Exploring The Perpetuation of the Racial "Other" in the Environmental Justice Movement

Chulumanco Mihlali Nkasela

MA Candidate (University of the Western Cape, South Africa)

Abstract

This paper poses the question, "How do different philosophical perspectives of race contribute to a critical understanding of how the racial 'Other' is perpetuated in the environmental justice movement?" The grounding work is the book What is Race? Four Philosophical Perspectives, authored by S. Haslanger, C. Jeffers, Q. Spencer, and J. Glasgow. I will critically examine the intersection of racial theory and the environmental justice sphere. I will interrogate how race, as a political construct, results in a hierarchy by drawing on Sally Haslanger's argument. Additionally, I will consider how these notions of race help us to understand the role of race in the environmental justice movement. The study will delve into the historical and contemporary contexts of the environmental justice movement, emphasising how racial constructs have influenced its development and operations. The application of these approaches to race in the research will further clarify the mechanisms through which racial constructs perpetuate the concept of the racial "Other," further entrenched by environmental injustices. Through a critical analysis of theoretical frameworks and case studies, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the perpetuation of racial "Othering" and offer insights for more equitable and inclusive environmental policies and practices. This paper contributes to the broader discourse on race, environmental justice, and social equity, advocating for a more intersectional and philosophically informed approach to addressing systemic injustices.

Keywords: Race, Racial "Other", Racial Constructs, Environment, Social Justice, Environmental Justice, Climate Change, Environmental Racism

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Introduction

Since its emergence in the late 1960s, the environmental justice movement has become an important social effort to address climate change and its effects on both our environment and human civilisation [Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010; Opperman, 2019]. Historically, this movement has been perceived as focusing on the protection of wildlife and the environment [Taylor, 2000]. However, the environmental justice movement has now become part of mainstream social justice discourse, as more people realise that environmental justice must also address the impacts of climate change on individuals and their livelihoods. In the past, the notion of environmental justice as social justice did not align, as different social markers, such as race, gender, and class, were not considered in terms of their effect on how people experience climate change and its impacts. Communities primarily composed of racialised individuals bear a disproportionate burden of the climate crisis [Bullard, 1993]. These groups often have limited access to ecological recreational spaces due to historical injustices, such as racial spatial planning, which confined racialised communities to areas with poor infrastructure and amenities. Consequently, they bear a heavier burden of air, waste, water, and environmental problems. In this way, race and the effects of racism particularly shape our notions of access, justice, equality, and how we experience the environment.

However, race and the impending ecological collapse are seldom considered to be interconnected concepts. Because climate change affects us all, it is suggested that something as divisive as race has no place in the movement, as it might hinder collective action on broader environmental concerns [Faber & O'Connor, 1993]. In contrast, racialised groups are affected in disproportionate ways due to historical and persistent inequalities arising from race. As Pellow [2005] states, it is evident that where social inequalities exist in society, environmental inequalities also prevail. This paper aims to bring the concept of race and the impending ecological collapse together in an effort to interrogate how racial constructs perpetuate the concept of the racial "Other" within the environmental justice movement. As noted above, this is an important task; drawing connections between race and environmental justice can better assist the movement in ensuring that its work is more equitable and adequately addresses the concerns of people marginalised because of race.

To do justice to this paper, I will begin by outlining Sally Haslanger's [2019] account of race, which advances the view of race as hierarchical, as this definition is the most suitable and plausible for the purposes of this paper. This will assist in illustrating how race is produced and, in turn, how the racialised subject is constituted. I will then provide a brief overview of the environmental justice movement and its history to contextualise its goals, the nature of the movement, and the key actors involved. Once this groundwork has been laid, I will attempt to explain the perpetuation of the racial "Other" in the environmental justice movement by examining the movement itself and the disproportionate effects of environmental racism on racialised communities. Lastly, I will present my proposal for a humanistic approach to environmentalism using Kimberlé Crenshaw's [1996] concept of intersectionality.

Understanding the Notion of Race

The debate on the nature of race has significantly evolved, with various scholars offering differing perspectives on whether race is biologically real or a social construct. The belief that race is biologically real has driven arguments that racialised groups are intellectually inferior; therefore, they cannot make erudite contributions to society [Fanon, 1952]. Additionally, a set of beliefs and practices aimed at "improving" the genetic quality of the population, namely eugenics, has also been based on and driven by the idea that race is biologically real [Foucault, 2003]. Therefore, we must pause and consider what we mean when we refer to race, because an incorrect understanding can be harmful. The definition I deem most plausible is that of Sally Haslanger [2000], who argues that race is a social/political construct in a similar way to gender, in that they are both shaped by hierarchical social structures and power dynamics. Gender is espoused around a social hierarchy that places men above women, and race is espoused around a social hierarchy that places white people over black people. This quote from Haslanger further explains this:

"**There is overwhelming evidence that differences between racial groups in educational attainment, health outcomes, incarceration rates, and the like are due to the looping effects of social structures that impose a racial hierarchy**"
[Haslanger, 2019: 23]

Haslanger's work is instrumental in understanding the foundations of how racial identities are formed and maintained, particularly in the context of systematic oppression, such as environmental racism. Haslanger's analysis is crucial for understanding how race operates as a tool for marginalisation within environmental justice contexts. Haslanger [2019] argues that Social/Political Race (SPR) is the core account of race, the most plausible, and the one that should be adopted. This paper employs Haslanger's [2019] SPR to better understand the concept of race. I will do this for two reasons. Firstly, Haslanger contends that race is not only a social construct but also a political one. Secondly, Haslanger's SPR account hinges on race being built on a hierarchy in which one group is privileged whilst the "Other" is subordinated. The abovementioned reasons do a significant amount of work in better demonstrating the making of the racial "Other" within the construction of the racialised subject.

