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Brooke A. Moore  
Environmental Racism: Exploring  
Suffering and Healing Through  
Collective Resistance

## ABSTRACT

This theoretical study was undertaken to explore how trauma theory can broaden our understanding of the psychological impact of environmental racism, and how liberation theory could be utilized to better prepare social workers to identify and understand the impact of environmental racism in the lives of clients and elucidate the role the profession should play in alleviating this form of oppression. Aspiring to examine the phenomenon and each of the theories from the vantage point of a perspective that falls outside of a dominant lens, this study explored race-based traumatic stress as a crucial element of a comprehensive definition of trauma, and considered the healing capacity of the environmental justice movement in treating race-based traumatic stress that is sourced by environmental racism. Finally, this study considered how engaging one's liberatory consciousness helps to reject dominant narratives of privilege, marginality, suffering, and healing. It examined the ways in which social workers can apply the tenets of liberation theory in their practice to expand notions of collective resistance and invoke creative strategies for collective transformation. This study identified the environmental justice movement as a collective resistance movement that both confronts and contextualizes issues of suffering and healing, and contributes significantly in a movement towards collective transformation.



**Environmental Racism:  
Exploring Suffering and Healing Through Collective Resistance**

A project based upon an independent investigation, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2011



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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

People of color throughout the United States are receiving more than their fare share of the poisonous fruits of industrial production. They live cheek and jowl with waste dumps, incinerators, landfills, smelters, factories, chemical plants, and oil refineries whose operations make them sick and kill them young. They are poisoned by the air they breathe, the water they drink, the fish they catch, the vegetables they grow, and, in the case of children, the very ground they play on. (Austin & Schill, 1994, p. 53)

Environmental racism is a form of institutional racism. As a form of institutional racism, this type of racist assault is obscured through complacent attitudes of business-as-usual that fundamentally neglect to acknowledge the relevance of the “historical embeddedness of racism” that serves as the foundation on which our policies, our laws and our practices have been constructed (Jones, 1997 as cited in Sue, 2005). Further, mechanisms for perpetuating institutional racism are generated by, and structured to reinforce, systems of white privilege. While the cumulative effects of institutional racism can (and often do) result in physical health concerns, environmental racism can (and often does) have a more fatal outcome. In addition, chronic illnesses, such as asthma and cancer, that compromise wellbeing and/or result in the loss of life of beloved family and friends, can exacerbate some of the psychological effects of racism. Bryant-Davis (2007) and Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2005) identify these as anger, anxiety, depression, grief, and hopelessness. The confluence of the fact that these losses are preventable and the result of racist policies, adds a haunting dimension to environmental racism. Such atrocities represent the polar opposite of “subtle” acts of racism often used to describe those acts that are typically defined to be more covert (institutionally and culturally embedded) forms of



racism. There is nothing subtle about the toxic poisoning of people and communities. In this way, environmental racism represents a very overt form of racism; despite continued research that documents the crippling and often fatal outcomes of continued exposure to toxic wastes and chemicals racist policies and laws continually condone the poisoning and deaths of people and communities of color. Individuals and families who live in environmentally toxic neighborhoods are faced with physical health conditions that poison their bodies with chemicals, toxins, and cancers at astonishingly high rates. Additionally, people are exposed to environmental stressors and hazards in dilapidated buildings through crumbling infrastructures and leaded paint of homes and schoolhouses (Kozol, 1996). Children and adults alike are literally being deprived oxygen in their lungs due to the effects of asthma (Kozol, 1996; Miller & Garran, 2008). In rural neighborhoods, communities subjected to environmental hazards are also isolated from access to healthcare facilities, from doctors, and from sufficient treatment needed to address the severity of these deadly health issues. Similarly, afflicted urban neighborhoods are often burdened by limited access to hospitals and/or are subjected to under-funded, under-staffed and non-hygienic hospitals, further exacerbating stress and health concerns for patients who have no other options for treatment (Kozol, 1996; Miller & Garran, 2008). Intricately laced into the experience of all of this, the United States' racist social structure continues to impede people of color from equitable access to jobs, housing, education, and health care; as well, continues to confine and segregate marginalized communities into neighborhoods that are already plague with noxious environmental hazardous, among other traumatic stressors such as life threatening violence and crime (Miller & Garran, 2008). The fact that society at large chooses—both intentionally and unintentionally—to look the other way, does not make the realities of environmental poisoning any less overt to those who live amidst disparately toxic environments. This draws specific

attention to a key factor in understanding environmental racism: the enactment of any form of racism can be sourced through both intentional and/or unintentional means. And, regardless of the nature intentionality, psychological insult and/or injury, and poor physical health and deadly illness occur as a result.

There exists a vast body of research and literature documenting the historical policies and laws that have created, and continue to encourage, industrial siting of waste facilities in communities in which residents are predominantly people of color (Bullard, 1990; Bullard, 1994; Bullard, 2005; Bullard, Mohai, Saha, & Wright, 2007; Bryant, 1995; Bryant & Mohai, 1992; United Church of Christ, [UCC], 1987). Further, there is extensive literature reflecting the continued lack of safety regulations (and/or enforcement of existing regulations) of city waste dumps and large-scale industrial waste companies (Bullard, 1990; Bullard, 1994; Bullard, 2005; Bullard, Mohai, Saha, & Wright, 2007; Bryant & Mohai, 1992; Chavis, 1993a; Chavis, 1993b; Mohai & Saha, 2007; UCC, 1987). Additionally, this growing body of research has made significant contributions in its connection of the racialized social construction that organizes decisions made around environmental policies (Bullard, Johnson, & Torres, 2004; Bryant, 1995; Pellow, 2004; Pellow, Weinberg, & Schnaiberg, 2002; Pulido, 2000; Taylor, 2008; Wise, 2003), and has provided evidence of physical health issues and fatalities caused by race-based environmental assaults. Complimenting this extensive body of literature is a comprehensive body of work outlining the legal battles—launched at the grassroots level—that have been waged against polluting industries as well as local and national governments whose race-neutral policies embolden the perpetuation of these types of unethical business practices (Bullard, 1993, Ed.). This study recognizes that an exploration of environmental racism equally warrants a discussion of the environmental justice movement if issues of suffering and healing are to be considered.

Together, people of low socioeconomic means and people of color have advanced the cause for environmental justice by creating and sustaining a powerful collective resistance movement that has “[...] become a unifying theme across race, class, gender, age, and geographic lines” (Bullard, 2005, p. 1). And still, while the movement continues to grow in unity, numbers and strength, and its struggles and gains have been well researched and documented, the movement itself continues to operate largely in the periphery. Its peripheral position, however, does not reflect a limitation in its effectiveness to organize and build multiracial and multinational communities that are collectively resisting racial and social oppression. And, as will be presented in this study, although peripheral (by dominant standards), this movement nonetheless possesses a resonant capacity to serve as a site of healing from race-based traumatic stress. Further, this study holds that what remains inhibited is the willingness of the mental health community to acknowledge trauma sourced by racism, as well as approaches to healing that can (and do) occur outside of dominant systems.

