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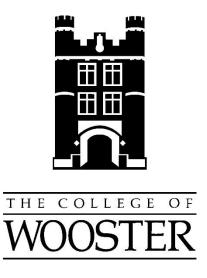🔴 Part of the Health Communication Commons, and the International and Intercultural Communication Commons

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BLACK OUTSIDE:
A FILM EXPLORING BLACK PEOPLE'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH OUTDOOR SPACES

by
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ABSTRACT

Spending time in nature is regarded as a great way to have fun and improve one's mental or physical health. Black people are largely underrepresented in public parks and other outdoor spaces. My film explores the lack of Black presence in outdoor spaces in an effort to promote Black people's usage of these places. I used interviews with students, environmental activists, and my own family in order to explore the scholarly, structural, cultural, and personal factors that impact Black folks' engagement with the outdoors. The interviews revealed several major takeaways including that Black people have historical roots in outdoor spaces that are often undiscussed and that their absence from these spaces is often due to concerns for their safety. The thoughts expressed by my interviewees suggested that community building and an intersectional approach are both important to Black people's experiences outdoors. The discussions also highlighted the importance of structural inequity being addressed concurrently alongside attitudinal changes in the Black community.

Keywords: Black people, racial equity, environmental justice, outdoor activity

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Growing up, I often heard descriptions of what Black people don't do. Some examples included swimming, hiking, kayaking, camping, or listening to country music while driving. Before I was old enough to try many of these endeavors for myself, I had mentally compiled a list of activities that people who shared my skin complexion need not bother with. Even so, I still found myself a little Black girl who loved the water more than the land and wished for a kayak every birthday. Even as a child, I was awkwardly aware that many people viewed my interest in the outdoors as an abnormality.

The feeling that I am out of place in outdoor spaces has not faded with adulthood; instead, it has intensified as I have grown to understand more about racial injustice here in the United States. The solace of a river or forest brings me peace, but it also brings the keen awareness of how vulnerable I am to the actions of others who may not welcome my presence there. In many ways, each trip that I make to explore a forest or river feels like an act of resistance against the fears and anxiety that I have as a Black woman in those spaces. Despite feeling conscious of the fraught history that my people in America have held with outdoor spaces, the ease that I feel when I am in nature outweighs those disadvantages. For many Black people, this is not the case.

Black folks' relationships with nature are heavily impacted by historical and cultural factors. For a long time, Black people were historically barred from public parks and other outdoor spaces. In Latria Graham's piece for Outdoor Magazine, she wrote, "Many national parks were created an as escape from urban sprawl, at a time when urban was shorthand for blacks and immigrants. They were designed to be clean and white, and if we let the data tell the story, that's how they've stayed." The data that she references here indicates that as of 2009,

Black people only accounted for 7 percent of national park visitors (Graham). A more recent study, conducted by the National Park Service in 2018, found that Black people composed only 2 percent of guests at national parks (Scott and Lee 73).

Despite the lack of visibility for Black folks in public parks, we are at a time in our culture where the media allow for communities to be created where none otherwise exist. The feeling of being an anomaly as a Black person enjoying outdoor activities is not specific to my experience and is perpetuated by many aspects of American society. Equally harmful is the pervasive idea that Black people as a whole do not enjoy being outside in nature. Black people's recreational interests are not monolithic, and the stereotype that black people and the outdoors are mutually exclusive is harmful. Recognizing this, many Black people have worked to change this narrative. Representation for Black folks outdoors has increased as recent years have seen an increase in social media groups dedicated to Black people and outdoor activities. In 2020, both the first ever Black Hikers Week and Black in National Parks Week were celebrated (Wetli 1). The increased emphasis on giving visibility to Black folks in the outdoors reflects a shift towards prioritizing Black people's feelings of belonging in outdoor spaces. My study aims to explore the nuanced relationship that Black folks have with outdoor spaces through the creation of a film. In this chapter, I will further define the purpose of my study, explain its scholarly and cultural significance, provide relevant definitions, and summarize my intended method.

The purpose of my study is to create a film that explores the lack of Black presence in outdoor spaces in an effort to promote Black people's usage of these places. I draw upon interviews with students, environmental activists, and my own family in order to explore the scholarly, structural, cultural, and personal factors that impact Black folks' engagement with the

outdoors. As I create as full a picture as possible of this issue, I hope to identify paths forward for Black people and their relationships with nature.

There are several rationales for why this project is needed. The year 2020 was already marked by the rapid spread of a global pandemic when its disproportionate effects on the Black community became apparent. As racial health disparities and systemic racial inequities came into the public eye, necessary dialogues began regarding the experiences of Black people in America. This project is culturally relevant at a time when conversations regarding the importance of Black lives have occupied scholarly literature and popular media alike. Black people's contentious relationship with the outdoors is a result of the structural racism that has prevented them from finding solace in American society. As a demographic that faces startling health disparities, Black people could experience great mental and physical health benefits from increased outdoor engagement. At the same time, many Black people are rightfully deterred by the thought of placing themselves in a position where they feel increasingly vulnerable to race-based violence or discrimination. It is important to acknowledge both of these truths in order to accurately explore the lack of Black presence in outdoor places. By providing increased space for Black stories regarding the outdoors, this project will prove beneficial to both Black people who are currently involved in outdoor activity as well as those who are not.