Haslanger's SPR account of race is as follows: a group G is racialised relative to the context of C if and only if members of group G are (all and only) those: a) who are observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed in C to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region (or regions), for instance skin colour; b) whose having (or being imagined to have) these features marks them, within the context of the background ideology in C, as appropriately occupying certain kinds of social positions that are either subordinate or privileged, and so justifies and motivates their occupying such a position; c) whose satisfying (a) and (b) plays (or would play) a role in their systematic subordination or privilege in C, that is, who are, along some dimension, systematically subordinated or privileged when in C, and whose satisfying (a) and (b) plays (or would play) a role in that dimension of privilege or subordination.

Essentially, with Haslanger's [2019] SPR account, the idea is that races are racialised groups. They are bound by the geographical associations that accompany the perceived body types of the members of these groups, and when these associations take on a social meaning with regard to how members of different groups must be treated and viewed, this places the groups within a social hierarchy. For Haslanger [2002; 2019], skin colour is to race as binary sex is to gender: it is used as a basis for explaining why the hierarchy must exist and for rendering it justifiable. This is the defining feature of the political constructionist account of race and explains how, in Haslanger's characterisation of race, the racial "Other" is created and perpetuated. A racial subject is produced that deviates from and is distinct from the "normal" subject; hence, its subjugation is justified.

Haslanger's [2019] account offers the best way for us to understand the historical development of the making of race. This speaks to a history of racialisation, one that is accompanied by European imperialism. People with lighter skin colour, for instance white people, who are from regions in Europe and have ancestral links to Europe, are, because of their observable skin colour, seen as a superior human species and therefore as deserving of a higher position in society. They hold a position of privilege, while those who are not of their skin colour, namely black people, are assigned a more

subordinate position in society. Their race ("whiteness") is used to justify their position of privilege, whilst for racialised groups their race ("blackness") is used to justify their subordinate position. As such, this position of privilege has allowed white people to colonise, dispossess, and subject others to race-based systems, such as apartheid laws. This, in turn, introduces a hierarchy in society in which white people are at the top, and racialised groups are positioned below them in varying degrees. Haslanger's [2019] political constructionist account offers a seamless explanation of the development of racial differences, the legacies of which are experienced in the environmental justice movement to this day.

This provides a smooth segue into another compelling facet of Haslanger's [2019] account. This account is best attuned to how race matters socially and better allows us to address issues of inequality. The presence of a hierarchy in society, in this case one perpetuated by race, breeds inequality. The hierarchy as described by Haslanger [2019] is an instance of social inequality, which leads to other forms, such as socio-economic inequality. Socio-economic inequality arises as some are seen as inferior or subordinate, whilst others are seen as superior, placing them in a position of privilege. With Haslanger's social/political constructionism, we are better able to explain the inequalities we observe in society. With

this understanding, we can then address these issues of inequality by recognising that, for them to be resolved, we must first deal with the hierarchy. This account also proves to be better attuned to people's experiences of race, particularly those of racialised groups. They experience the perils of the hierarchy and bear its brunt in their everyday lives. They fall victim to race and must navigate life accordingly, whilst, on the other side of the racial divide, those privileged within the hierarchy enjoy positions of opulence and freedom, benefiting from advantaged lives economically, politically, environmentally, and in other ways. Take, for instance, how black people were forced to live in underdeveloped townships while having

to work in developed, affluent suburbs. They were stark victims of race; however, they still had to navigate life and essentially "get over" the disparities between their lives and those of the white families for whom they worked.

Lastly, Haslanger's [2019] social/political constructionism emphasises the importance placed on hierarchy when it comes to race by the general public. This stands in contrast to other social constructionist scholars, such as Chike Jeffers [2019], who believe that importance is placed on culture. Jeffers' [2019] view is important for understanding how race may remain significant once hierarchy is dismantled. However, when discussing how race has impacted the public, understanding hierarchy is of greater importance. This can be attributed to the effects and influences of race on people's lives, in particular on racialised groups, who have received the short end of the stick in terms of their position within the racial hierarchy. Viewing race in this way is helpful because it allows for a clearer understanding of the systematic injustices that racialised people face. The political social constructionist account of race reveals race as a system of power, one that has placed value on members of white society whilst devaluing those who are not part of that society. With the understanding that those who fall outside the ambit of white society are disadvantaged, broader society can begin to pave the way forward regarding what reparations should look like. Ha-

slanger's [2019] account of race is therefore appealing for projects of social justice, as it provides a coherent understanding of the origins of race and how to address its hierarchical legacies. Haslanger's account suggests that with the fall of racial hierarchy will come the fall of race itself. This implies that the elimination of inequalities between different racial groups would amount to the elimination of racial classification. Race survives on the notion that white people are superior and should be privileged, whilst black people are inferior and should be subordinate. With the elimination of this notion, the concept of race would serve no purpose; as the hierarchy would no longer exist, race itself would cease to exist.

