaning (Springgay et al., 2005). Rather than attempting triangulation or pursuing a reductive understanding of participants' art and underlying meanings, the merging of art and writing allowed me to compound and crystallize understanding of these multiple voices, perspectives, and creations (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Incorporating the arts into research helped focus participants' ideas, feelings, and conceptualizations, which created opportunities for rich data and deeper meaning (Derr et al., 2018, pp. 67-68). It also took pressure off participants, allowing them to share more freely, as the object of focus becomes their creative pieces rather than themselves (Derr et al., 2018, p. 68). There are no steps to this methodology, as it resists criterion-based prescription of method (Springgay et al., 2005). However, Schultz and Legg (2019) outline Springgay and colleagues' (2005) six methodological concepts, or intermingling and simultaneously performing *renderings* of a/r/tography:

(1) *Contiguity* implies the coming together of art and text. The two elements complement and extend each other rather than one extracting meaning from the other.

(2) *Living inquiry* acknowledges that research is an embodied process, continuously subjectively performed and co-produced (with participants and readers) with no true beginning or end.

(3) *Metaphor and metonymy* are used in the meaning-making process to make the meanings accessible to our senses…. The play we see between signifier and signified in both metaphor and metonymy as well as in the slashes (/) of a/r/tography spark tension and cause us to pause and reconsider normalized meanings.

(4) *Openings* are what allows the artist/researcher/teacher/reader to enter the text… but openings often come with discomfort. The goal of the a/r/tographic product, then, is to provide openings for the reader to join in the conversation.

(5) *Reverberations* are the movements that make the openings happen.

(6) *Excess* is about embracing a loss of control over our research, over the meaning-making process. This research lets go of "explaining data" neatly (or at all), putting anything into a fact or figure, or coding into neat reportable themes. (pp. 3-4)

I addressed Springgay and colleague's (2005) six renderings of a/r/tography (*contiguity*, *living inquiry*, *metaphor and metonymy*, *openings*, *reverberations*, and *excess*) in this research in the following ways. *Contiguity* merges text and art to extend the meanings of each, rather than one extracting meaning from the other (Schultz & Legg, 2019). Through the process of creating

art, youth could connect with their emotions and focus their intentions in responding to the prompts. The meaning of/within the art that youth created was extended through their artist statements about the pieces. In my role of researcher as curator, I gathered and arranged the pieces with the associated artist statements. As I journaled reflexively throughout the research, I also extended the meanings and knowledge created in my own art as I responded to my personal prompts. *Living inquiry* is research embodied in the researcher's, participants', and viewers' artful performance of and continuously co-produced subjective meanings of ~~nature~~ (Schultz & Legg, 2019). As the participants and I created art, we also created knowledge. As the reader now experiences this art, the reader also produces knowledge on what ~~nature~~ *is* and how the reader's social identity influences their own conceptualizations of ~~nature~~. *Metaphor and metonymy* are devices for engaging senses in meaning-making to make explicit what we tend to implicitly connect (Schultz & Legg, 2019). In my research, participants and I could use metaphor and metonymy in our art as we expressed our knowledge and meanings. *Openings* are rips and tears through which the researcher, participants, and readers can enter the text and join the conversation (Schultz & Legg, 2005). Those viewing the product of this research will find openings through which they can begin to consider multiple meanings of ~~nature~~ from various perspectives—including their own—and how personal identities and experiences can shape that meaning. *Reverberations* are what creates these openings. Producing and viewing the art that was created through this study may cause emotional reverberations and, I hope, move people into examining their own assumptions around what ~~nature~~ means and why it takes that meaning for them. Embracing *excess* in research entails the researcher letting go of control over the research and the meaning-making involved (Schultz & Legg, 2005). Assuming the role of researcher as curator, I abandoned coding, triangulation, and interpretation of the data. I relinquished control

over the meaning-making process to the participants and, ultimately, the viewers of the research

to create more opportunities for reverberations through which the viewers can (continuously)

contribute to the knowledge created through this research.

My Role as A/r/tographer: Researcher as Curator

Arts-based methodology disrupts oppressive patriarchal approaches to research (Capous-

Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018; Cuerden, 2010) which strips data from its context, codes and

condenses it into themes, and represents it reductively through a manuscript. Using a/r/tography,

I rejected patriarchal commodification of data representation and embrace *excess* in Black and

Brown youth's meanings of ~~nature~~ which can be deeply layered and emotionally saturated. Arts-

based methodology can also be used to decolonize research (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine,

2018). This made it a powerful approach to decolonizing dominant white conceptualizations of

~~nature~~. Combining the arts and research helped mitigate the problematic sentiment that I, as the

researcher, could "give voice" to the participants in the study (Alcoff, 1991). Youth spoke for

themselves through their art and artist statements. I was researcher as curator, *gathering* voices

responding to the research question and creating an opening(s) through which viewers may feel

moved to consider their own identity-entangled meanings of ~~nature~~.

Analysis & Representation: Art Zine

Art, and particularly a/r/tography, is an experience that makes the audience as much a

part of the process as the creator(s) by asking the audience to participate through viewing,

meaning-making, and creating their own artful additions (Schultz & Legg, 2019) of ~~nature~~

entangled in identity. Parry and Johnson (2007) describe Richardson's (1997, 2000) five criteria

for creating and judging CAP, and this is the criteria that can be used to judge this research:

(1) The text must make substantive contribution to a deeper understanding of social

life, including being grounded or embedded in a human perspective which

informs the ways in which the text itself is constructed. For example, an author

who processes life through music might construct the text in the form of a song.

(2) The text should be judged by its aesthetic merit. It should entice the audience to

form their own interpretation of the social world presented and it should be

complex, interesting, and engaging.

(3) The author should be reflexive about how the text was created, including their

role as researcher, bringing adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the

readers to just the author's point of view. The author is held accountable for the

knowledge presented and discloses any ethical issues surrounding the creation of

the text.

(4) The text should have an emotional and intellectual impact that generates new

questions and motivates the reader towards new inquiry or practice.

(5) The text should invoke an expression of reality—an embodied sense of lived

experience that is believable and conveys a credible account of the sense of

something "real." (pp. 125-126)

I used Creative Analytic Practice (Berbary, 2015; Parry & Johnson, 2007; Richardson &

St. Pierre, 2005) to resolve my three-fold crisis of representation (Alcoff, 1991; Berbary, 2015;

Parry & Johnson, 2007): 1) my intent to research the perspectives of youth in marginalized racial

groups of which I am not a member (Alcoff, 1991); 2) honoring self-definitions in my use of

BFT (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 2007); and 3) my use of arts-entangled data (Berbary, 2015; Parry &

Johnson, 2007). In keeping with a/r/tographic methodology (Schultz & Legg, 2019), I was also

interested in providing an *opening* for other Asheville community members to participate in

sharing their conceptualizations of ~~nature~~ which can make a positive impact through community

placemaking[6]. To accomplish this, my use of CAP allowed my thesis to take the form of an art

zine with youths' artful interpretations of ~~nature~~ in Asheville. The art zine is presented in the

results section followed by my reflections on the lessons learned in this project.

Reciprocity

Asheville Writers in the Schools and Community provided me with access to AWITSC

program space, access to youth participants, and allowed me to incorporate my research into

their program. As part of the AWITSC programming, AWITSC supplied art materials and

compensated additional mentors to support the program meetings. Youth participants produced

and shared their artwork—and by extension, their (counter)stories, and perspectives—as part of

their program activities and to help answer the research question. Considering the incredible

generosity extended to me, I wanted to ensure reciprocity for the program, participants, and

larger community connected to my research. I accepted the director's invitation to stay as a

mentor (one of the ways I fulfilled the role of "teacher" in a/r/tography) and committed to

maintaining my participation in the program, even after completing my research. I won a small

grant to offset costs associated with running the sessions related to my research. I also considered

how this work could make a significant and lasting impact in the communities my research was

connected to. Representing the arts-based data and disseminating this research in the form of an

art zine created a unique opportunity for community participation in this work. With youths'

permission, I compiled and distributed the art zine as a community placemaking art project. I

also included a link in the form of a QR code on the zine cover through which readers can donate

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[6] Derr and colleagues (2018) describes placemaking as "the participatory act of imagining and creating places with other people."

to AWITSC to generate funds to revitalize Asheville's Black & Brown communities through

AWITSC's social justice programming.

Reflexivity

My privileged identity as a white (adult) artist/researcher/teacher in the context of a

program created specifically for Black and Brown youth artists to develop under Black and

Brown leadership necessitated ongoing critical reflection related to my purpose for being there,

how my presence might have impacted program participants (both positively and negatively),

and how I was intentional in the way I showed up in the space and in my research. I name and

attend to the power and privilege of my whiteness in the context of this research process, topic,

site, and purpose. Beyond being a "confession, catharsis, or cure" to release myself from the

subjectivity of my whiteness and "get better data" (Pillow, 2003), I have identified my whiteness

and my white privilege as part of my reflexive practice to strengthen alignment with my research

purpose of increasing racially equitable access to ~~nature~~. I sat with the discomfort of my

whiteness in Black and Brown spaces; with the power I held as researcher and the way it reflects

the power I hold in my whiteness. If racially *in*equitable access to ~~nature~~ entails

underrepresentation of Black and Brown people in ~~nature~~, the completion of this logic must

acknowledge an *over*representation of white people in ~~nature~~. Whiteness, particularly *my*

whiteness in the context of this research, and all that it comes with and represents, was as much a

subject of my research inquiry as the ways Black and Brown youth conceptualize ~~nature~~.

Embedded in my research approach was a recognition that Black and Brown people *do* access

and create relationships with ~~nature~~, and that ideas of what ~~nature~~ is may or may not align with

white cultural idea(l)s of ~~nature~~. In my efforts to increase access to ~~nature~~ for people with

marginalized racial identities, it was critical for me to make conscious how my own privileged

racial identity influences my ideas of ~~nature~~ and how it 'should' be accessed and used, in order to then understand, emphasize, and normalize other ways of knowing and being with ~~nature~~ in my work as an environmental educator and researcher.

It is my responsibility as a white person to dismantle white supremacy culture. I do this in my personal life by actively (un)learning the socialization I have received as a beneficiary of white supremacy, practicing anti-racist thinking and living, and regularly reflecting on the ways in which I (re)produce oppression or actively resist and disrupt it. As a white person, becoming anti-racist is a permanent aspiration. It is a never-ending process of learning, action, and reflection that is fraught with good intentions, mistakes, and shortcomings. In my role as an artist/researcher/teacher, I work to dismantle systems of oppression through art as a form of knowledge creation, through pedagogical shifts in my teaching practice, and through research that is boldly political and grounded in anti-oppression. I wrote the research question to honor the multiple ways people of various backgrounds and cultures might define and experience ~~nature~~ while also acknowledging and seeking input to correct racial disparities in safe access to ~~nature~~. I have thought and will continue to think critically about my reasons for engaging in this research, the intention behind my approach and selection of methods, and the outcomes that it may produce. The responsibility of maintaining awareness and being thoughtful about my conduct as a white person in the context of Black and Brown spaces lies squarely with me. I remained receptive to the guidance given and expectations set by the program leaders and participants related to the terms of engagement surrounding this research.

Results

The results of this research have been represented in the form of a publicly distributed art zine using Creative Analytic Practice (Berbary, 2015; Parry & Johnson, 2007; Richardson & St.

Pierre, 2005). The zine was printed for public distribution around Asheville's communities and

the pages have been reproduced in Figure 1 for review below. The digital version can be viewed
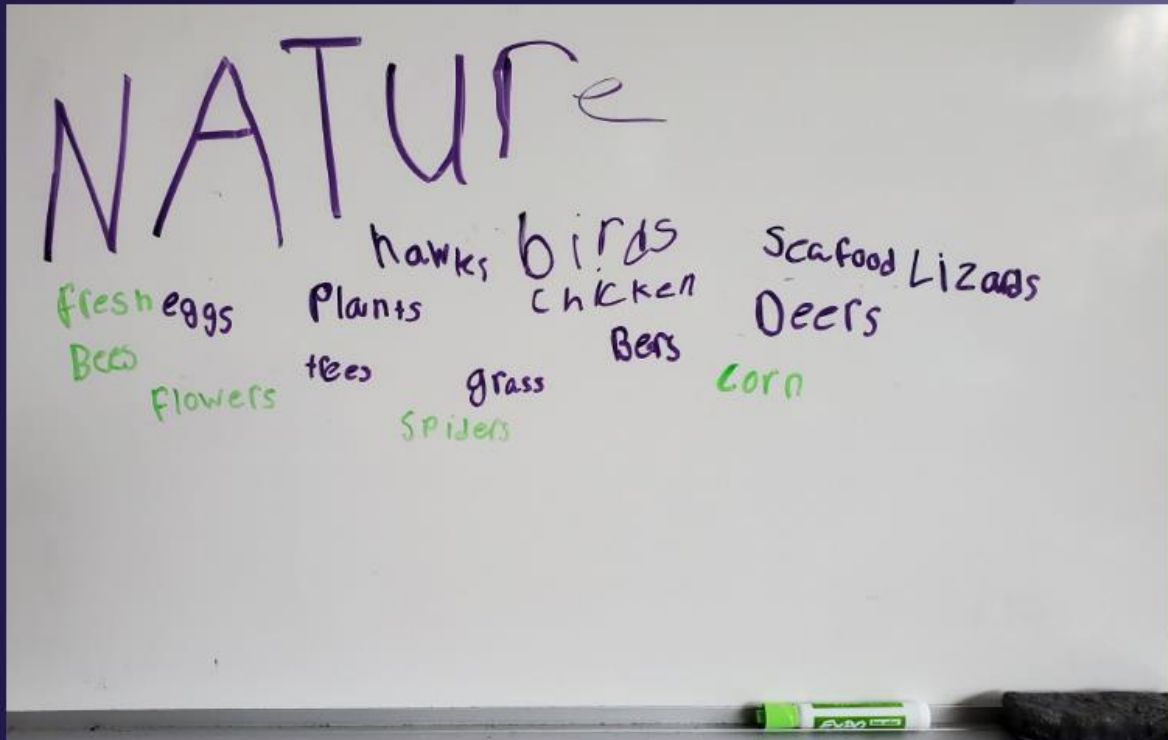
on the AWITSC website:

https://ashevillewritersintheschools.org/BlackBrownYouthsIdeasofNatureinAsheville_2022-03-

23_23-19-57.html

Figure 1.

