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DEVELOPMENT OF THE "PEOPLE OF COLOR" IDENTITY IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT OF THE SOUTHWESTERN UNITED STATES

...there such a thing as a postmodern form of organizing? Since social scientists "discovered" the fragmentary and situational nature of identity, scholars and activists have debated the implications of multiple identities for building counterhegemonic movements. Regardless of whether one welcomes or regrets the recognition of multiple identities, there is no

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denying that they pose a new series of challenges to political organizing. In *Beyond Identity Politics*, John Anner notes,

as the victories pile up . . . so do the internal contradictions of identity politics. Identity politics, like any other particularist basis for political organizing, has some big built-in problems. Should lesbians organize around their sexuality with gay men, or around their gender with straight women? Does a working-class African-American family have more in common with its white neighbor or with a millionaire Black businessman?²

While one may argue (correctly so) that movements and activists have always grappled with such questions, these issues have become even more pronounced with the advent of postmodern scholarship.

I hope to shed empirical light on these concerns by examining the identity of one of the more successful oppositional movements in recent times, people of color in the environmental justice movement (EJM) in the Southwestern United States.³ Specifically, I am interested in the extent to which activists deploy a unitary identity, how it is constructed, and how its inherent contradictions are negotiated. I argue that activists privilege one particular form of oppression (racism), and that a unitary identity is still essential for mobilizing a national or regional counterhegemonic movement. Despite the unitary nature of this identity, however, it is not totalizing in the debilitating way that modern identities have often been characterized. Instead, borrowing from Espiritu, I argue that activists invoke a situational identity, meaning that it ebbs and flows as the situation warrants.⁴ For example, while nonwhite activists routinely invoke people of color as a primary identity when opposing the state or a polluter, their discourse and organizing allows for individual racial or ethnic identification when among themselves. Despite scholars’ recent emphasis on the fragmentary nature of identity, few have documented the process of identity formation among successful broad-based contemporary social movements.

The first part of this article briefly discusses the relationship between identity and social movements while the second outlines the contours of the environmental justice movement. In the third part, I examine
how a unitary racial identity is developed. To facilitate this process I conceptualize identity formation in three steps. First, I determine who is a person of color within the context of the movement. Second, I explore how racism serves as a unifying social relation, and third, I consider one of the social meanings that has become associated with people of color, positive ecological relations. Finally, I argue that although “people of color” is a unitary identity, it is not totalizing and compels us to rethink our conceptualization of unitary identities, particularly in times of growing conservatism.

IDENTITY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Social movements and oppositional struggles have long attracted attention because they are considered primary engines of progressive social change. Leftists have traditionally privileged those movements that were clearly class based, such as labor or agrarian movements. More recently, however, campaigns identified as “new social movements” have arisen. Unlike “old” movements, focused on economic and political rights, new social movements are centered on cultural, identity, and quality-of-life issues—concerns typically associated with the rise of postindustrial societies. Although environmentalism is considered a new social movement, several have argued that the environmental justice movement—because of its largely working-class constituency, demands on the state, and wedding of economic and quality-of-life issues—defies easy categorization.

One thing all movements share are issues of identity: a shared identity is a necessary basis for collective action, and many new social movements are explicitly about identity or identity politics. These two aspects are distinct but related. While all movements require a shared identity as a basis for organizing, some movements also seek to redefine and affirm historically denigrated identities, such as those of gays and lesbians, disabled individuals, and American Indians. It is in this latter category, identity politics, that Jan Penrose and Peter Jackson find “groups and individuals become aware of their differences, attach significance to certain dimensions and contest the relevance of other designations.” Both forms of identity are at work

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among environmental justice activists in the Southwest. Not only is the collective identity of people of color being developed as a basis for organizing, but this particular identity, and the identities from which it is drawn (individual racial and ethnic groups), are being given new meanings and significance. Both of these practices serve to empower historically marginalized peoples.

A central question for all movements is the type of identity to be deployed. Will it be narrow or inclusive? How will the borders be defined and negotiated? How will participants’ multiple identities be handled? Until recently, a unitary identity has been presumed. Movement participants evoke a unitary identity when they articulate and act upon one particular identity, such as workers, environmentalists, or Asian Americans. Though individuals may, in fact, have numerous (and conflicting) identities, one is privileged in order to build a unified group identity. Accordingly, marginalized segments of a movement have often had to struggle to create the political space necessary to express unique concerns, as women did within the early Chicano movement, for example.

Postmodern scholarship has helped bring this contradiction to light and has challenged the totalizing nature of unitary identities. In addition, the relativism associated with postmodern analyses has also led to a hesitancy to privilege any particular form of oppression. The rejection of the universal subject, the embracing of positionality, and the rise of identity politics in general have greatly altered the political landscape. No longer are race and class seen as the most profound forms of oppression, as they now coexist with other forms of “difference” such as sexuality, ability, citizenship status, and gender.8

Such an unfixed social reality, however, has serious implications for movement building: How might diverse people come together to challenge the dominant social order without privileging a particular form of oppression, and by extension, an identity? Some, like Edward Soja and Barbara Hooper, have suggested that various marginalized groups articulate linkages or form affinities and thus create the necessary space for the validation of an array of identities and organizing strategies.

Though individuals have numerous identities, one is privileged to build a unified group.
The intent behind this radical postmodernism of resistance is to deconstruct (not to destroy) the ebbing tide of modernist radical politics, to renew its strengths and avoid its weaknesses, and to reconstitute an explicitly postmodernist radical politics, a new cultural politics of difference and identity that moves toward empowering a multiplicity of resistances rather than searches for that one "great refusal," the singular transformation to precede and guide all others.9

Although some local struggles have effectively managed a diversity of identities, there are few national or international counterhegemonic movements predicated on a range of identities. Consequently, some have argued that postmodernism is utterly disabling. "The results of deconstruction politics are serious," warns Oscar Handler. "Postmodernism celebrates its lack of global vision. The postmodernists defend their position with the claim, 'But there are no grand narratives.' However, the opposition is not playing that game. It has belief systems, meta-narratives that allow theories of power, of action."10

Indeed, what are the possibilities for building a broad-based counterhegemonic movement? How might identity function so as to bring a mass of people together while remaining respectful of difference—two supposedly opposing tensions? The EJM, a relatively successful movement, offers several insights. Originating in the anti-toxics struggles of the early 1980s, a "submovement" has developed in response to nonwhites' disproportionate exposure to environmental degradation. Explicitly privileging racism, activists have created a situational racial identity that both serves to unite a diversity of people and allows for individual racial group identification. As a racial category, people of color is not a new term, but it is being used to an unprecedented extent in several arenas, including environmental justice.