As a system of hierarchy and social repression, race is not only destructive but also produces a particular kind of discourse, which "activates or forms the subject" [Butler, 1997: 84]. From Haslanger's conception of race, we can deduce that a racialised subject has been produced, a subject we might call the racial "Other". This

is because this subject is distinct from the "normal" subject, who enjoys a privileged position within the hierarchy. To clarify this further, it is necessary to understand and define what the "Other" looks like. "Othering" refers to a process in which, through discursive practices, different subjects are formed: hegemonic or privileged subjects, that is, subjects in powerful social positions, as well as those subjugated to these powerful conditions [Thomas-Olalde & Velho, 2011]. In the case of racial "Othering", different racial subjects are formed, with some occupying privileged social positions while subjugating those who are subordinate to these powerful conditions. Racial groups with darker skin colour, who are systematically differentiated and marginalised, are positioned as inferior and are often not afforded the same rights, opportunities, and resources as racial groups with lighter skin colour [Whyte, 2018]. This process of racial "Othering" is deeply etched into society, and in the sections that follow, I will explore how it emerged within the environmental justice movement.

The Environmental Justice Movement

Having defined race through the lens of Haslanger [2019] above, it is important to contextualise the environmental justice movement. Environmental justice activists and communities began turning their attention to environmental issues as a result of Hurricane Katrina; however, concerns about climate change and its impacts have long been present within the environmental justice movement [Schlosberg & Collins, 2014]. The emergence of the movement has been traced by many academics and activists to the 1982 protests against the disposal of PCB-tainted soil at a new landfill in Warren County, North Carolina [Schlosberg & Collins, 2014]. The movement emerged as a response that sought to address the unequal impacts of environmental hazards on communities, with particular attention paid to how these hazards disproportionately affect marginalised communities. Since the 1980s, the movement has grown from addressing environmental issues in isolation to becoming a global movement that highlights how local environmental inequities translate into global environmental inequities [Taylor, 2000]. Additionally, the movement has expanded into one that confronts global environmental challenges, such as the climate crisis itself, and advocates for structural and systematic changes to address the impacts of climate change, which continue to be exacerbated by other forms of inequality, such as race.

As such, it can be asserted that the roots of the environmental justice movement extend back to the activism of the 1980s, which exposed the unequal distribution of the burdens of environmental hazards and climate change towards racialised communities. This activism

focused on revealing the systematic inequalities and discriminatory policies that disproportionately exposed these communities to pollution and other environmental risks [Schlosberg & Collins, 2014]. As awareness of climate change and its impacts on marginalised populations grew, the environmental justice movement expanded to incorporate global environmental issues and their effects.

The first generally acknowledged reference to climate justice appeared in a 1999 report titled Greenhouse Gangsters vs. Climate Justice, published by the Transnational Resource & Action Center [Bruno et al., 1999]. The report focused on the oil and petroleum industry as the largest contributor to the climate crisis and outlined approaches for responding to it. Tokar [2019: 4] succinctly summarises the key points of the report as follows:

> **"Addressing the root causes of global warming by holding corporations accountable; Opposing the destructive impacts of oil development and supporting communities most affected by weather-related disasters; Looking to environmental justice communities and organised labour for strategies to encourage a just transition away from fossil fuels; Challenging corporate-led globalisation and the disproportionate influence of international financial institutions."**

This report marked a shift from addressing local environmental hazards to confronting global environmental issues and their root causes. Environmental justice advocates increasingly focused on the unequal burdens borne by vul-

nerable communities as a result of environmental degradation and have called for greater community participation in environmental decision-making.

In terms of its composition, the environmental justice movement consists of a broad coalition of stakeholders and actors. These include environmental non-governmental and non-profit organisations, grassroots organisations, labour unions, indigenous communities, as well as state actors and governments [Guerrero, 2011; Tokar, 2019]. One of the core principles of the movement is the "polluter pays" principle. This principle holds that those who contribute most to environmental degradation must bear the responsibility for addressing and remedying its impacts. The movement recognises that those who contribute the least to environmental degradation often bear the heaviest burdens; therefore, a justice-oriented response to the climate crisis is required, one that equitably distributes responsibilities [Guerrero, 2011; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014; Tokar, 2019]. For example, Climate Justice Now!, a network formed in 2007 that organised alternative actions at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC] Conference of the Parties [COP] in Bali, has called for measures such as reduced consumption and the protection of indigenous land rights as integral components of environmental justice [Guerrero, 2011].