Art zine: Black & Brown youth's ideas of ~~nature~~ in Asheville

Black & Brown youth's ideas of nature* in Asheville

? What comes to mind when I say "nature"...

NATUre

hawks birds scafood Lizaas
fresh eggs Plants chicken Deers
Bees trees Bers corn
Flowers grass
Spiders

this zine is the product of anti-oppressive research seeking to increase culturally relevant and racially equitable access to nature for Black and Brown youth in Asheville, NC. but...

who gets to decide what "nature" is?

Alayna (researcher) and Anna-Marie (program facilitator) asked a few of Asheville's Black & Brown youth for their ideas.

Artists: Bella, Davaughn, Jamahl, Khloe, Scoop, Tyshon

dominant ideas of "nature" are often centered

around whiteness & white preferences.

white cultural preferences are "normal" and

INVISIBLE

in white supremacy culture.

we use

nature
(with strikethrough)

to acknowledge this bias

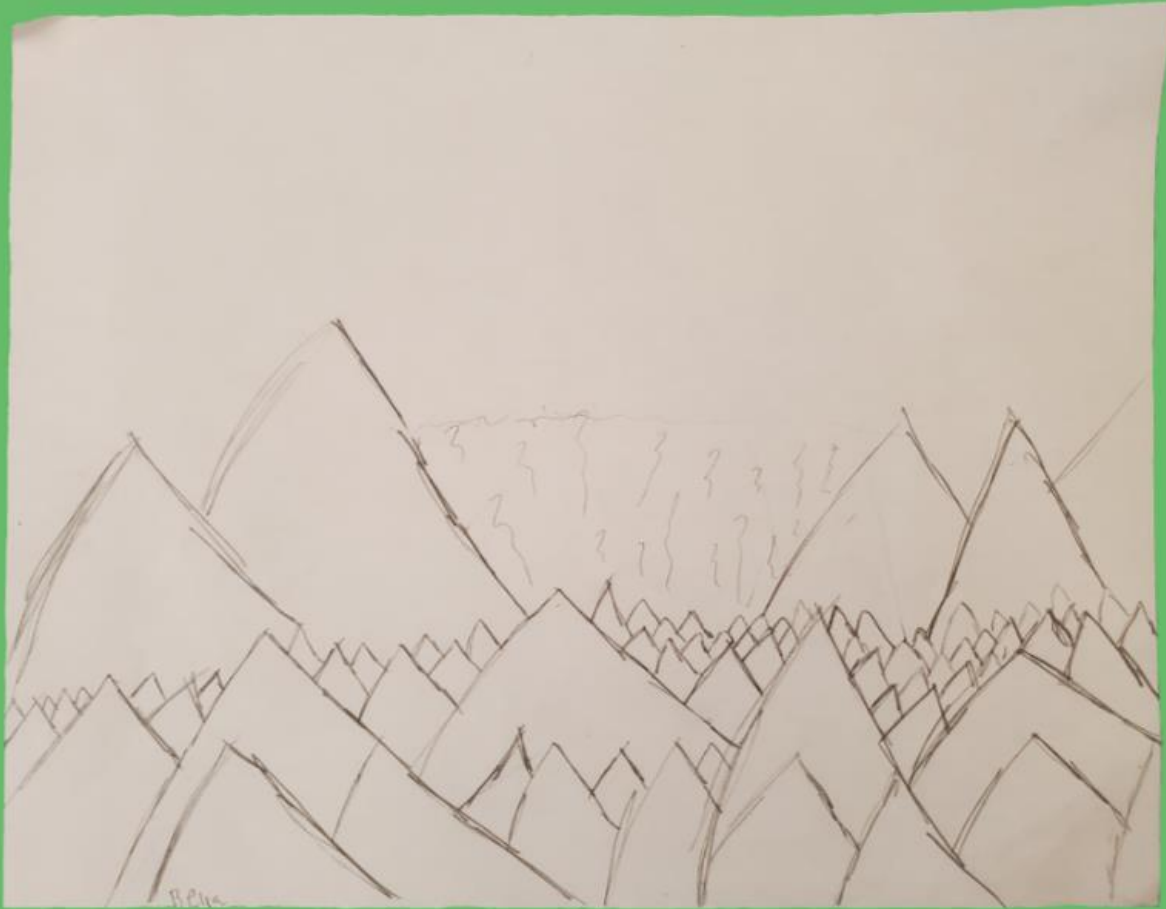and create

openings

for alternative ideas and
definitions.

thesis research:

Anti-oppression self-expression: An a/r/tographic understanding of
Black & Brown youth's conceptualization(s) of nature

by Alayna Schmidt
Dr. Callie Schultz; Dr. Hinnant-Crawford; Dr. Baron Palamar; Dr. Jeremy Schultz
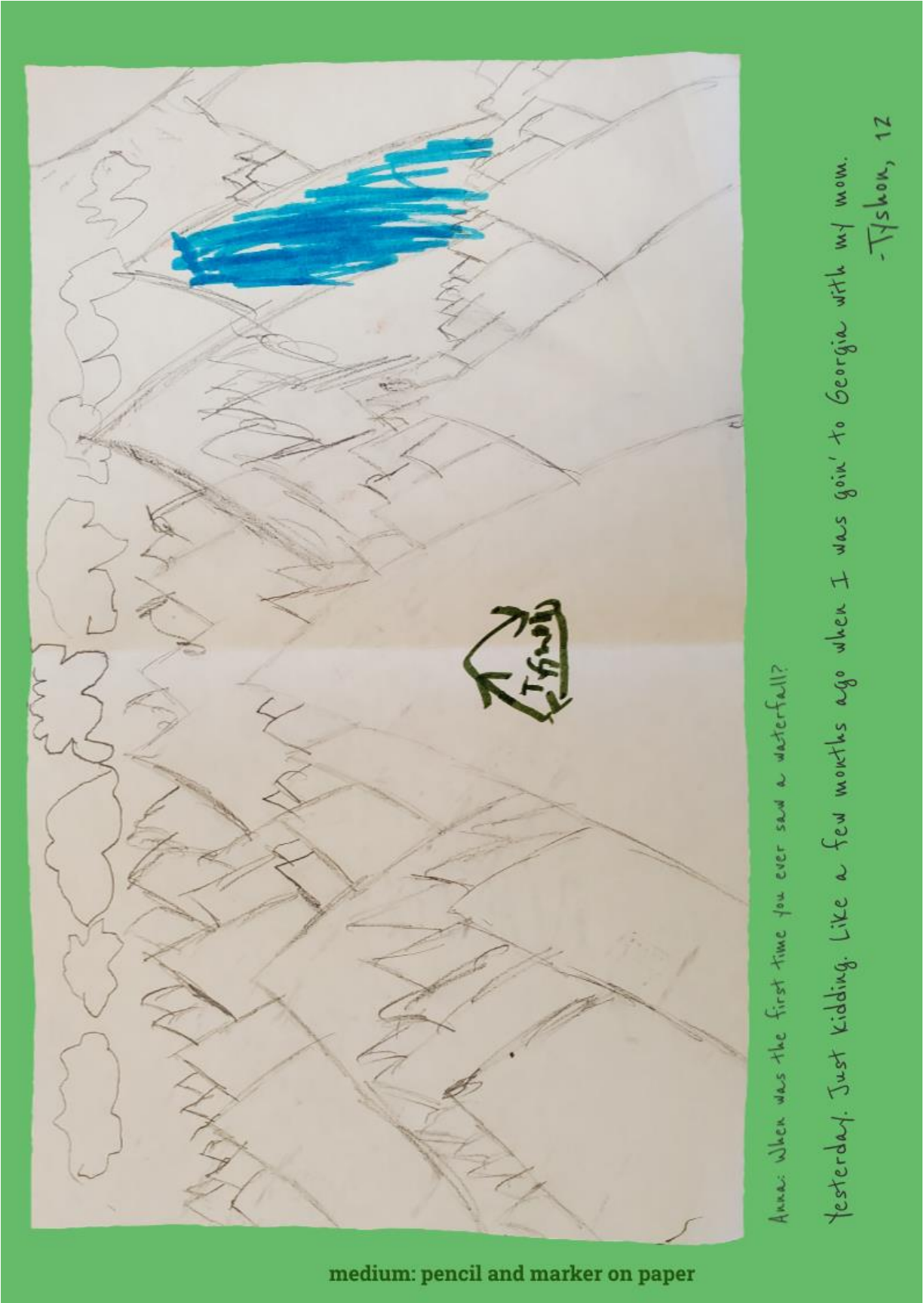Western Carolina University

? **Draw your dream space in ~~nature~~**
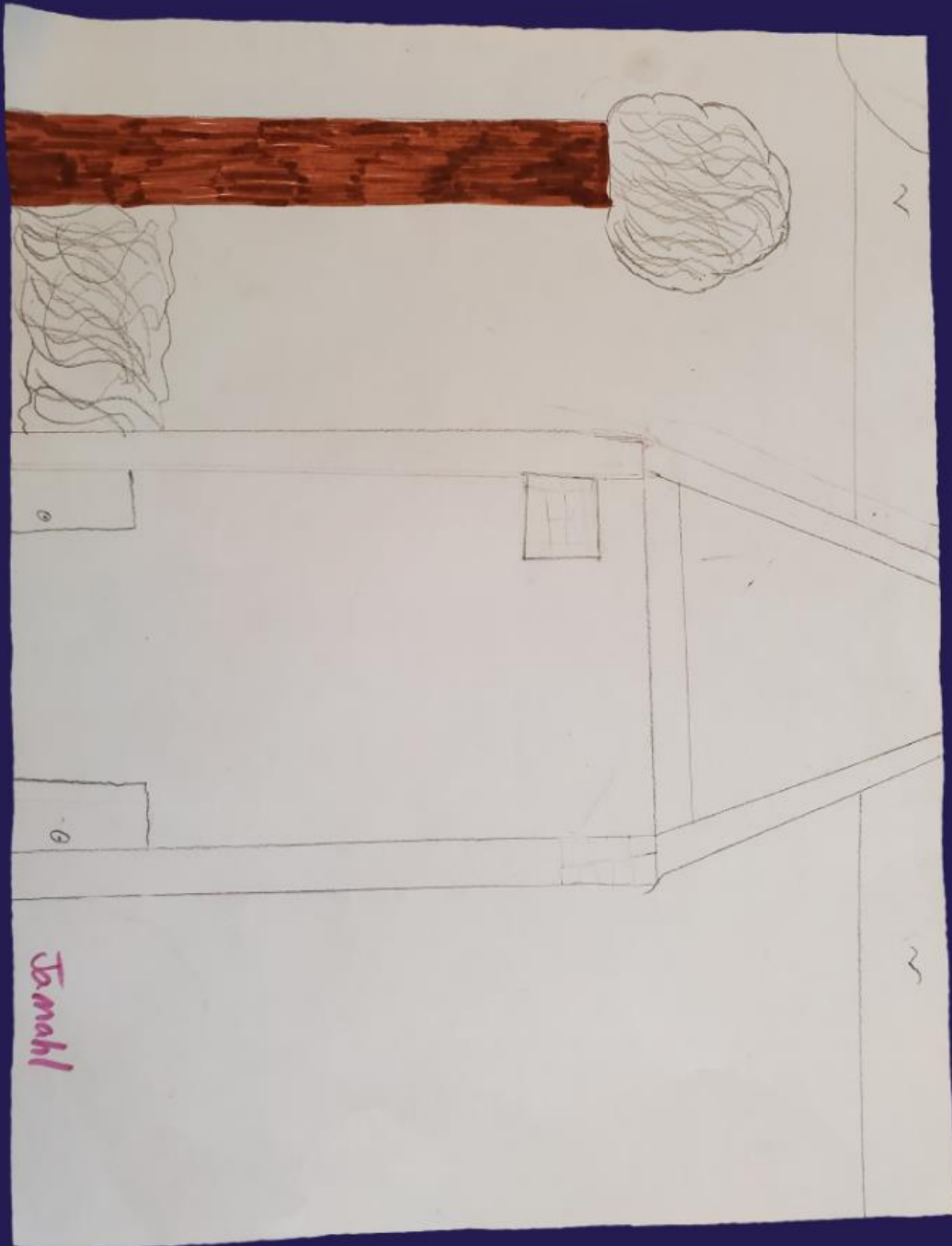
It's a waterfall.

-Bella, 10

medium: pencil on paper

medium: pencil and marker on paper

Anna: When was the first time you ever saw a waterfall?

Yesterday. Just kidding. Like a few months ago when I was goin' to Georgia with my mom.