This theoretical thesis will utilize current literature of environmental racism and trauma theory, with an emphasis on race-based traumatic stress, as the foundational basis from which issues of compromised psychological health and wellbeing will be explored. Within this foundational discussion, description of the environmental justice framework will help to contextualize the basis for exploring suffering and healing through a lens of collective resistance. Next, this study will shift its gaze to explore liberation theory. Clinical social workers are often called upon to listen empathically, to absorb, and to assist clients in construction of trauma narratives for the purpose of healing. Rarely, however, are social workers equipped to identify trauma that results from various forms of racism. In like manner, theories for healing trauma are commonly drawn from dominant healing paradigms that do not specifically address issues of

race-based traumatic stress. Additionally, social workers rarely (and for some, perhaps, never) consider how collective resistance movements that emerge out of struggles for civil and human rights might serve as a vital space for healing aspects of traumatic stress that are sourced by racism. This study holds that in order to do this effectively, social workers need to be able to engage in an on-going process of critical self-reflection as well as some form of social action that seeks to transform unjust racial and social systems of oppression and privilege. Utilizing liberation theory, and specifically, “liberatory consciousness”, as explicated by Barbara J. Love (2000), in clinical practice may increase our capacity for this process.

### **Theoretical Orientation**

This research utilizes a theoretical approach to explore the ways that trauma theory and liberation theory can better situate social workers to identify and understand the impact of environmental racism in the lives of clients, and the role the profession should play in alleviating this form of oppression. Additionally, this study seeks explore: (a) how the conditions of environmental racism may result in race-based traumatic stress; (b) the relevance of the environmental justice movement in resisting racial oppression and healing aspects of race-based traumatic stress; and finally, (c) how social workers can better identify, confront, and move towards eliminating this insidious and deadly form of racism. These theoretical explorations will be approached by examining environmental racism through the lens of both trauma theory with an emphasis on race-based traumatic, and liberation theory with a focus on the integration of a *liberatory consciousness*.

**Trauma theory and race-based traumatic stress.** Trauma theory will be considered in this study as a means by which to explore the potential effects of environmental racism on psychological health. Trauma theory, however, provides only a broad theoretical framework for

this exploration. In an effort to elucidate the potential effects of environmental racism on the mental health of individuals living in afflicted communities, the study of trauma theory will be expanded to include a discussion of race-based traumatic stress. If we fail to expand our understanding of the various ways in which an individual's psychological blueprint is impacted by the natural environment that compromises one's physical health and psychological wellbeing, we are essentially failing to provide effective support and an opportunity for healing. Understanding the unique ways in which a person of color may experience chronic and ongoing forms of racism as traumatic—including those that are environmental in nature—is crucial if our aspirations for cultural competency in social work practice are to be realized.

**Liberation theory.** Reflecting on the key factor that all forms of racism—including environmental racism as both a form of and distinct from institutional racism—can be enacted through both intentional and unintentional means, focused and determined action needs to be taken to confront the unintentional means by which racism is perpetuated: *Unintentionality* cannot be addressed without excavating the unconscious beliefs that promote our continued collusion with acts of racism. Liberation theory promotes psychological liberation for both oppressed and oppressor by conceptually deconstructing socialization processes that perpetuate subtle forms of racism in our current society. Once the oppressive components of socialization are revealed, the theory itself advocates for liberation at the collective level through social action aimed at eradicating dynamics of power. Love (2000) explicates a practice of *liberatory consciousness* that incorporates elements of liberation theory at both the individual and collective levels. Specifically, for this purpose, this theory was chosen. Additionally, there are principles inherent in the adoption of a liberatory consciousness that do more than deconstruct whiteness; they actively seek to decentralize it. For social workers, actively adopting a liberatory

consciousness has the potential to unearth the racist elements of socialization that have been deeply embedded in our unconscious, those that ultimately limit our ability to fulfill some of the very values that define the profession, and the ethical principles on which these values stand: Social justice; Dignity and worth of the person; Importance of human relationships; Integrity; and, Competence (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008, pp. 5-6).

The following chapter will more thoroughly articulate the chosen methodology employed, as well as the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used to ground this research. Following the conceptualization, the chapter will discuss the apparent biases of the researcher and conclude with a consideration of the strengths and limitations of the chosen theoretical method.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Methodology and Conceptualization**

In this chapter, the chosen methodology will be provided, and its use justified. Following, it will discuss the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that inform the exploration of the phenomenon of environmental racism as both a form of and distinct from institutional racism. The distinctions offered will provide the conceptual framework as the starting point of analysis for this research. Subsequently, this chapter will present the frameworks of trauma theory and liberation theory, respectively. A discussion of trauma theory will provide the broad theoretical foundation that will ground our understanding of traumatic experiences. Because this study seeks to better understand how experiences of environmental racism can result in experiences of trauma, the discussion of trauma theory will be extended to encompass a description of race-based traumatic stress. Next, a brief description of liberation theory, and a brief introduction to *liberatory consciousness* as explicated by Love (2000) will be provided. Descriptions of the above named theories will help clarify the justification for the chosen theories and provide the basis for analyzing the relationship of each theory to environmental racism. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a presentation of the potential biases of this writer as well as the strengths and limitations of the chosen methodology.

#### **Methodology**

This theoretical thesis is comprised of six chapters. The preceding chapter introduced the phenomenon of environmental racism and briefly introduced the theories that will be used to elucidate our understanding of the phenomenon. The second chapter will set the trajectory for

this study, providing structure to the research through a presentation of concepts that ground the theories used, and a description of the scope of the research. Chapter Three will include a thorough exploration of environmental racism, including a discussion of the environmental justice movement. Structuring the discussion of environmental racism, I will begin by grounding the reader in the sociohistorical and sociocultural context of race and racism in the United States. Recognizing that the presence and prevalence of racism is inextricably linked to the social construction of race, this study will highlight the ways in which racial privilege and racial oppression are sourced by and perpetuated through systems of white privilege and institutional racism. Doing so will help to contextualize our understanding of environmental racism. Drawing from the well of previous academic research, this study maintains that, like other forms of racism, experiences of environmental racism can result in traumatic stress.

This writer's interest in gaining a more explicit understanding of environmental racism and the trauma it can cause, and identifying opportunities for prevention and healing, fostered the research questions: How can trauma theory and liberatory theory better situate social workers to identify and understand the presence of environmental racism, its implications in the lives of clients, and the role of the profession in alleviating this form of oppression? Addressing these inquiries necessitates an examination of trauma theory, with an emphasis on race-based traumatic stress, which will be offered in Chapter Four; and, an exploration of liberation theory and the working principles of a liberatory consciousness, which will be offered in Chapter Five. In the final chapter, an analysis of the suffering caused by racial oppression and race-based traumatic stress sourced by environmental racism will be framed by a discussion of healing that considers the capacity for healing inherent in a collective resistance movement like that of the environmental justice movement. Next, this chapter will synthesize the elements of suffering,



healing and collective resistance by challenging the dominant narrative of marginality.