Over its lifespan, the movement has had key concerns that have shaped the way it has responded to the climate crisis and how it has sought accountability and action on the part of major polluters. One

of the key concerns of the environmental climate justice movement is the notion of "environmental debt". This refers to the idea that countries with high levels of industrial development and urbanisation owe a debt to developing countries because of their massive historical and ongoing contributions to pollution and climate change. Environmental activists argue that wealthy nations should lead mitigation and adaptation efforts, as well as address loss and damage [Schlosberg & Collins, 2014]. This is one of the ways in which the disproportionate impacts of climate change can be addressed. The 2002 Bali Principles of Climate Justice articulate these concerns, calling for the Global North to compensate Global South nations for environmental degradation and to support sustainable energy initiatives [Tokar, 2019]. By Global North and Global South, I am not referring to geographic regions but rather to the relative power and wealth of countries in different parts of the world, with the former being wealthier and the latter being more disadvantaged and underdeveloped [Braff & Nelson, n.d.].

The environmental justice movement has stressed the importance of community participation and sovereignty in environmental policy decisions. There is an insistence that affected communities should be empowered and capacitated to make decisions about climate solutions and have the right to reject initiatives that threaten their environment or well-being [Guerrero, 2011]. This focus on procedural justice aligns with the broader environmental justice movement's view that all communities must have an active role and voice in decisions impacting their environment and quality of life [Schlosberg & Collins, 2014].

Several key stakeholders have played an instrumental role in the formation and continued growth of the environmental justice movement. Indigenous communities, who are often based in regions most affected by climate change, have been at the forefront of advocating for the protection of their environment and land [Whyte, 2018]. Grassroots organisations, coalitions, and alliances have also played a critical role in leading the fight for environmental justice. For instance, the Climate Justice Alliance, a coalition formed in 2012 in the United States, represents a group of grassroots organisations focused on ushering in a "just transition" that seeks to do away with fossil fuels [Schlosberg & Collins, 2014]. Another organisation is the African Climate Alliance, a youth-led grassroots organisation closer to home. It is an Afrocentric alliance that advocates for environmental and social justice on the African continent, with a particular focus on youth and the amplification of African youth voices [African Climate Alliance, n.d.]. The organisation is currently leading a court case against the South African government to halt 1,500 MW of coal-fired power.

Despite the commendable work carried out by grassroots organisations, they often face significant challenges. These include tensions with more mainstream environmental organisations and intergovernmental efforts, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of the Parties. Such bodies often prioritise emissions reduction, advancing solutions that place profits over people's lives and livelihoods, and are frequently blind to the intersectionality of environmental justice with racial justice and other forms of socio-political justice. Environ-

mental justice activists argue that these approaches allow countries and corporations in the Global North to continue polluting while shifting the responsibility for mitigation onto marginalised communities, typically in the Global South [Tokar, 2019]. Additionally, the movement has faced challenges in uniting the needs and concerns of its diverse constituencies. Differing priorities and approaches to environmental action have often led to conflict over strategies and goals [Faber & O'Connor, 1993].

As it stands, the environmental justice movement represents a formidable response to the global climate crisis and the environmental challenges it presents. It has demonstrated that environmental action can be rooted in equity and justice. However, despite the significant progress made, there has been insufficient recognition of how the environmental justice movement may continue to perpetuate the idea of the racial "Other".

Graffiti, diversity, wall art, and inclusion in Lima, Peru by Miles Peacock © milesypea on Unsplash

The Perpetuation of the Racial "Other" in the Environmental Justice Movement

The concept of race features prominently in discussions of environmental justice. Bullard [1993] argues that racialised communities bear a disproportionate burden of environmental issues. He asserts that "even in today's society, race influences the likelihood of exposure to environmental and health risks as well as accessibility to health care" [Bullard, 1993: 23]. This impact is felt as a direct consequence of the greater environmental burdens borne by racialised groups. It is therefore important to investigate the role race plays in shaping how people, particularly racialised groups, experience the environment and the impacts of the climate crisis, as well as how conceptual frameworks contribute to these experiences.

As outlined above, Haslanger's [2019] conception of race helps us to understand the hierarchy upheld by racial classification. It produces two subjects: one privileged and one subjugated. The subjugated subject takes on the identity of the racial "Other". To

pursue this argument further, it is necessary to clarify how the racial "Other" also informs the creation of the environmental "Other". Put differently, the racial "Other" perpetuates multiple forms of "Othering", and the environmental justice movement has not been exempt from this process. The connection between race and the environmental justice movement becomes apparent through an examination of the creation of the environmental "Other". Although environmental degradation affects everyone, it does not affect everyone equally. By the environmental "Other", I refer to those people who are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation as a result of their race.

The concept that does much of the explanatory work in demonstrating how "Othering" operates within the environmental justice movement is environmental racism. Tubert [2021] defines environmental racism as the disproportionate exposure of racialised people to environmental hazards.