This project is relevant to the scholarly world of communication studies, too, as little research to date prioritizes the relationship between Black people's perception of outdoor spaces and their rates of participation. This becomes even more true as one considers the methodology that I am using. Some would argue that films are particularly well suited to address environmental issues since they ''build communicative links between a variety of constituencies that might not otherwise talk to one another" (Chiu and Arreglo 225). My study is also a form of

applied research that will allow me to delve deep into the topic of lack of Black presence outdoors by engaging with individuals who are involved with the issue. The process of documenting this engagement and creating a film will allow others to easily access the discoveries that I make. The ability to extensively consider the way that one's work resonates with certain groups has been identified as an advantage of applied research, along with the ability to create communication resources on difficult subjects (Pezzullo and Onis 116). While my film is documenting this aspect of the Black experience particularly for the benefit of Black folks, its message will have practical applications for those who work in conservation, environmental justice, public health, outdoor recreation, and many other fields, as well.

Finally, this study will be beneficial to individuals in a variety of academic and professional fields as it is truly interdisciplinary in its approach. Because my project draws upon scholarly work from several disciplines, it bridges communication studies and environmental studies while also holding relevance to the fields of psychology and of public health. The topic of Black people's relationship with outdoor spaces cannot be thoroughly addressed within the confines of one discipline as it is intertwined with many. I have embraced the interdisciplinary nature of my project, which helps to make it truly unique. Environmental communication has been described as a field that must encourage healthy, regenerative relationships with nature as much as it discourages the destruction of nature (Pezzullo and Onis 115). My film aims to meet this call as it supports the regeneration of Black people's relationships with nature.

For this project, I define outdoor activity as any activity that is exclusively done outdoors, whether in green spaces, blue spaces, or both. Green spaces are areas that are characterized by their abundance of greenery, such as trees, bushes, grass, and other kinds of vegetation. Blue spaces are characterized by the presence of natural bodies of water, such as lakes, rivers, and

oceans. Examples of outdoor activities that are done in these spaces are hiking, birdwatching, rafting, camping, and kayaking.

In order to create the film, I conduct interviews with several populations. The bulk of my interviews are with college students who self-identify as Black. I also interview people working in the field of environmental justice in order to further penetrate the layers to the issue and highlight existing initiatives that seek to increase Black folks' outdoor participation. Finally, I interview my own family in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of my own complex relationship with parks, and to obtain an up-close view of how messages that are passed down from generation to generation have played a role in that relationship. I also use the time that I am in outdoor spaces to collect footage that reflects on my presence in the space. Ultimately, I combine all of the footage into one short film.

Overall, I aim to use this film to uplift Black folks and encourage Black participation outdoors. I also plan for the film to serve as a resource for those who are working on related topics. This project is culturally relevant to the Black community, following a summer that saw both a pandemic and racial injustice disproportionately impacting Black people globally. This project also holds scholarly importance as it employs a unique methodology and bridges several academic disciplines. In the next chapter, I review scholarly literature on my topic that provides relevant contextual and academic information for my project.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to explore the relationship that Black folks hold with the outdoors, it is important to first understand the factors that other scholars have identified as impactful to that relationship. As the history of anti-Black racism in the United States has shaped the current reality of the Black community, I begin this chapter by discussing structural racism in America and racial health disparities. In the following section, I discuss environmental racism in Black communities and the environmental justice movement. I conclude with the known factors that constrain Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) from outdoor spaces, the relationship between outdoor spaces and health, and work that is currently being done to increase engagement in nature among Black folks.

Structural Racism in America

Since their initial arrival in the United States through the transatlantic slave trade, Black people have faced the direct and indirect effects of racism. Even after the enslavement of Black Americans was formally abolished, Black people found themselves facing oppressive structures in almost every area of their daily life that hindered their ability to integrate into society. Considering the impact that one's social and economic status has on their recreational habits, this different lived reality led Black people to have a drastically different relationship with public spaces than White people.

Segregation and the Jim Crow Era

In America, Black people have continuously lived with a drastically different quality of life than White people. Even after slavery was formally abolished in the United States, practices such as segregation, or Jim Crow laws, were enforced in order to ensure distinctly different qualities of life for Black and White communities (Bruelle). Jim Crow laws pushed a fictive

narrative of "separate but equal" that argued for separate facilities for White and Black people with the implication that they would be comparable in quality. Black communities were provided with fewer resources than similar White communities despite the written laws. This prolonged period of social and economic stratification for the Black community led to further disadvantages in most areas of their lives. The main realms for Black Americans that were negatively impacted were health care, education, employment, and housing (Hahn et al.) This was significant as several studies have found that civil rights are a determinant of health (Hahn et al.), and the Black community's difficulty in attaining civil rights has likely contributed to their more negative health outcomes. The continued history of racism and violence in outdoor spaces that Black people have endured also can impact feelings of safety in outdoor spaces.

Indeed, Black people's lack of engagement with public parks is due in large measure to their historical lack of access to resources. The segregation of the Jim Crow era became legal at the same time that public parks rose in popularity at the end of the nineteenth century (O'Brien 168). Over a decade of peak park development, when the country's finances allowed for an endless amount of construction, only nine state parks for Black people were built (O'Brien 169). These parks were located in just five states, which meant many Black folks had no access to a facility. Even after 20 more years of rapid park development, the vast inequality remained: while most White people lived about a 50-mile drive from their nearest park, most Black people would have to travel from another state in order to find a park that they could legally enjoy (O'Brien 174). For nearly 70 years, White Americans adopted state parks as part of their recreational routines, while Black Americans were left without safe or local alternatives. State park integration finally began in 1954, but not all states complied until 1964 (O'Brien 174). As with most instances of desegregation in American history, this integration of state parks was met with

resistance from White Americans, leading Black people to be further excluded from the spaces (O'Brien 177). Public parks were created to serve as places of conservation and sources of public health. However, for most of their existence, they were widely inaccessible to the Black community (O'Brien 174). This is one of many examples of Black folks being denied equitable access to health resources.

