Addressing Environmental Racism Through Storytelling: Toward an Environmental Justice Narrative Framework

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This study uses communication, critical race theory (CRT), and storytelling to examine environmental racism and environmental justice efforts. In New Mexico’s Petroglyph National Monument, a conflict emerged when officials moved protected rock carvings to build a road through the park. When creating the monument, stakeholders evoked cultural and environmental protectionism. Yet, proroad campaigners then used colorblind racist development arguments, while environmental justice activists argued that the road violated Indigenous peoples’ wishes and environmental integrity. After analyzing the case, in the tradition of CRT scholarship, I present my own fictional narrative as an environmental justice tool. I advance an environmental justice narrative framework to address environmental racism by exploring through storytelling how racial and environmental inequalities materialize and to what effect.

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In the U.S. Southwest, through colonialism, racism, regulation, and cultural practices, many Indigenous peoples have been removed from their homelands, and their spaces continue to be modified and affected negatively. Included within these practices are acts of environmental racism, a term that positions dominant environmental framings as racially driven, where people of color\(^1\) are affected disproportionately by environmental and spatializing practices (Bullard, 2001). Researchers and activists address how people of color are more exposed to toxic pollutants, suffer excessively from environmentally related health problems, struggle with land rights issues, and are omitted from decision-making processes, even within their own communities (Bullard, 2001; Loh & Sugerman-Brozan, 2002; Morello-Frosch, Pastor, & Sadd, 2002). In response, environmental justice efforts, which combine human social justice with environmentalism, attempt to reveal the practices that enable unequal protection and to give all people a voice.\(^2\)

While racial practices such as environmental racism continue in the present, as critical race theory (CRT) scholars argue, a master narrative in the United States largely

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positions these acts as unfortunate historical incidences and no longer widespread (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Tate, 1997). Yet, as the case of the Petroglyph National Monument demonstrates, spaces continue to be co-opted racially in the present. An area in Albuquerque, New Mexico, contains historic petroglyphs—images carved onto rock surfaces—that hold special meaning to Indigenous people. In 1990, when looting and development threatened the area and rocks, the site was turned into a national monument, a unit of the U.S. National Park Service (NPS). However, years later, the city and state built a four-lane commuter road through the monument, moving sacred rocks in the process. Proroad supporters argued the road was needed for development and the common good and was not a racist or discriminatory act. An environmental justice coalition sparked by Indigenous people fought against the road, arguing it threatened cultural and environmental integrity. Proroad campaigners ultimately prevailed.

In this paper, I use a CRT lens to expose how this conflict constitutes a case of environmental racism and to what effect; as a theoretical, methodological, and applied tool, CRT exposes how cultural and spatializing practices have silenced, marginalized, and racialized local Indigenous groups and degraded the environment. Below, I first explain why CRT is valuable to use in this case, notably how CRT writers incorporate storytelling methods to address racially driven issues. After overviewing environmental racism and environmental justice, I describe the petroglyphs, the area, and the role of developers, and I analyze governmental, media, and web-based texts to interrogate the language parties used to create the monument. I overview the conflict over the road, and I investigate pro- and antiroad stakeholders’ main arguments. In the tradition of CRT scholarship, I then present my own brief fictional tale—“The Petroglyph Global Village”—as an applied environmental justice tool to help uncover ongoing acts of environmental racism and the challenges environmental justice activists face. In essence, I combine traditional research methods with storytelling to articulate the basic premise of a critical environmental justice narrative framework. Such a framework promotes storytelling as an instrument to help expose and critique the racializing practices that underlie environmental politics and illuminate the battles of environmental justice activists.

A Critical Race Theory Lens

Here, I use various race and color related terms. I conceptualize race as it is typically theorized in CRT and critical research in the United States and elsewhere—a culturally produced phenomenon that is based on historical, physical, and social components and that plays out in contemporary contexts (Omi & Winant, 1994). As a sociopolitical construct, race organizes people into social groups based on physical features, phenotype, language, religion, and tradition and has detrimental effects (Bonilla-Silva, 1996). Wander, Martin, and Nakayama (1999) trace the concept of whiteness in the United States and define it as “a historical systemic structural race-based superiority” (p. 15, emphasis in original). They argue that shifting from
the study of race to whiteness allows an expanded view of how “racial categorization frameworks operate to reinforce their historically established hierarchies through a range of strategic devices that mask its true operations” (p. 23). In other words, whiteness is an ideological framework which feeds a series of practices entrenching racial supremacy and subordination. Moreover, the notion of whiteness enables a critic to examine how “people happily if unwittingly benefit from and informally reproduce patterns established by racism” (p. 15). In this way, people use colorblind racism to obscure racial hierarchy, reinforce privilege, and argue that we live in a “postracial” society where race no longer matters (Bonilla-Silva, 1996).