Additionally, the synthesis will include a discussion of the clinical implications of engaging in a liberatory process. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a discussion of the strengths and the limitations of doing a theoretical thesis and make suggestions for future research and practice.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks**

Environmental racism is a worldwide phenomenon. However, a discussion of such is beyond the scope of this research. This theoretical study will focus its discussion on environmental racism that occurs in the United States. Mindful of the unique ways that racism exists both historically and currently in this country, it is important to be clear about the terms of reference being used in this study. Throughout this study, any reference to “dominant” or “dominant narrative” refers specifically to those of us who have race privilege, those of us who are white. While dominant also makes broad reference to other privileged social identities such as gender and/or class for example, this study primarily focuses on racial privilege and racial oppression and therefore uses the term accordingly. An underlying perspective of this research, however, acknowledges the ever-present intersections of each person’s multiple social identities, and when possible, these intersections will be considered. Throughout this study, this writer uses the term “people of color” broadly. *People of color* broadly refers to individuals and communities of diverse races, ethnicities and cultural identities, whose racial groups, historically and currently, have been oppressed as a result of the social construction of race, and the various and harmful manifestations of racism this social construction proliferates.

Acknowledgment of the racial, ethnic and cultural diversity of people of color has a unique relationship to this study as well. The environmental justice movement organized itself around the collective identities of people of color both nationally and internationally, to confront

and eradicate environmental racism. *Collective identity* herein speaks to the shared experiences of struggles and suffering caused by racial oppression that affects people of color in similar, yet dissimilar ways. An example of collective identity, relevant to the study of environmental racism, is illustrated by the alliance made between American Indians who struggle to maintain land rights and Latino/a farm-workers who confront issues of pesticide poisoning while working in unsafe landscapes (Austin & Schill, 1994). In some ways, these issues of environmental racism could be translated as isolated events; however, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, which first convened in the nation's capital in October 1991, acknowledges these events as inextricably linked, and as having a devastating impact on all of humanity. Fighting these battles in solidarity with one another illuminates the essence of the environmental justice (EJ) movement. Given this, the term *collective resistance* will be used in this study to refer to movements of social action/activism. Collective resistance was chosen because this writer feels it more accurately embodies the essence of the EJ movement. One last point of conceptualization to consider here, is that environmental justice movement also combats issues of injustice that occur along class lines and, as will be discussed in Chapter Three, issues of race and class commonly intersect. Because the primary focus of this study is environmental racism, issues of class will not be directly addressed; however, this theoretical underpinning remains intact.

**Trauma theory and race-based traumatic stress.** The study of trauma provides clinicians with a solid foundation of what constitutes trauma and the various ways that people experience trauma both physically and psychologically. Herman (1997) explains “traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community” (p. 51). Trauma

research has been extensive in its attempt to explore: the effects of trauma related to single incidents of a horrific nature; chronic abuses that include physical, emotional and sexual violence, and at times a co-occurrence of these; collective and intergenerational trauma; and trauma relating to political turmoil, war and/or genocide (Allen, 2001; Herman 1997; Parson 1995; Scaer, 2005; van der Kolk, 1996).

Like other academic research which privileges the cultural perspectives of dominant society, traditional trauma research has historically neglected to incorporate experiences of trauma that are sourced by racism. This negligence gave rise to an extensive body of research highlighting the various and complex ways that racism impacts psychological health and wellbeing (Bryant-Davis, 2007; Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005a 2005b; Carter, 2007; Comas-Díaz, 2000; Harrell, 2000; Loo, et al., 2001; Manson, et al., 1996; Scurfield & Mackey, 2001; Speight, 2007; Sue, 2005; Thompson-Miller & Feagin, 2007). This study attempts to bridge these two bodies of research by synthesizing the historical evolution of traditional trauma theory and current understandings of both trauma theory and race-based traumatic stress. Bryant-Davis (2007) informs that race-based traumatic stress has been also referred to as “societal trauma, intergenerational trauma, racist incident–based trauma, insidious trauma, psychological trauma, emotional abusiveness, and racism” (p. 135). Current trends in scholarly literature reflect the need for race-based traumatic stress to be included as a specific type of trauma within the existing definitions of trauma theory (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Bryant-Davis, 2007; Carter, 2007), with the underlying intention of developing treatments and training therapists to engage in self-awareness and cultural competency needed to effectively attune to this specific form of trauma. The growing body of literature on race-based traumatic stress examines individual, cultural, institutional, and internalized racism (among other forms) through the lens

of trauma theory (Bryant-Davis, 2007; Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Carter, 2007; hooks, 1995; Speight, 2007; Thompson-Miller & Feagin, 2007). A discussion of the existing literature of trauma theory and race-based traumatic stress will provide the theoretical lens from which environmental racism can be understood. This research will consider both how distinct aspects of environmental racism might source race-based traumatic stress, as well as the approaches to healing that extend beyond traditional paradigms.

**Liberation theory.** Harro (2000) defines “*liberation* as ‘critical transformation,’ in the language and thinking of Paulo Freire (1968),” and highlights the necessity for transformation at the collective level (p. 463). Emphasizing “[...] that one must ‘name the problem’ in terms of *systemic* assumptions, structures, rules, and roles that are flawed. Significant social change cannot happen until we are thinking on a systemic level” (Harro, 2000, p. 463). Specifically as it relates to environmental racism, inequitable access to power in leadership roles and decisionmaking processes historically and currently results in the siting of industries that produce “environmentally hazardous” materials, city dumps, and industries of mass pollution in people of color communities at disproportionate rates (Freudenburg & Wilkinson, 2008; Mohai, 2008). Simultaneously, many white communities are privileged by spatial (geographical) distance from industrial pollutants, and thereby lack both an awareness of the problem as well as a *personal* and/or life-threatening reason to gain awareness or invest their efforts in combating the detrimental effects of environmental hazards. This lack of awareness speaks to deeper issues of privilege, apathy and complacency of white communities, but specifically as it relates here, it underscores the added privilege of overall better health: both physical and psychological. The interrelated relationship between the aforementioned issues of social and racial justice and

physical and psychological health, share a space that has long been attended to by social work practice. In her discussion on *Poverty and Economic Justice*, Abramovitz (2001) articulates:

Given social work's location between the client and society, we can either leave solving poverty to the economists or join the fight for economic justice. A growing consensus holds that exposure to economic hardship and adverse conditions often precedes the rise of individual and social problems rather than the other way around, as previously presumed. This conclusion translates into a mandate for prevention and social change. Some fear that making individual and social change a fundamental part of our work politicizes a previously objective and unpolitical profession. *Yet, to argue for neutrality itself becomes a political stance—one that tolerates government neglect, compromises our profession's ethics, and otherwise favors the status quo by letting it stand unchallenged.* Since social work cannot avoid the political, it is far better to address these issues explicitly than to pretend they do not exist. The middle ground, if one ever existed, has fast receded. We must decide which side we are on. ("The Top Five Social Justice Issues Facing Social Workers Today," p. 24; emphasis mine)

Although her discussion focuses specifically on poverty and economic justice, we can apply her explication of "hardships and adverse conditions" as the cause of "individual and social problems" to the experiences of those suffering from environmental racism. Moreover, her sentiments regarding the responsibility of the social work profession, has direct application here. A central aim of this study is to gain a more explicit understanding of environmental racism and the trauma it causes, with the underlying goal of identifying the role of social workers and of the profession in alleviating this form of oppression. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to first

unpack some of the core components of the issue so that we can then critically engage in a process of alleviation. This study holds that such a process is wholly unattainable if there is no recognition of the connection between theory and action—this is the essence of Love’s (2000) method for liberatory consciousness, as well as the anchor of liberation theory.