The geographic focus of my study is the Southwestern United States. Though both environmental justice and people of color are national in scope, the multiracial meaning of people of color is most fully developed in the Southwest. This can be seen in the fact that the Southwest has the largest number of self-defined multiracial environmental justice groups. Figure 1 illustrates that the Southwest is home
A broad-based movement is only possible by developing a more inclusive identity.

to 32 such groups, while the rest of the country has only 17. Furthermore, the Southwest is not dominated by any single nonwhite population. Due to the historical geography of the Southwest, the region has never fit the national bipolar racial model, as it has long been home to African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, and Chicanos. Thus, in the Southwest, people of color refers not only to nonwhites but to a diversity of nonwhite groups. It is precisely this diversity that makes the development of a unitary identity significant and key to innovative movement-building. While many local groups consist of a single racial or ethnic group and effectively counter local threats, a broad-based movement is only possible by developing a more inclusive organizing framework and identity. The movement could have defined itself in various ways. For example, activists could have emphasized the *environmental justice* frame, and therefore forged a greater solidarity with whites. Instead, nonwhite activists chose to emphasize *racism*, and consequently, organized as *people of color*. 

Figure 1. People of color groups in the United States.
THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

The Racialization of Environmentalism

It is difficult to isolate the starting point of the EJM, but two events stand out. First was the discovery of abandoned hazardous waste in Love Canal, New York (a working class Anglo community), in the 1970s. Residents from this struggle subsequently established the Citizen's Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste, a leading organization in the environmental justice movement that assists other communities in resisting undesirable land uses and hazards. The second key event that is pivotal to understanding nonwhites’ engagement in these issues was an effort in 1982 to locate a poly-chlorinated biphenyl (PCB) dump in Warren County, North Carolina (a black and white community). Residents of Warren county actively opposed the dump and mobilized the support of the African American civil rights establishment. Not only did this place environmental racism on the agenda of civil rights and social-justice organizations but it also led to the racialization of environmentalism. Racialization is the process of producing racial meaning. In the case of environmentalism, a previously non-race-related issue became imbued with racial meaning. This does not deny the historically racist nature of the mainstream environmental movement but rather refers to a recent and conscious effort on the part of nonwhites to reveal and emphasize the racially unequal practices of environmentalists, polluters, and the regulatory structure. Activists are articulating environmental justice in such a way that it is essentially becoming the struggle against environmental racism. Explains Barbara Epstein, “A growing recognition of the particular exposure of communities of color to toxics has prompted a shift toward concern with environmental racism; in recent years people of color have made up the most rapidly growing section of the movement.”

The racialization of environmentalism was prompted by a series of studies documenting nonwhites’ disproportionate exposure to various forms of pollution. The widely publicized United Church of Christ’s (UCC’s) Toxic Waste and Race in the United States found that all nonwhites, namely African Americans, Asians, American Indians, and Lati-
All nonwhites were disproportionately affected by hazardous waste.

Although focused mainly on the causes of environmental racism (i.e., racism and class status), this multiracial framework provided a starting point for mobilization. The emergence of race as the dominant frame does not deny that sympathetic whites committed to antiracist politics have emerged as leaders of the movement nor that environmental justice activists often support white communities. It does, however, attest to the need to draw clear boundaries, and privilege particular forms of oppression in movement-building.

Despite the growing racial emphasis of the EJM, there have been few frank discussions of this shift and its political implications. Indeed, many laud the EJM for its multiracial organizing capacity: "The movement for environmental justice . . . mobilize[s] community-wide coalitions built across race, ethnic and class lines," praises observer Dorceta Taylor. Such conclusions are hardly surprising, however, since crisis often produces unity. In the words of one activist, "People have heard a lot of myths about what black people think about environmental issues and development. They would be amazed to see how much we had in common when we actually got together to hash things out over LANCR [an incinerator planned for South Central Los Angeles]." Despite this temporary mobilization, the real question is, can that white/nonwhite coalition be harnessed for other political objectives? And if so, based on what politics? The fact is, nonwhites have chosen not to pursue this strategy. There are any number of reasons for this, including white racism and a perceived lack of commonality. But perhaps most important are the profusion of racism and the current retreat from race. Regardless of the pervasiveness of racism, there are significant efforts to deny the existence of racism—the repealing of antiracist measures (like affirmative action) and the invocation of racist initiatives (including California's recently passed anti-immigrant and three-strikes propositions). It is within the context of this siege mentality that we must ask, What are the commonalities with whites? The obvious Left response is class. But a class-based movement is far more difficult in this particular context. For one, while depicted as working class, the membership
of the EJM is quite complex in terms of income, social status, the division of labor, and relation to the means of production. Without a more sustained and targeted political agenda (no small task after the demise of the immediate threat), the absence of a shared material reality and conflicting class positions mitigate against a multiracial left movement. This does not mean that such a movement is not a worthy goal, but that it is exceedingly difficult. Consequently, nonwhite activists have drawn on a broadly conceived racism, one that recognizes the racialized nature of economic inequality, as a framework for organizing.

This racial frame was solidified when over 500 organizations convened in 1991 for the first National People of Color Environmental Justice Leadership Summit. Since then, a series of networks, predicated on place, race, and ethnicity, have provided the structural framework to connect local groups. A sampling of networks includes the Indigenous Environmental Network, the Asian/Pacific Islander Environmental Network, the Southwest Network for Economic and Environmental Justice (SNEEJ), the Southern Organizing Conference (SOC), and the newly formed Northeast Network.