CRT positions this case within a critical framework, where racism and whiteness are predictable, institutional, and mainstream, and they occur materially, ideologically, locally, and globally (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado, 1995). CRT scholars argue that a lack of true racial reform stems from the popularly held belief that, after the U.S. civil rights movement, race is no longer a significant issue (Tate, 1997). CRT repositions racism as rampant and current and not an unfortunate historic act; racism upholds the invisibility of whiteness and allows racism to endure. Race and whiteness continue to play an influential role, including, as this study illustrates, in environmental issues.

CRT additionally positions racism as still having certain forms of ideological space within “traditional liberal civil rights discourse” (Tate, 1997, p. 203) and among left-leaning political players. Social progressivism and the judicial system are not likely to enact social change, as they are part of the problem (Tate, 1997). In this regard, racism and whiteness are not just performed by stereotypical southern poor whites, but by white collar, Democratic, liberal “nonracist” whites (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Tate, 1997). CRT writers wish to expose this contradiction and the invisibility of whiteness.

Storytelling and Narrative Methodologies in CRT
One primary reason for using CRT here is due to its characteristic use of storytelling methods. Various CRT writers incorporate fictional and nonfictional narratives, storytelling, and counterstorytelling to expose racism. In this regard, Love (2004) positions CRT as an unorthodox methodological move that “represents a paradigm shift in discourse about race and racism . . . by challenging existing methods of conducting research on race and inequality” (p. 228). Storytelling can help expose the dominant racial forces that materialize through lived experiences (Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). They allow readers to be inserted into the lived realities of those most affected by a racialized society and expose the ridiculousness, irrationality, and dire implications of racism.

To reveal whiteness and racism, some CRT writers contrast real narratives of marginalized people with the privileged (e.g., Delgado, Bernal, & Villalpando, 2002; Love, 2004), while others use fictional storytelling (e.g., Bell, 1993). Bell exposes the repercussions of a racialized society in a collection of fictional short stories entitled Faces at the Bottom of the Well. In one story, “Space Traders,” alien ships come to
Earth with an offer; the aliens will supply gold, safe nuclear energy, and chemicals that reverse environmental damage in exchange for all U.S. African Americans. After public debate, the United States agrees to the exchange. Ultimately, narratives such as these can prod readers to empathize with and reconsider an issue.

Important to note is that storytelling in academic writing is largely unconventional and confined to certain disciplines. In communication studies, with several exceptions (e.g., Anzaldua & Keating, 2002; Buzzanell, 2008; hooks, 1984), many scholars are not accustomed to storytelling as valid academic writing. At the heart of the issue is an epistemological debate over what constitutes “legitimate” scholarship (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Taylor, 1999). A traditional academic paradigm still positions research largely within empirical, objective, rational, and Eurocentric forms of knowledge construction. Against this norm, narratives can be branded as venturing too far from valid scholarship (Farber & Sherry, 1995; Kennedy, 1995). Here, I work from Delgado Bernal and Villalpando’s (2002), Taylor’s (1999), and other CRT scholars’ assertions that CRT storytelling is a legitimate method to examine race-based issues.

Environmental topics frequently are positioned within a similar traditional research framework, where a scientific, rational worldview can limit other ways of understanding environmental issues (White, 2007). Yet, as White contends, other framings—such as spiritual or poetic approaches—are useful and necessary. In this regard, fictional narratives have played a powerful role in environmentalism. In 1962 Rachel Carson published Silent Spring, an apocalyptic fictional tale that highlighted the implications of toxic pesticide use and contributed to the ban of DDT. The book was credited with advancing the modern environmental movement by critically examining industrialization (Brooks, 1980). Hynes (1989) argues that Carson’s tale “politicized pollution by asking the political questions. Who creates it? Who protects it? Who profits from it? Who are its victims” (p. 15)?

Moreover, environmental justice efforts sometimes incorporate fiction, drama, and autobiography to overcome the limitations of traditional, scientific, and rational environmental framings (Krauss, 1994; Pezzullo & Sandler, 2007). Pezzullo and Sandler note that environmental justice storytelling “contrasts with environmental reports that rely heavily on scientific and economic data and challenges particular conceptualizations of what an educated presentation entails” (p. 11). Using storytelling to examine environmental issues additionally can expose how politicians, left-leaning stakeholders, the justice system, and commercial and private forces continue to be driven by racist assumptions. Moreover, this can happen even as parties advocate for environmental and cultural protectionism.

Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice

Environmental racism describes how environmental degradation and spatializing practices unduly affect people of color (Westra & Lawson, 2001). Bullard (2001) defines environmental racism as “any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or
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communities based on race or color” (p. 160). Environmental racism research illustrates how people of color are more likely to reside in areas with increased exposure to air, water, and noise pollution; hazardous waste treatment facilities; pesticide and chemical exposure; and geographic and residential alienation. Moore, Kosek, and Pandian (2003) argue that race and environmental issues often are perceived of separately—as environmental destruction or racism—when they should be viewed as intrinsic cocreations, both arising from similar systems of power. Communication scholars have begun to focus on these and other environmental racism and environmental justice issues (e.g., Agyeman, 2007; Endres, 2009; Heinz, 2005; Peeples & DeLuca, 2006; Pezzullo, 2003).

One type of environmental racism—and the primary focus of this study—is the intersection between race and space-based issues, such as the racialized politics behind land zoning and use. These studies point to how governmental zoning ordinances, deed restrictions, and land-use decisions negatively affect people of color and the poor (Bullard, 2001). Race frequently plays a role in development, governance policies and practices, and the exploitation of land, environment, and people (Bullard, 2001). Brook (1998) further notes how racist land-based acts can be “perpetuated by the U.S. government and by private corporations alike,” and “some of their methods are legal” (p. 105). In this regard, boards and commissions, policy-making processes, and regulation enforcement are more likely to omit marginalized populations from decision-making practices. Due to historical, political, and social alienation, people of color are less likely to protest and mobilize. Moreover, these topics can be situated within colonial and postcolonial contexts and relations, where histories and repercussions of colonialism have shaped environmental and racial issues. To address these issues, environmental racism scholars seek to understand and reveal “who pays and who benefits from the current environmental and industrial policies” (Bullard, 2001, p. 161). In effect, historical, governmental, legal, political, economic, and (post)colonial institutions and practices not only tolerate but can perpetuate environmental racism.

Environmental justice efforts attempt to link social justice with the environment and expose how social justice issues are a central dimension to traditional environmentalism (Jamieson, 2007). Pezzullo and Sandler (2007) point out that traditional environmentalism and environmental justice are two distinct movements that have been marked by division and contentiousness. Environmental justice activists began questioning the whiteness of the traditional environmental movement and how environmentalism has failed to make social justice issues such as racism and poverty a priority alongside the environment. Environmental justice activists called for new ways to define and discuss the environment and social justice, especially in ways that honor varied cultural perspectives (Di Chiro, 1998).

Environmental justice movements rely on a number of core principles and goals of activism. These principles largely stem from the commonly cited “Principles of Environmental Justice” (1991) that was adopted at the first National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. Bullard (2001) summarizes several common
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objectives: to a) fight for the rights of people against environmental degradation; b) prevent these threats before they occur; c) shift the burden of proof to hold perpetrators accountable for egregious acts; and d) move away from solely objective scientific measurements. Illustrating these goals, for example, in an investigation of a Louisiana area dubbed “cancer alley,” Pezzullo (2003) examines community members’ use of “toxic tours” by bus through neighborhoods to highlight the damaging practices of petrochemical companies and expose environmental racism.4

Several cases illustrate environmental justice practices, and these efforts established core tenets such as demands for involvement, holding perpetrators responsible, and rallying. In the historic case of Love Canal, residents mobilized to expose and address toxic waste leakage from a dump site, and the case sparked national attention and resulted in federal legislation and lawsuits to hold polluters accountable.5 Warren County is a classic example that gave a national voice to environmental racism and environmental justice. In 1982, the North Carolina state government built a hazardous waste landfill in a poor, rural, and predominantly African-American community in Warren County. Residents and activists protested, and they used environmental racism terminology to give language to the problem. These narrative acts of interruption worked as an oral strategy in environmental decision-making forums (Pezzullo, 2001). Activists eventually lost the battle and toxic contaminants were dumped. Yet, the case exposed the purposeful and aggressive efforts of stakeholders to routinely target communities of color as repositories for facilities that negatively impact environmental and human health.

An Analysis of the Case of the Petroglyphs

For this project, I examined governmental and media-based texts to describe and analyze the monument’s creation, how the road was built, and stakeholders’ main arguments. In the Petroglyph National Monument Establishment Act of 1989 (“Establishment Act”), parties presented arguments to protect the area and create the monument; stakeholders appeared in a hearing before the U.S. Senate’s Committee on Energy and Natural Resources to justify the monument, explore the logistics of establishing it (such as expense and land acquisition), and set its boundaries. Public Law 101-313 (1990) turned the Establishment Act into federal law, while the General Management Plan (1996) provided options for managing the monument. The debate over the road is detailed in the Petroglyph National Monument Boundary Adjustment Act of 1997 (“Adjustment Act”), which legally changed the monument’s borders so that a strip of land could be returned to the city and state.