—Tyshon, 12
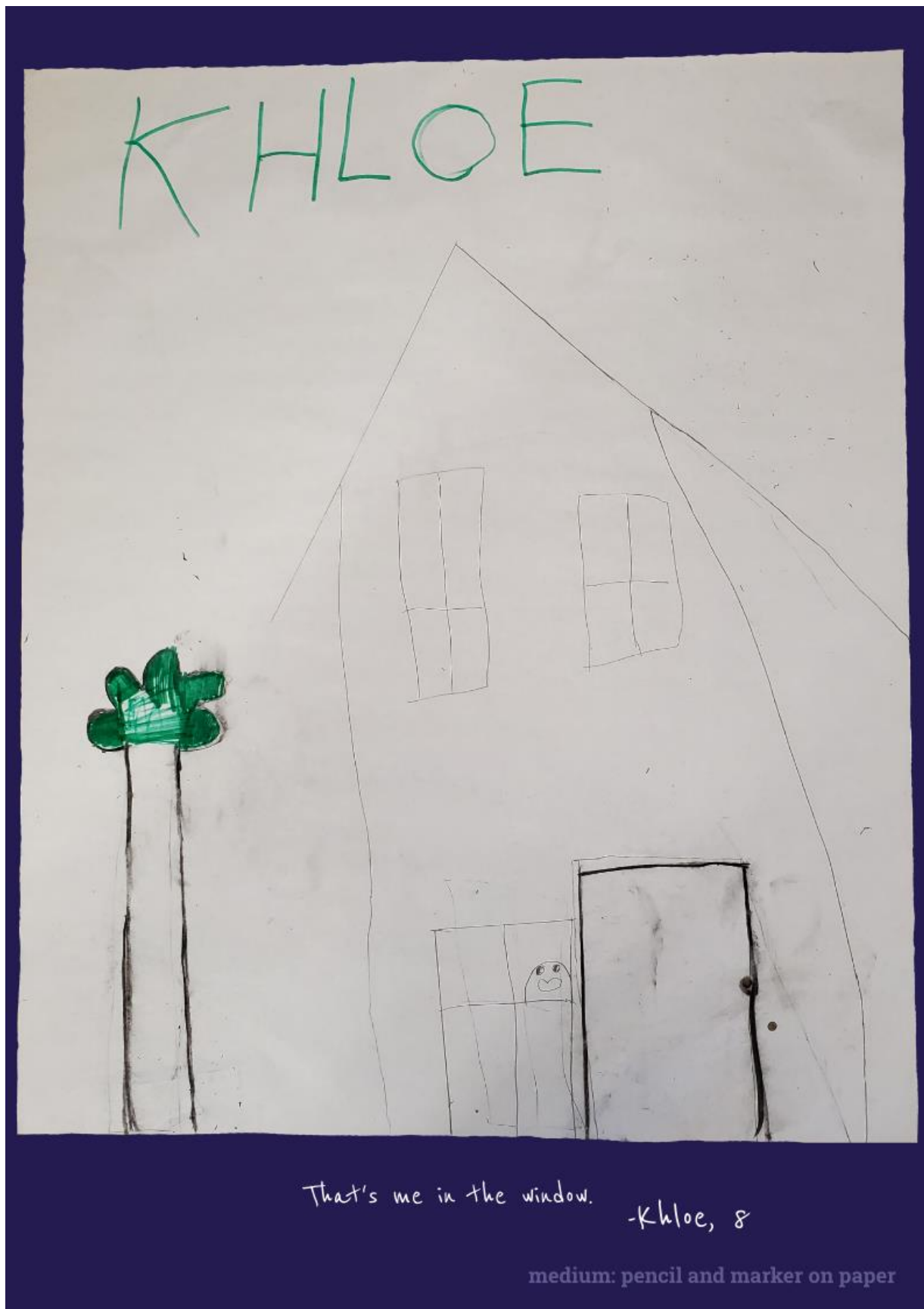
? Draw ~~nature~~ around your home

-Jamahl, 12

medium: pencil and marker on paper
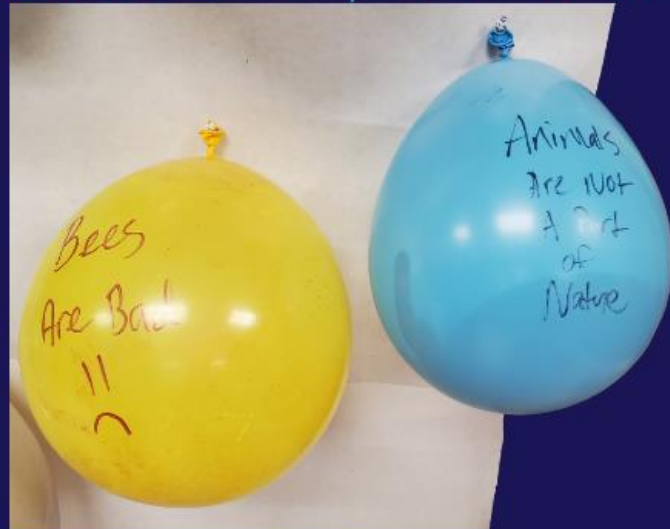
That's me in the window.

-Khloe, 8

medium: pencil and marker on paper

? Myth Buster: Write some m about your i

"Dinosaurs"

"Animals are not part of nature."

Dinosaurs

Bees Are Bad !!

Animals Are Not A Part of Nature

Snakes Are Bad

"Bees are bad."

"Snakes are bad."
Khloe: "But yes they are!"

Nature is Dead!

Nature is only Outside
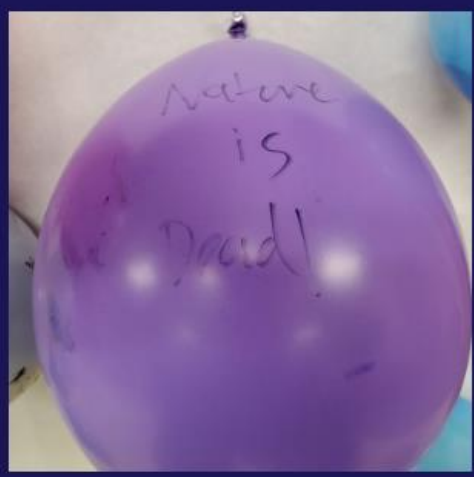
"Nature is dead."
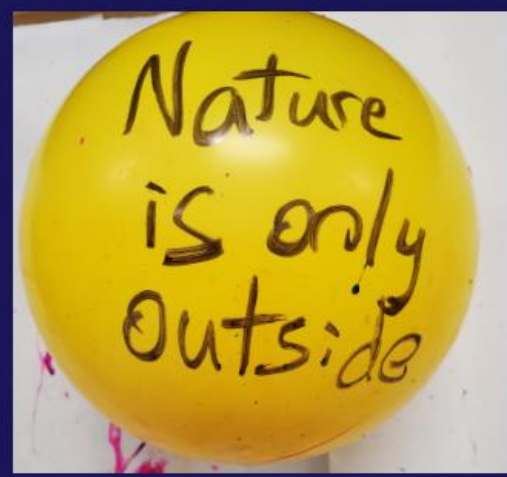
"Nature is only outside."

myths people might have about ~~nature~~ OR
ideas of ~~nature~~ that you want to bust

medium: balloons, darts, and paint on paper

Alayna: Paint how you feel when you connect with ~~nature~~.

ALL: I don't know...

Alayna: How do you like to connect with ~~nature~~?

Jamahl: Bruh, do I *look* like I connect with ~~nature~~?

? Paint how you feel when you connect with ~~nature~~.

It's trees. And a little bit of like... goin' to the woods.

-Tyshon, 12
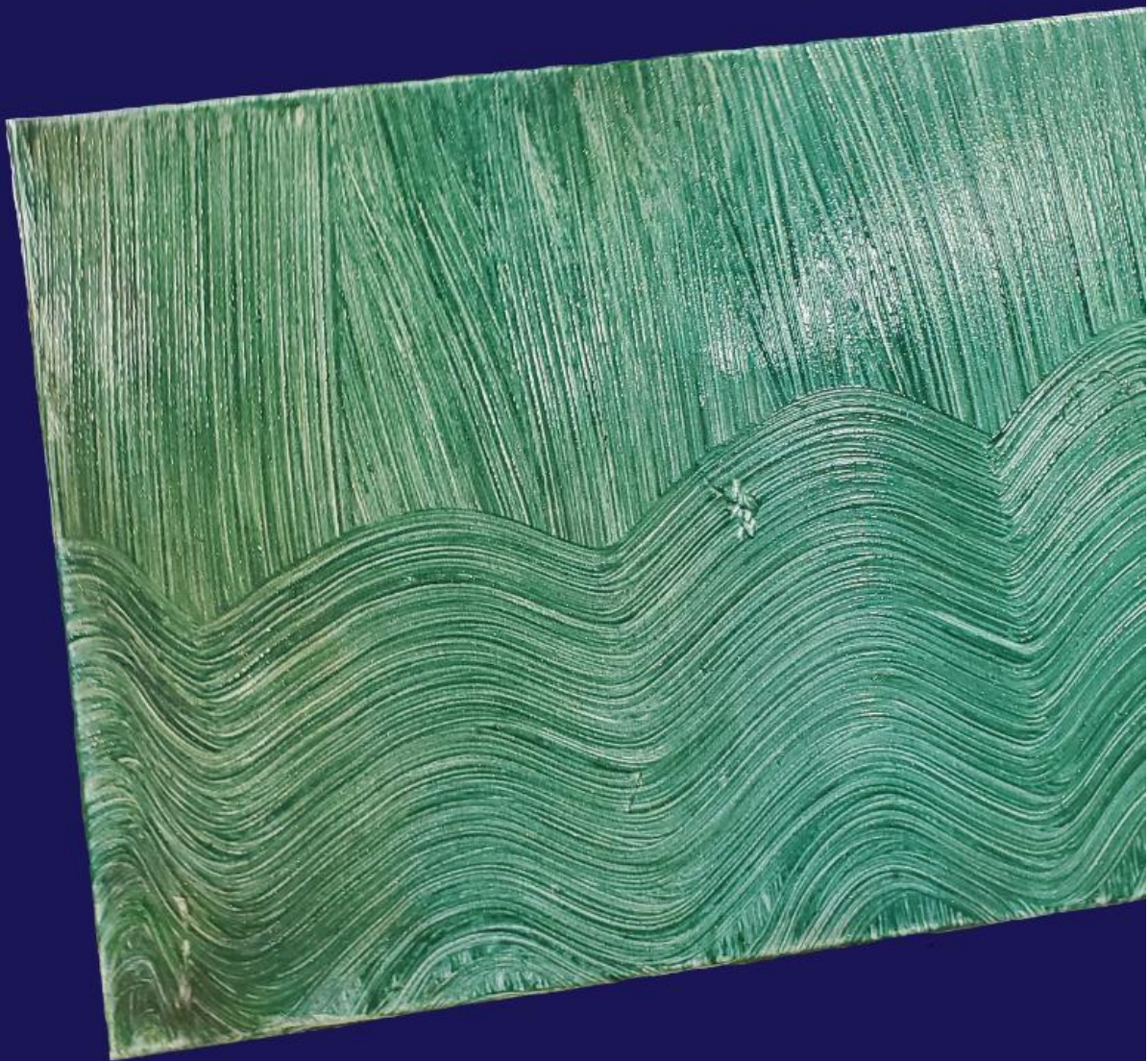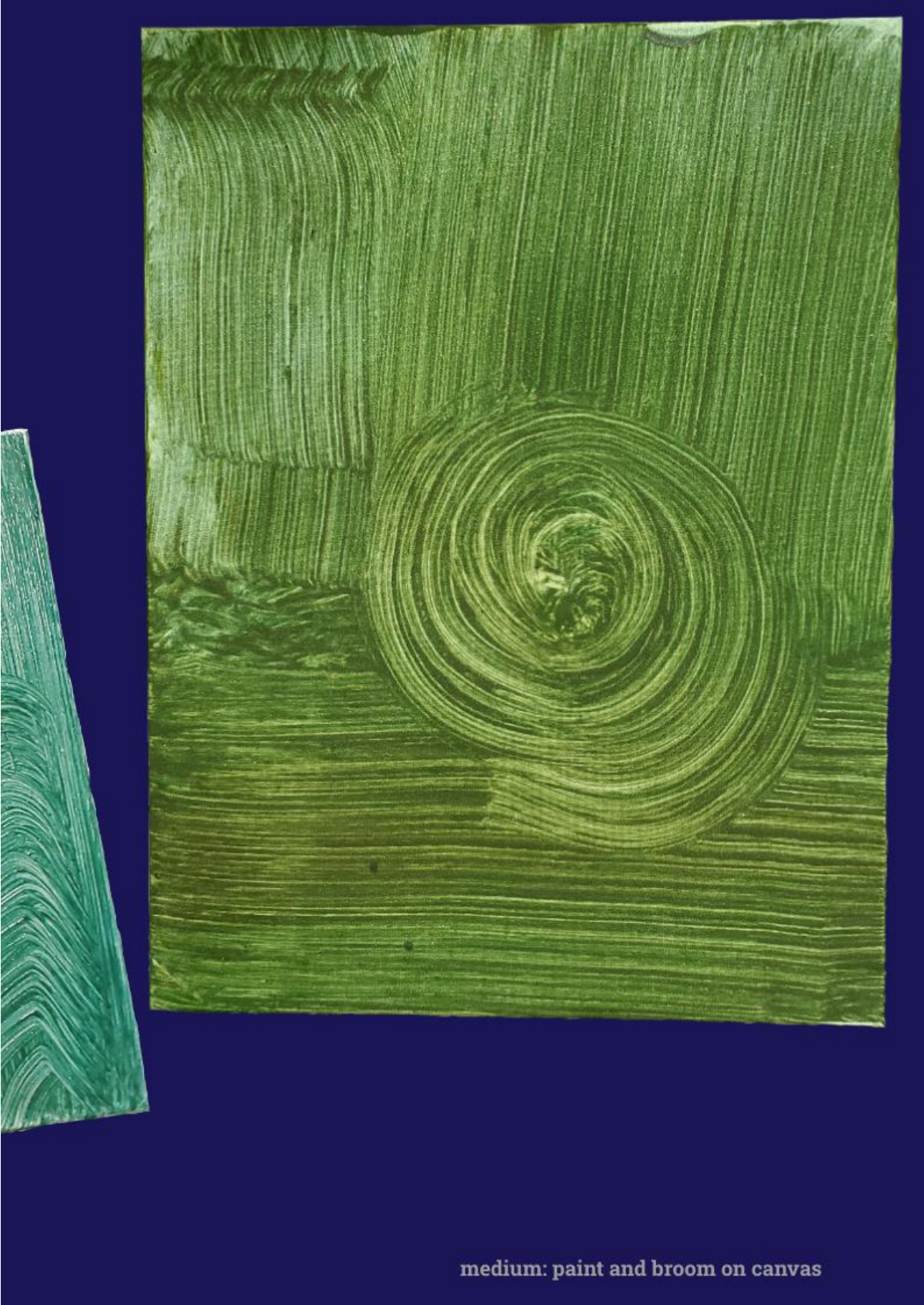
medium: paint and broom on canvas

Alayna: I like to walk barefoot on the ground.