Three levels of organization can be discerned within the people of color environmental justice movement: grassroots organizations, local institutionalized groups, and networks. These levels are important in illustrating the relationship between identity, mobilization, and spatial scale. Grassroots community groups are usually geographically based and often consist of a single racial or ethnic group. This is not surprising since most environmental hazards are place specific and opposition is largely limited to locals. For example, Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles is comprised overwhelmingly of African American women. However, despite its homogenous membership, its members have assumed a leadership role in SNEEJ where they work in partnership with Chicanas/os, Asian Americans, and American Indians. These patterns illustrate how a broader identity is needed at larger spatial scales.

The second and third tiers are more formal. Unlike the grassroots, these groups do not necessarily emerge from a direct environmental
threat (such as an incinerator) and have access to more resources, including both highly skilled people and funding. To a certain degree, these organizations are institutions themselves, as they compete for grant money and exhibit a more permanent nature. The Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO), based in Oakland, California, for instance, was originally established to train nonwhite community organizers but subsequently moved into the environmental justice arena via a childhood lead campaign. They define themselves as “an organization working with activists and community organizations to promote the interests of Asian, African-American, Latin and Native American peoples.”

The final strata within the movement, networks, is best illustrated by SNEEJ, arguably the most developed of all the networks, and the most successful at multiracial organizing. SNEEJ was established at a 1990 meeting attended by nonwhite activists from California, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Colorado, Texas, and Oklahoma (Mexican representation was subsequently added). SNEEJ was convened in order “to discuss environmental and economic justice issues from the perspective of people of color.” Membership is by organization only and each affiliate must have significant nonwhite participation in order to join. SNEEJ offers resources, technical assistance, and solidarity to organizational members. Its philosophy is that “as people of color, the Southwest Network recognizes that the demand for a safe, clean environment and workplace can only be achieved by building a multiracial, multicultural and international movement that promotes environmental and economic justice.”

Though SNEEJ recognizes and validates individual racial/ethnic identities, there is a continual effort to articulate similarities. Indeed, SNEEJ’s assumption that a single people of color perspective exists expresses a desire to create a unitary experience. It’s through the identity “people of color,” the meanings attached to it, and the shared experience of racism that the Shoshone Nation, for example, can identify with the largely Chicano Tucsonians for a Clean Environment.
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PEOPLE OF COLOR AS A RACIAL CATEGORY

Before examining the development of a racial identity, we must first have a working understanding of race. I draw on Michael Omi and Howard Winant's definition of race as "an unstable and decentered complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle." Hence, we can see the development of the people of color identity as a distinctly political act intended to alter the racial formation. EJM activists are not only actively promoting a more inclusive racial category but are simultaneously seeking to reassert the centrality of racism and to offer a positive set of meanings to this racial identity in terms of nature-society relations. The process of developing this racial identity can be broken down into several steps: first, defining the boundaries of who is included in the people of color racial identity; second, identifying common experiences (such as racism) upon which to base this identity; and third, cultivating a new set of meanings associated with people of color—positive nature-society relations. While the first step establishes the boundaries of the group, the latter two serve to unify the members by emphasizing their shared experience of racism and providing a positive set of meanings—harmonious ecological relations—to which all can lay claim.

Inherent in Omi and Winant's definition of race is the recognition that race must simultaneously be understood through both economic and social structures, as well as cultural representations—what has elsewhere been called a material/discursive formation. In other words, the reality of people of color and our analysis of it cannot be limited to the political economic sphere, nor can our analyses be limited to representational practices, particularly when abstracted from larger material processes. Our analysis must include both the material and representational in order to appreciate how people (re-)produce and experience race, and the dialectic between the two. In the following sections I discuss the development of a people of color identity while approaching race as a material/discursive formation.
Who Is a Person of Color?
The people of color environmental justice movement is built on a series of discrete racial/ethnic identities. In actuality, it consists of state-sanctioned racial minorities: African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, and Chicanos/Latinos. It should be recognized, however, that the categories Asian American, American Indian, and Latino (and even Chicano) have only recently been forged themselves from an amalgam of linguistic, national, tribal, and regional identities. The formation of a nationwide identity, such as Asian American, was a necessary predecessor because it initially consolidated a diversity of peoples. Nonetheless, it should not be assumed that such identities are readily adopted. Instead, they result from the racialization of various groups by the dominant society—never a smooth and uncontested process. Designation as a state-recognized minority group itself needs to be problematized. Such a status is not inevitable nor granted to all nonwhites. Rather, it is the result of historical racial oppression and resistance in the United States, and of having successfully made particular claims on the state. Racist experiences that contribute to minority status might include incorporation into the United States against one’s will, attempted genocide, having suffered from entrenched exclusionary practices, and of course, being labeled nonwhite.

Charles Lee, a leading figure in the UCC study, illustrates how these diverse experiences can be interpreted as commonalities. “The long history of oppression and exploitation of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans . . . has taken the form of genocide, chattel slavery, indentured servitude, and racial discrimination in . . . the United States.” Hence, the Irish are not people of color because they are now considered white, even though they were once subject to intense discrimination and exploitation. Likewise, people from India are only occasionally considered “minorities” and as a group are not part of the EJM. Despite enduring racism, their history as a people has not been deemed integral to the historical development of the United States, thus mitigating against current claims against the state, although this
is subject to debate.\textsuperscript{31} In contrast, the practice of including recent Asian and Latino immigrants as "minorities" is a function of past and present struggles as well as an appreciation of the role of US imperialism in the displacement and subjugation of certain peoples. Indeed, the fact that people in Mexico are identified as people of color by EJM activists underscores how the categories and experiences of US groups can be extrapolated onto others (see Figure 2).