In addition to governmental documents, I looked at Web pages and news reports. The National Park Service’s Web site (NPS.gov, 2006a; 2006b; 2006c) offers information and shows how the monument is framed for the public. To analyze developers and their link to colonialism, I looked at Web pages from Westland Development Company (2003), SunCal New Mexico Development Company (2007), and SunCal Companies (2007). Moreover, I investigated news reports and Web pages...
detailing the road debate. I drew from a number of helpful sources that document the road controversy, including The Pluralism Project at Harvard University (2004), The Sacred Land Film Project (2011), The SAGE Council (1999), The Sacred Sites International Foundation (1996), and the Albuquerque Tribune newspaper. In what follows, I describe and explain the area and the monument; the role of developers and their link to colonialism; the main rhetorical arguments parties used to create the monument; the road conflict and environmental justice efforts; and arguments parties used in the road debate.

The Area, the Petroglyphs, and the Monument
Centuries ago, near a lava escarpment by the Rio Grande River in what is now Albuquerque, New Mexico, various Native people have etched images onto volcanic basalt rocks, including animals, people, nature symbols, brands, and other complex images. Spanish colonists and modern individuals modified and added carvings. The rocks and space are special to Pueblo and Indigenous groups, who highly regard the area and use it for traditional and ritual purposes.

The site containing the petroglyphs lies in what is now the Petroglyph National Monument, an area that was incorporated into the NPS in 1990. Stakeholders argued that a monument was needed to protect the area and rocks from development and looting. Senators Pete Domenici (a Republican) and Jeff Bingaman (a Democrat) proposed the monument, maintaining that the area is a natural and cultural resource. Virtually everyone applauded the act, including developers, Native American groups, environmentalists, and residents.

Developers and Links to Colonialism
Developers were involved in creating the monument and promoting the road and are important to mention because they are directly linked to Spanish colonial land grants, illustrating the link between race, colonialism, and space. In 1692 Spain created the Atrisco Land Grant and gave plots of land to reward explorers, some of whom quelled a “Pueblo Revolt.” In the 1960s the New Mexico legislature allowed 7,000 land grant heirs to form the Westland Development Company, a private corporation (NPS.gov, 2006a). Westland began developing near the monument, including a recent 6,400-acre development called “The Petroglyphs Master Planned Community.” Westland was sold in 2006 to SunCal Development Company before it went bankrupt and was sold in 2010 to Western Albuquerque Land Holdings (Childress, 2010). In effect, issues surrounding the monument are positioned in and contextualized by Spanish colonialism, postcolonial relationships among people, and environmental issues.6

Arguments to Create the Monument: Cultural and Environmental Protectionism
Stakeholders used cultural and environmental protectionist arguments to create the monument, a typical starting place in the making of many U.S. national parks. All stakeholders agreed that the area is an important “natural and cultural resource” that government can safeguard. Stakeholders specifically built their argument on
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protecting nature, maintaining that the monument would protect the space, the rocks, wildlife, animal life, and Albuquerque’s unique natural essence. Parties argued the monument would prevent erosion and damage caused by looting, development, and urbanization. In the Establishment Act, a sixth grader argued: “We shouldn’t have apartment buildings being built right up to [the escarpment]. If we build these apartments it will destroy the animal’s [sic] homes” (p. 22). Senator Domenici added: “words cannot express the beauty of a sunset in Albuquerque . . . it is time to preserve the Northwest Mesa Volcanic Escarpment in order to protect our sunsets” (p. 31). A national monument would guard the rocks, the landscape, and natural features.

Stakeholders additionally used cultural protectionism arguments to contend that the site and rocks have special meaning and histories to Native American and Spanish people alike. In the Establishment Act, Herman Agoyo, Chairman of the All Indian Pueblo Council, argued that the area will “help insure for the Pueblo Indians their First Amendment rights under the United States Constitution” (p. 118). The creation of a NPS Spanish Colonial Research Center will help with “questions of ecclesiastical and land grant history as these relate to the Atrisco Land Grant” (p. 121). At one congressional proceeding, Senator Domenici announced students in the audience from the Santa Fe Indian School, and Senator Bingaman asked them to stand and be acknowledged. The NPS continues to communicate the importance of the area to Pueblo and Spanish cultures: “Petroglyphs are central to the monument’s sacred landscape where traditional ceremonies still take place” (NPS.gov, 2006b, para. 1); “Among the volcanic rocks that form the canyons within the Atrisco grant, a considerable number of historic petroglyphs include Christian crosses, livestock brands, and Spanish initials” (NPS.gov, 2006a, para. 10); and “Pueblo Indians use petroglyphs to teach their children about their history, culture, and spiritual beliefs” (NPS.gov, 2006c, para. 7).