Davaughn: Ewww.

Jamahl: You pig! What if you get worms in your feet?

Alayna: I would've put that on the myth buster board...

? Paint how you feel when you

Anna: What's the thing you're most afraid of in ~~nature~~?

Scoop: Bears.
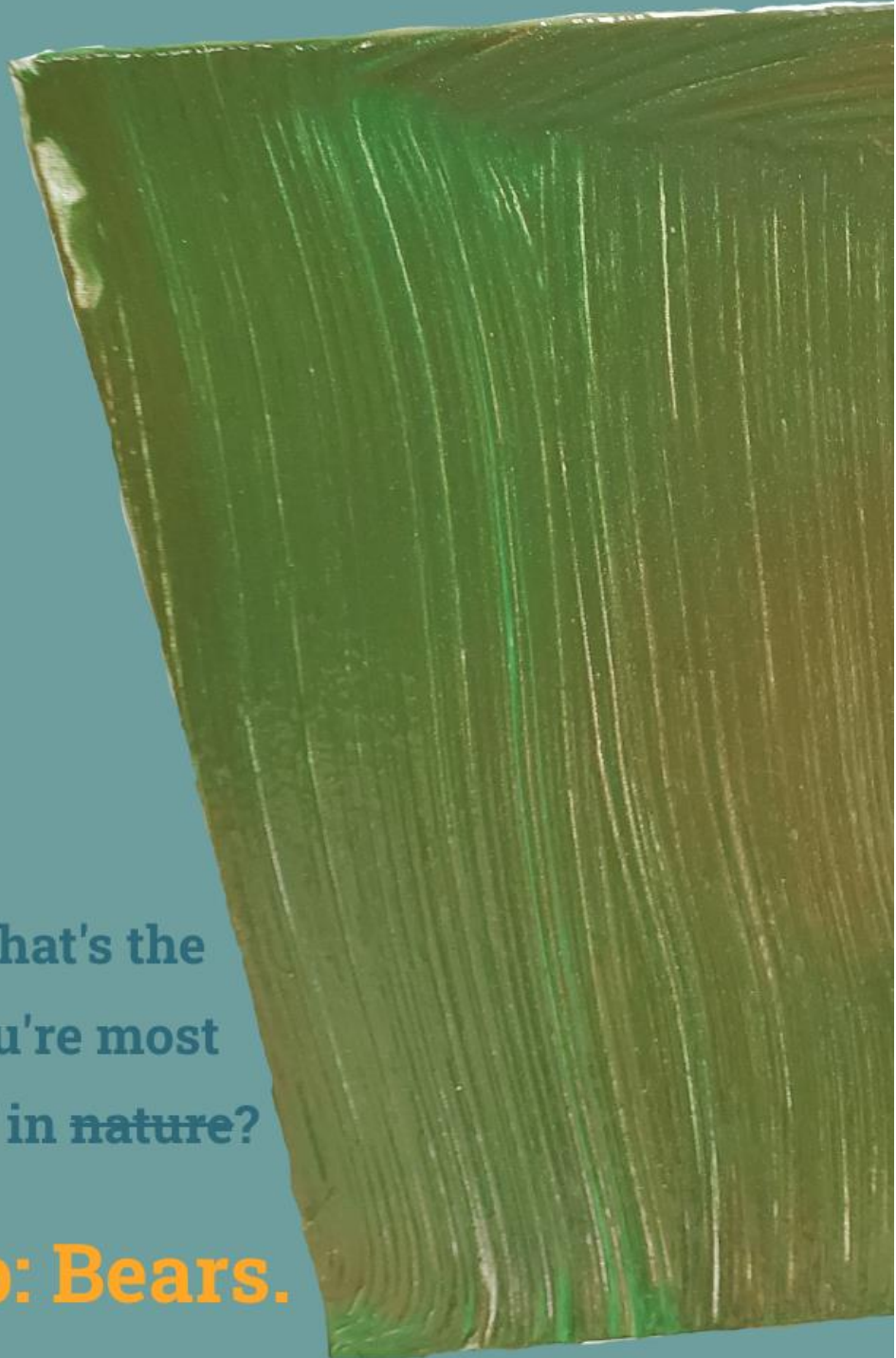
connect with ~~nature~~.
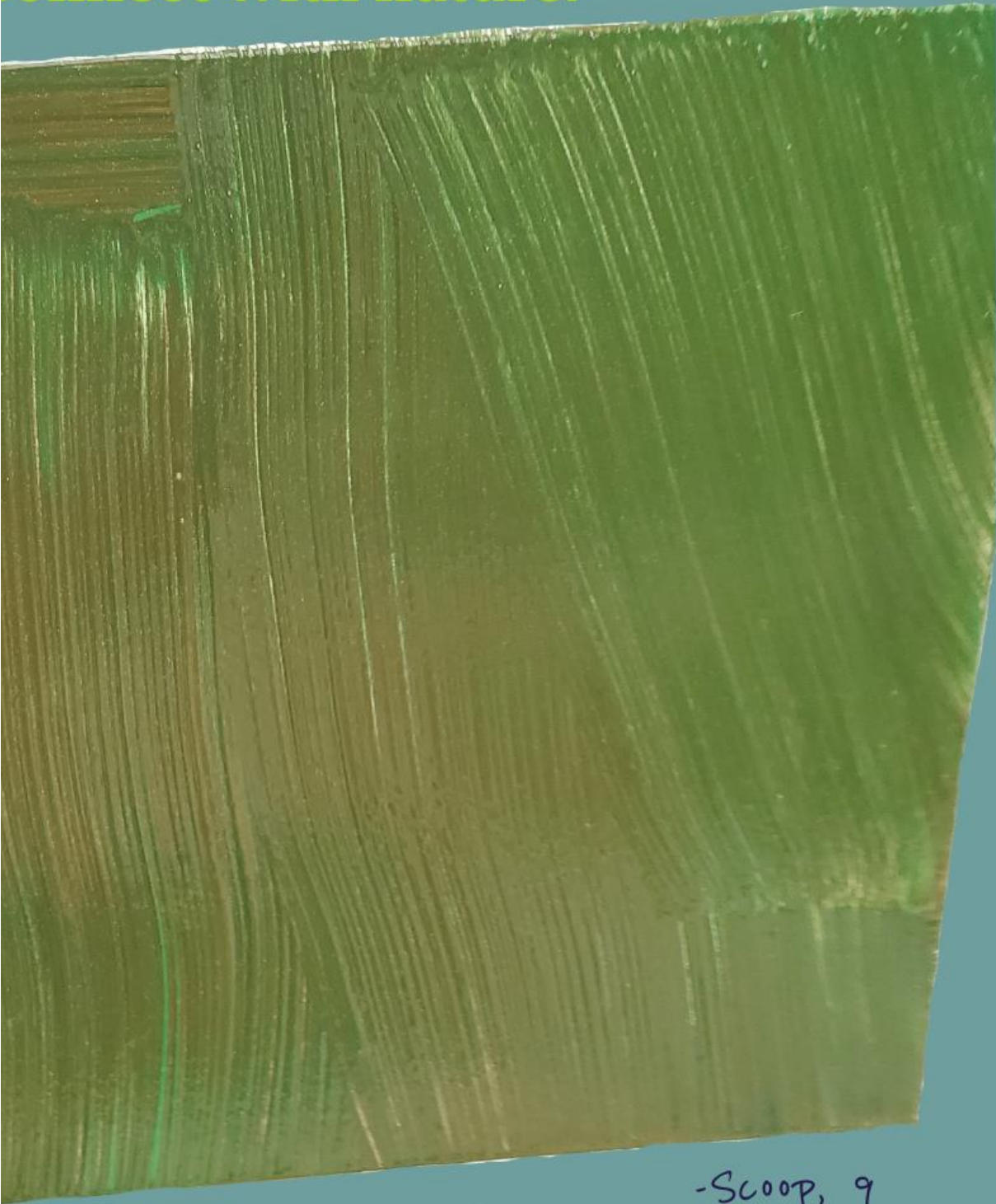
-Scoop, 9

medium: paint and broom on canvas

Tyshon: I know how he connect with ~~nature~~. When he playin' Fortnite, he be looking at the trees.

Jamahl: Bruh, that's not funny.

Tyshon: I ain't say it was.

Davaughn: They both be lookin' at the birds in Fortnite.

? Paint how you feel when you connect with nature.
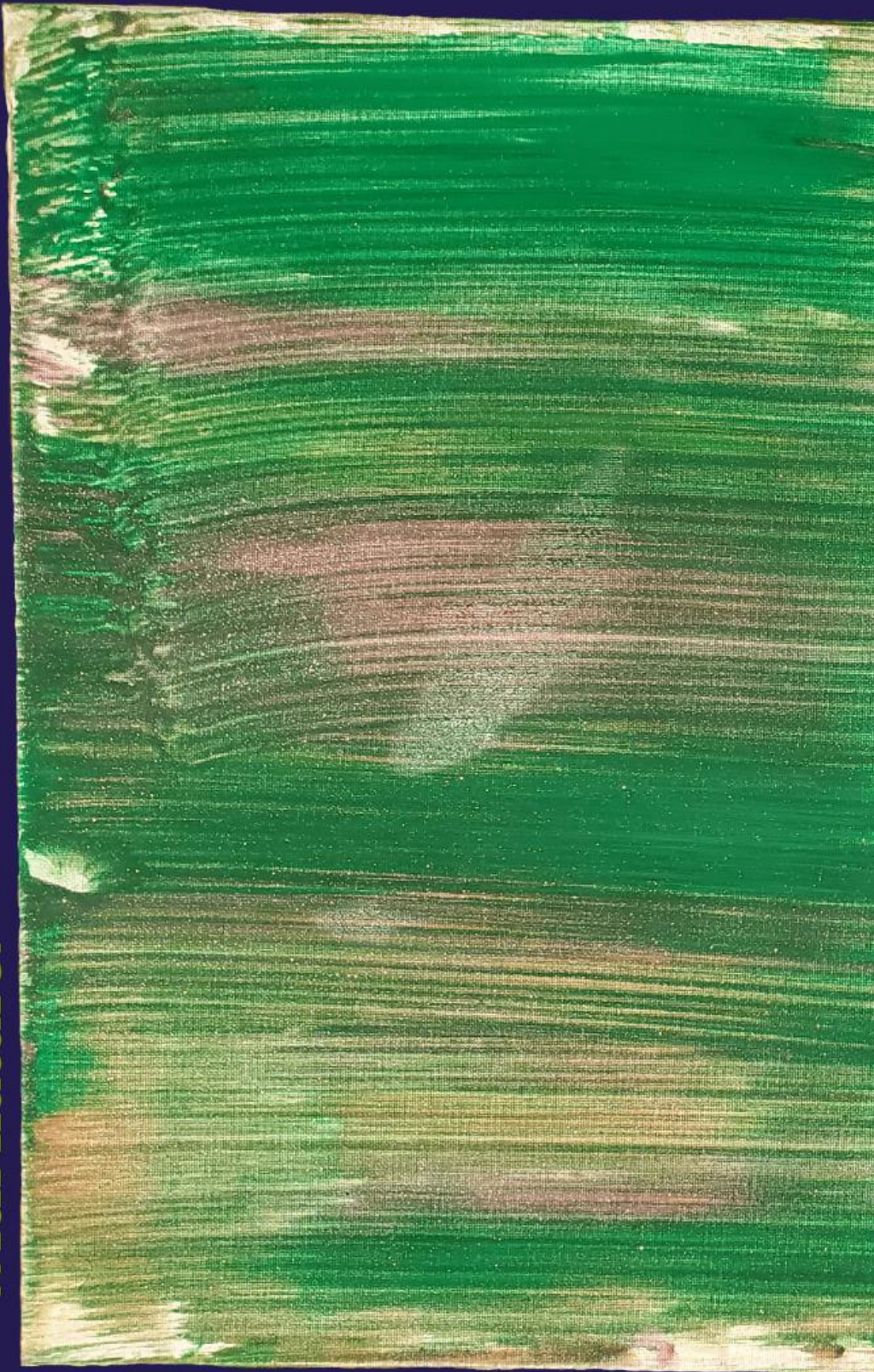
medium: paint and broom on canvas

-Jamahl, 12

Alayna: Is ~~nature~~ only outside?

ALL: No!

Khloe: It's inside.

Jahmal: It's right there on the wall. That painting.

Khloe: Plants.

Davaughn: Stinkbugs.