It is precisely these historical and contemporary experiences with racism that state-recognized minorities share in common. Moreover, these experiences are most clearly juxtaposed in the Southwestern United States. It is only in the West, and particularly the Southwest, that all of the key groups have long and comparable histories of racism that activists have linked. The Southwest has been the site of Chinese exclusion laws, Japanese internment, the displacement of Mexicans and Indians, Indian genocide, and entrenched discrimination against blacks. In contrast, although the South is the site of vibrant environmental justice activism, the population is largely black

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and white. Nevertheless, because of the power of the national biracial narrative, activists draw on it. This is crucial in allowing blacks to play a leadership role in the southwestern people of color identity. In comparison to American Indians, Asians, and Chicanos, African Americans are tenuously linked to the region. Yet the centrality of the black experience to our national history not only facilitates their incorporation into the people of color identity but also informs it. Not all racial/ethnic groups are equally integrated into the people of color identity. At the national level, African Americans and Latinos are, respectively, the two most prominent groups. This is due partly to numerical dominance, relatively consolidated identities, and continual evidence of discrimination. Although the American Indian population is far smaller, it figures prominently in both the national and regional movements. American Indians are accorded a special status not only because of their history of genocide and displacement but also because of their particularly vulnerable legal relationship to the federal government and their historical connection to the land (see below). Moreover, the larger Indian nations are located in the Southwest and have been the site of tremendous conflict.

In contrast, Asian Americans have the most tenuous status. Indeed, only 16 Asians attended the People of Color Leadership Summit. Underscoring this problem, one activist has noted, “In the last two decades, a number of studies have been published which document the effects of environmental racism on the African-American, Native American, and Latino communities in the US. In contrast, very little has been written regarding issues of environmental justice in the US Asian and Pacific Islander communities.” This sparse representation reflects several characteristics unique to Asian Americans. For one, the “model minority” myth may mitigate against widespread participation by perpetuating the stereotype that Asian Americans have few problems, neatly overcome racist barriers, and generally support the status quo. In addition, Asian Americans exhibit extreme national, economic, and linguistic heterogeneity, and a still-nascent collective identity. Indeed, Espiritu and Ong have argued that “class differences pose the greatest barrier to racial solidarity.” In contrast, Lati-
nos, although also characterized by high rates of immigration, have several organizing advantages in that they only have to contend with two languages, Spanish and English, and, at least in the Southwest, are largely working class.

To summarize, the first step in developing a situational identity is drawing the lines of membership. Who is a person of color is not as evident as a first glance would suggest. Membership is based on being designated nonwhite by the dominant society, having successfully made some claims against the state, and by a strong presence in the Southwest. Moreover, while membership consists of state-recognized minorities, membership is not even. As with any racial identity, boundaries and membership are fluid and temporal. The second step in developing a people of color identity is discerning the social relations that undergird this racial identity and using it to consolidate the group.

**Racism as a Unifying Basis of People of Color**

The creation of a unitary racial identity entails a far more self-conscious effort than simply establishing boundaries. Forging a collective racial identity for a diverse group of people is a process that requires identifying a series of commonalities (real or mythic), developing those commonalities, extrapolating them onto a set of people, and acting upon them in order to enhance group solidarity. Activists have chosen to focus on various commonalities, some anchored in material conditions (poverty, racism, environmental degradation) and some on a selective appropriation of ideological elements (cultural similarities, harmonious ecological relations). It is through the process of identity building that activists strive to create a unitary identity.

The experience of racism, discrimination, and resistance are common to people of color and serve to differentiate us from whites. Accordingly, the experiences of racism and its counterpart, resistance, are continually stressed as a way of articulating unity. Consider one African American leader's effort to consolidate the nonwhite experience:

_When you lift up a struggle beyond your own community you find out... what my Native American sisters and brothers have been going through, what my Latino American brothers and sisters, and_
Asian American and Pacific Islanders have been going through, there's a commonality. Not just experiencing oppression, but a commonality in our earnest... plight to challenge that situation. Emphasizing the commonality of racism is perhaps the most important step in building a collective identity. It is the process of identifying commonalities among a diversity of peoples that is the beginning of political power. In effect, this strategy recognizes that we do not all need to be identical to mobilize; the experience of racism offers a sufficient basis.

This accentuation of racism occurs generally, as the above quote suggests, but has also been forcefully used to ensure that environmental inequity is not reduced to class, thus displacing racism. For example, a widely used quote from the UCC study reads, "Race proved to be the most significant among variables... in the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities." By insisting that the problem of environmental inequity is a racial one, activists are clearly privileging a particular form of oppression.

Despite what may appear to be a "natural" framing of the issue, the decision to emphasize racism is a choice. Although race is a key axis of difference in our society, there are any number of ways an oppositional environmentalism could have been articulated. Instead, it was decided to develop an environmental racism frame and not to cast the problem of disproportionate risk in terms of class, age, or any other category. That a debate exists over whether it is racism or poverty that causes disproportionate exposure is evidence of the struggle over how to frame the debate. Scholar/activist Bob Bullard makes a strong case for the importance of a racism frame:

In the United States, race interacts with class to create special environmental and health vulnerabilities. People of color, however, face elevated toxic exposure levels even when social class variables (income, education, and occupational status) are held constant... Race has been found to be an independent factor, not reducible to class, in predicting the distribution of 1) air pollution... 2) contaminated fish consumption... 3) the location of municipal landfills and incinerators... 4) the location of abandoned toxic waste dumps... and 5) lead poisoning in children.
Activists’ emphasis on racism attests to their racial project, which is, in a time of competing claims of difference and a social policy agenda that seeks to discredit the role of racism in determining social outcomes, to prove that racism is alive and well.

In addition to insisting that racism accounts for such environmental inequities, US activists have extrapolated their experience of racism to their understanding of other people’s oppression. At a SNEEJ meeting held along the Tijuana/San Diego border, an activist who had never previously been to a less-industrialized country was appalled at the living conditions of the Mexican colonias and remarked, “As a Black woman living in Texas I thought I knew everything there was to know about racism and oppression, but what inhumanity! This is slavery and racism!” Her outrage and sympathy with the Mexicans led her to interpret their specific exploitation and oppression with forms she was familiar with. Her willingness to apply her history to those of another country suggests the ease with which racism is applied as a totalizing experience to all people of color in the United States.

Elevating racism as the defining feature among nonwhites is an important organizing strategy. In effect, activists produce a unitary conception of racism that obscures differences. It glosses over the fact that different forms of racism exist and that various racial and ethnic groups are constituted differently.