Yet, while cultural protectionism appears to honor both Native American and Spanish people, certain historical details are presented in ways that point to the area as a postcolonial space that is embedded in racism and favors Spanish heritage. For example, the Establishment Act offers the following history:

Approximately 1000 B.C. to 500 A.D. . . . the inhabitants of the Rio Grande Valley picked up a rock and used it to peck out a geometric pattern on one of the large, dark basalt boulders . . . By the time that the first Spanish explorer, Vasquez de Coronado, arrived in the area in 1540, over 15,000 Indian petroglyphs stretched along the 17 miles. (p. 31)

As in many governmental narratives, missing is how Spain illegally took the land and awarded it to Spanish colonizers, an act later legitimized by the U.S. government. The area is first positioned within an ancient human history and then through Spanish explorers, who “arrived” and added their own images. Throughout the narratives, Native Americans are forefronted when the area is positioned through neutral and peaceful Indian-colonial relations, but missing is any reference to the legacy of racist, violent, and colonizing practices that influence contemporary issues.
Interestingly, in promotional materials, developers de-emphasize Pueblo histories and amplify Spanish colonial heritage to promote a sacred colonial place that homeowners can purchase. For example, SunCal New Mexico (2007) “recognizes there has been no greater opportunity to revive the spirit of this [Spanish] historic concept,” where the goal is to “create a remarkable new place that will foster a unique sense of community and belonging.” In effect, developers highlight Spanish colonial heritage, which can be consumed through private property ownership.

The Road Controversy

In an act that appeared to contradict preservationist claims, in 2007, the city and state moved several significant rocks in the monument to another part of the monument to build a four-lane commuter road to ease projected traffic congestion to developments. Grassroots, local, and national environmental and social justice organizations fought against the road for 10 years. Antiroad mobilizers included the NPS, the Sierra Club, local and national activist coalitions (such as the Petroglyph Monument Protection Coalition), local and national Native American groups, and residents. Proroad advocates included developers, city council members, Mayor Martin Chávez, residential associations, and politicians, including Senator Domenici, the original sponsor of the monument legislation (The Adjustment Act; The Pluralism Project at Harvard University, 2004; The Sacred Land Film Project, 2011).

The conflict was sparked in the early 1990s after politicians and a local developer maintained that a road was needed for future development and was originally planned. In their early efforts, road supporters pursued legal avenues, including seeking congressional approval and funding. After these efforts failed, Senator Domenici proposed the Petroglyph National Monument Boundaries Adjustment Act of 1997, which asked for eight and a half acres of land within the monument to be given back to the city and state to build the highway. The NPS and others proposed alternatives, but these suggestions were rejected. The bill passed in 1998.

Throughout the controversy the NPS opposed the road, arguing that it did not serve a park purpose and was illegal. After the adjustment act was passed, the NPS mostly dropped its involvement in the dispute, contending that it no longer had authority or jurisdiction over the land. Additionally, the NPS focused on negative environmental effects and not social justice implications. When activists ramped up efforts to focus on social and environmental injustices, the NPS mostly stepped aside, and it failed to make the corresponding social justice issues a priority. In this way, the NPS missed an opportunity to combine forces with environmental justice advocates to continue fighting against the road. As the environmental justice movement broadly argues, this is unfortunately common in many traditional environmental organizations.

Advocating against the road, in 1996, local Native American activists formed what would become the Sacred Alliance for Grassroots Equality Council (“the SAGE Council”). SAGE spearheaded the opposition, including filing a lawsuit against the state. SAGE brought to light unethical practices of several road advocates, launched
letter-writing campaigns, and successfully blocked a bond measure to fund the road. Additionally, some activists engaged in public demonstrations, and several protesters were arrested for standing in front of bulldozers. In the end activists lost the lawsuits, and voters eventually passed a bond measure to fund the construction.

**Pro- and Antiroad Arguments: Development and the Common Good versus Cultural and Environmental Integrity**

Proroad advocates maintained that the road was necessary for development and prosperity and benefited the common good. Moreover, only New Mexico should be able to decide “with freedom of choice” and “without cumbersome federal regulations” (p. 28) what is best. Supporters argued that they “certainly did not intend the Monument to be a barrier to the community and an obstacle to orderly growth” (p. 28), and sacrificing land and rocks is fundamental for progress and the state’s future. The impact and acreage of the road corridor were de-emphasized, such as when stakeholders called them a “tiny road” and a “little corridor.” Whereas once all politicians, developers, and residents supported protection, many now positioned the rocks and land as unfortunate but necessary casualties. For example, Colorado Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell now reasoned that moving the rocks was unproblematic because petroglyphs naturally fade with time: “No matter what you do, no matter how you protect them, they are going to go . . . they [will] all disappear anyway” (p. 21). Stakeholders positioned the road as the “right thing to do,” and alternative proposals would be too destructive to established residential communities.