As noted above, liberatory consciousness is a term operationalized by Love (2000), and refers to the strategic process by which one can actively engage in the process of developing a *critical consciousness*. This parent term is directly rooted in the writings of Paulo Freire, who sought encourage the educators to engage in and promote critical consciousness development (hooks, 1994; Love, 2000; Macedo, 2000). A discussion of the history of liberation theory, with a brief examination of liberatory consciousness will meet two foundational aims of this study. First, it will provide the theoretical lens from which environmental racism and the environmental justice movement can be better understood. Second, it will help to decentralize dominant perspectives on healing race-based traumatic stress, as well as help frame the discussion of the unintentional elements of reinforce the perpetuation of environmental racism (and all forms of racism).

### **Biases, Strengths and Limitations**

The most apparent bias is that I am a white woman writing about the race-based traumatic experiences of people of color. This influences my perception, as well as limits my ability to know fully the internalized impact of these experiences. Additional bias exists as the product of my own subjugated identities as a woman who grew up impacted by the oscillation between moments of poverty and the fragility of working-class poor. These subjugated identities also encompass strengths and limitations. As an element of strength, my experiences of class oppression (more so than my experiences of gender oppression) provided me with the internal

capacity to recognize the oppression of others. To be clear, this is not a statement equating the oppression of class with that of race. Instead, it is mentioned because this part of my identity is what impassioned me to self-educate on issues of race, class and gender in the first place—it is how I knew I needed to go searching for truth. As an element of limitation, I am always first-and-foremost informed through these identities, and because society continues to be successful in veiling the privilege I am afforded by my white racial identity, I must remain diligent in my awareness of the salience of this unearned privilege. At times I am limited by my lack of success in this effort. As a methodological bias, my continued efforts to realize the depth of my race privilege in confluence with my long held emotional struggle with my own white guilt drew me to the theory of liberatory consciousness. I proceed with caution here; however. I know that my white guilt is intricately intertwined to my role as an oppressor. I do not seek to have my feelings of guilt assuaged by a surface level promise of liberation, when no actual critical transformation of systemic racial oppression has been realized. For as long as people are suffering from the deleterious effects of racism, then I too, will suffer from white guilt. The bias here exists because at every moment I *want* to believe in the full capacity of liberation and I try to envision a world free of systemic oppression. I believe that strategies for enabling such a vision can be attained through a liberatory process. The strategies outlined for a liberatory consciousness help to sustain my commitment in the struggle to promote racial justice. These beliefs and visions that I hold tightly both empower my efforts in the struggle and at times might cloud my perspective.

The most salient strength of this theoretical thesis is that it places personal experiences at the center of the discussion of the importance of environmental policies and decisionmaking. As social workers, our commitment has remained central to people and social justice. Gaining a deeper understanding of the physical and psychological impact environmental racism has on

people will better position us to advocate for prevention and healing. Another strength is that the theoretical exploration of the proposed phenomenon carves out a space for the discussion of environmental racism in social work literature. A final methodological strength is that it lays the groundwork for future researchers in the field to broaden the lens of exploration in consideration of environmental racism, environmental justice and race-based traumatic stress.

One limitation present in this research is the lack of identity intersectionality represented. Gender, class, and sexual orientation are significant contributors to a person's vulnerability to, and experiences of, trauma including those that are environmental in nature. The scope of this research does not permit an extensive consideration of these intersections. Because our lived experiences are embodied around the kaleidoscopic nuances of our intersecting identities, the absence of analysis in this area represents a significant limitation to this research. An additional limitation is highlighted through one of the study's strengths; that is, its focus on personal experiences. Because of its theoretical orientation, the voices of those afflicted by and those who have mobilized a resistance against environmental racism are absent. This limitation invites future empirical studies strengthened through interviews of those who reside on the front lines of the struggle for environmental justice. The following chapter will present the basis for such future studies with thorough presentation of the phenomenon of environmental racism.



## **Chapter Three**

### **Environmental Racism**

Eradicating environmental racism is a central goal of the environmental justice movement. While the movement as a whole is focused on stopping industrial practices and political decisions that result in the poisoning of people in all communities across race, gender, and economic lines, and on a global scale, the collective body of community-level activists and researchers who populate the movement acknowledge the reality that regardless of other factors, people of color communities historically and today bear the heaviest burdens of environmental injustice than do whites. Given this, the following chapter will specifically outline the history of environmental racism by examining the relevance of the social construction of race in the United States, and the systems of racial oppression and racial privilege that cause and perpetuate this phenomenon. Brief consideration will be given to the impact of environmental racism on psychological health and wellbeing. This discussion will provide the foundation for a discussion of race-based traumatic stress that will be presented in the following chapter. Finally, recognizing that at the grassroots level, people of color community activists have spearheaded a powerful resistance movement in the fight against environmental racism, this study remains conscious of the fact that a discussion of environmental racism is incomplete without recognition of the ways the environmental justice movement confronts both racial and social oppression. Further, as will be suggested in the final chapter, this movement might serve as an effective space for healing aspects of race-based traumatic stress that are sourced by environmental racism.

## **Environmental Racism: A Brief Chronology**

Issues of residential environmental hazards have a long history in the United States—one dating back before the 18<sup>th</sup> century and persisting in severity through each century to current day.

Bullard (1993) informs:

Environmental problems [...] did not appear overnight; some have been around for centuries. Moreover, the root cause of many of them can be traced to the imperial ethics and values surrounding the ‘conquest’ of the land and its people and the glorification of the colonization process in our literature. (p. 9)

Further, environmental injustice faced by early European-American immigrants has long been addressed in scholarly literature (Bullard, 1993; Taylor, 1993; Pellow, 2004). For centuries, people with the least access to wealth and power in the United States, not surprisingly, have also experienced environmental injustice. And, as with other civil rights struggles by oppressed people throughout our history, the movement for environmental justice was forged out of determination for the right to a better way of life. Both Taylor (1993) and Pellow (2004) acknowledge that European immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century resisted against environmental injustice and aspired to secure the beauty of natural environments. Their efforts focused primarily on the outdoors including neighborhoods, wildlife preservation, and/or public parks and open spaces. According to Taylor (1993), the overall concern of environmentally minded activism during this period centered on “natural resource conservation, and wilderness and wildlife preservation” (p. 53). Pellow (2004) informs readers of neighborhood struggles in Chicago by settlement house residents who were involved in “leading a battle against the city’s

unhealthful and *exploitative* practice of concentrating garbage dumps in immigrant neighborhoods” (p. 515). Additionally, Pellow (2004) recognizes women activists Mary McDowell and her colleagues (one of whom was the social work profession’s own, Jane Addams) to be, “without question early environmental justice activists, fighting against environmental injustices directed at European immigrant populations in their ward, but also speaking out against violence and discrimination directed at African Americans” (p. 515). Despite these early efforts to alleviate environmental injustice and social ills, it is important to acknowledge that during this period there also existed a driving white racism that was attempting to further reinforce the racist social construction of the United States by legally defining white and nonwhite racial identities. As these categories became more legally and socially entrenched, European immigrants who could assimilate to white identities began to make social, political and capital gains that deepened the racial divide, and in turn, further racialized the disproportionate allocation of society’s waste and environmental toxins that increased during the industrial revolution (Miller & Garran, 2008). Today, this racialized social construction continues—both overtly and covertly—and is perpetuated through mechanisms of individual, institutional and cultural racism to privilege whites at the expense of people of color (Miller & Garran, 2008).