This occurs through structural and systematic mechanisms, such as policy-making practices, legislation, directives, and the exclusion of racialised communities from decision-making processes. Robert Bullard [1993], one of the early scholars to examine environmental racism in the 1990s, offers a similar understanding. He highlights how racialised communities are disproportionately affected by climate change and environmental hazards, such as pollution. Bullard [1993] argues that these communities often bear the brunt of environmental collapse and degradation, while wealthier, often white, communities have access to cleaner and healthier environments and are better positioned to adapt to climate-related hazards. For Bullard, this unequal distribution of environmental burdens is not accidental but reflects society's racist history and the deep-seated racial biases embedded in structural systems that shape environmental policy.

Tubert [2021], however, adds an important dimension by arguing that environmental racism is derivative of other forms of racism. She develops a more philosophical account by proposing two conditions for an act or omission to qualify as environmental racism: i) environmental burdens and benefits must be distributed according to race, and ii) this distribution must be caused by a history of racism. Tubert argues that this causal claim must be understood counterfactually, meaning that "if the history of racism had not occurred, the current distribution of environmental burdens and benefits would not have occurred" [Tubert, 2021: 557]. In essence, Tubert's position is that, in the absence of racism, the current racially disproportionate distribution of environmental burdens and benefits would not exist. This is the account of environmental racism that I will be working with.

Aerial view of the Noor 3 solar power station, near Ouarzazate, southern Morocco, April. 1, 2017.
The king unveiled one of the world's biggest solar plants, taking advantage of the Sahara sunshine and a growing global push for renewable energy.
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the plant would use two to three million cubic metres of water annually [Kouz, 2011, cited in Hamouchene, 2016]. Almost eight years later, during Hamouchene's [2023] visit, the dam had dried up, leaving surrounding communities without water for consumption and agriculture.

Disproportionate Effects of Environmental Racism on Racialised Communities

Environmental racism is evident in the disproportionate impacts of the climate crisis on racialised communities. The burdens of the crisis are distributed disproportionately towards racialised communities; furthermore, they are often left to adapt on their own. Holifield [2001] further demonstrates the extent of environmental racism by highlighting its institutionalisation. This institutionalisation is perpetuated not only through the uneven distribution of the burdens and risks of the climate crisis but also through the systematic and structural exclusion of marginalised communities from decision-making processes, structures, and platforms. According to Holifield [2001], racialised communities are frequently excluded from environmental governance, which ensures that their interests are not prioritised and their concerns are easily overlooked.

One such structure is the UN-FCCC, where the Global North holds the greatest power, and decisions regarding policy implementation often favour its needs and concerns [Tokar, 2019;

Guerrero, 2011]. This exclusion reinforces the marginalisation of racialised communities and positions them as the racial (environmental) "Other", separate from the political and social processes that shape their environments [Holifield, 2001]. Environmental racism, therefore perpetuates a form of institutional "Othering" that denies racialised groups the ability to shape their environmental conditions.

Pulido [2014] expands on this understanding by emphasising that environmental racism is not simply the result of individual acts of discrimination but is rooted in broader structural processes such as white privilege. Pulido [2014] argues that white communities often distance themselves from environmental hazards through socio-economic and political power, allowing them to maintain environmental privilege while marginalised groups are disproportionately exposed to pollution and environmental risks. For instance, in a case where a large company were to initiate plans to establish a power plant

in an affluent white community, that community would most likely pool its political and financial resources to oppose and halt such plans. They would be able to pursue legal action and exert influence over political leaders, which would, in turn, stop such a project. A racialised community, however, is less likely to have the capacity to pursue such avenues because of its limited political and socio-economic power. This process of distancing not only perpetuates racial inequalities but also reinforces the spatial segregation of racialised communities [Pulido, 2014]. By spatial segregation, I am referring to the physical separation of people living in different areas of the same city based on social class, including race. Pulido's [2014] work highlights how the spatial dynamics of environmental racism are deeply tied to the construction of the racial and environmental "Other", whereby marginalised communities are systematically excluded from desirable and safe environments and relegated to spaces of environmental harm.

Let me draw attention to the construction of the Ouarzazate Solar Power Plant in Morocco. For this paper, I will not dwell on the level of debt Morocco, an already debt-burdened country, has incurred for the construction and operation of the plant. However, it is worth mentioning this context, as the indebtedness of African countries is a legacy of colonisation and plays a role in their subjugation. I will focus primarily on the displacement, appropriation, and environmental impact of the solar plant.

The solar mega-project began operating in south-central Morocco and covers an area of 3,000 hectares, making it the largest solar power plant in the North African nation [Hamouchene, 2016; 2023]. The plant was constructed with the intention of supplying Morocco with electricity, with power exported to Europe. In his chapter, Hamza Hamouchene [2023] notes that people in the surrounding area were not consulted about the installation of the plant or included in the site-selection process. Additionally, the commu-

nal land on which the plant was subsequently built was sold at a fraction of its value, as those purchasing the land justified the price by claiming it was based on the "marginality" and "non-productivity" of the land [Hamouchene, 2016: par. 13]. One community member interviewed by Karen Randall lamented that "the project people talk about this as a desert that is not used, but to the people here it is not desert; it is a pasture. It is their territory and their future is in the land. When you take my land, you take my oxygen" [Randall, 2012: 19].