Racial Health Disparities

While Black people's lack of equitable access to public parks is a public health issue, it is a part of a much larger issue of health disparities within the Black community. Racial health disparities are present when members of a specific racial group show significantly poorer health outcomes when controlling for all other influences. When compared to White Americans, Black Americans are performing at a lower rate for nearly all standards of health (Dressler et al. 233). Even in comparison to other marginalized racial-ethnic groups, studies have found Black Americans to have leading rates in "total mortality, heart disease, lung cancer, breast cancer, [and] stroke" (Dressler et al. 233). Along with these high diagnosis rates, according to the Centers for Disease Control, Black people in the United States also have a disproportionate chance of dying from the top deadliest diseases (3). In many ways, racial health disparities in the Black community are a result of the structural racism that Black folks have faced throughout American history. Type II diabetes, which is often linked to excessive weight and lack of exercise, is diagnosed in around 10 percent of Black women, and 80 percent of Black women exceed what would be considered a healthy weight for their size (Airhihenbuwa and Liburd 489). This statistic is not a random occurrence, though, as many Black women's physical health conditions are impacted by factors such as stigma surrounding exercise and the high instances of Black communities being in food deserts that have little access to food or swamps that are

oversaturated with unhealthy foods. Living in both food deserts and swamps are linked to obesity and diabetes (Taylor and Ard 105). The persistence of racial health disparities in the Black community illustrates a need for Black folks to have more options for improving their physical health.

Black people also face startling health disparities when it comes to mental health outcomes. Both Black adolescents and adults are subject to more environmental stressors than their White counterparts, which in turn increases the racial health gap (Boardman and Alexander 1659). Increased stress rates in Black folks lead to higher levels of biological weathering and lesser health outcomes (Geronimus et al. 21). The effects of increased stress can be drastic: in a study of Black women and white women of identical ages, researchers found that Black women were 7.5 years older biologically (Geronimus et al. 21). Separate from the increased stress levels that Black people contend with, racism in mental health care prevents Black folks from getting adequate treatment. The National Institutes of Health reports that Black adults face higher rates of involuntary hospitalization, even with all other demographic factors are controlled (Breland). Black adults are, simultaneously, offered medications to improve their mental conditions at a lower rate (Breland). Black children also face disparities in mental health treatment and are more likely to spend time in a youth detention center for "treatment" than their White counterparts, who are more likely to be referred to a softer setting (Breland). It is worthwhile to note that Black parents are also less likely to seek clinical assistance for their children's mental health struggles due to cultural stigma surrounding mental health issues (Breland). The presence of mental health stigma within the Black community exacerbates the preexisting mental health disparities that exist due to racism outside the Black community. It is imperative that Black folks have more power to cope with stress and access to resources to manage their mental health. It is

also essential that Black people be allowed to live in and occupy environments that are conducive to their mental and physical health. As racial health disparities and environmental justice have become increasingly mainstream, they show a growing potential to be addressed concurrently. As we will discuss in the next section, the effect of racism on Black people's health is heavily intertwined with the racism that many experience in their environment.

Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice

Among the many ways that American structures have continuously harmed Black individuals' health, environmental racism has played a particularly damaging role. The recent developments in environmental studies have made this effect more apparent, and as environmentalism has become more prevalent, so has an interest in how it intersects with civil rights. Similar to the way in which race and income mediate access to equitable housing and education, access to green spaces is also mediated by race (Aldy et al. 101). America's refusal to prioritize the rights of BIPOC people to a safe living environment has been a consistent issue throughout history and is a form of environmental racism. The inequitable Black presence in public parks is also a result of environmental racism. The following section will discuss environmental racism against Black communities, and the civil rights movement that developed as a response.

Environmental Racism Against the Black Community

Environmental racism describes the inequitable standard of living that impacts the health of marginalized racial-ethnic groups. The term was coined by Benjamin Chavis in 1980 as he spoke out in North Carolina against the construction of a toxic landfill. According to Chavis, environmental racism consists of "racial discrimination in environmental policy-making, the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic

waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and the history of excluding people of color from leadership of the ecology movements" (Chavis and Bullard xii). Many discussions of environmental racism center around potentially deadly environmental pollution, as studies have consistently shown that being a racial minority in the United States is positively correlated with the number of health risks that one faces in their environment (Bullard 10). According to Wright, the low value placed on Black lives is a key cause of the environmental pollution often located within Black communities (14).