There are the historical problems of being a colonized people—the loss of land and water, the commercialization of our cultures, the poisoning of workers and communities, and most importantly, the lack of knowledge of our own history. The indigenous people of New Mexico: Native Americans, Mexicanos/Chicanos and African Americans have a great history; a history of resistance, a history of survival.

This description of a common history by activist Jeanne Ganna demonstrates an effort on the part of activists to extrapolate an indigenous history of racism to other racially subjugated people. For instance, the loss of land and water and the commercialization of culture are particular forms of racism affecting Indians and Hispanos in the South-
west. The inclusion of African Americans as indigenous to New Mexico and overlooking Chicanos' roles as both colonizers and colonized illustrates activists' attempts to create a unitary identity by projecting a common experience of racism. In addition to underscoring the nature and profundity of racism, the quote also stresses the importance of resistance, once again articulating it as a common experience.

People of Color Representing Themselves
Closely related to the material commonalities of people of color is how activists represent themselves and their concerns. The phrase "people of color" literally refers to the idea of skin color, and activists routinely employ the idea of phenotype in their visual and discursive representations. Such practices are important in helping us understand not only how people of color choose to represent themselves but also how such acts serve to produce racial meanings for the larger society. Consequently, they are key to understanding the development of a racial identity. Racial categories may be predicated on any real or imagined physical attribute, including hair texture, eye shape, or skin color. It is this last form, however, that has become the dominant basis for differentiating supposed "races."

Phenotype itself, of course, is meaningless outside of the social relations it signifies. As Robert Miles and Rudy Torres explain, "human beings identify skin color to mark or symbolize other phenomena in
a historical context in which other significations occur. When human practices include and exclude people in light of the signification of skin colour, collective identities are produced and social inequalities are structured. Activists' emphasis on phenotype, then, serves several purposes. First, it distinguishes between the racially dominant (whites) and subordinate (nonwhites). In organizing around the fact that nonwhite bodies are subordinantly racialized, activists do not reify phenotypic variation but simply focus on whiteness and nonwhiteness. Cognizant of the power of whiteness and the strength of the color line, a nonwhite phenotypic identification becomes one basis to include and exclude people. Second, it serves to unite nonwhites by noting that they are collectively marked by "colored skin." As one activist put it, "My thing is that when they look out there and they discriminate against minorities, it's not necessarily just because I'm black, but it's just all of us minorities out there." Third, it becomes a discursive and visual symbol of racial injustice and resistance. Figure 3 demonstrates this tendency as seen in the protestor's slogan, "We don't have the complexion for protection." Here the activist is suggesting that she is a victim of discrimination because her body (and community) is not marked as white and therefore does not have access to all the privileges associated with whiteness. In another case, a Dallas African American activist has suggested, "no handicap, or hardship would prevent the coalition from working to halt the destructive impact upon the lives of pigmented people." Moreover, in explaining the discriminatory nature of environmental protection, Bob Bullard has emphasized the importance of phenotype. "Some communities receive 'special' benefit and privileges by virtue of the skin color of their residents. . . . It should not be a surprise to anyone that discrimination exists in environmental protection." Some have criticized activists for reproducing racial categories and for unproblematically treating ideas of "skin color" rather than attempting to dismantle them. Such remarks, however, seem to place unrealistic demands on activists dealing with the life and death consequences of racism and overlook the fact that emphasizing phenotype has united a wide variety of people. For others, the emphasis on phe-
notype is problematic because it is a clear reminder of the exclusion of whites. Such attitudes, however, do not appreciate the pervasiveness of racism and nonwhites' need for political space away from whites.

*Producing New Racial Meanings: Nature-Society Relations*
While racism has been a key force in prompting the mobilization of people of color, a viable identity requires that people see themselves as agents in their own right, and the development of mythologized nature-society relations partially fulfills this need. *Nature-society relations* is a broad term which refers to how a particular group of people interact with their environment. Included are such things as ecological history, landscapes, and forms of economic development. Environmental justice activists have developed a set of nature-society traditions rooted in the Southwest that belong to people of color. Not only do these traditions draw upon the unique ecology and history of the region but they are also informed by activists' subordinated position. Activists use nature-society relations as a building block in the creation of a unitary identity. Many elements of this tradition are drawn from the American Indian experience and then extrapolated onto all people of color. The "invention of tradition" is a common tool among groups engaged in identity politics. Efforts on the part of activists to develop a set of ecological traditions contain two distinct essences. First, activists assume the moral high ground through both their ecological focus and marginalized status. Second, activists intimate that people of color have enjoyed an ecological tradition more harmonious than that of whites.

The first theme is the assertion of moral authority in environmental matters. This stems from the fact that nonwhite environmental justice activists practice a form of environmentalism rooted in social justice, as well as the fact that as subordinated people, they are not responsible for the current environmental crisis. Because environmental justice activists' entry into environmentalism was via toxics (broadly defined), they have literally been dealing with life and death issues. The urgency of these problems allow activists to contrast their agenda with that of mainstream environmentalism, which has been caricatured as worrying about less-weighty issues. "They [mainstream envi-
sion of veness of whites.

environmentalists] perceive environmentalism as conservation but for us it's the survival of our communities. According to another activist, "white environmentalists have primarily been concerned with protecting trees, birds and mountains, I also support those goals, but for black folks housing and leadpaint poisoning are environmental issues." Still another commonly heard phrase is, "We are the real endangered species in America, people of color." (See Figure 4). These comments all suggest that people of color's environmental concerns are more pressing and valid than those of the mainstream movement. Figure 5 dramatically depicts this theme by showing how industrial pollution is contaminating both the body of the woman of color as well as her Southwestern homeland.