These arguments are redolent of covert colorblind racism, even while proponents deny bigotry or discrimination. In the Adjustment Act, after William Weahkee, a Pueblo representative, accused proroad advocates of bigotry against Native Americans, Senator Domenici responded:

I do not believe I have one ounce of bigotry in me and I do not think I have ever conducted myself with reference to the Indian people of New Mexico where anybody would conclude that . . . there is no better supporter around than I when it comes to the Indian people. (p. 64)

Even though he is touted as a liberal, proenvironment, and pro-Indian politician, Domenici appears unable to identify his actions as disproportionately affecting Pueblo people. In this way, road advocates such as Domenici consistently position Pueblo people as existing outside of the common good. Those who mainly benefit from the road are development companies, prodevelopment politicians, and residents who live in predominately white, middle- to upper-class suburban neighborhoods.

In contrast, antiroad proponents argued the road would negatively affect Indigenous cultures and the environment and was an act of discrimination and bigotry. The sacredness of the site to local Pueblo cultures would be tremendously violated. In the Adjustment Act, William Weahkee maintained, “A vote for [building the road] is a vote for religious bigotry and a prelude to the annihilation of an indigenous religion” (p. 46-47). Some activists argued it would be equivalent to building a road
through a church. Brody (2004) summarizes other antiroad arguments, including anthropological ramifications and a concern for urban sprawl.

In sum, arguments surrounding the monument’s creation and the road debate reveal a situated environmental justice struggle that is enacted and performed through colorblind racism and (post)colonial territorial possessiveness. Environmental protectionism is located within a white colonizing mentality that masquerades as doing what is best for the public while excluding nature and some people from that public.

A Fictional Narrative for Environmental Justice: “The Petroglyph Global Village”

Below, I shift to storytelling method to present my own fictional short story to illustrate and critique environmental racism in this case. My objective is to show in an alternative way how the area has been and likely will continue to be constructed as a cultural and natural place that is embedded in racism. In addition to scholars, potential audiences for this story include Albuquerque residents, activist groups, politicians, developers, news media, and others. I insert factual information throughout this fictional tale.

The year was 2060 and New Mexico was undergoing a massive economic and cultural transition. After the catastrophic 2056 national financial collapse and ensuing depression, the state struggled to avoid bankruptcy and chaos. For help, the state turned to the area’s cultural and environmental uniqueness. For years, New Mexico considered itself a minority-majority place, where Hispanics, Native Americans, and everyone else lived together in the tri-cultural state. Albuquerque’s distinct natural terrain and cultural diversity could be a resource in these hard times.

Known as the “Land of Enchantment,” New Mexico was, in the past, a popular place for people to relocate. For cheaper land and to escape crowding, white people in particular flocked to the state, and Albuquerque’s population exploded. They settled mostly in planned communities near the Petroglyph National Monument and suburban developments to the northwest of the city.

New residents were excited to be close to the special area called “the petroglyphs.” When the national monument was created in 1990, politicians, Native Americans, environmentalists, residents, developers, and the public applauded the move to protect the area on behalf of Native Americans and the environment. People were horrified to discover that looters were even shooting at sacred rock carvings for target practice. Senators Domenici and Bingaman worked across party lines to save the space and were hailed as cultural and environmental stewards.

Yet, years later, to improve access to developments, the city and state gained the authority to build a road through the park, moving protected rocks in the process. Activists were furious, and in an ironic twist of events, groups now sat in congressional hearings to beg officials not to build the road and move the rocks, for the place held special meaning to Indigenous people and was environmentally important. Proroad supporters branded these opponents unreasonable naysayers who opposed progress for a few rocks.
After the road was built, developers continued marketing new residential and commercial developments. New housing sites named “Watershed,” “Desert Drove,” and “Sacred Piñon” inundated the area nearby the monument. Immigrating residents loved it. You could see the sacred petroglyphs from your backyard while your front porch overlooked Albuquerque’s skyline and the Sandia Mountains. You could golf, jog, and bike among the ancient hills, the cacti, and the roadrunners!