One case of blatant disregard for Black folk's health can be seen through the 2014 crisis when the city of Flint, Michigan, failed to pay for a relatively cheap water treatment as they switched water supplies. The untreated water corroded the pipes and caused them to release toxins into Flint's water supply (Kennedy). Government officials in Flint ignored residents— 40 percent of whom live in poverty— who complained about the contaminated water (Kennedy). For months, the untreated water continued to corrode the pipes and caused toxins to continue to be released into Flint's water even after the city switched back to its original water supply (Kennedy). As Laura Pulido points out, the contaminated water source was a problem, but not as much as the decrepit infrastructure that allowed lead to infiltrate the water supply of Flint. The substandard infrastructure in Flint shows that the city's residents had been consistently neglected by their elected officials (Pulido). The government's lack of care for the wellbeing of Flint residents demonstrates how environmental racism decreases Black people's ability to live healthy lives. The negative impact of environmental injustice on Black folks' health outcomes is exacerbated as Black communities are also less likely to have access to safe, affordable medical care. While the dangerous effects of environmental racism can be seen through pollution rates, the stratified impact of climate change, and the response to crises such as the one in Flint, the

effect of environmental racism on Black Americans is also reflected in their decreased ability to enjoy time in outdoor spaces.

Environmental Justice Efforts in America

Environmental justice is a response to the harmful issue of environmental racism that "seeks to protect not only endangered species and wilderness but also vulnerable and endangered human communities, particularly the poor and people of color" (Floyd and Johnson 61). The term was popularized in the 1980s—a decade that saw residents of North Carolina fighting to stop the construction of a toxic landfill in protests that are often regarded as the start of the environmental justice movement (McGurty 373). This event was the first time that Black people joined together from across the country to protest environmental racism (McGurty 373). Rooted in the fight for Black rights, the environmental justice movement has since used a variety of civil rights strategies to advocate for systemic reform. Toxic tours have become a form of resistance for many who are impacted by environmental racism as this medium emphasizes the need for reform by guiding non-residents through a "tour" of the "toxic assault" that occurs in many BIPOC and low-income communities (Pezzullo 5). According to Pezzullo, these tours often show tourists the areas where residents "live, work, play, and pray" as well as the environmental conditions that threaten the residents' health and lives (79).

<div align="center">

Black People and Outdoor Spaces

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As the environmentalism movement has become more inclusive, activists have also begun to consider access to outdoor activities an issue of environmental justice (Floyd and Johnson 61). Historically, Black people have been far less likely than White people to seek recreation in outdoor spaces or national parks (Martin 514). This trend holds up as recently as

2019, with Black Americans reporting the lowest outdoor recreation participation rates in the country (Outdoor Foundation 21).

While my study explores Black persons' lack of presence in public parks, research already has identified several factors known to negatively impact Black folks' engagement with outdoor spaces. Structural racism in America can greatly affect Black individuals' access to and feelings of safety outdoors. Alongside that, environmental racism can also describe the social and cultural factors that create a hostile or uncomfortable outdoor environment for Black people.

Constraints Related to Race

Myron Floyd identifies three theories that researchers have identified to explain Black people's relationship with outdoor spaces. One theory is the marginality hypothesis, which explains decreased participation as a product of discrimination that led to socioeconomic disparities (Floyd 3). Though the country has undergone changes since the Jim Crow Era, structural issues still negatively affect Black folks' park presence. Fifty-five percent of Black people who responded to the 2010 census lived in the Southern region, a region that contains only nine of the nation's 62 national parks (Graham). Separate from the disproportionate spread of national parks, many state and regional parks are located well outside of urban areas. This lack of proximity is a notable issue; Black people are far more likely than White people to be infrequent park visitors and to report that they would visit more often if the need for public transportation was not a deterrent (Floyd 15).

While the marginality hypothesis focuses on discrimination throughout history, the discrimination hypothesis focuses on more recent experiences an individual may have had (Floyd 5). The discrimination hypothesis postulates that perceived or actual instances of discrimination lead racial minorities to visit parks and outdoor spaces less often (Floyd 5). For example, the

story of Christian Cooper, a birdwatcher who faced racial discrimination while bird watching in

Central Park, went viral in the news this past summer (Nir). Cooper could be less likely to

attempt to enjoy bird watching in that park again because of the discrimination that he faced, and

other Black folks who saw the news story could be similarly deterred, even though they were not

there (Floyd 6). Compared to the other theories presented by Floyd, this hypothesis is studied the

least and much of the existing work fails to consider the impact of institutional discrimination

(Floyd 6).

Another theory is the subcultural or ethnicity hypothesis which asserts that different

racial groups have different ideas of what an enjoyable recreation activity is (Floyd 3). As

opposed to a space of relaxation, this theory hypothesizes that Black and Native Americans are

less drawn toward outdoor recreation because it reminds them of their oppression (Floyd 3). The

history of anti-Black racism in America is fraught with instances of oppression that could taint

Black people's views of outdoor spaces. Indeed, one of Black America's greatest orators, James

Baldwin, argued the visual spatialization of rural landscapes automatically made one cognizant

of the brutal history of Black violence. "It was on the outskirts of Atlanta that I first felt how the

southern landscape—the trees, the silence, the liquid heat, and the fact that one always seems to

be traveling great distances—seems designed for violence, seems, almost, to demand it"

(Baldwin 189). As Baldwin describes the experience of viewing a rural landscape for the first

time, he alludes to the potential harm that could occur there. As a result, Baldwin brings

awareness to the quick analysis that many Black persons conduct in order to evaluate their safety

in any setting. Willie Wright describes the relationship between Black American history and the

earth as an "infection" to the natural world (12). The word "infection" is fitting. For many Black

persons, the solitude, scenery, and health benefits that the outdoors could offer are tainted by the

consciousness of past atrocities that have occurred in similar settings. Many Black scholars refer to this as cultural mistrust, defined as "a healthy paranoia exhibited by people of African descent toward institutions, systems, and individuals that have exhibited harm in the past and the potential for future harm" (Breland). In the context of the outdoors, Black Americans were enslaved, sharecropped, and lynched. Johnson describes the cognizance of these events as part of Black people's collective memory, which shapes their view of the outdoor environment (12).