The industrial revolution and the decades following World War II in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century marked a shift in the environmentalist paradigm. This shift was identified by Taylor (1993) to be an awareness of “human welfare ecology” which included a burgeoning social awareness of the possible health concerns for the human population that were the result of industrial wastes and toxins, the threat and possible side-effects of nuclear war (a social fear fueled by the Cold War), and a growing awareness of issues of global warming (Taylor, 1993, p. 53). And, while mainstream environmental movements had begun to consider the effects of the external

environment on the human condition, the overall perspective continued to be distorted through the dominant lens in several ways. First, Bullard (1993) emphasized that:

Rather than listening to and learning from Native Americans, who cared for the land for centuries, European colonists chose to control, dominate, tame, and develop the “wilderness” for their material comfort and profit (Limerick, 1987; Jaimes, 1992).

Generally, disputes over use of public lands, water rights, and alternative development projects in heavily Latino places, like southern Colorado and northern New Mexico, stem from the conflict of values surrounding stewardship. (p. 9)

More specifically, Bullard highlights the contradiction of the mainstream movement towards environmental awareness that was fostered out of the dominant culture’s lack of respect for the land, and for those who already had a relationship with it. Secondly, the mainstream shift in the environmental movement in the 1950s and 60s, however much it concerned itself with the human condition, did little to address the already deeply entrenched racial divide existing in the country; nor was it motivated by an awareness of the environmental struggles in which people of color were already deeply engaged. White society’s deeply embedded and narrow scope of “whiteness,” which placed (and continues to place) an all-white perspective at the cultural center, resulted in the mainstream’s limited view of those being most affected by environmental dangers, as well as a negligence to include people of color in environmental decision-making and positions of leadership regarding environmental policies and concerns. Acknowledgment of this illustrates a crucial distinction between environmental injustice and environmental racism. Whereas environmental injustice speaks to the harms faced by racially and economically diverse communities, in the United States and throughout the world, who lack economic and political

power to protect themselves from environmental hazards, environmental racism addresses specifically the disproportionate harm environmental hazards has on people and communities of color both locally and globally, and, regardless of socioeconomic status. Drawing from academic research that documents this disproportionality, as well as central acknowledgments informing the environmental justice framework, Bullard (2000) defines environmental racism as:

Environmental racism refers to any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color. Environmental racism combines with public policies and industry practices to provide *benefits* for whites while shifting *costs* to people of color. It is reinforced by governmental, legal, economic, political, and military institutions. In a sense, ‘Every state institution is a racial institution.’ (p. 98; emphasis original; quotes Omi & Winant, 1986)

Given dominant society’s overall lack of awareness and/or acknowledgement of institutional racism and the various and consequential ways it manifests, Taylor (1993) noted that it was not surprising that when “the environmental movement emerged as a significant mass movement by the 1970s [...] this new wing of the modern environmental movement tended to operate without significant minority participation” (p. 53). Assuming, however, that a lack of presence of people of color in the mainstream environmental movement of the 1970s signifies a lack of environmental awareness, concern, or activism by people of color, is in fact quite wrong. To the contrary, Bullard (1993) points out several crucial elements of consideration regarding environmentalism during this era.

People of color, individually and collectively, have waged a frontal assault against environmental injustices that predate the first Earth Day in 1970. Many of these struggles, however, were not framed as “environmental” problems—rather they were seen as addressing “social” problems. For example, the U.S. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968) discovered that systematic neglect of garbage collection and sanitation services in African-American neighborhoods contributed to urban disturbances in the 1960s. (p. 9)

When he talks about framing, Bullard (1993) is drawing emphasis to a pervasive dominant narrative promoting mainstream environmental movements that was created, and has been regenerated throughout the decades, to disenfranchise pockets of resistance pushing for deep societal transformation. More precisely, his work draws emphasis to the pervasive lack of respect for and acknowledgment of life experiences of people of color living in toxic neighborhoods (as well as in a toxic racist society). Framing civil rights resistance movements, which emerged out of a need to protect people of color communities from housing the America’s waste, as “urban disturbances,” speaks heavily to overt racial tension of the era. This incessant white cultural (racist) framing of environmentalism, however, has been successful in maintaining its more covert race-neutral stance for several decades. Evoking a shift in the national conscience around this issue is a core aim of the environmental justice movement, which recognizes environmentalism for what it is: an issue of civil and human rights (Bullard, 2005). This quest for a conscientious reframing has its roots in the mainstream Civil Rights Movement. Bullard (1993) points out that:

Civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Memphis in 1968 to resolve an economic and environmental justice dispute. African-American sanitation workers were striking for better wages, improved work conditions, and equity with other municipal employees. King was assassinated before he could complete his mission. Nevertheless, the issues raised by the sanitation workers were placed on the national civil rights agenda. (p. 10)

Additionally, it is important to recognize that during this period the mainstream environmentalists—who were predominantly white—had the privilege to advocate freely for *their* environmental issues without the fear of physical harm. In this way, white privilege afforded early white environmentalists the *luxury* of fighting for the preservation of wilderness and wildlife, and to promote public awareness of the importance of clean air and water. The burgeoning mainstream environmental struggle during the 1970s, however relevant it remains to the overall movement for a healthy environment, remains a privilege afforded to whites because of their race. For people of color during this period, interest in the natural environment was inextricably linked, and perhaps somewhat overshadowed by, the climate of the times which required energies and struggles be faced elsewhere and/or in different ways. And, perhaps as a result of these divergent environmental movements—and politically distinct perspectives—there has been a long held belief that people of color have less of an interest in the environment than do whites (Mohai, 2008; Taylor, 2008). While people of color communities and academics of environmental racism have continued to assert the absurdity of this misconception, it is only recently that it has made mainstream news. Results of a recent survey conducted by the University of Southern California and the *Los Angeles Times* revealed that Latinos and Asians

are more likely to be concerned with environmental hazards than are whites. Of the 1,689 adults surveyed, it was reported:

50% of Latinos and 46% of Asians who responded to the poll said they personally worry a great deal about global warming, compared with 27% of whites. Two-thirds of Latinos and 51% of Asians polled said they worry a great deal about air pollution, compared with 31% of whites. Similarly, 85% of Latinos and 79% of Asians said they worry a great or a fair amount about contamination of soil and water by toxic waste, compared with 71% of whites. (Sahagun, 2010)