Adding salt to the wound of dispossession experienced by the Ouarzazate community was the impact this solar plant had on the water supply of this already water-strained region. The solar plant required water to be channelled from a nearby dam to assist in the cooling process [Hamouchene, 2016]. This affected the already strained water supply intended for consumption by the communities surrounding the plant. At the time Hamouchene [2016] wrote his article, estimates suggested that

This case is an important one, as it clearly illustrates how environmental racism operates and subjugates racialised groups by positioning them as the environmental "Other". Environmental racism is evident in the lack of consideration given to how the solar plant would affect surrounding communities. Priority was placed on generating electricity in a manner deemed environmentally acceptable; however, insufficient attention was paid to how the installation of the Ouarzazate Solar Power Plant would affect the lives and livelihoods of local communities. The environmental burdens were delegated to a racialised community for the benefit of Europe, thereby benefiting Europe without incurring the environmental costs associated with the power plant. Community members were not consulted during the process and were dispossessed of land to which they had strong social and economic ties, under the justification that it was "unproductive". Moreover, this supposed environmental solution further exacerbated local conditions by completely drying up the dam used for drinking water and agriculture.

Examining the Movement Itself

Now, I turn to examine the movement itself. Doing so will enable me to draw the connection between how the disproportionate effects exhibited above are dealt with. Secondly, this will help examine whether organisations that form part of the environmental justice movement is dealing with these impacts or continue perpetuating them, whether by staying silent and tone-deaf or by reinforcing them through the ways in which they go about their activism. I will be using a second case study of Extinction Rebellion (XR) as it is one of the biggest organisations in the environmental justice movement. I will look into the culture of the organisation, how it is perceived, and the ways in which they have gone about their advocacy initiatives. This will show that there is an exclusionary culture that is perpetuated by environmental justice organisations by not paying attention to the racial legacies that lead to racialised groups being disproportionately affected by the climate crisis. Therefore, in this way, they have perpetuated the cycle of the racial (environmental) "Other."

According to their website, Extinction Rebellion (XR) is a decentralised, international, and politically non-partisan movement using non-violent direct action and civil disobedience to persuade governments to act justly on the climate and ecological emergency. However, many racialised and working-class communities have expressed that they do not feel represented by the organisation [Bell & Bevan, 2021]. Akec [2019] writes that it is important for XR to realise that the organisation lacks diversity and glamourises experiences such as arrests

that are tone-deaf to the context of racialised youths. A central critique of the tone-deafness of the organisation revolves around its dominant strategy of civil disobedience, which often leads to arrests. Bell and Bevan [2021] argue that this has the potential to alienate racialised youths because of the already disproportionate challenges they face with the criminal justice system. There is often an emphasis placed on arrest by the organisation, viewing it as a symbol of commitment and putting one's body on the line for the cause; however, this overlooks the much harsher consequences for activists from racialised communities compared to their white counterparts, who are most likely to experience leniency [Bell & Bevan, 2021]. Additionally, as bad as it already is, XR does not account for migrants who risk deportation should they get arrested.

This tactic has prompted much-needed critique from activists, such as those from the Wretched of the Earth coalition in the United Kingdom. It is worth contextualising that this coalition is named after Frantz Fanon's text "The Wretched of the Earth," which seeks to describe the plight of Black people living in racist societies. The coalition argues that XR's methods reflect a privilege that is not afforded to all, particularly based on racial lines; this has led to many racialised youths feeling unsafe in the face of systemic racial discrimination [Wretched of the Earth, 2019]. In the open letter, Wretched of the Earth makes reference to Greta Thunberg's words "Our house is on fire," urging world leaders to act on the climate crisis, and they further say:

"Our communities have been on fire for a long time and these flames are fanned by our exclusion and silencing. Without incorporating our experiences, any response to this disaster will fail to change the complex ways in which social, economic, and political systems shape our lives – offering some an easy pass in life and making others pay the cost. In order to envision a future in which we will all be liberated from the root causes of the climate crisis – capitalism, extractivism, racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and other systems of oppression – the climate movement must reflect the complex realities of everyone's lives in their narrative."
[Wretched of the Earth, 2019: 110]

In the research conducted by Bell and Bevan [2021], the main reasons expressed by possible participants as to why they would not get involved in initiatives organised by XR were that, firstly, they do not see themselves as part of the demographic that the organisation is trying to reach. Their demographic and leadership are lacking in diversity, often being white and middle class, and this has contributed to the idea of exclusion of racialised peoples within the organisation. Secondly, participants expressed that they did not relate to the culture of the organisation, as they viewed it as "hippyish" or eccentric, which did not resonate with their lived realities. Comments from interviewees underscored how XR's predominantly white membership sometimes failed to connect with the specific social and economic concerns that marginalised groups face, from economic survival to racial justice [Bell & Bevan, 2021].