Youth viewed a wall mural similar to this one.

medium: washable paint and broom on canvas

I used colors from the wall painting. I used the brown in the deer but made it black. And I used the blue in the water.

-Khloe, 8

Khloe: It's the sky. In the middle of a tornado. That's why it's black. I painted it blue, then black.

Alayna: Have you ever seen a tornado in real life?

Khloe: Yeah, we had to go in the basement. But we don't have one. And we have windows everywhere.

I just like dark colors.

-Davaughn, 12

Anna: What in ~~nature~~ do you enjoy seeing the most?

Davaughn: Birds.

Jamahl: You and Scoop, ha!

medium: washable paint and body on canvas

ou connect with ~~nature~~.

It's like water. Calm.

-Bella, 10

medium: paint and unpopped myth buster balloons on canvas

this project made possible by
Asheville Writers in the Schools & Community
Southside Community Garden
Edington Career and Education Center
Youth: Bella, Davaughn, Jamahl, Khloe, Scoop, Tyshon
Adult Mentors: Anna-Marie, Deidra, Hannah, Olu, Laura, Leandra, Sekou,
Shuvonda, Tamarya

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Concluding thoughts: Research directions, ~~nature~~, and responsibility

Much has been written about the positive health outcomes and increased wellbeing associated with access to ~~nature~~ (Chawla, 2015; Frumkin et al., 2017; Kondo et al., 2018). Besides supporting physical and mental health (Seltenrich, 2015; White et al., 2019), access to ~~nature~~ improves community cohesion (Kondo et al., 2017; Zelenski et al., 2015), academic success (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998), and is necessary for children's healthy development (Chawla, 2015; Williams & Dixon, 2013). However, there is evidence of racial disparities in accessing ~~nature~~ and its associated positive outcomes (Jennings et al., 2016; Landau et al., 2020; Schelhas, 2002). While there is a growing body of literature examining barriers to accessing ~~nature~~ for racially marginalized groups (Floyd et al., 2008; Powers et al., 2020; Stodolska et al., 2019), studies generally focus on access to ~~nature~~ through parks, greenways, and other publicly accessed green spaces (Floyd et al., 2008; Powers et al., 2020). Future studies could measure the extent of equitable access to ~~nature~~ using an expanded definition that goes beyond what is publicly accessible to include backyards, schoolyards and other areas that may not be traditionally thought of as ways to access ~~nature~~. Additionally, the literature often focuses on the deficits experienced by marginalized racial groups rather than the overabundance of resources and normalization of preferences experienced by racially privileged whites (J. Davis, 2018; Doerr, 2018; Powers et al., 2020). Future studies examining racial disparities in ~~nature~~ access should critically examine the effects of white supremacy culture in creating and perpetuating injustices related to ~~nature~~ access. This includes examining how cities can increase safe and abundant access to ~~nature~~ by centering the needs and ideas of racially marginalized groups while also preventing the gentrification that often follows "greening" efforts (Curran & Hamilton,

2012; Pearsall & Anguelovski, 2016). To address this, I brought together this need to examine

racially (in)equitable access to ~~nature~~ using an expanded definition of ~~nature~~ that centers the

ideas and needs of communities of color *and* disrupts unquestioned hegemonic white preferences

related to ~~nature~~ access efforts which can often trigger gentrification.

My responsibility—Considering my own identity

A final responsibility (my own) to consider is my outsider identity as a white person. This

positionality brings an important perspective in increasing anti-racist knowledge and practice—

an endeavor that can and should be taken up by more white people. While I have first-hand

experience living in a culture steeped in white supremacy, my identity places me in the position

of oppressor through un/conscious complicity in and benefit from racist policies, behaviors, and

thinking—both my own and at a systemic level. In fact, part of my privilege within white

supremacist culture is that I have not been required to—and therefore have only later in life

started to—understand and dismantle race and racism on a deeper conceptual level. I will not

understand the artful data of this research in the same way that someone who experiences racial

oppression might. It is my responsibility to try to understand anyway. Through my own process

of listening to honor and understand the experiences of people who experience racial oppression,

I become a better artist/researcher/teacher of environmental education and I contribute to anti-

racism in these practices at a systems level through the lens and position of the racially

responsible.

Our Responsibility

While the purpose of this study was to explore racially equitable access to ~~nature~~ for

children living in the City of Asheville, it was limited to gathering conceptualization(s) of ~~nature~~

specifically for the youth participating in the study. While the findings cannot be used to

generalize about how all Black and Brown youth conceptualize ~~nature~~—or even for those living in Asheville—the study provided an *opening* for practitioners of the arts, research, and teaching to begin considering the assumptions we may hold around what ~~nature~~ is, where that understanding of ~~nature~~ comes from, and how we can make our conceptualization(s) of ~~nature~~ conscious, so that ~~nature~~ is intentionally incorporated into practice in multiculturally relevant ways. This is our collective responsibility.

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CHAPTER FIVE: CAN OR SHOULD WHITE WOMEN DO BLACK FEMINIST THEORY?: EXPLORING TENSIONS, CONTRADICTIONS, AND INTERSECTIONALITIES WHILE PERFORMING JUSTICE-FOCUSED RESEARCH

Can or should white women do Black feminist theory?: Exploring tensions, contradictions, and intersectionalities while performing justice-focused research

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Can or should white women do Black feminist theory?: Exploring tensions, contradictions, and intersectionalities while performing justice-focused research

"Speaking the truth to power in ways that undermine and challenge that power can often best be done as an insider….Challenging power structures from the inside, working the cracks within the system, however, requires learning to speak multiple languages of power convincingly" (Collins, 2012, p. xiii).

In a recent research project, I strove to be what Collins (2012) calls an 'outsider-within,' someone within an institution doing "edge work" to provide alternate perspectives. Using a/r/tography (Schultz & Legg, 2019), I (a white woman) sought to understand how Black and Brown youth living in Asheville conceptualize 'nature.' Youth expressed their knowledge through art, and I was 'researcher as curator,' gathering this art and framing it in Black feminist theory. The goal was for the product to guide efforts to increase racially equitable access to nature in our city in ways that would be most authentic and meaningful for the people the work was meant to impact. The research design was meant to simultaneously disrupt white patriarchal ideas of what counts as "knowledge" in academia. Tensions arose as I worked the space between/around disrupting oppressive structures in academia while obligated to work within those very frameworks to ensure the research would be "accepted." Conflicts also occurred as I considered whether it was appropriate for someone with my social identity to conduct this research.

Black Feminist Thought is produced by and for Black women (Collins, 2000), but could it be applied by—be the conceptual lens for—others? How do/should I position myself as a white woman doing Black feminist work? How do I de-center myself, center Black voices, and also use the power that my whiteness provides to do the type of social justice work Black feminist thought approaches demands? Here, I wrestle with the answers to these questions mainly through my 'conversations' with Black feminist intellectuals such as Collins (2000), Lorde (2007), Cooper (2018), and Kendall (2020). In this reflective piece, I explore six 'lessons learned' which emerged from the tensions/conflicts I encountered while doing this project in the confines of academia with the goal of considering how academics and practitioners can create knowledge in anti-racist ways.

Keywords: Black Feminist Theory; white women; anti-racism; feminism

Can or should white women do Black feminist theory?: Exploring tensions, contradictions, and intersectionalities while performing justice-focused research

> I am doing what Black women do best. I'm calling America out on her bullshit about racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and a bunch of other stuff.... Black girl feminism is all the rage, and we need all the rage. Feminism can give us a common language for thinking about how sexism, and racism, and classism work together to fuck shit up for everybody. (Cooper, 2018, p.5)

We *ALL* need Black girl feminism. But how can/should white women researchers, in particular, engage with and take up Black girl feminism, or Black Feminist Theory (BFT), in research? It is clear that white women cannot *produce* BFT. Black feminist theory is produced by and for Black women (Collins, 2000). But could Black feminist theory be *applied* by—be the conceptual lens for—others (e.g., white women)? This is what I (Alayna, 1st author), a white woman, attempted to do in a recent a/r/tographic research project using art to understand how Black and Brown youth conceptualize "nature" in Asheville, NC. I regularly questioned the appropriateness of my use of Black Feminist Theory in my research. I questioned whether I was the "right" person to do this—whether I should leave this work to scholars with lived experience encountering and resisting gendered and racialized oppression. This question arose from my struggle to reconcile my desire to help meet the need for more people, especially people with privileged positions, to take up anti-oppressive work and my own self-critique of not wanting to take up space as a white person in social justice projects. Particularly given that Black and Brown people, and especially Black and Brown women, are already leading this work—often with greater physical and emotional labor and less recognition and support than their white counterparts. By "this work," I mean the type of research I had undertaken—specifically, using

Black Feminist Theory to conduct research that aimed not only to examine human oppression, but to disrupt it in/through the very process and product of the research. In this paper, I give a brief overview of BFT and point to some works using BFT in leisure literature. Then, I introduce my own research project and outline some lessons learned in my use of BFT for social justice research as a white woman.

What is BFT and What Work Does It Do?

As Ratna (2017) notes,

Black feminist thought emerged for the rationale cited in the important scholarship of authors who questioned the epistemological practices of white feminists who universalised the experiences *all* racial and ethnic 'Others', ignorant to racial power bestowed upon them as white women (p. 153).

In this section, in order to begin to understand how white feminists might engage with BFT and make feminist thought and practice more equitable, I argue we must begin by fully understanding guiding principles and epistemological tenets of BFT.

Locating and Defining Black Feminist Theory

Black Feminist Theory is the name given to the intellectual and theoretical traditions of Black feminist thinkers, a tradition with "no name" (Collins, 2000, p. 21). In her book, *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) resists defining BFT and instead offers six distinguishing features:

- U.S. Black feminist thought exists (still today) to empower Black women in a dialectical relationship with Black women's oppression (by race *and* gender) and Black women's activism through ideas and practices of resistance.

- While U.S. Black women as a group face common challenges, not all individual Black women have had the same experiences and there are many diverse responses to these experiences.

- Black feminist thought is interconnected in dialogical relationship with Black feminist practice—Black women's experiences inform Black women's thoughts and changed thinking may produce changed actions.

- Black feminist thought also exists in dialogic relationship between and among everyday Black women engaged in "taken-for-granted knowledge" and Black women intellectuals who form specialized knowledge.

- Black feminist thought and Black feminism as critical social theory must remain dynamic to continue resisting changing social conditions.

- Black women's liberation is part of a holistic vision for *human* liberation.

These six features serve as the foundation for the unique standpoint on the experiences of Black women as a group. Throughout history Black female experiences as teachers, mothers, gardeners, activist, scholars, and many other roles has led to the production of thoughts— voices—as determined by their membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes *and* the active resistance to white male patriarchy and white feminism (Combahee River Collective, 2014). BFT is a framework that provides a safe space for generations of Black female collective wisdom, resistance, empowerment and liberation.

While these six distinguishing features highlight the intersection of race (Black) and gender (woman), here, it is important to acknowledge the differences between Black Feminist Theory and Intersectionality Theory (which came later). Intersectionality Theory—which is credited to Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), a critical legal scholar and Black woman—was originally

written to look specifically at the ways the American legal system marginalized Black women by failing to account for discrimination based on *both* race *and* gender. However, the theory of intersectionality is often removed from this historic context and has come to mean the ways in which many various aspects of identity can intersect for anyone (Mowatt, 2017, p. 5). This has resulted in Crenshaw revisiting her initial premise due to its continued distortion in academia and the general public through its dilution of ownership and epistemological roots. Intersectionality theory can be understood in terms of Critical Race Theory—in fact, Crenshaw was one of Critical Race Theory's prominent early figures (Delgado et al., 2017). Many critical leisure scholars (c.f. Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013) have used an intersectional lens in their research. Black Feminist Theory, while similar to both Intersectionality Theory and Critical Race Theory, is distinct in its emphasis on pursuing the interests and liberation of Black women as a collective, and other similarly oppressed groups, by and through Black women's critical social thinking and social justice projects (Collins, 2000). One of the foundational pieces of all three of these theories is the prioritization of standpoint—that is, the unique perspectives created from the social locations of various groups encountering (and resisting) oppression within the matrix of domination and the resulting empowerment of these groups in claiming their standpoints (Collins, 2000; Collins, 2004).

Given the above definition of BFT, we argue that white women can and should allow these distinguishing features to inform the ways we think about and perform *feminist* research (which has oft been critiqued for being elitist and primarily serving white women). We can listen to and learn from the truths of Black feminists and engage in dialogue with Black feminists for guidance in this work—all while acknowledging, respecting, and attempting to understand our differences and to identify our points of connection in working towards social justice. It is not

only appropriate for white woman to do so, it is necessary to dialogue and build coalition with

Black feminist thinkers (Collins, 2000, pp. 37-38). However, it is important that white women

remain self-conscious in how we show up in such dialogues with Black feminists. In a heartfelt

letter, poet and Black feminist Audre Lorde (2007) challenges the under- and misrepresentation

of Black women and Black women's work by asking white women a sincere question:

> Do you ever really read the work of Black women? Did you ever read my words, or did
>
> you merely finger through them for quotations which you thought might valuably support
>
> an already conceived idea concerning some old and distorted connection between us? (p.
>
> 68)

Lorde's probing question urges white women not to tokenize and misrepresent the work of Black

women intellectuals to further our own agendas.

Additionally, a key component of research using BFT is that it should lean toward praxis,

meaning that there should be action *coupled with* theory. Collins (2000) noted that BFT sees

thinking and action—theory and practice—as inseparable. Similarly, in *Teaching to Transgress*,

hooks (1994) spoke to the necessity of educators connecting theory and practice inside and

outside the classroom: "Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills

this function only when we ask it to do so and direct our theorizing towards this end" (p. 61).