For Black women, their intersecting marginalized identities may make their relationship with the outdoors even more complex. Black women face threats of both gender and racial discrimination and violence, which may lead to hyperawareness in outdoor settings. Socially, Black women have been portrayed as less feminine, and as a result, may be deterred from physical exercise and outdoor activities (Johnson 8).

Outdoor Spaces and Health

Despite the numerous factors contributing to lower Black engagement in outdoor spaces, Black people still have much to gain from establishing a presence within them. Physical activities, such as walking, are already known to decrease individuals' weight and improve their overall health (Godbey 5). The decision to go for a walk in a more natural setting can make the activity of walking more pleasurable and consequently provide more potential for the health benefits of walking to be observed (Godbey 7). Physical activity is not only correlated with better physical health, but also better mental health, with physical activity linked to fewer depressive symptoms in Black adults (Torres 71). Being present in the outdoors offers many of these wellness benefits. In one Swiss study, the simple act of breathing fresh air successfully treated depression and improved general mental health (Beyer et al. 282). In recent years, spending time outdoors has become a more common prescription from doctors (Beyer et al. 282).

The health and wellness benefits that come along with outdoor engagement could prove invaluable to fighting the specific mental and physical health disparities that the Black community faces.

Current Efforts

Several organizations and individuals value the importance of what increased outdoor engagement can do for Black people's mental and physical health and work to address racial inequities in outdoor engagement. Many of these groups and activists work to combat the lack of representation for Black people in outdoor spaces by creating a sense of community on social media. Positive media coverage has been shown to be effective in combatting the racist outcomes that result from negative media representations of Black people (Holt 119). Examples of this can be seen through the advent of celebrations like Black in National Parks Week and Black Birders Week, which both aim to highlight the experiences of Black people in outdoor places. Having a strong sense of support may be important for members of a racial minority who are interested in getting outdoors. According to research on this issue, Black people camp in larger groups than White people do (Floyd 15), and Black people report that the lack of a partner to explore the outdoors with is one of the top constraints that keeps them from being outdoors (Johnson et al. 17). Black people may feel safer exploring outdoors in larger numbers, which makes initiatives that increase community support invaluable.

<div align="center">**Conclusion**</div>

Given the deep history of structural and environmental racism in America, it is easy to see why there are disparities in Black people's engagement with public spaces. Even so, many Black people have found space for themselves and others in the outdoors. When looking at the health disparities within the Black community and the numerous health benefits that the outdoors

can provide, the racial gap in outdoor participation is worth addressing. As people from a variety of backgrounds work to increase BIPOC people's engagement with the outdoors, I aim to further give voice to Black people's unique perspectives by turning their interview into a film. In the next chapter, I will explain my method for creating my film in greater detail.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

I knew that I wanted to focus my project on Black people's relationships with the outdoors the summer before my senior year. The interviews that I had conducted with three Black outdoor activists for my summer job had given me a deep desire to further explore the topic through my independent study. I also wanted the opportunity to speak to more people and so interviewing individuals became an important part of my methodology even before my decision to produce a film. I wanted the freedom to listen to people's stories and viewpoints without pressuring them or myself to produce quantifiable data. As the subject of Black people's relationships with the outdoors is complex and historically underexplored, it was important for me to engage with this topic freely and follow where the project led me. After my advisor recommended I consider a creative project, I decided that a film could provide representation and spark a conversation in a way that other methods simply could not. I also enjoyed that a film could be posted online and was more likely to be viewed by a broader audience than a written document. Despite my lack of experience in film making, I decided that the challenge would be worth the results.

As someone who had no prior knowledge of filmmaking, every step of my project was a learning process. I relied upon internet tutorials and books acquired through the college library to fill in my gaps in knowledge. When all else failed, I turned to help from friends or Google. As a first-generation low-income student and a first-time filmmaker, my options for recording equipment were also limited. As the college library closed due to the pandemic, I used my Samsung Galaxy S9 and a cell phone tripod to record most of the footage. Once library resources became available, I utilized a tripod with my Canon Rebel T5 camera. I switched between these

two based on what equipment was most accessible throughout the process of recording interviews.

The decision to create a film amidst a global pandemic presented challenges of its own. The pandemic rendered extensive travel, face-to-face contact, and group gatherings unsafe, so I did my best to avoid all of these. As I worked to schedule my in-person interviews, I chose to conduct them all in outdoor spaces. This was important to me for several reasons. First, I wanted my film to show Black people in outdoor spaces in as many ways as possible. The experiences that I had as I talked and walked with interviewees were also very helpful in creating my film. Filming outdoors allowed for a safer in-person meeting than if I were to gather indoors with participants. Whenever possible, I opted to record footage in person. I enjoyed the opportunity to be in outdoor spaces, as opposed to recording from behind my computer screen, and felt that the outdoor settings would create more appealing footage. To avoid risky travel, though, I recorded some interviews remotely, particularly those that involved community leaders.