XR's approach to climate activism has also drawn criticism for neglecting the broader social justice dimensions of climate change. Many marginalised communities experience environmental issues such as air pollution, poor housing, and limited access to green spaces as immediate threats; yet, XR's messaging often focuses on global climate collapse without addressing these localised issues. This "one-size-fits-all" narrative can feel disconnected from the everyday struggles of marginalised communities, which often revolve around securing basic environmental and social rights. XR's demand for urgent climate action, while it resonates, fails to incorporate a focus on the intersectional nature of environmental and social justice, which is crucial for marginalised people. This omission reinforces a perception that XR's agenda does not fully understand or prioritise the specific needs of these communities [Akec, 2019].

The examination of XR above provides the perfect segue to the three main arguments I intend to make. Firstly, society has been socialised to view climate change as a Western issue, one that is less about bread-and-butter issues. I argue that this is evident in the strategies taken up by XR and their ilk. Secondly, the prioritisation of the "planet" over people is anti-Black/Brown (racialised peoples). Lastly, the environmental justice movement prioritises the needs of the Global North over those of the Global South. This imbalance in the priorities of the environmental justice movement is rooted in the history of racism and thus perpetuates the racial (environmental) "Other."

I argue that there has been socialisation to view climate change as a Western issue, one that is not "bread and butter." It is no secret that the Global South is riddled with an array of issues, such as debt, poverty, and underdevelopment. However, this does not negate the fact that the Global South is affected by climate change, with catastrophic effects [Bullard, 1993]. Some scholars have lamented that, in fact, the Global South is affected by climate change disproportionately. Additionally, indigenous communities have strong ties to the environment and land, so they are not blind to the impacts of climate change [Whyte, 2018; Wretched of the Earth, 2019]. If anything, this should cause them to be even more interested and involved in climate action. However, the culture of the environmental justice movement has been alienating and exclusionary to racialised groups, and this has unfortunately been presented as a lack of interest. The issues that are considered to be more bread-and-butter than the climate crises are the ones that exacerbate their experience of climate change and cause a disproportionate impact. For instance, a person who stays in a shack is disproportionately affected by a flood, and it exacerbates their condition of not having a reliable structure as a home.

Incorporating social justice in tackling racial and socioeconomic inequality would go a long way in offering sustainable solutions to address the disproportionate impact of climate change on racialised communities. The move to understanding environmental justice as social justice would be a better approach than one that prioritises just the planet over the lives and livelihoods of racialised people. I will be addressing this claim further in a moment.

For now, I want to pivot to my other argument: that the environmental justice movement prioritises the needs of the Global North over those of the Global South. This is made evident by how platforms for environmental policy reforms are inaccessible for racialised people, and there are no efforts made to make said platforms accessible for them [Pulido, 2014]. This means that the voices and concerns of racialised communities are not paid enough attention to, and as a result, are hardly ever considered in the decision-making processes. This also means that there is no room made to accommodate racialised people's interests, and they are not seen as a group of people who can meaningfully contribute to the shaping of solutions that are developed on these platforms. This speaks directly to the false notions perpetuated by eugenics, presenting racialised people as intellectually inferior with no ability to make erudite contributions [Foucault, 2003]. This has contributed to the subjugation of racialised people, and their indigenous knowledge systems have been undermined and subsequently erased. Once again, racialised groups have been portrayed as a deviation from the norm and thus are "Othered."

Lastly, the argument I will advance in this section is that the prioritisation of the "planet" over people is anti-Black/Brown. The focus of big environmental justice organisations, like XR, has been the conservation of the planet [Bell & Bevan, 2021]. Whilst they have not explicitly claimed that they are more interested in the conservation of the planet over people, their culture has made it clear where their priorities lie. The tone-deafness of XR's strategies and approaches to climate change

issues has evidenced that they are prioritising the planet above people. While the planet must be conserved and protected from the impacts of the climate crises, people equally must be protected. I delve deeper into this in the section to follow by proposing a humanistic approach to environmentalism.

Towards a Humanistic Environmentalism

A possible objection is that an approach which prioritises humans above non-human animals is anthropocentric. In response to this, I construct an argument that a humanistic approach to environmental justice is not inherently anthropocentric; rather, it is ethically grounded in humanism. To advance my response, I must distinguish between two main concepts that are at play here, namely, anthropocentrism and humanism. Hayward [1997] defines anthropocentrism as attitudes, values, or practices which promote human interests at the expense of the interests or well-being of other species or the environment. This typically involves viewing human beings as the focal point of moral concern [Cave, 2021]. Contrariwise, humanism, as an ethical framework, is centred on the idea that all human lives have inherent value and moral worth, while also acknowledging and respecting the value of non-human entities within the broader ecological system [Kopnina et al., 2021]. This distinction supports the notion that environmental justice, when approached through a humanistic lens, is ethically robust rather than merely human-centred, as it prioritises equity for marginalised communities without negating the intrinsic value of nature.