White women must continuously examine *both* our thinking *and* our actions (both directly

related to our research and indirectly through our daily choices) to critically evaluate whether

and how we may be *resisting* or *reproducing* oppression in the ways we navigate "norms" (read:

white patriarchal preferences) in the academy. BFT calls upon those who employ it to do just

that (see the ethic of personal accountability discussed below). This is the beginning of the *work*

that BFT does on the researcher and on the research design and process.

The work that BFT does

BFT theory asks all involved to assess the implications of and (if necessary) critically re-think power and power structures (resulting from intersectional oppression) at *every level* of knowledge production. This is the foundation for the work that BFT *does*. And, when using BFT to inform research, that work begins by critiquing the power inherent in the very methods used to produce knowledge. Measuring racial disparities using methods traditionally accepted in the academy (think 'objective' quantitative and post-positivist methods) (re)produces oppression and disparities for Black people. Collins (2012) wrote, "Challenging power structures from the inside, working the cracks within the system, however, requires learning to speak multiple languages of power convincingly" (p. xiii). Certainly, quantitative and post-positivist qualitative (counting, coding, theming) evidence can be used to demonstrate a clear need to invest in communities that are marginalized by white supremacy culture (and these approaches are often *required* by those in power as these approaches are normalized 'intelligible' and 'reliable' research). However, this work "speaks the language of the oppressor" (hooks, 1994)—it speaks to and can be understood by the white men (and women) colonizers who continue to control spaces of decision-making and many resources that are necessary in correcting social injustices. And as poet and Black feminist Audre Lorde (2007) states so powerfully, "the master's tools will not dismantle the master's house" (p. 112). Meaning that white patriarchal colonialist idea(l)s of what "counts" as *knowledge* and *truth* are not sufficient to dismantle those same systems which produce these inequities. Collins (2019) explains, "subordinated groups know that epistemology has never been neutral, and that epistemic power is part of how domination operates" (p. 122). While works relying on paradigms that align with white patriarchal idea(l)s of truth make important contributions and have their place, they cannot be the only approach that we take to

dismantle patriarchal colonial white supremacy culture in research and application. Those interested in advancing feminist, antiracist, justice-forward work must see the validity in ideas of *truth* and ways of knowing that may not align with white patriarchal preferences. Collins (2019) goes on to explain that epistemic resistance best comes from within the exclusionary institutions that control knowledge claims, i.e. academia. This is part of the power white women, who have been privileged with greater access to academic spaces, can bring as institutional "insiders" to build epistemic resistance in coalition with Black women.

Still, like other theories, BFT is a partial perspective—unfinished in its analysis and benefiting from the inclusion of multiple groups' unique situated standpoints for a more holistic understanding (Collins, 2000, p. 270). I am not suggesting that BFT is the only lens capable of anti-oppressive work or that it is the lens through which academics should examine all work related to oppression. This would be to fall into the *either/or* binary thinking of white colonial patriarchy. Rather, I use the *both/and* conceptual approach of BFT to emphasize that we need to examine disparities *both* through empirical studies that aim to quantify it *and* through alternative approaches that recognize other ways of knowing as credible and legitimate. Because alternative knowledge claims, like BFT, have been (necessarily) developed outside of institutions in which knowledge claims are validated by people in such positions of power to designate them so, it is important that alternative approaches—like the approach used in my study—be evaluated by their own set of criteria. Here, I outline Collins' (2000) distinguishing features[18] regarding the credibility of knowledge claims using Black feminist epistemology as it is understood through its own concerns:

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[18] Collins does not refer to these as "criteria" for validating BFT, but rather distills the distinguishing features of the knowledge validation process in Black feminist epistemology.

- **Lived experience as a criterion of meaning** – Individuals making knowledge claims are rendered more credible if they have lived through the experience(s) in which they are claiming to be experts—more so than individuals who have merely read or thought about such experiences.

- **The use of dialogue –** Connectedness (not separation) through dialogue (not debate) are essential in knowledge validation.

- **The ethic of caring** – Three interrelated components make up an ethic of caring in which truth emerges through collective care: 1) Emphasis on uniqueness of individuals, 2) the use of appropriate emotion in dialogue[19], and 3) developing capacity for empathy.

- **The ethic of personal accountability** – An individual's moral and ethical connections to their personal beliefs and viewpoints are examined, in addition to their knowledge claim.

These four dimensions of Black feminist epistemology can be politicized and attached to a social justice project to form a framework for Black feminist thought and practice (Collins, 2000). Knowledge claims using BFT are validated through acceptance by everyday Black women and the community of Black women scholars, *and* they must also be acceptable to the group controlling the institutional validation of knowledge claims (Collins, 2000). The acceptance of research by academic institution determines the "validity" of the knowledge claimed in one sense. In terms of using BFT as a guide in approaching research and the work that is produced, everyday Black women and Black women scholars who read and judge the work, directly or indirectly, will be the ones to determine its validity through Black feminist epistemology's own

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[19] Not "appropriate" as in the muted separation of emotion that is familiar to white patriarchal "respectability," but rather emotion deeply connected to, elicited, and expressed through dialogue.

knowledge validation process. I describe how BFT informed my thinking through my research

and how I politicized and attached the four dimensions of BFT to my research later.

BFT in Leisure Literature

Ratna (2017) argues that the literature around leisure and sport is lacking when it comes

to engaging with BFT in an appropriate way:

> The number of scholars who have attempted to adopt black feminist thinking or the
>
> theoretical ideas of Spivak, in a developed rather than tokenistic way, to a socio-cultural
>
> analysis of sport and leisure continues to be limited (p. 153).

When speaking directly about a 'tokenistic' engagement, Ratna is critiquing studies in the leisure

literature where scholars 'name-drop' BFT without actually following the guiding tenants of the

work or going through the labor to trace and fully understand the genealogy. This critique has

been made outside of leisure as well and is important especially for white women to note if we

choose to use BFT in our work.

While Ratna's critique rings true in many studies, Ratna (2017) also points us to the

following leisure and sport scholars as those who have indeed used BFT in a developed way:

Aitchinson (2001); Burdsey (2015); Scraton (2001); Scraton, Caudwell and Holland (2005);

Stride (2014); Walton (2012); Scraton and Watson, (1998). But how far have we come since the

publication of Ratna's work nearly 5 years ago? As work in the leisure literature focused on

social justice, particularly through the lens of intersectionality, has been growing exponentially

in recent years, there still remain only a few studies specifically employing BFT in leisure.

Below are some notable exceptions that we wish to add to Ratna's (2017) list. Centering the

narrative and lived experiences of a young Black girl, Brown & Outley (2019) apply BFT and

Critical Race Feminism to deconstruct her use of leisure to resist racialized gendered oppression

in her Black girlhood. Hay and colleagues (2018) use Deidre "D.S. Sense" Smith's spoken word poem "On My Detroit Everything" to highlight Black feminist activism in independent, Black women hip hop artists' cultural productions to promote Black women's self-definitions, validations, and resistance to oppression. Williams (2021) explores representations of queer Black womxnhood in film and TV, emphasizing the care and nuance given when written and produced by queer Black womxn themselves.

Overview of My Study: Anti-oppression Self-expression: An A/r/tographic Understanding of Black & Brown Youth's Conceptualization(s) of ~~Nature~~

In my research project, six Black and Brown youth (four boys and two girls), ages eight to twelve, created art around their ideas of 'nature' in Asheville, NC. All six of these youth lived across three of Asheville's historically Black (and rapidly gentrifying) neighborhoods and one youth also partially resided in a neighborhood which historically specifically banned Black people from purchasing land and homes within it. All youth resided in apartments. The research was done in partnership with the Black-led nonprofit Asheville Writers in the Schools and Community (AWITSC), a local organization that "ignites social change through the power of the arts, culture, and restorative self-expression" (Asheville Writers in the Schools and Community, 2022) for youth and adults in Asheville's Black and Brown communities. AWITSC finds its home in the Arthur R. Edington Education and Career Center, the same building which originally held the African American Livingston Street School in Asheville's historically Black and rapidly gentrifying Southside neighborhood. Next to the Center is the Southside Community Garden, located on the site of the former school's playground.

The two-fold ideas driving the research project were 1) that 'nature' is a social construct with shifting meanings that can be influenced by context, social identity (in this project, namely,

racial identity), and power; and 2) that centering Black and Brown youth's ideas of 'nature' as

counterstories (Delgado et al., 2017) can challenge hegemonic white conceptualizations of

'nature' which often dominate initiatives and strategies that aim to improve nature access for city

residents. I chose a/r/tography (Schultz & Legg, 2019) as my research methodology and method

to reject patriarchal extractive forms of data collection, flattening forms of data analysis (e.g.

coding and theming which can erase individual stories and power) and disempowering neoliberal

forms of data representation (such as those that tote 'researcher is expert' or tell stories of others

for personal gain). The research project was developed to disrupt white patriarchal oppression in

the academy *and* in access to 'nature' for young city residents of color. By asking youth to create

art around their ideas of 'nature' and to self-describe the meaning of their art, youth could speak

for themselves and represent their knowledge claims in their own way, rather than my

problematically 'giving voice' to young Black and Brown participants as the white adult

researcher within academia (Alcoff, 1991). Instead, I was 'researcher as curator,' gathering

youth's artful expressions of "nature" and arranging them into a publicly distributed art zine[20].

The zine was intended to create openings for community participation in viewing youth's art and

using youth's artist statements to interpret meaning(s) from/within the art (rather that my

interpreting *for* them).

Interested in producing anti-racist research with an activist dimension, I also held a

feminist urge to resist hegemonic patriarchy in the academy. I selected Black Feminist Theory as

a paradigm that emerged (and is emerging) from the intersection of anti-racism and feminism. In

my research, I used Black Feminist Theory as a knowledge generator. I applied BFT's

epistemology and distinguishing features to think through the development of my research

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[20] A zine is a small self-published work used as a vehicle for social, political, personal and/or artistic expression that features illustrations, graphic design, photography, mapping and various forms of printmaking

protocol, my relationship(s) with participants and program staff at my research site, and how to

represent this work in a way which simultaneously disrupts white patriarchal oppression and

elevates BFT as a viable and valuable theoretical framework which can and should be taken

seriously in academia. I politicized and attached the four dimensions of BFT epistemology to my

research in the following ways:

- While I do not have the credibility that comes through lived experiences of racial

  oppression, part of the knowledge in this study was produced through the lived

  experiences of Black and Brown youth in my city who speak for themselves and their

  own experiences. I *do* have the **lived experience** of being a white woman engaging in

  justice-forward work for racial equity, and this is the part of the knowledge claim that

  I produced.

- Knowledge was created/gathered through **dialogue** that took place in and through this

  research, connecting me in the process to the youth participants, research site staff,

  my colleagues and mentors, and the broader community who were asked to touch the

  work.

- An **ethic of caring** was entangled in my capacity for empathy in the research process,

  the emphasis on individual uniqueness of participants and their expressions, and in

  creating space in the research process for emotional engagement in artistic

  expressions and dialogue. Because of my position as a white woman, I had to be

  consciously careful of the thin line between cultivating an ethic of caring and white

  saviorism. An ethic of personal accountability was essential in this point.

- With an **ethic of personal accountability** to this work, I recognized that not only will

  the knowledge claim in my research be examined, but also the moral and ethical

dimensions of the paradigms and processes through which I approached the creation/gathering of this knowledge. To protect from my tipping over into white saviorism and its entanglements, I met weekly to debrief with the (Black) primary program leaders. This dialogue became especially important as I ended up (necessarily) stepping into the role of program administrator. It was during one of these debrief sessions that I expressed not wanting to show up as a "bossy white woman," but that stepping into the role of program administrator led me to showing up in that way. I recognized that my social position as a white woman combined with my role as a program administrator created a power differential that I was uncomfortable with—a conflict I ultimately just had to sit with.

Below, I share my reflections on my experiences applying BFT in research as a white woman. I denote "lessons learned" through both my failures and my successes in the research process.

How can/should white feminist researchers engage with BFT? Lessons Learned

Throughout the research process, I kept a personal journal and continued to read BFT as I engaged with the students in the study. The "lessons learned" that I present below are those that resulted from 1) my own reflexivity during the study (through journaling), 2) dialogue with the participants, fellow researchers, and Black Feminist Theorists, and 3) my shared experiences with the youth and fellow facilitators during the study. The six lessons learned include:

(1) White women shouldn't be at the center of this work, but should do this work

(2) We should start from a place of rage, as our silence will not protect us

(3) Feminist work has to be accessible

(4) Much of this work starts in each of our own identities

(5) Doing Feminisms is messy as hell—we need to be ok to "be in process"

(6) Feminist work should be rooted in love & relationships

White women shouldn't be at the center of this work, but should do this work

I do wish white feminists would embrace the notion, however, that in this new feminist movement we are all trying to build, they aren't automatically our choice for the 'strong female lead' (Cooper, 2018, p. 68).

How do/should I position myself as a white woman doing BFT? How do I de-center myself, center Black voices, and also use the power that my whiteness provides to do the type of social justice work BFT demands? Here, I wrestle with the answers to these questions mainly through my "conversations" with theorists.

There is epistemic value in, and a specific need for, research that is not only "about" groups experiencing various forms of oppression, but research conducted *by* the people who identify as members of these groups. Indeed, Freire (1970) argued that the oppressed should be intimately involved in their own liberation. There is value to being an "insider" who can identify with shared experiences and similar perspectives, potentially opening multiple points of connection between researcher and participants to build rapport, ask insightful questions, and embody positive representation of participants (Collins 2000). Consider, also, the poetic intimacy of speaking/writing in terms of "our" versus "their." Research *about* Black women *by* Black women aligns with Black Feminist Theory's emphasis on the importance of self-definitions— that is, Black women's conceptualizing and defining themselves for themselves, not measured against any other group while also defining her 'self' through her connection with her community (Collins, 2000).