But, after white people came in droves, they again became unsettled. Something in their restless and homeless history told them there had to be more. Life is too short, and you can’t take it with you when you die. Because you worked hard — so hard that you sacrificed time with your family — you deserved the best. The constant search for more, for newness, and for ultimate happiness crept back into their psyches, as it had for centuries.

Besides, the monument was old news — how many times could one look at rock carvings anyway? And, environmental issues were surfacing. Natural gas extraction through hydraulic fracturing was polluting drinking water, and water scarcity led to restricted lawns and golf courses. A toxic waste dumpsite was being built close to a nearby Indian reservation and too close to communities. Residents began fleeing to emerging gateway communities in the wild wilderness of Montana, Wyoming, and Alaska. With the increasing ability to telecommute, one could start anew and live affordably in pristine wilderness. Many people had already moved, and they continued to flee when the financial collapse hit. State officials became alarmed at the exodus and feared for the state’s future.

In her office, just as her uncle before her, Governor Julia Richardson pondered the fate of her state, and she turned to the problems of white flight and economic recession with a vengeance. She would save the state by finding new ways to expand tourism and development. She recognized that splendor was missing — not typical New Mexico pastimes like golfing, hiking, shopping for Indian art, and touring the petroglyphs. People—wealthy people in particular—wanted more. She needed to turn New Mexico into something grand.

With the help of developers and politicians, Governor Richardson proposed The Petroglyph Global Village. It would be a truly novel and majestic place. Part cultural palace, theme park, and commercial complex, it would have international flair, progressive entertainment, and novel cultural activities. Wealthy visitors would flock to enjoy the site’s exotic Pueblo-inspired architecture. The site would feature the world’s tallest tower — a complex in the shape of a traditional Pueblo adobe dwelling. Guests could visit enormous ovens used to cook ethnic Indian breads, and they could eat dishes that incorporated the area’s renowned chili. Revamped Pueblo artwork would revitalize the area’s art mecca reputation, and governmental regulation would ensure the art’s marketability. A mega theme park would include Indian-inspired rides, such as the “Rumbling Cloud Rollercoaster.” But, to make the area truly grand, visitors could be shuttled to the newly finished White Sands Spaceport, where they could cross off their list the ultimate adventure — human space travel.

Fortunately, the area could be funded by income from the lottery, bond measures, natural gas extraction, and alcohol, tobacco, and gambling taxes. But, due to rampant overdevelopment, land for the new site was scarce. To solve the problem, the governor
would petition Congress to acquire the Petroglyph National Monument. Of course, this would be highly controversial. To help prevent dissent, the governor proposed to save the petroglyphs by carefully moving them to a one-acre protected site where visitors could continue to appreciate them. And, certainly Indians would be compensated; they could have unlimited access to the rocks for ritual purposes and would receive generous royalties to combat alcoholism and improve living conditions on reservations.

Native American groups, activists, the NPS, and environmentalists were incensed. They argued that developing the area and moving the rocks was sacrilege and racist, and they immediately filed lawsuits. National media caught wind of the proposal and factions formed. To enable healthy democratic dialogue, Senators Rodríguez and Bingham II formed Congressional hearings; it was, after all, a true sign of American democracy that these conversations could take place. The debate would be decided by the people, and the government would protect the public good.

Politicians, developers, and residents who supported the zone maintained it was an unfortunate but necessary way to save the collapsing economy. What good was the outdated monument in the face of such a life-altering financial crisis? The zone would create jobs, revive property taxes, and fund education, transportation, and social services. Who in their right mind would not want that? Prozone advocates scoffed at the protest, especially because the rocks would be preserved.

Protesters tried to explain that it was not just the rocks that were special—it was the land and place as a whole that should be respected on its own terms. This was just another case of environmental degradation and bigotry against Native Americans. Activists collectively used the term environmental racism to position the zone as an injustice for people and nature alike.

Prodevelopment groups found it absurd to frame this as a racial issue; yes, bad things happened in the past, but that was history. That Indians did not recover from European settlement wasn’t about race. In one Congressional hearing, after being accused of continuing the damage of his Spanish forefathers, one senator yelled, “It’s not my fault that my ancestors did that. I wasn’t even alive!” Indians were asking for too much and were selfishly rejecting an opportunity to help the common good.

After extensive debates, lawsuits, and protests, the Petroglyph National Monument Dissolution Act of 2060 was passed, requiring the federal government to sell the land back to the state to develop. But, the federal government demanded three conditions. First, Pueblo people would be given a special “cultural ambassador” role and generously compensated for teaching visitors about their culture. Second, Native Americans could choose the one-acre site where the rocks would be moved. Last, when moving the rocks, the state would be required to remove large portions of ground with the petroglyphs, ensuring that Indians’ concerns about the sacredness of both the land and the rocks were properly addressed.