Most of my interviews were with students. When meeting with students who attended The College of Wooster, I used a Google form to collect their contact information and demographic background. The only prerequisites for participation were that they were current students and self-identified as Black. I chose to film Black students who also attended The College of Wooster for several reasons. First, the community of Black students at the college is one with which I am deeply involved and in close contact with since we live together. The proximity of this community provided ample opportunity to interview and engage with this demographic. The second reason that I chose to interview Black college students is that the younger generation in this country is living in a time that is more diverse and we have more access to information than previous generations. Due to this, I felt that this age group could

provide great insight into the effect of generational cycles and representation on Black folks' experiences with the outdoors. Lastly, I chose to interview Black students at the college because of what a diverse group we are. Even though we all attend the same school, the Black students here vary greatly in many respects, such as socioeconomic status, hometown, and familial upbringing. Though most of my project focuses particularly on the experiences of Black Americans, great diversity in the nationality of the students on this campus also exists with regard to who self-identifies as Black. While the experiences of Black Americans are unique from Black people from other parts of the diaspora, they also hold many commonalities. This becomes even more true when you look at Black students of similar age who all attend a college in rural Ohio. In a predominately white neighborhood, particularly, many people do not distinguish Black American students from African students who represent different nationalities. As such, our experiences with race and discrimination become increasingly alike. For this reason, I chose to interview any student who self-identified as Black regardless of their country of origin.

The same Google form that collected students' demographic information asked students to share a way that they connected to their blackness. After reading their responses, I asked some participants if they would be willing to let me record them doing their activity in an outdoor space and every participant that I approached obliged. For example, one student shared that she connected to her blackness by doing her hair routine and was excited to bring her supplies along to our interview, while another student asked to do an acrylic painting. I used these images as b-roll throughout my film.

Along with students on campus, it was important to me to interview community leaders who were working to increase Black presence in parks and other outdoor spaces. This project

was initially sparked this past summer as I completed a small interview series with Black women involved in increasing such outdoor participation. I gained so much perspective from these interviews that I knew these women would be an incredible asset to the film. When researching possible interviewees, I found that there is a large community of Black outdoor activists attempting to engage other Black folks and make green and blue spaces more welcoming places. Due to the pandemic, I chose to gather this footage remotely.

I became familiar with Nicole Jackson's work months before I ever heard her name. In 2020, Black in National Parks Week made its rounds for the first time. Black in National Parks Week was created in response to the brutality and discrimination that characterized the summer of 2020 for many Black folks. As a newcomer to the world of Black outdoor activism, I was very excited to hear that the founder was creating the event to share the joy of Black people who visit national parks and to encourage other Black folk to be more involved (Wetli 1). I met Nicole for the first time during a roundtable that was discussing parks, health, and the Black community. I found out that she was responsible for organizing Black in National Parks Week and was an environmental educator at The Ohio State University, as well as a member of the National Park Service's Next Generation Advisory Council. After hearing Nicole share her perspectives on how essential time in nature is to Black people's mental health, I knew I wanted to speak to her for my project and set up an interview over Zoom.

Likewise, I met Porsha Dossie, a historian with the National Park Service, through the same roundtable discussion. I was intensely drawn into Porsha's storytelling as she discussed Black history in the outdoors. Growing up in school, I learned a skewed version of American history that did not accurately represent the plights or the perseverance of my ancestors. Porsha's depiction of Black history was everything I did not know that I needed. She spoke of the

atrocities that have been inflicted upon Black folks in outdoor spaces, as well as of the roots that Black people have established in nature and the accomplishments they have achieved there. I wanted to be able to bring her voice into the film to provide a historical perspective. Though I could not obtain film from her due to a technological issue, she offered to send an audio recording that answered my interview questions.

Deciding to interview my family was more difficult than deciding to interview students or community leaders. As someone who was accustomed to social scientific data collection through research, it felt strange to insert my personal life and experiences into this project. Even so, I entered this project with the deep belief that Black people's roots in this country and collective conscience are key to their relationship with the outdoors. Most of the scholarly literature that I read, as well as the interviews that I conducted with students, confirmed this. My family therefore felt like an ideal resource to explore this relationship and the role that generational ideas play in Black people's views of the outdoors and nature. I interviewed my mother, my maternal aunt, and my younger cousin. As my grandparents have passed, I relied upon my mom and aunt's perspectives to explore the impact of generational cycles within my family.

As I spoke to both my classmates and my family, I felt a growing urgency for me to sit with my own thoughts and opinions. I had always trained myself to be impartial to my subject and to remove my own thoughts from the process of research. Ultimately, however, this was not impartial work. I did not come to this topic after locating a void in the current academic literature, but I found it after locating an area of longing in my personal life. This project was borne from my desire to normalize Black people enjoying themselves outside and to have my family be able to experience the benefits that I gain when I am enjoying my favorite outdoor

activities. After realizing that this project was a result of the experiences that I have had and the disparities that I have watched in my community, whether I would include footage of myself in the film became a point of internal conflict. In the end, I decided that I would rather have more time to dedicate to the voices of my interviewees than to insert myself into the film.