But this work can't *just* be the responsibility of Black women. Accepting Freire's words uncritically and at face value risks the assumption that the dominant (oppressive) group cannot

contribute valuably to social justice work and would need to, instead, leave the work to people

with targeted identities. This framework is supported by Lorde (2007) when she critiques white

women for overburdening Black women and reminds us that we need to do some work too:

> Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance
>
> and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of
>
> all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear
>
> that it is the task of women of Color to educate white women – in the face of tremendous
>
> resistance – as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival.
>
> This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought (p.
>
> 113).

Both Kendall (2020) and Ratna (2017) agree with Lorde that this work is the responsibility of the

oppressor/privileged (i.e., white women need to do some work) too. To make sense of Freire and

Lorde's seeming contradictions, it is useful to apply the "both/and" lens of BFT (Collins, 2000)

to realize that both claims can exist as simultaneous realities. Black women's liberation should

center the voices, perspectives, interests, experiences, and resistance of Black women. *And* Black

women should not be left to struggle for liberation (for themselves *and others*) alone. Because

Black women experience multiply constituted oppressions (racialized and gendered), until Black

women are liberated, no one else occupying either marginalized position can be free. The same

can be said for the many '-isms' of oppression. Collins' (2000) writes that by advocating,

refining, and disseminating BFT in non-exploitative ways, individuals from other social groups

working on similar (to Black women's) social justice projects can build coalitions along points of

connection to advance these projects and BFT. White women cannot shirk responsibility of

identifying and correcting social injustice, particularly related to the forms of oppression which

we benefit from at others' expense and, if uncritical in how we navigate them, would continue to uphold. White women can valuably contribute to the disruption of the systems that privilege us and it is our responsibility to do so.

By prioritizing the 'politics of location' (Lewis, 1996 as cited in Ratna, 2017), we can center Black women, decenter white voices, and work *together* towards our *collective* liberation. But this is not happening in practice. As Kendall (2020) states, "solidarity is still for white women" (p. 1)—we must decenter that. And decentering white women does not mean that the things white women experience are not important:

> But as adults, as people who are doing hard work, you cannot expect your feelings to be
>
> the center of someone else's struggle. In fact, the most realistic approach to solidarity is
>
> one that assumes that sometimes it simply isn't your turn to be the focus of the
>
> conversation (Kendall, 2020, p. 7).

So, practically, how do we take this approach to solidarity, turning the lens away from us and toward those who need to be the focus? The 'turn taking' Kendall points to is akin to Ayvazian and Tatum's (2018) discussion around 'choosing the margin' as a way of thinking through building relationships and coalition along points of difference towards social justice. Ayvazian, a white woman, and Tatum, a Black woman, occupy different positionalities which locates them each differently in respect to being at the 'center' (closer to privilege) or at the 'margin.' Yet, they each 'choose the margin' (Russel, 1993 as cited in Ayvazian & Tatum, 2018), although this manifests in different ways according to their positionality. Ayvazian identifies herself as holding many identities placing her close to the center of power, resources, and dominance. 'Choosing the margin' for her means moving from 'center to margin' and bringing other progressive people in the center with her towards more progressive politics and action. Tatum,

on the other hand, identifies herself as occupying the margin, except in a few dominant identities. As someone on the margin, she chooses to claim the margin and work in solidarity with others from the margin while moving collectively towards a shared center—rather than denying aspects of her experience and disconnecting from herself to emulate the dominant group, in order to 'choose the center' as an individual.

Whiteness can no longer be at the center of feminism; this shift is in everyone's best interest. White women can do this work through an ethic of care for other women *and* this is also a selfish project. As Lilla Watson, (2004) famously said, "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." As I present the remaining six lessons, I continue to touch on ways I worked to "choose the margin" in this study, to decenter myself and make room for my participants (see 'researcher as curator' below) and importantly give Black women credit for their work (theoretical, creative, emotional, physical, etc.) publicly. I have leaned into the power of thinking through *who* I am citing in this paper, intentionally citing mostly Black women writers, working to 'pivot the center' (Collins, 2000) to include the valuable insights of authors who occupy different positionalities.

We should start from a place of rage, as our silence will not protect us.

> In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation (Lorde, 2007, p.43).

Eloquent rage (Cooper, 2018) is the rage 'focused with precision' that Lorde (2007) describes as an appropriate feminist response to oppression in its various forms. Rage is energizing. Rage fuels the work to transform the systems that we are raging against. Cooper

(2018) tells us, "that's the place where more women should begin—with the things that make us angry" (p. 1). Black women have a lot to say about anger and rage because there is a lot for Black women to be angry about (Cooper, 2018; Lorde, 2007). Rather than staying silent or politely or passively supporting (i.e., 'likes' on social media pages) Black Feminists who push back against systems that hurt them and their loved ones, white women should start raging alongside them. Kendall (2020) notes that "part of the journey from being a would-be ally to becoming an ally to actually being an accomplice is anger" (p. 251). But this importantly is *not* the 'Karen' rage that white women take up at any affront to our racial privilege (Cooper, 2018, pp. 172-173). Nor is it white women's tears weaponized to endanger people of color which then dry with wry smile upon the restoration of our privilege (Cooper, 2018, p. 179). This racist behavior is not the rage that white women should be starting from. Rage is a legitimate political emotion (Cooper, 2018, p. 5) that empowers women to assert that things are deeply wrong and must be corrected.

The things that are deeply wrong and must be corrected are often difficult to see from positions of white privilege, yet we must begin to view liberation as a collective stance. White women's liberation (and everyone else's) is included in BFT's march towards *collective* liberation:

> I am not free while any woman is unfree, even if her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of Color remains chained. Nor is anyone of you (Lorde, 2007, pp. 132-133).

Feminism is not feminism if it is only concerned with increasing privilege for a few. Feminism focuses on issues that matter to *all*, even when those issues don't seem to have an immediate impact on (or benefit to) white women, cis women, or hetero women. Kendall (2020) said, "A

one-size-fits-all approach to feminism is damaging, because it alienates the very people it is supposed to serve, without ever managing to support them" (p. 3). And that too-tight 'fit' has been maintaining white privilege at the expense of other women.

Black women's issues are inherently *feminist* issues that must be addressed to have a truly feminist moment. White women have so strongly centered ourselves in feminism for so long that it will take our deliberate effort for us to see and understand our privilege, decenter it, and *do something about it*. So white girls need to rage about the systems that negatively impact us as women *and* positively impact us as white (deconstructing this power). Our silence will not protect us (Lorde, 2007). Being able to identify and tie the things we rage about into systemic issues is ensures the things we're raging about are worthwhile; this makes the difference between eloquent rage and 'Karen' rage (Cooper, 2018). With this in mind, here are some worthy things I'm raging about from my study:

- I struggled to find money for this project to happen. Projects with 'traditional' methodologies that uphold 'traditional' ways of knowing are often prioritized. In order to prioritize multiple knowings in the academy, such as those produced by BFT using new methodologies, we must prioritize funding for these projects.

- Structural constraints of my academic context (thesis timelines) restricted the ways in which youth could be involved in designing the research. Institutional Review Board (IRB) regulations made it difficult to name youth as 'co-researchers.'

- IRB is a system that won't allow our work to be "in process" or "messy" as many feminist studies are. Instead, the researcher is prioritized in making all decisions and linear processes are upheld (which rarely reflect those I encountered in reality).

- IRB was unequipped to consider alternative forms of "community consent" in which parents/guardians trusted youth were safe while participating in activities with a trusted community resource (the research site) without feeling compelled to formally document consent on (paternalistic) IRB-approved consent forms, ultimately delaying research and further disenfranchising the people IRB was created to protect.

- APA 7th edition guidelines for in-text citations require me to "erase" acknowledgement of authors in multiple author collaborations (such as this manuscript) by only listing the first author's last name followed by 'et al.' in all of the mentions in text. This can work against the collaborative knowledge production process highlighting only the accomplishments of one.

Feminist work has to be accessible. My Role as A/r/tographer: Researcher as Curator

What is being argued here is for the coupling of representation (a political act) with re/presentation (the material conditions that ground individual and collective acts of differential agency). Arguably, this would enable subaltern women's metaphorical speech acts to be centred, heard, interpreted and connected to better facilitating effective social change (Ratna, 2017, p. 157).

Collins (2000) calls for the deconstruction of the concept of "intellectual" and the institutions in which "intellectuals" can be found. Because Black women have been historically excluded from and continue to be suppressed in white patriarchal institutions, like academia, Black feminist theory has been produced, validated, and disseminated in diverse alternative formats. In addition to theory produced by Black women intellectuals in academic settings, Collins (2000) also includes the works of Black women blues singers, storytellers, poets, and other intellectuals who contribute to Black women's empowerment, often through reinforcing the

importance of Back women's self-definitions. This concept of self-definition is evident in

Lorde's (2007) famous quote, "[I]f I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into

other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive" (p. 137). In BFT, self-definitions refer to the

individual and group assertions of Black women's conceptualization of Self in the context of

their connectedness to community (not separation from others) as liberation from popular images

applied to objectify and control Black women (i.e. the mammie, the matriarch, the welfare

mother, and the hoochie; Collins, 2000). Collins' inclusion of intellectuals and the knowledge

created and shared in forms that do not fit within white patriarchal standards (i.e. in forms of

bodies, knowledge, dissemination, etc.) is evidence of the "both/and" conceptual lens that Black

feminist thought uses (Collins, 2000). This is in contrast with white patriarchal "either/or"

thinking in which there is one-sided privilege at the cost of a denigrated Other. For example,

consider the different process of thinking needed for—and the potential associated outcomes

of—analyzing social conditions that people experience based on *either* race *or* gender, versus

analyses that can examine *both* race *and* gender. In *Poetry is Not a Luxury*, Lorde (2007) points

out how women can use poetry to connect *both* "ideas," which are precious to white patriarchy,

and "feelings," which are suppressed in white patriarchy:

> At this point in time, I believe that women carry within ourselves the possibility for
>
> fusion of these two approaches [ideas and feelings] so necessary for our survival, and we
>
> come closest to this combination in our poetry. I speak here of poetry as a revelatory
>
> distillation of our experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers
>
> distorted the word *poetry* to mean – in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination
>
> without insight. (p. 37)

BFT can be *both* poetry (and blues, and prose, and film…) *and* critical social theory. In fact, it is in these forms that BFT can be most accessible to everyday Black women—part of the process for validating knowledge claims through BFT that Collins (2000) puts forth, which I discuss later in this section. Art in its various forms and other alternative forms of knowledge claims have been a powerful and necessary method of producing, practicing, and sharing BFT and other social justice projects. This is due in no small part to the exclusion and suppression of Black women from/within institutions of scholarship controlled by white men who hold the power to then reject this knowledge as legitimate (Collins, 2000). Lorde (2007) also speaks of the uses of the erotic as power, the erotic which comes from a deeply feminine place and can be channeled through creative power and harmony:

> Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning in our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe. (p. 57)

It is through the power of the erotic that self-definitions—that essential ingredient in the pursuit of Black women's liberation, of *human* liberation (Collins, 2000)—can be expressed. Art is a way of facilitating connection to the erotic as power—that is, to the connections between our Self and the erotic through the creative pursuits of our senses (music, dancing, writing, building, cooking) and through our Self shared with others in deep connection (Lorde, 2007). Because of BFT's inclusion of alternative and artful forms of knowledge claims, emphasis on self-definitions, and embracing *both* thinking *and* feeling in critical social theory, art can be a

powerful and well-aligned methodology and method of producing/gathering knowledge that

works to liberate people from oppressive white colonial patriarchal control in the academy.

I selected a/r/tography for its fit with BFT's emphasis on self-definitions, the erotic as

power, and deconstructing white patriarchal idea(l)s of what knowledge is and who are the

intellectuals who produce it (Collins, 2000, Lorde, 2007). Arts-based methodology disrupts

oppressive patriarchal approaches to research (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018; Cuerden,

2010) which strips data from its context, codes and condenses it into themes, and represents it

reductively through a manuscript. Using a/r/tography, I rejected patriarchal commodification of

data representation and embrace *excess* in Black and Brown youth's meanings of nature which

can be deeply layered and emotionally saturated. Arts-based methodology can also be used to

decolonize research (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018). This made it a powerful approach to

decolonizing dominant white conceptualizations of 'nature.'

I became 'researcher as curator' (Kamposiori, 2012; Skrubbe, 2016) to decenter the

power I held as a white woman researcher in the context of programming and research with/for

people who experience racial oppression. I rejected traditional forms of coding, triangulation,

and interpretation of the data. Instead, I relinquished control over the meaning-making process to

the participants and, ultimately, the viewers of the research product. My selection and

organization, or *curation*, of art and artist statements in the art zine may be considered a loose

form of 'coding.' In my role of researcher as curator, I gathered youth's art pieces and worked

with youth to arrange the art with their associated artist statements. This created space for youth

to speak for themselves in describing their meanings of "nature" and the meaning of/within their

art. I arranged pieces so that the viewer may get a sense of the overarching themes (art prompts)

threaded through the work(s) and the statements youth made about or related to their art. In this

way, I created openings to turn data analysis over to the viewer—much as curators ultimately

turn meaning-making(s) of artwork over to the exhibit viewer—so viewers can contribute to the

knowledge created through this research by directly experiencing and interpreting the youth's

art/knowledge as it is (re)presented by the youth through the viewers own lenses. In doing so, the

viewer may subsequently feel challenged to consider how the viewer's own social identities

influence the ways the viewer conceptualizes what "nature" is.