Likewise, people of color's approach to environmentalism is thought to be more comprehensive than that of the mainstream. "Communities of color have often taken a more holistic approach than the mainstream environmental movement, integrating 'environmental' concerns into a broader agenda that emphasizes social, racial and economic justice." This sentiment has been captured in the oft-heard environmental justice phrase, "the environment is where we live, work and play." By casting their issues and methods as more holistic than mainstream environmentalism's, people of color environmental justice activists offer a more socially relevant alternative. Moreover, the idea that people of color have more integrated environmental visions is closely associated with their marginalization. Having endured various forms of oppression (slavery, land loss, colonialism, genocide, etc.), a link is made between a history of oppression and the current organizing strategy. "Women of color are logical leaders of this dynamic movement to bring a people's agenda forward and provide clean alternatives necessary for the survival of Third World communities, in the United States and abroad." It is not surprising that indigenous leaders are organizing the most effective resis-

A link is made between a history of oppression and the current organizing strategy.
tance within communities of color. They are completely wedded to social and economic justice agendas. The subtext to these quotes is that the experiences of poverty and oppression preclude the development of a narrow environmentalism, which is clearly deemed inferior.
The second theme in cultivating a distinct set of nature-society relations is to contrast the ecological histories of people of color to that of whites. The assumption that people of color and whites have opposing world views, and thus, differing ecological relations, is expressed in a number of ways that offer people of color ecological legitimacy (a form of moral authority). The Southwest Network’s statement of solidarity provides a clear example of these themes: “We recognize that people of color, including women, children, the elderly, indigenous peoples, and migrant workers, are the poorest of the poor and are paying the highest price from pollution with increased work, health problems, and economic devastation. We understand traditional and indigenous sacred knowledge to manifest a compassionate, inter-connected, and harmonious relationship to the natural world and to one another. Together we stand for harmony and balance for all people.”

This quote suggests that not only are people of color bearing the brunt of poverty and environmental degradation but that the current reality of industrial capitalism is counter to the “traditional” values and ways of people of color. It is implied that, had people of color remained in control of their own lands, such environmental degradation and social injustice would not have occurred, or, at least not on the scales they have.

As should be evident, much of this tradition is derived from the experiences of American Indians. The environmental justice movement has built on the belief that American Indians lived ecologically sustainable lives and has applied it to people of color as whole with varying degrees of efficacy. This link has been most readily established with Chicanos. Despite centuries of conflict with Indians, segments of the Chicano population lay claim to an indio heritage and have a history of cooperative approaches to resource use. Including other nonwhites within this unitary representation is more difficult but still feasible due to their marginalization. “The modern Native American, Native Hawaiian, and Chicano movements owe their genesis to a recognition of the importance of land, the relationship of spirituality and environment, self-government and self-determination.”

Segments of the Chicano population lay claim to an indio heritage and have a history of cooperative approaches to resource use.
Minority activists have developed an environmental tradition that is quite distinct from mainstream environmentalism.

At the heart of this argument is the belief that indigenous and non-white peoples enjoyed cultures which were less domineering and not driven by monetary concerns. A document from the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit proclaims, "The concept of domination rather than relationship with the natural world and the indigenous people of these shores is exhibited throughout historical literature which describes the 'conquering of the West.' Rather than listening to and learning from the indigenous people who had cared for the land for centuries, colonists were encouraged to control and develop the wilderness for material comfort and gain."59

In another example, People Organized in Defense of the Earth and Its Resources (PODER), a Texas Chicano environmental justice group, describe themselves as follows: "In our traditional ways, we do not view the land as a collection of resources that require development. Instead, we view these resources as living entities to be honored."60

By drawing on American Indians' heritage and emphasizing the connections between people of color, "tradition," nondomination, and an oppressed status, minority activists have developed an environmental tradition that is quite distinct from mainstream environmentalism and enables all people of color to lay claim to it. Indeed, one Indian activist has deliberately sought to broaden the definition of indigenousness: "when I say indigenous peoples, I'm not only talking about Indians. All people come from land-based cultures. Some have been colonized longer than I have, which means they have got more work to do."61 Of course, there are many problems with this practice, including overlooking the diversity of Indians and romanticizing their experiences—issues that have yet to be worked out by the movement. The fact remains, however, that this tradition provides one set of meanings to the people of color identity, as it signifies that they are not just victims of racism but also have their own cultural traditions that white environmentalists can learn from.
PEOPLE OF COLOR, IDENTITY POLITICS, AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

The environmental justice movement, as we have seen, unequivocally privileges racism and a racial identity in its discourse and practice—all identities and forms of oppression are not considered equal. Moreover, activists have consciously and deliberately sought to unite nonwhite activists under a primary and unitary identity. Nonetheless, this unitary identity is constantly being negotiated. The struggle around various lines of difference are evident in the case of gender. The strong participation and leadership of women in the EJM has been well noted. Within the SNEEJ, for example, there is a conscious effort to ensure gender representation at all leadership levels, and sexism within the movement is routinely challenged. Moreover, the particular vulnerability of women is repeatedly acknowledged in activists’ political analyses. For instance, one movement publication is entitled, “Unsafe for Women, Children and Other Living Things.” Nevertheless, a gender consciousness is relatively muted within the larger movement. According to one SNEEJ leader, “The feminist movement plays a crucial role in the education of our movement by identifying how women are impacted by the issues we are involved in. Beyond that there really hasn’t been much discussion of specifically feminist issues at the annual gatherings.” In this analysis of the situation, feminism is only an issue insofar as it acknowledges the special needs of women. Although there is struggle around gender, the movement insists on a largely racial articulation of the problem and a primary racial identity. This does not preclude, however, the environmental justice movement from supporting other movements and issues. It is explicitly pro-feminist, grapples with homophobia, and makes connections with issues as diverse as immigration, breast-cancer survivors, and free-trade. The movement’s willingness to reach out and empathize with many forms of oppression may appear to echo a “multiplicity of resistances,” but activists consistently return to a unified racial definition of the problem and solution.
One of the key ways the movement manages to maintain such a diversity of people under one umbrella and to prevent a totalizing identity is through the situational nature of the people of color identity. This situational nature can best be seen through strategy. Despite a continual effort to articulate commonalities, there is space for individual racial/ethnic identification. When engaged on a national level, such as with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or confronting a major polluter, activists tend to assert a panracial identity. For instance, in a letter to President Clinton opposing the NAFTA, activists wrote, “NAFTA will perpetuate the exploitation of workers, mainly women of color from poor communities, people of color communities and indigenous people in the hemisphere.” Likewise in a press conference targeting the EPA, activists stated that their goal was “to protest against its [the EPA’s] ineffectiveness in communities of color.” Yet, when not engaged in confrontation, diversity is encouraged. For instance, the newsletter, Race, Poverty & Environment, routinely devotes whole issues to the environmental justice concerns of specific racial/ethnic groups (see Figure 6).