My interviews were all completed between October and March and, in all, I recorded a total of 22 participants for my film. As I counted that I had over 12 hours of recorded interviews, I realized that the editing process might be more difficult than I initially envisioned. I used Adobe Premiere to edit after attempting to utilize software that I thought might be less complex. Ultimately, editing the film proved itself to be the most difficult part of the process as I worked to simultaneously learn how to use Premiere and complete my project.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

This project became immersive for me. When I initially began exploring the absence of Black people in outdoor spaces, I felt unqualified to discuss it. Due to my personal experiences as a Black woman in Wooster, I had never sought out a park during my first three years in the town. With this project, I found myself going out several times a week to local parks and going on solo hikes in an effort to ensure my own comfort in the spaces. This allowed me to plan locations to film as well as become familiar with the grounds before taking others onto them. Spending time alone in Wooster's parks also forced me to confront my own relationship with outdoor spaces and grow a greater understanding of them. The introspection that this project led me to engage in translated into a more purposeful thought process as I worked on my film. The words of all 22 of the individuals whom I interacted with in order to create my film resonated with me and the process of completing the interviews was healing. I started this project because I felt that other Black folks could benefit from these conversations, and if what I gained personally is an indicator, then I am confident that they will.

Along with locations throughout Wooster, I also visited Cuyahoga Valley National Park. While I recorded two interviews and b-roll during my time in the park, this experience was also highly personal. As it was my first time in a national park, I found myself confronting two kinds of emotions that are quintessential to my experience with the outdoors. I felt anxiety as I drove around the surrounding neighborhood and as I encountered unknown individuals during my trip. I also felt awe and elation, as I stood in the snow and saw waterfalls crash into the water below them for the first time in my life. For me, going outdoors has always been a careful balance: I want to experience nature and interact with the outdoors, but also, I often find myself forced to leave my comfort zone as I enter areas where I do not feel welcome or secure. As a result, I can

see why many Black people feel that the risks of outdoor exploration outweigh the benefits. Even so, I believe that increased conversation and community building can tilt the scales. Through creating this film, I hope to have been a small part of that effort.

One of the major takeaways from my project is that Black folks have roots outdoors. In my interview with Nicole Jackson, she spoke of the important contributions that Black folks have made to the discovery and preservation of public lands. She spoke of the Buffalo soldiers, with whom I was familiar, but she also spoke of histories dating back to the 18th century, of enslaved Black folks who discovered and developed the lands that we call National Parks today. These are histories that I did not come across in my literature and that are generally underdiscussed. Among those I interviewed, a common theme was how the displacement inflicted upon enslaved peoples continues to deter feelings of connection to the outdoors among many Black people even today. On the other hand, a few interviewees made note of the ways that Black people's connection to nature has persisted and flourished despite the impact of chattel slavery in the States. Prior to this project, I was unfamiliar with Black people's historical connection with nature myself. Learning about it, though, made me feel more connected to my ancestors and to nature. The historical presence of Black folks in outdoor spaces should be discussed more within the context of Black History.

Another important pattern that I observed is that for many Black families, the lack of presence outdoors is due to safety concerns. As I interviewed my mother and aunt, and they discussed their thoughts about me going to parks and forests in Ohio, I heard the very familiar warnings that I would be better served staying indoors and not driving after dark. My aunt spoke of the day that she helped me move onto campus as a first-year student and told me that she felt unease as soon as she saw the country landscapes. Her expressions were startlingly like those of

James Baldwin decades ago when he described the rural southern landscape as being designed for violence (Baldwin 189). Unsurprisingly, many of the students I interviewed shared similar sentiments that their families conveyed to them about Ohio. These cautionary ideas can be viewed as inhibitors to outdoor activity, but they are often a necessary conversation for Black parents to have with their children. It became clear in my interviews that my aunt's and mom's words of caution about my time spent outdoors in Ohio were a direct response to their experiences in rural areas and their desire to protect me. Many interviewees interpreted the words of their elders similarly as attempts to convey wisdom that would shield their children from potential harm, a realistic assessment on the part of elders that was rooted in the Black experience.

The effect of this collective conscience on Black folks in America extends even to those whose family lineages are not based in the United States. The whole diaspora is affected. As I planned my film, I felt unsure as to whether to focus my film exclusively on students who identify as Black Americans or if I should include students who identify as Black but are tied to specific countries in Africa. I ultimately decided to include all students who identify as Black, regardless of their national ties, and I was surprised to learn of the experiences of students who grew up in Africa and moved to the States for their studies. I was not expecting the effects of collective conscience to be felt so deeply by students who came to here from majority Black countries. The traumas passed onto Black Americans through the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow seemed to have a transitive effect even on students who do not directly have ties to that history. Interviewees discussed becoming aware of their Blackness and becoming fearful of the implications that it held in American society.

Another major conclusion that can be drawn from my study is that Black people are adventurous and do not hate nature. In my research, I found Black people had curiosity about nature and that it was other factors that deterred their participation in outdoor activities. My interviewees also spoke with great positivity about nature itself when prompted. I asked many interviewees, if they did not fear racial discrimination, what outdoor activity they would like to do. The responses varied from skydiving to being able to lay on a blanket in a field. By and large, it seemed that those who I interviewed saw the benefits of time spent in outdoor spaces and, just as clearly, they saw the risks. For most interviewees, their greatest fear was not nature but others discriminating against them in outdoor spaces. Those who participated in my study displayed cultural mistrust in an effort to protect themselves from harm (Breland). Whether people viewed the outdoors as being more beneficial or detrimental varied from person to person, but everyone saw a variety of factors—for example, familial upbringing or previous experiences with discrimination— that influenced their stance. Ultimately, I hope that we will be able to tilt the scales so that more Black folks see the possible benefit of being outdoors as outweighing the risks. The work of environmental educators like Nicole Jackson and historians like Porsha Dossie, as well as countless other outdoor activists, is crucial to rewriting the experiences of Black people outdoors. I also believe that projects like mine that spark dialogue and raise awareness are key to changing attitudes towards outdoor spaces.