I used Creative Analytic Practice (CAP; Berbary, 2015; Parry & Johnson, 2007;

Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) to resolve my own three-fold crisis of representation (Alcoff,

1991; Berbary, 2015; Parry & Johnson, 2007): 1) my intent to research the perspectives of youth

in marginalized racial groups of which I am not a member (Alcoff, 1991); 2) honoring self-

definitions in my use of BFT (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 2007); and 3) my use of arts-entangled data

(Berbary, 2015; Parry & Johnson, 2007). To accomplish these ends, my use of CAP allowed my

thesis to take the form of an art zine with youths' artful interpretations of ~~nature~~ in Asheville.

This made the knowledge claim accessible, not only to be *understood* outside of academia, but

also in providing an opening for other Asheville community members to *contribute* to the

knowledge claim through their participation in meaning-making around the youths' and the

viewer's conceptualization(s) of ~~nature~~.

Much of this work starts in each of our own identities

[O]ur politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community

which allows us to continue our struggle and work." So they adopted the term 'identity

politics,' a belief that 'the most profound and potentially radical politics come directly

out of our own identity…' (Cooper, 2018, p. 67).

Questioning whether this work was "for me" as a white woman, I also struggled with whether I contributed much, if anything, of value to this research, to the program, or to the participants. I felt conflicted over my desire to privilege the leadership and thinking of Black women involved in this project without burdening them with my own work. But as the lines between my position as researcher and program mentor blurred, I also found myself in positions of leading activities and managing the day-to-day chaos of out-of-school time programs. I confided my struggle to resolve these internal conflicts in a program planning conversation with the program facilitator, a Black woman. I told her I was worried about becoming a 'bossy white woman wagging her finger around' when I really wanted to decenter myself as a white person in the context of this program and research. She carefully listened, validated, encouraged, and reminded me to hold in both hands the importance of knowing when to step back and listen and when to accept invitations to step in, as my whole self, to speak up and participate—from the fullness of my own positionality and perspective as a white woman—towards social justice projects. She advised me that while I should look to Black elders in the community for this invitation, she also hoped that *when* the youth in our program invite me into their lives, I would be available and open to accept their invitation as well—to show up for them as my *whole* self.

There is value in my stepping back as a researcher to center the youth participants' interests and voices, to step back as a white person and question my intentions and positionality in relationship to this work and others in it... *and* there is power in being 100% me. Not downplaying myself, my rage, to adhere to respectability politics, as Black women, trans women, and queer women are often forced to do more so than cis-white-hetero women. Respectability, of course, centering on white comfort and prioritizing patriarchal "calm", unemotional, and

controlled. Because respectability is all about protecting privilege, white women attempting to do social justice work can negate our work when we try to simultaneously maintain respectability:

> The emotional labor required to be respectable, to never ruffle anyone's feathers, to not get angry enough to challenge much less confront those who might have harmed you, is incredibly onerous because it is so dehumanizing. Respectability requires not just a stiff lip, but burying of yourself inside your own flesh in order to be able to maintain the necessary façade (Kendall, 2020, p. 93).

Fuck that.

Doing Feminisms is messy as hell—we need to be ok to "be in process"

> Here's the thing: My anger and rage haven't always been 'focused with precision.' The process both of becoming a feminist and becoming okay with rage as a potential feminist superpower, has been messy as hell. We need to embrace our messiness more. We need to embrace the ways we are in process more. Very often Black girls don't get the opportunity to be in process (Cooper, 2018, p. 6).

> From the study's conception, I anticipated the 'messiness' of my alternative approach to research, but I had not anticipated how much lines would blur. I was granted site access as well as opportunities for my research to be both folded into and emerge from the program. It was the director's view that my research project could valuably inform the program and be informed by the program. We initially envisioned that I would occasionally 'drop-in' to take photos of artwork during the program. But as months went on, the program and my research resisted developing as separate projects. We found support on both sides as the projects enveloped each other, becoming something far more intricate and beautiful than originally envisioned. I found myself ripping planks from an imaginary boundary to become further entangled in the

conflicting demands of my institution's fixed requirements for doing 'research' and those of a

community-based organization doing social justice and racial equity work with Black and Brown

youth in 'nature.'

From imagining the concept, to writing and proposing, I had big plans for 'letting go of

control.' I wanted to be open to the organic unfolding of my alternative approach. But organic

unfoldings of anti-oppressive work may not necessarily align with rigid academic timelines and

demands. My research was going to brilliantly push back on oppressive white patriarchal

expectations of the academy and approaches to environmental education. Maybe it still

can/does… but I certainly (naively) underestimated the power of academic domination. Or

perhaps (again, naively) overestimated my own power to disrupt it. It is hard for me to say

whether these naiveties are a blindness courtesy of my racial identity in a system that privileges

it or simply that of a zealous young graduate student thrilled to finally both learn *and* have an

outlet for new language and action towards social justice in environmental education. As I've

learned through my use of Black Feminist Theory, it is probably closer to truth to acknowledge

that my naivety is likely from *both* my whiteness (privileged in less practice thinking about and

disrupting racial oppression) *and* my greenness (unfamiliarity with navigating research and

academia).

For example, collecting parent/guardian consent forms proved to be a challenge. Not

because parents/guardians were concerned about the research, but because the process and

structure of IRB created a cultural barrier. The standards, norms, and protocols that are designed

to 'protect' participants, in many ways, oppresses their autonomy and agency around knowledge

production and associated practices (Sabati, 2019; Sanders & Ballengee-Morris, 2008). To

successfully navigate IRB's official procedures, I had to break my own feminist paradigm to

rewrite my intentionally messy alternative approach in a precise and unambiguous way.

Researchers are forced to write condensed versions of potentially nuanced procedures for IRB

reviewers to make risk-averse evaluations on research 'ethics' and 'appropriateness' without

familiarity with the context of the discipline and/or the methodology involved. IRB reviewers

hold the authority to approve whether the research can move forward or not. Yet, they may not

be equipped to understand—much less offer guidance in—developing the ethics of the research

or researcher. I fumbled my way through the IRB process, doing my best to satisfy reviewers

while also trying to keep the forms brief and accessible for the parents/guardians they were

intended to inform. I went through multiple iterations of the document and each change required

me to resubmit it for review. Even the request to move my exact paper consent form into a

Qualtrics digital consent form required two weeks to review, taking away even more of the

limited time I had to work with the youth on the research project.

When I expressed relief to the program leaders upon finally receiving signed

parent/guardian consent forms, AWITSC Executive Director Sekou Coleman (personal

communication, December 17, 2021) suggested that because the project was embedded in a local

program based in trusted community resources (the Edington Center and Southside Community

Garden) and administered by trusted community leaders, it is likely that I already had

'community consent' for the youth to be there and participate. Meaning that adults and youth in

the community trusted that youth were safe in whatever activities they may be engaging in with

this community resource and with the community leaders without needing to know all the

particulars or feeling compelled to read and return a signature on a dense document with a

university letterhead. Parents and guardians quickly expressed verbal consent as soon as I was

able to make a personal connection with them and explain the research project. IRB still required

their signature. Parents and guardians gladly signed my forms without much more than a glance

at the paragraphs in which I had painstakingly detailed the study, expectations, and potential

risks per IRB's requirements. Ultimately, it was relationship that led to informed consent.

Whereas IRB's focus is on mitigating risk (and arguably prioritizing risks to the

institution) through its official procedures and formal documentations, 'community consent' is

based in trust established over time and with respect for community members' methods of

approval. IRB's patriarchal (and paternalistic) structure ultimately hindered good research with

the very people that it was designed to protect. Researchers should learn and emulate successful

methods of seeking parent/guardian permission (consent) that community-based programs

related to the research site use (recognizing that these methods still may not be perfect).

Ultimately, structural changes to IRB will be necessary for its process to even be able to consider

alternative forms of consent, like community consent. Until then, future research with Black and

Brown communities could consider ways to incorporate community consent (which looks

different for each community) into the IRB approval process. This could look like completing

the full board review process to verbally consent participants (a process that may be inaccessible

for many graduate students due to time restraints). Perhaps a more useful alternative could be for

researchers to seek permission from leadership of the research site to obtain and use 'secondary

data' owned by the research site, an ethical process which can be exempt from IRB. This would

allow the community members to own the data outright and researchers would then be seeking

permission directly from the community.

Feminist work should be rooted in love & relationships

"[F]eminism isn't just academic theory. It isn't a matter of saying the right words at the

right time. Feminism is the work that you do, and the people you do it for who matter

more than anything else" (Kendall, 2020, p. xv).

Members of my thesis committee, staff at the research site, and interested individuals I

conversed with repeatedly asked me, '*Why?*' Why am I doing this work? Why am I the right

person to do this work? These gentle probes into my axiology challenged me considerably, as I

struggled with whether I *was* the right person to do this work. As a young queer white woman, I

hold memberships in several dominant and marginalized identity groups. My own liberation

(even as a white person) is bound up with the liberation of others from interlocking oppressive

structures (hooks, 1994; McGhee, 2021), especially as they manifest in the outdoors. As I've said

before, this is partly a selfish project. But here's the other thing…

I love women.

Loving women is part of my queerness, part of my politics, part of my feminism. And in

Cooper's (2018) words,

[O]ne can't truly be a feminist if you don't really love women. *And* loving women deeply

and unapologetically is queer as fuck. It is erotic in the way that Audre Lorde talks about

eroticism. It's an opening up, a healing, a seeing and being seen (p. 20).

Feminist love, erotic love, led me to take up my research and conduct it in the way I did. My

embracing the erotic is evident in my use of artful ways of knowing and representing knowledge.

Erotic love is connected to my love of nature and my desire to correct systems that exclude

people from safe access to nature and its associated outcomes. Love sucked me into my research

in ways I did not intend or predict. It called me to give myself completely to the research. And in

the blurring of lines between my role as researcher and mentor, I gave myself over to the youth,

loving them too. A feminist ethic of care (Collins, 2000), an ethic of love, permeated my desire to take on my research project.

Conclusion

So then, who can/should do Black Feminist Theory in research? Regarding this, Ratna (2017) cautions against allowing the question of 'who should do it' to distract from getting the work done. Still, it is a question I asked of myself and believe it to be an important one to consider as white researchers seek to create knowledge and take action to resist oppression. And in all honesty, *it depends*. Collins (2000) and Kendall (2020) note that white women can and should (appropriately and *with care*) learn and do BFT in solidarity with Black women towards collective liberation. But there is also valid concern among Black feminist intellectuals that not all white women can (and therefore these white women should not) do BFT. I see it is my responsibility as a white person to disrupt unconsciously reproduced racial oppression in my practice as an environmental educator and in efforts to increase equitable access to nature. I reject white feminisms which have historically only reproduced oppression in its many forms and left Black and Brown women behind (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 2007). Instead, I embraced the teachings and guidance of Black feminists and critical race theorists (both in readings and in my personal/professional relationships) to learn from/about our points of difference rather than reinforcing a necessity for overwhelming commonalities to build coalitions for our collective liberation (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 2007).

Importantly, BFT should not be seen as 'limited and particular.' BFT needs to be seen as inextricably intertwined with feminist theory. However, it is important that BFT not be subsumed by feminist theory because this would flatten the differences. White women *should* study and practice learnings from BFT so as not to leave the burden to Black women to pursue

social justice work that seeks to liberate people from multiply constituted oppressions. White women, as simultaneously beneficiaries of and exploited by multifaceted systems of oppression *should* be responsible to/for dismantling the systems which we have upheld for our personal comfort at the cost of others' (and our own) liberation. We also have a shared responsibility to/for building coalitions towards the creation of new systems for collective human liberation. As an 'insider' to systemic power by race, there is power in white women promoting BFT as a serious and viable epistemology in the academy and in practice. This is why I used BFT as a knowledge generator in my research—as a way of creating knowledge that doesn't reproduce white patriarchal power structures and critiques those institutions. I recommend using BFT to reproduce this research with white youth too, because I selected BFT, not because I was working with Black and Brown youth, but because I was trying to disrupt white patriarchal ideas of nature in Asheville and of knowledge in the academy.

This paper is *NOT* an invitation for any/all white women academics to casually pick up and attempt to use BFT. Neither is this permission for white women to drown out the voices of Black women who already are and have been developing and advancing BFT and the work that it does. There is a real risk that some white women—those who have not yet begun and committed to always doing the deep reflexive anti-racist work necessary *prior* to attempting BFT—may remove BFT from its context and misappropriate its contributions towards projects that further oppress Black women and others experiencing multiply constituted forms of oppression. White women interested in using BFT to advance collective liberation through social justice projects must *first* consider our relationships to Black women, not only in academic settings but also in our everyday social spheres. White women must avoid speaking over and/or projecting definitions on Black women in research or any other context. Instead, white women should seek

points of connection through our authentic relationships with Black women. Through these

connections white women can build coalitions with Black feminist intellectuals to continue

centering the voices and perspectives of Black women under the guidance/advice of Black

feminist intellectuals—without leaving Black women to shoulder the work of educating us *and*

dismantling the systems white women cling to for our own comfort.

We must no longer be silent; these words are my attempt at breaking my own silence.

This list of lessons should be viewed not as finite or complete but as 'in process,' added to by

those who use BFT in various projects. Additionally, I acknowledge that neither my research

project nor my thinking in this piece are perfect and can be further critiqued and added to with

dialogue with other women. We opened with a call, a need for more 'Black girl feminism.' We

end with a call for the end of silence, for meaningful collaborative work speaking 'real words'

towards our truths:

> My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real
>
> word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still
>
> seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a
>
> world in which we all believed, bridging our differences (Lorde, 2007, p. 41).

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