Why does it matter which racial group is more concerned with the environment? It matters for a couple of different reasons. First, it matters primarily because it is reflective of race-based environmental injustice, which, in turn, is reflective of how racism is still very much present in our current society. Second, it illuminates the racial divide that continues to benefit whites at the expense of people of color. The lack of concern by white communities perhaps represents the privilege of not being faced with the imperative need to be concerned. More specifically, and again, this illuminates an instance of the privilege whites have to *choose* to participate in issues related to the environment. This privilege of *choice* about where to live, or even the privilege to choose whether or not to be concerned with the environment, is largely unavailable to targeted communities. The *decision* to engage in concerns regarding the environment by people and communities of color is grown out their struggle to attain equitable access to clean neighborhoods, and the right to good health. It is grown out of the fight to protect family members from environmental atrocities that cause illnesses such as lead poisoning, asthma, and cancer, to name a few. Quite simply, yet regrettably, the *decision* by people and



communities of color to be more concerned with issues of the environment is one grown out of necessity for survival. It is a necessity fostered out of the disproportionate rates of toxic poisons in the neighborhoods in which people of color already live, as well as the disproportionate rate in which these communities are targeted for future environmental abuses and contaminates. Bullard (2000) explains that many of the African American residents living in the Houston neighborhoods he was researching “had spent much of their lives escaping from waste sites, only to find waste-facility disputes following them to their new neighborhoods” (p. xv). The disparate burden of toxic hazards and wastes endured by communities of color illustrates a core example of environmental racism. And, the racially discriminatory practice—whether intentionally or unintentionally—of siting deadly environmental hazards and industrial facilities in people of color communities at alarming and disproportionate rates remains a persistent violation in the struggle for environmental justice. Although not named specifically in the *Times* article for what it is—environmental racism—evidence of race-based environmental injustice is clearly presented:

California has one of the nation's largest concentrations of minorities living near hazardous chemical wastes and air pollution produced by refineries, port operations, freeway traffic and railroads. An analysis of census data by researchers at four universities for the United Church of Christ showed that 1.2 million people in the greater Los Angeles area, 91% of them minorities, live less than two miles from facilities handling hazardous materials such as chrome-plating businesses and battery recycling centers. Latinos make up 37% of the state's population, Asians are 12.5%, whites are 41.5% and African Americans are 5.8%, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. African

Americans were included in the survey, but the number of people questioned was too low to analyze reliably. (Sahagun, 2010)

And, although estimations for the number of affected African American communities are not represented in the *Times* study, African American communities remain one of the most overrepresented groups in bearing the largest burden of the nation's wastes and life-threatening environmental hazards. This was the focus of Robert D. Bullard's book, *Dumping in Dixie* (2000). Bullard, an "environmental sociologist," focused his environmental justice research on the southern United States for two reasons (p. xv). First, because in the South, African Americans "make up the region's largest racial minority," and, after conducting a "study on the spatial location of all the municipal solid-waste disposal facilities in Houston," Bullard (1990, 1994, 2000) realized that the placement of waste sites in predominantly African American neighborhoods was in fact intentional. It was driven by race-based decision making. Second, Bullard (1990, 1994, 2000) wanted to research the "economic and political vulnerabilities" that resulted in African American communities being "routinely targeted for the siting of noxious facilities; locally unwanted land uses, or LULU's, and environmental hazards," revealing that "people in these communities, in turn, are likely to suffer greater environmental and health risks than in the general population" (p. xv). The evidence synthesized in the *Times* article, and the above mentioned scholarly literature, is that communities of color in the United States (and globally) whether Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian, or people of African decent, among other ethnic groups, have always been more concerned with the environment because historically and today, these communities disproportionately bear the burden of toxic wastes, environmental hazards, and inadequate access to environmental safety in comparison to whites

(Bullard, 1993; Bullard, 2000; Bullard, 2005; Bullard & Smith, 2005; Mohai, 2008; Santana, 2005; Taylor, 1993).

In 1987, the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice (UCC) published a report entitled: *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States*, in which the commission coined the phrase environmental racism (Bennet, 2004; Wise, 2003). Environmental racism, as understood by the UCC, speaks to specific incidents of environmental *injustice* (the toxic unloading and burden of poisonous chemicals and waste into the environment), which statistically occur with more prevalence in communities of color throughout the United States. Environmental hazards of this nature include sewage facilities; industrial manufacturing plants; industrial waste (large-scale incinerator) facilities; and garbage dumps (Bullard, 1990; Bullard, 1993; Bullard, 2000). And, as noted above, this list is by no means all-inclusive of the environmental hazards faced by poor people and communities of color in modern society. In, *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice After Hurricane Katrina*, Bullard and Wright (2009) offer a critical examination of the racialized “geographic vulnerability” of communities afflicted by natural disasters. The research pays special attention to the harm that occurs as the result of the negligence of the government in failing to protect vulnerable communities via preventative planning and maintenance of infrastructures, implementation of efficient crisis response times, provision of effective solutions during a crisis, and overall negligence in reparative efforts following such a disaster. Also focusing on the government’s negligence in preventative and aftermath efforts, Lavelle and Feagin (2006) draw emphasis to the regenerative dominant narrative that assumes that issues of class rather than issues of race are the roots of problem. Challenging this narrow discourse, Lavelle and Feagin (2006) argue that the two are inseparable:

To represent well the structure of New Orleans, or any urban area, one must look at the development of race and class there from past to present. We argue that race and class have always been used as tools by the white elite and have usually been supported by the white citizenry, first and foremost, to *maintain white supremacy and white privilege*. We view race and class as inextricably intertwined categories because of this country's centuries of racial oppression [Feagin, (2006)]. The reason the Katrina disaster seemed like a race issue was because it was. The reason it seemed like a class issue was because it was. In reality, race and class are deeply intertwined in New Orleans primarily because of a long history of well-institutionalized *racism*. (p. 53; emphasis original)

The argument highlights the complex ways that social identities (i.e., race, class, gender, and so forth) impact one another. It also highlights that when aiming to disrupt any form of systemic oppression, it is crucial to clearly identify the individual factors at play. Clearly identifying race as a social construct, and the kaleidoscopic ways this manifests to enable racially oppressive systems is necessary to understanding the phenomenon of environmental racism. Therefore, it is necessary to frame our understanding of environmental racism by defining a few of the central constructs (race/racism) and systems (white privilege and institutional racism) that are responsible for both creating and regenerating this phenomenon.

### **A Working Definition of Racism**

Defining racism is no simple task. A singular definition of racism—one that effectively incorporates the breadth and depth of its inherent complexities—is not readily accessible. For the purpose of this research, this study will utilize a definition of racism that has been operationalized by the Racial Justice Working Group of The National Council of Churches

(1984). This definition of racism would eventually inform the landmark 1987 report by the UCC, which named the phenomenon *environmental racism*. Their definition of racism states:

Racism is the intentional or unintentional use of power to isolate, separate and exploit others. This use of power is based on a belief in superior racial origin, identity or supposed racial characteristics. Racism confers certain privileges on and defends the dominant group, which in turn sustains and perpetuates racism. Both consciously and unconsciously, racism is enforced and maintained by the legal, cultural, religious, educational, economic, political, environmental, and military institutions of societies. Racism is more than just a personal attitude: it is the institutional form of the attitude. (Chavis, 1984)

In addition there are different forms of racism and multiple ways in which it is enacted in everyday life. Acknowledging the scholarly research that has long drawn connections between environmental racism and the larger sociopolitical structures in play, and accenting the argument put forth by Lavelle and Feagin (2006) that environmental injustice affects people along race and class lines, a discussion of the different forms of racism and some of the ways it can be enacted will help to better structure our understanding of environmental racism.