These conclusions have implications that should inform efforts to increase Black presence in public spaces. One implication of this project is that community building is incredibly important in the effort to increase Black people's presence outdoors. While the fear of experiencing discrimination or violence is palpable for many Black people, most interviewees expressed that they felt safer when with other Black folks outdoors. This was unsurprising given

the research that demonstrates that Black people prefer to camp in large groups and that lack of a partner to adventure with is one of the top deterrents to Black outdoor involvement (Floyd 15; Johnson et al. 17). One interviewee who frequents outdoor activities described feelings of inadequacy when she was out on trails with non-black folks as she feared that any shortcoming on her part would be attributed to her race. Her experience shows that even apart from safety concerns, Black folks deal with feelings of incompetence as they engage in outdoor leisure activities. It also emphasizes the importance of community building for Black folks to have increased connections and representation in outdoor spaces. Research emphasizing the importance of positive media representations for Black people's outdoor involvement was also a motivating factor in my decision to capture b-roll footage of Black people doing activities in the parks and forests where we recorded footage (Holt 119). It was my desire to present images of Black people enjoying themselves in nature in order to increase representation for the community.

The work required to increase Black presence in outdoor spaces is not as simple as an attitudinal shift within the Black community, though. As many interviewees pointed out, this burden should not fall solely on our shoulders. This conversation is important for lawmakers, educators, and every other member of American society to be a part of, as well. Several interviewees expressed that they were not simply afraid of someone harming them while they tried to enjoy themselves outdoors. They also feared that something would happen to them and that their friends and family would see no justice. Black people are not deterred from outdoor spaces because of a few violent people who wish them harm; they are fearful of the systemic racism that allows violence against Black folks to persist at all. This issue is a result of both the environmental racism and historical discrimination that Black Americans have faced in this

country. As we work to effect change within the Black community, we must also consider the structural oppression that has led to, and perpetuates, the lack of Black presence outdoors.

The results of this project also highlight the importance of intersectionality. Black women voiced unique concerns regarding their time spent outdoors. In Chapter 2, I had wondered if the intersecting marginalized identities that Black women hold might lead to their relationships with the outdoors being more complex. In Johnson's work, she discussed that Black women are often masculinized, which can deter them from outdoor activities (8). This sentiment was expressed by several interviewees. One discussed how the fear of messing up one's hairstyle kept many black women and girls from participating in physical activities. Another interviewee, a frequent camper, discussed the stigma that many Black women face as they fear being characterized as dirty or unkept in everyday life. Being outside in the elements can intensify these fears and prevent Black women from trying outdoor activities. In addition, many Black women expressed to me an increased fear of being physically harmed or harassed due to their gender. Several Black women shared that they would feel safest outdoors in community with other Black women and emphasized that being outside with only Black men or white women would not suffice. In my interviews with Black women, the relevance of sexism and misogynoir—misogyny rooted in anti-Black racism (Bailey and Trudy 762)— proved crucial. The burden of holding intersecting oppressed statuses weighed heavily in the perspectives of every woman who was interviewed. As this work is continued in the future, intersectional identities within the Black community must be explored more deeply. This includes the perspectives of Black women, non-binary Black folks, LGBTQ+ Black folks, and Black folks with disabilities.

Like all studies, my project had its limitations, too. One main limitation rests with the level of caution required to safely film during a pandemic. While it worked out perfectly that my

film was set in the outdoors, which is one of the most COVID safe spaces to meet, there were other limitations to navigate. Any interviews outside of my immediate family and students on Wooster's campus had to be completed virtually. This approach allowed me to gather the perspectives of remote interviewees but decreased my ability to capture clear footage. I would have liked to have been able to speak to people in small groups or to have been able to capture more interactions among people, but individual filming sessions were safest given the pandemic.

An unexpected limitation of my project was the amount of footage that I gathered. Recording a surplus of footage seemed like the best choice as a novice filmmaker as I contended with fears that I would not have enough interest in my project and therefore lack a sufficient number of interviewees. Thankfully, many willing individuals agreed to be interviewed, and I was pleasantly surprised that they had so many valuable thoughts on the topic. As a result, interviews routinely ran around 30 minutes and, in some cases, longer. In retrospect, I recorded far more footage than I would need for my 25-minute film. This resulted in having to make extensive cuts to each person's interview footage. Indeed, the greatest challenge in my project was deciding how to convey to my audience what I learned in 12 hours of listening to interviews by creating a film that was under 30 minutes in length.

While the project creation came with several challenges, the honest and reflective discussions that I held with the film's participants were more than I could have hoped for. I began this project because I wanted to explore Black people's relationship with the outdoors and create a film that would hold space for dialogue on this topic. Ultimately, I was able to fulfill my purpose in a way that left me with a greater understanding of myself, of my community and of all those whom I interviewed. I hope that the same reflection will occur for all those who engage with my film. The ability to spend time outdoors in a way that feels safe and healthy is not an

amenity: it is a matter of civil rights and justice. Holding conversations like those at the core of my project is essential to promoting healing and health in the Black community. Through this film and future efforts, I hope we can continue to promote Black people being outside.

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