In terms of the structure of the movement, the SNEJ was originally created by racially/ethnically defined delegations. In fact, the SNEJ's annual gathering always features the music, dance, and food of each racial/ethnic group. And, when it comes to electing leaders, not all people of color are interchangeable. During nominations and elections members are urged to consider racial/ethnic representation in an effort to ensure balance and prevent intragroup conflict. The fact that racial/ethnic diversity is not ignored within the inner workings of the group and that differences are routinely maximized and minimized according to the situation, demonstrates activists' double-consciousness and the situational nature of the panracial identity.

The nontotalizing nature of this unitary identity is best illustrated by the unique situation of American Indians. As previously stated, Indians are central to the people of color identity, not only because they are nonwhite and have experienced severe marginalization but also because of their unique history of nature-society relations. Furthermore, American Indians are engaged in some of the most intense
such a deviant identity, despite its inherent connotative and devaluing connotations. AFTA, NAFTA, and colorwashing irrealities and goals unite us in solidarity.

Native Nations in 1992: 500 Years of Cultural Survival

Lost in America

by Paul Smith

The title comes from the name of a funny movie Albert Brooks made a few years ago. It was about a yuppie couple in Southern California who, sick of their spiritually untenable lifestyle, cash in their expensive home, titles, savings, cars, and the rest of their possessions to create a "nest egg." This will give them the freedom to explore their full human potential to live free, travel, and "touch Indians." They never make it to Indian Country, losing the nest egg in a Las Vegas casino. Mary Yappie is returned to working in a fast food restaurant in Arizona. In the end Brooks gives back to his old profession with a renewed appreciation of material success: the movie wraps up and becomes sort of a cautionary tale about middle-class risk-taking.

Discovering Columbus: Re-reading the Past

by Bill Bigelow

Most of my students have trouble with the idea that a book — especially a textbook — can lie. That's why I start my U.S. history class by making a student's purse. As the year opens, my students may not know when the Civil War was fought or what James Madison or Frederick Douglass did; but they know that a slave named Christopher Columbus discovered America. Indeed, this bit of environmental justice conflicts, as there are ongoing efforts to dump all manner of waste on tribal lands. Thus, because of their unique history, their ongoing and distinct legal/environmental problems, and their status as indigenous people, American Indians belong to people of color but do not lose their indigenous identity. This is due both to the efforts of Indians as well as to the respect of other people of color. Non-Indian people of color stand in solidarity with native peoples, recognizing they are connected but not the same, particularly because Indians often refer to their struggle in terms of sovereignty, as well as racism. This is evident, for example, in the numerous statements and positions issued at people of color environmental justice
events in which there is always a distinct statement about indigenous people. For instance, within the Principles of Environmental Justice, issued at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, principle number eleven proclaims, "Environmental justice must recognize a special legal and natural relationship of Native Peoples to the U.S. government through treaties, agreements, compacts, and convenants affirming sovereignty and self-determination." Likewise the SNEEJ's Statement of Solidarity devotes a whole paragraph to the plight and concerns of indigenous peoples: "We express our outrage at the genocide of indigenous peoples, the disregard for sovereignty, the violation of treaties, the theft of land. We demand full reparation for all past injustices, and we further demand an immediate halt to all proposals that degrade indigenous lands and lives with harmful development and waste disposal." Concrete resources have also been directed to Indian struggles by the SNEEJ. The SNEEJ is essentially built on a series of campaigns, one of which is entitled "Sovereignty/Dumping on Native Lands."

Clearly Indian concerns and identity have not been eclipsed by participating in a people of color identity. Both the consciousness of individual racial/ethnic groups, in this case, American Indians, as well as the political consciousness and respect of the larger group allow for the development and deployment of a situational identity. The fact that it is unitary but not totalizing may be one of the keys to the movement's success.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored the identity developed by a highly successful oppositional movement composed largely of marginalized people. I have argued that activists have not only insisted on a racial definition of the problem of environmental inequity but that they have created a unitary identity to facilitate mobilization. The formation of a panracial identity can be understood as a three-step process. First, it requires clarifying who is a person of color; second, it requires the fleshing-out of commonalities; and third, it entails the production of new racial meanings. By examining the process of identity formation...
in terms of both organizational structures and material commonalities as well as representational practices, I hope to shed light on the complexity and multidimensional nature of race. Despite what appears to be a homogenizing effort, the people of color identity is situational in that it also allows for individual racial/ethnic identification, particularly when not on the offensive. Activists clearly recognize when it is necessary to come together and obscure their differences and, in fact, are continuously seeking to articulate commonalities. But they also see the value in granting more "breathing space." This recognition comes from an appreciation of the unique material relations each group is embedded in, the importance of group history and identity, and the need to prevent intragroup conflict. Such a double consciousness and strategy challenges conventional notions that pose unitary and multiple identities as either destabilizing or totalizing.

One question that arises is, however, why is this happening now? I have hopefully explained why a panracial identity is most fully developed in the Southwestern United States, but the question of temporality remains. I offer two tentative observations. First, it was only beginning in the 1960s that consolidated individual racial/ethnic identities (with the exception of African Americans) were formed. Consequently, each group has had the time to build an individual identity and develop institutional capacity, in the form of legal organizations, grassroots groups, supportive politicians, and ethnic studies programs—all of which have provided valuable resources to each group and to the larger struggle. Each group's strong sense of self allows it to participate in a panracial identity without fear of being lost.

Equally important, however, is the current political climate. The 1990s have witnessed not only a severe political retrenchment, as seen in the "retreat from race," but also the proliferation of various forms of difference and growing fragmentation within various racial groups. These political developments have all contributed to a crisis of the racial formation (racial identities, the saliency of racism, etc.) in the United States. The "discovery" of environmental racism and the rise of the EJM are efforts to alter the racial formation by reaffirming
the existence of racism. Accordingly, activists' identification as people of color offers a consolidated and powerful reminder of race. The fact that they have been relatively successful demonstrates not only the crisis of our times but the continuing need for unitary identities.