Conclusions: Toward an Environmental Justice Narrative Framework

A goal of critical scholarship, CRT, and environmental justice is to expose damaging cultural practices that enable power inequalities and domination, over people and
nature alike. I advance environmental justice scholarship by exploring how the racialization of people and environmental degradation continue in the present and are shaped by individuals, systems, ideologies, histories, and practices. Here, I combine my analysis and fictional narrative to advance a critical environmental justice narrative framework to expose and assess environmental racism.

A CRT lens positions this case as racially driven and further understood through storytelling. CRT scholars reposition whiteness and racism as predictable, institutional, and mainstream. In this case, race, nature, and power intersect materially and through government, commerce, and culture. Materiality—rocks, land, and space—crisscross with wide-sweeping cultural ideologies, postcolonialism, and consumer practices that have detrimental effects on people and nature. Stakeholders used colorblind racist arguments when they moved the rocks, where left-leaning politicians and residents abandoned protectionism to support racist and anti-environmental legislation, and they should be held responsible.

In an act of environmental racism, policies, legislation, development, and spatializing practices have disproportionately affected Indigenous communities and nature. Local Pueblo belief systems—that space and rocks have intrinsic value and are used to communicate with ancestors—lie outside of dominant and rational notions of “the common good.” Local activist groups were omitted from decision-making processes, even, as my story illustrates, as free speech and democracy are purported to ensure fairness. Nature and Indigenous people have paid the highest price, while largely white middle-class residents, developers, and politicians have benefited. Moreover, this act of environmental racism has been legally perpetuated by government and private corporations.

Storytelling positions this case differently. The above narrative can help illustrate how moving petroglyphs for development is extreme and racist—just as ridiculous as removing the ground with rocks and relocating them. Native American belief systems are legitimate forms of evidence in and of themselves, and the burden should be shifted to hold politicians, developers, and residents responsible for the egregious act of building the road. The story helps expose how the judicial system and environmental laws failed to enact justice through a rather ironic series of events—allowing the city and state to loot rocks, degrade a spiritual and environmental site, and build a commuter road through a protected space to better access development, when the monument was created to safeguard Indigenous belief systems and protect the rocks from looting and development in the first place.

As an applied environmental justice tool, perhaps fictional narratives can help activists expose environmental racism. Just as Carson’s *Silent Spring* implicated toxic pesticide use, in this case, storytelling points to the absurdity and irrationality of policies and practices. Activists, educators, and scholars can use the past to predict that environmental racism will continue to play a role in how the petroglyphs and other areas are shaped in the future and prevent damaging practices before they occur. Ultimately, the communication field and researchers can ecologically further
critical race theory and combine traditional and storytelling methods to help affected communities fight to define and manage their own space.

Notes
1 Please see a full discussion of race and color related terms in the next section.
2 Environmental justice movements argue that traditional environmentalism has not significantly addressed racism and poverty, and they seek to redefine environmentalism to allow all people to participate and speak (Pezzullo & Sandler, 2007).
3 Briefly, CRT argues that racism and systems of whiteness are not historical anomalies but are widespread and in the present. Race continues to negatively affect people of color despite an assumption that race no longer matters. One unique element of CRT scholarship is the use of storytelling to reveal racial practices.
4 As another example, in the area of climate justice, core values include equity, protection, inclusion, empowerment, and demands for community participation (Bali Principles of Climate Justice, 2002). Climate justice activists argue that the repercussions of global climate change—changes that are predominately caused by rich nations—will continue to fall disproportionately on people of color and low-income communities and nations (Shah, 2011).
5 In the case of Love Canal, a neighborhood in Niagara Falls, New York, after not properly cleaning up a toxic waste dump site, a chemical company sold the land cheaply, on which a neighborhood developed. In the late 1970s, reporters revealed the dump site, and a public health crisis resulted when toxic waste began leaking and long-term health hazards surfaced.
6 Scholars have written about this link between colonialism, postcolonial relationships, and nature, such as how both native people and nature have been conceptualized historically as “heathen,” “uncivilized,” and “undeveloped.” Pratt (1992) finds this association in early European travel writing. Travel narratives were created within the context of colonization and through the descriptive tool of natural history, where Europeans used exotic and sentimental narratives of the uncivilized “Other” to construct a (civilized and developed) superior identity (Pratt, 1992). Colonization and natural-science categorization, then, involved sets of specific environmental and social assumptions, whereby both nature and people were understood as uncivilized, chaotic, and requiring management. Similar assumptions and management practices can be found in contemporary postcolonial relations and environmental issues in New Mexico (Kosek, 2006).

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References
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