The most commonly acknowledged form of racism is individual racism, which describes the discriminatory-fueled beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of individuals stemming from a deeply constructed belief that whites are racially superior (Sue, 2005). Sue (2005) draws attention to the fact that while individual racism is the most widely *understood* form of racism, understandings are often very narrow. Sue (2005) clarifies that what is often *not* understood about this form of racism is that such beliefs, attitudes and behaviors can and do exist both consciously and

unconsciously, and are enacted both intentionally and unintentionally (Sue, 2005, p. 103-105). A second form, institutional racism, refers to the policies and practices of institutions that privilege those belonging to the dominant racial (white) category. Because environmental racism remains a unique form of institutional racism a more detailed discussion of institutional racism will be provided below. The third form, cultural racism, assumes white cultural standards and characteristics to be “normal,” and in turn, people of color are socially expected to aspire to these cultural standards, and are measured against these characteristics. Cultural racism is continually regenerated through institutional means such as media and education. According to Sue (2005):

Cultural racism is the superordinate umbrella that influences and allows individual and institutional racism to flourish (Sue, 2001a). Cultural racism is the individual and institutional expression of the superiority of one group’s cultural heritage over another. The belief that one group’s history, way of life, religion, arts and crafts, language, values, and traditions are superior to others makes up this particular category. [...] Our history is replete with examples of cultural racism where our nation attempted to tame the West, civilize heathens, and change the so-called primitive cultures of other groups. Note the superior and inferior dichotomy used in these historical actions. (p. 103-104)

While each form of racism is inherently present in the others, an in depth discussion of race and racism is beyond the scope of this research. Readers are encouraged, however, to deepen their understanding of the complexity of race and racial formation in the United States, because, as we are reminded by Miller & Garran (2008):

“None of us is a bystander in a society structured by racism. We either benefit from it or suffer the consequences of it, or, in some instances, we do both. When we say “benefit,”

we are referring to the unearned privileges that white people have in American society as a result of racism. But ultimately racism hurts and degrades us all, even those with race privilege.” (p. 2)

### **The Relevance of Institutional Racism**

As it has been identified that environmental racism is a unique form of institutional racism, a working definition of institutional racism is necessary to frame this study. Because it offers the most succinct description of institutional racism, Jones’ (1997) definition, as cited by Sue (2005) will be utilized here:

Institutional racism is any organization policy, practice, and structure in government, business, unions, schools, churches, courts, and law enforcement agencies by which decisions are made as to unfairly subordinate persons of color while allowing other groups to profit from such actions. Examples include housing patterns, segregated schools, discriminatory employment and promotion policies, racial profiling, inequity in healthcare, segregated churches, and educational curricula that ignore and distort the history of minorities. (p. 104)

Several forms of institutional racism intersect with and increase experiences of environmental racism including perilous and unregulated housing practices, segregated housing and neighborhoods (residential racism), lack of economic opportunities (economic injustice), ineffective or nonexistent public transportation, and freeways and industrial infrastructures cited in existing neighborhoods, to name a few. All of these disproportionately affect poor communities and communities of color (Bullard, 1993; Bullard, 2000; Bullard, 2004; Miller & Garran, 2008; Momeni, 1987; Pulido, 2000). As stated, each of these types of institutional racism

operates independently from the other but also have an interdependent relationship (Miller & Garran, 2008). Miller and Garran (2008) describe this complex interwoven relationship as the “web of institutional racism” (Miller & Garran, 2008, pp. 65-66); in turn, this *web* can compound the level of stress experienced by people living in afflicted communities (Boyd-Franklin, 2008).

Acknowledging that environmental racism extends beyond toxins and chemicals, and recognizing that its pervasiveness becomes more deeply entrenched through government negligence and ill preparedness, these phenomena are further impacted by policies and practices that outright neglect to stop the poisoning of people—specifically, in communities of color—in the first place (Bullard, 1994; 1999; 2000; 2005; 2007; Bullard & Wright, 2009; Wise, 2003). Lack of political leadership and/or representation by people of color at the local and national levels results in significant exploitation of targeted communities (Bullard, 2005). This represents a core component in the proliferation of the injustice.

Environmental racism is racial discrimination in environmental policymaking. It is racial discrimination in the enforcement of regulations and laws. It is racial discrimination in the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste disposal and the siting of polluting industries. It is racial discrimination in the sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in communities of color. And, it is racial discrimination in the history of excluding people of color from the mainstream environmental groups, decisionmaking boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies.

(Chavis, 1993a, p. 3)

It is important to take pause here, and consider that this form of institutional racism is an issue of life and death (Chavis, 1993b, p. xii). In their critical analysis of the interrelated relationship



between various, yet interconnected, types of institutional racism, Miller & Garran (2008)

articulate:

Although all forms of institutional racism are abhorrent, two particularly insidious forms of institutional racism are environmental racism and health racism. Together, they expose people of color to greater health risks; injuring, hurting, and maiming their bodies and spirits; depleting and devastating their communities; and abrogating life chances—a graphic reminder that racism literally kills people. (p. 73)

The critical importance of exposing and eradicating this particular form of institutional racism cannot be understated, and as such, has served as the impetus for environmental justice research (and the activism of the environmental justice movement) that has informed scholars for more than three decades. Scholarly literature documenting the presence and prevalence of environmental racism holds that a core purpose of such research and action is to incite social change and increase the prevention and/or treatment of short- and long-term effects of such hazards on peoples' physical and psychological health, and wellbeing (Bullard, 2005; Pulido, 2000; Taylor, 2008). Notably, however, much of the efforts of research thus far have been directed at producing studies that outline the existence and prevalence of environmental racism. And without question, it has and continues to represent an imperative need in a racist society that incessantly denies its own transgressions. This point of analysis serves as an underlying aim of this study, which is to broaden current discourse of considerations regarding the psychological impact of environmental racism on individuals. A discussion of possible psychological outcomes of life experiences inflicted by environmental racism will be discussed in the chapter on trauma

theory. First, we continue with an exploration of the systemic racial oppression sourced by institutional racism by focusing on the system of privilege it maintains.

### **The Relevance of White Privilege**

As suggested in the above argument of Lavelle and Feagin (2006), white privilege and institutional racism are inextricably linked to one another. To reiterate, the *institutions*—the organizations, the established laws and/or practices, and the structural social systems—are organized and operated to benefit those with more cultural, social, or political power. In the United States, when considering race, those who benefit from these privileges are whites. More specifically, every institution—at times intentionally, at other times unintentionally, and sometimes through a combination of both—affords privileges to dominant society by way of institutional racism. Institutional racism “encompasses neighborhoods and housing, education, employment, upward mobility, environment and health, mental health, racism within the criminal justice system, political racism, and media racism” (Miller & Garran, 2008, p. 66). In her well-respected article, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (1990), Peggy McIntosh, outlined a list of privileges that can be “taken for granted” by whites because they are unaware they are receiving them. This offers an important dimension to our understanding of privilege specifically as it relates to the quality of the environments in which people live. One example of the many environmental privileges afforded to white Americans leads us to reflect on the historical and current element of choice regarding where we choose to live, the choice of whether or not to participate in environmental activism, as well as the underlying privilege that exists in perceiving environmentalism as a cause aimed at protection of wilderness rather than one of human rights.