NOTES

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3 Robert Bullard has identified over 350 people of color environmental justice (EJ) groups. It's important to realize, however, that most groups do not identify solely, or even primarily as EJ groups; rather, they are organizations that are engaged in environmental justice issues. See Robert Bullard, People of Color Environmental Groups, 1994–95 Directory (Atlanta, GA: Environmental Justice Resource Center, Clark Atlanta University, 1994).

4 Yen Le Espiritu, Asian American Panethnicity (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992). An important difference is that while Espiritu focuses on ethnicity, I focus on race. Although it could perhaps be argued that activists are acting in terms of ethnicity, they not only explicitly frame their activism, identity, and consciousness in racial terms but are also seeking to alter the racial formation. See also Felix Padilla, Latino Ethnic Consciousness (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).


6 Numerous scholars have challenged the new and old social movement distinction. For example, Plotke has suggested that the distinction between material and identity-rights movements are overblown (Plotke, 1990). He points out, for example,
that the Black civil rights struggle had elements of both class struggle as well as identity politics. In a different vein, Robin Kelly has argued that class struggle has been too narrowly defined as shop-floor struggles and that equally important are the "infra-politics" of southern Blacks engaged in. By emphasizing the whole life of the working class, for example, struggles over public transport can also be conceived as a form of class struggle (Robin Kelly, Race Rebels [New York: Free Press, 1994]). In terms of the environmental justice movement, I have argued that for highly marginalized nonwhite populations, environmental struggles are also material struggles (Laura Pulido, Environmentalism and Economic Justice [Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996]). Taking a different angle, Epstein has argued that the environmental justice movement does not fit either conception of old or new social movements, since they are concerned with quality of life issues but call for greater state intervention (Barbara Epstein, "Grassroots Environmentalism and Strategies for Social Change," New Political Science 32 [1995]: pp. 1–24).


9 Soja and Hooper, p. 187; emphasis added.

10 Handler, p. 726.

11 Bullard, p. 28. I define the Southwest as: CA, NV, AZ, NM, TX, and OK.


15 Epstein, p. 6.

16 The US General Accounting Office's study of the southeastern US was one of the first investigations into waste and community demographics focused primarily on


17 Taylor, p. 44.

Robin Cannon, member of Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles. Interview with author.


Tomas Almaguer, Racial Faultlines (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), argues that in the case of California, for example, being labeled "nonwhite" precluded citizenship and thus severely limited one's rights.


Again, this does not mean that individuals are not active participants but that Indian communities and organizations are not, nor are Indians included within the discursive framework of the movement.


Ben Chavis, keynote address, Symposium on Health Research and Needs to
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36 I am grateful to Michael Murashige for this insight.
37 United Church of Christ, p. xiii, emphasis added.
38 See Stella Catek, 1993, and Eileen McGurty, 1995, on the process of how environmental justice frames are developed. The situation is analogous to class identification and organization. Despite the objective existence of class relations, workers may often choose not to identify and organize on this basis. See David Harvey, 1993. In a different light, Greenberg has argued that age is an important criterion in the location of undesirable land uses. Michael Greenberg “Proving Environmental Inequity in Siting Locally Unwanted Land Uses,” Risk 4 (1993): pp. 235–252.
40 Patsy Oliver, member, Southwest Network for Economic and Environmental Justice. Interview with author (San Diego, 1993).
41 This in no way denies the saliency of racism in shaping nonwhites’ lives, but recognizes that just because disparate groups experience racism doesn’t automatically translate into political unity and action. This is partly due to the existence of different types of racisms; see Phil Cohen, “It’s Racism What Dunnt’: Hidden Narratives in Theories of Racism,” in “Race,” Culture and Difference, ed. J. Donald and A. Rattansi (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1992), pp. 62–103; the fact that various groups are racialized in distinct ways. For excellent historical examples, see Tomas Almaguer, 1994. His work is particularly significant because he shows how even within the same racial/ethnic group, racialization was partially contingent upon one’s gender and class position, thus making even less likely the possibility of uniting.
44 Marilyn Morton, member, The Ethnic Coalition. Interview with author (Los Angeles, 1993).


53 Jeanne Guana, *Unsafe for Women, Children, and Other Living Things* (Albuquerque, NM: Southwest Organizing Project, 1991); emphasis added.


56 The role of American Indians as part of the environmental justice movement and people of color is complex. Clearly, Indians meet all the criteria and belong to the people of color racial category. In addition to genocide, displacement, and colonization, Indians also have a unique set of structural problems with the federal government. Non-Indian minority activists have supported Indians in their struggles and within the actions and discourse of the SNEEJ; for example, the unique structural position of Indians is always noted. Nonetheless, some have argued that Indians have more in common with Fourth World people than US minorities. See W. Chang, “The ‘Wasteland’ in the Western Exploitation of ‘Race’ and the Environment,” *University of Colorado Law Review* 63 (1992): pp. 849–870. Others have emphasized the unique claims of indigenous peoples: “While disproportionate environmental impacts should be investigated for all groups at-risk, Indigenous people have a unique cultural and legal claim in U.S. history and cannot be treated as simply one among many ethnic or socioeconomic groups” (Tom Goldtooth, “Indigenous Nations: Summary of Sovereignty and Its Implications for Environmental Protection,” in *Environmental Justice*, ed. B. Bryant [Washington, DC: Island Press, 1995], p. 143).

Although Indians have long spoken out against the appropriation of their heritage by whites, its appropriation by other nonwhites acting in solidarity has not been fully addressed. For an overview of many of these issues, see Ward Churchill, *Indians Are Us?* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage, 1994).

60 People Organized in Defense of Earth and Its Resources, organizational pamphlet (Austin, TX: PODER, nd).
64 SNEEJ, Open Letter to President Clinton and Vice President Gore (Albuquerque, NM: SNEEJ, 1993).