Humanism, especially when applied to environmental justice, seeks to alleviate disparities in the impact of climate change on racialised communities. Such an approach does not inherently exclude or devalue non-human concerns; rather, it integrates the well-being of both human and non-human entities. With humanism, we are able to bring into focus not only concerns about the planet but also varied human experiences of climate change. As Di Paola [2024] describes, virtue ethics and humanism align in their commitment to the virtues of care, empathy, and justice, which can extend beyond human interests to encompass broader ecological concerns. This virtue-centred framework enables humanistic environmental justice to ethically support those who suffer disproportionately from environmental degradation, namely, racialised and economically marginalised communities, without reducing nature to a mere tool for human welfare.

Critics of anthropocentrism argue that it centres human welfare at the cost of non-human life, fostering environmental degradation through speciesism and human supremacy [Kopnina et al., 2021]. However, a humanistic approach to environmental justice that prioritises marginalised groups in climate discourse does not inherently adopt an anthropocentric stance. Instead, it advocates for the fair treatment of those disproportionately affected by climate change, acknowledging that these communities have been systematically excluded from environmental benefits while withstanding the worst of ecological harm. This humanistic perspective aligns with an ethical commitment to address historical injustices, rather than centring human interests to the detriment of other species.

Acknowledging the unequal impact of environmental harm on specific human communities can be seen as a necessary step toward more inclusive ecological ethics. By centring human justice within environmental justice efforts, we recognise that some racialised communities hold unique relationships with their local ecosystems, which are often shaped by historical and cultural connections to the land. These connections emphasise the moral and practical importance of preserving both human and non-human lives within these ecosystems, which are seen as interdependent rather than competing entities [Di Paola, 2024]. A humanistic approach to environmental justice, rather than being a shallow endorsement of anthropocentrism, can bridge human and non-human concerns. By fostering empathy and solidarity with affected communities, humanism naturally expands into a broader ecological ethic. Hayward [1997] highlights the danger of conflating humanism with anthropocentrism, suggesting that the former need not imply the exclusion of non-human interests. Instead, humanism in environmental justice emphasises a shared sense of agency and responsibility among diverse human and non-human communities, which challenges the narrow anthropocentric framework that views the environment merely as a resource [Kopnina et al., 2021].

In addition, a humanistic approach can address the systemic inequalities that often exacerbate environmental degradation. For instance, affluent nations and groups tend to consume resources at higher rates and contribute more to ecological crises, while low-income and racialised communities bear disproportionate environmental burdens [Bullard, 1993]. Addressing these inequalities requires a shift towards an ethical framework that recognises shared responsibility across all species, including humans. As Di Paola [2024] notes, virtue ethics—when applied through a humanistic lens—requires environmental action that is both context-sensitive and morally inclusive, focusing on fostering resilience and justice for all life forms involved.

Proponents of ecocentrism argue that human-centred ethics cannot adequately protect non-human entities due to inherent anthropocentric biases [Kopnina et al., 2021]. However, a humanistic approach does not necessitate prioritising human interests above all others but rather acknowledges human responsibility for environmental harm and seeks to rectify it by promoting equitable solutions. By focusing on the ethical imperative to protect vulnerable human communities, humanism can serve as a stepping stone to more comprehensive environmental ethics that include non-human entities as equally deserving of moral consideration. For example, humanistic environmental justice advocates may support policies that protect biodiversity, not only for its intrinsic value but also because the survival of diverse ecosystems directly benefits the communities most reliant on natural resources for their subsistence. This interconnected view opposes the notion of humans as dominant over nature, instead promoting mutual well-being across species. Hayward's [1997] argument, which emphasises legitimate human concern for welfare without anthropocentric domination, aligns with this inclusive ethical stance, which does not reduce non-human entities to mere instruments of human benefit but rather acknowledges them as integral to a just and sustainable world.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored how the racial "Other" is perpetuated within the environmental justice movement. My aim was to understand how different philosophical perspectives on race contribute to this perpetuation. Grounding my analysis in a socio-political account of race, as presented by Sally Haslanger [2019], I defined race as a hierarchy in which one group is privileged and another subordinated. This hierarchical structure gives rise to the racial "Other," viewed as a deviation from the norm and thereby justifying subjugation. I contextualised the environmental justice movement as a response to the impacts of environmental hazards, highlighting its key stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations, alliances, coalitions, state actors, and international governmental organisations like the United Nations. Through this foundation, I investigated how environmental racism perpetuates the racial "Other," evidenced by the disproportionate effects of climate crises on racialised communities and the exclusionary culture within organisations such as Extinction Rebellion.

To effectively address the complexities of the environmental crisis, embracing a humanistic approach to environmentalism is essential. This approach prioritises equity for marginalised communities and incorporates intersectionality—a framework coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw [1996]—which examines how overlapping systems of oppression, such as racism, classism, and sexism, shape the experiences of individuals. By applying an intersectional lens, we can recognise the unique experiences of racialised individuals, ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of environmental justice. Abandoning binary perspectives on social issues allows for a nuanced understanding of how various forms of oppression intersect to impact marginalised communities. Moving forward, intersectional humanistic environmentalism presents the best path to address the environmental crisis, providing a framework for inclusive solutions that acknowledge and respect the interconnectedness of human and non-human lives. Additionally, it opens avenues for further research that can deepen our understanding of these critical issues and contribute to more just and equitable environmental practices.

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