Also influential in framing our understanding of white privilege and its relevance to our discussion of environmental racism is Pulido's (2000), article: *Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California*. In this article, Pulido, a geographer, asserts that historically geographic literature was limited through its simplistic view of the ways racism is enacted on individuals, and through societal systems. In response, Pulido (2000) addressed this academic oversight by presenting a more comprehensive discourse revealing the complexities of racism, and the "range of racist motives that exist" in determining the neighborhoods and natural environments in which people live (p. 15). Included in Pulido's (2000) argument was the recognition that academic research, more often than not, operates from a narrow lens that focuses only on racist *intent* rather than considering the "[...] role of structural and hegemonic forms of racism in contributing to such inequalities" (p. 12). Pulido (2000) contends that while a significant body of work on environmental racism operates from the theoretical basis of the relevance of institutional racism, and this standpoint is reflected in the literature (Bryant & Mohai, 1992; Kreig, 1998; Taylor, 1993), few of the articles focus attention on the threads that weave the functionally dysfunctional systems together. This is not to say that such a perspective was left out of the discussion altogether. For instance, Pulido (2000) recognizes that Bullard (1990) had long been discussing the role of "structural" (institutional) racism in his academic research on the topic. Further, it should be noted, that Bullard (1990, 1993, 2000, 2007) has remained meticulous in his efforts to openly discuss how "white racism," in all its forms and functions of exclusion, exists at the core of all race-based environmental injustice. Expounding on this position, Pulido's (2000) article was the first to flesh out the relevance of "white privilege" in the occurrence of environmental racism. Pulido's (2000) paramount contribution was successful in bridging the discourse of environmental racism to

existing social science research that was considering the impact of institutional racism in the contexts of historical, social and political facets of current society.

Pulido (2000) focused her research efforts on the metropolitan city of Los Angeles. And, with respect to the recent estimates of toxic—and deadly—environmental threats faced by people of color communities throughout Los Angeles, her research, which was completed more than ten years ago, was both necessary and commendable. Her recognition of both the struggles being faced and fought by affected communities in the *City of Angles*, and her focus on the intricate facets of the larger social structure(s) that produce such outcomes, has provided the context upon which this research will build. Following the trajectory established by Pulido's (2000) work, this research attempts to extend the discussion to the national struggle and enhance the discourse by exploring ways in which the social work profession can address both the social injustice and individual suffering sourced by environmental racism. As well, it promotes effective opportunities for healing both the individual suffering and the societal ills that result from this form of racism. As a society, it is imperative that we acknowledge, with integrity, the ways in which our society has been structured to benefit some at the perilous expense of others. Equally, this acknowledgment should not engender an apathy or complacency. Contrarily, our acknowledgment of the reality of environmental racism is meant to incite collective resistance that demands that environmental justice be understood as an issue of civil and human rights.

### **The Environmental Justice Movement**

The environmental justice movement has been actively combating issues of environmental injustice, and specifically environmental racism, for more than three decades. Bullard (1993) explains that many of its initial activists had been part of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and as such, were already politically and socially positioned to

understand that the issue is one of civil and human rights. Most telling, however, is that the movement emerged out of a dire necessity to combat environmental hazards that threatened the overall health and quality of life of children, families, friends and neighbors (Bullard, 1994; Bullard, 2000; Bullard, Mohai, Saha, & Wright, 2007), in the communities in which these activists lived. Motivated by this central cause, the environmental justice movement confronts the disproportionate burden of environmental hazards that affect both communities of color, as well as poor people from all races, ethnicities and cultures, and on a global scale. The environmental justice movement operates at the intersection of race and class; and central to its effectiveness is the recognition that the movement will grow strength and sustain its longevity by building coalitions of diverse communities of color (and allied groups) who reject dominant political paradigms that essentially undermine the value of humanity. The collective identity and collective resistance of these individual yet socially and politically aligned members of the environmental justice community are also effective because they are able to confront issues that affect people personally at the local level, while also having an impact at the national (and international) level.

Activist groups of color are waging grass-roots environmental campaigns all over the country. Although they are only informally connected, these campaigns reflect certain shared characteristics and goals. The activity of activists of color is indicative of a grass-roots movement that occupies a distinctive position relative to both the mainstream movement and the white grass-roots environmental movement. The environmental justice movement is antielitist and antiracist. It capitalizes on the social and cultural differences of people of color as it cautiously builds alliances with whites and persons of the middle class. It is both fiercely environmental *and* conscious of the need for economic

development in economically disenfranchised communities. Most distinctive of all, this movement has been extremely outspoken in challenging the integrity and bona fides of mainstream establishment environmental organizations (Austin & Schill, 1994, p. 57).

The *antielitist*, but specifically, the *antiracist* foundational values that inform the collective movement highlight a key aim of this study: to challenge dominant narratives and dominant approaches to healing that disregard the subjective experiences of those suffering—both physically and psychologically—from environmental racism. This study acknowledges that: “The discussion of environmental justice is not a philosophical debate, although we do need to question the philosophical ethos that allows a society to participate in its own destruction” (Chavis, 1993, p. xii).

To better understand the effects of environmental racism on one’s psychological health and wellbeing, the following chapter will examine the case for race-based traumatic stress. First, however, the chapter will situate the discussion of race-based traumatic stress within the larger context of trauma theory. Doing so will help to build the basis for discussion regarding approaches to healing aspects of race-based traumas that are sourced by incidents and experiences of environmental racism.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Trauma Theory and Race-Based Traumatic Stress**

The study of trauma is complex. This is due in part to the complexity involved in ascertaining what causes trauma, what constitutes as trauma, the various ways and degrees in which trauma is experienced, and the complex way in which trauma affects some while sparing others. Additionally, like all knowledge, the forum that both generates and disseminates the information that leads us to know what we know about any given subject bears weight on its ability and accuracy to capture the multidimensional layers of the human experience; the study of trauma is no different. The dynamics of the sociohistorical and sociopolitical contexts from which the definition of trauma has been negotiated and renegotiated throughout history plays a significant role in how we as professionals make sense of peoples' exposure to and experience of trauma, and our evaluation of traumatic incidents and events (Basham, 2008). But these same dynamics—the sociohistorical and sociopolitical factors that shape our meaning and definition of trauma—can also determine who bears the weight of traumatic experiences. Consider for a moment the context that leads to the trauma experienced by soldiers of war, abused women and children, or people living in poverty who lack the resources and opportunity to protect themselves against natural disasters like that of Hurricane Katrina. Social and individual identity such as race, class, gender, religious affiliation, and sexual orientation, at specific moments and places in history and at present, also serve to inform a person's exposure to and experience of trauma (Basham, 2008). Consider the brutal and forcible colonization of America and the lasting effects this has had on Native people; the brutal legacy of Slavery, Jim Crow laws, and nationally

enforced segregation; domestic abuse and sexual violence against women that went unacknowledged for centuries; and hate crimes committed against ethnic and religious Jews, Muslims, and those committed against gays and lesbians (Basham, 2008; Herman, 1997). These represent only a few of the examples of outwardly violent forms of oppression—both, past and present—in American culture. The kaleidoscopic dimensions of what constitutes trauma, how it is experienced at an individual, group and community level, and how we then proceed to prevent it and heal from it is dependent on our critical social awareness of these intricately entwined layers of the human experience.

As mental health professionals, and as social workers committed to ethical practices of social justice, it is imperative that we continue seek a conscientious understanding of what trauma is, what factors the experience of trauma are rooted in, how and why it impacts individuals differently, as well as how and why some individuals and communities may be more susceptible to trauma than others. To do this, however, requires that we also maintain flexibility in our willingness to not rigidly subscribe to a fixed academic or medical definition of trauma and traumatic experience. The following chapter will seek to present historical underpinnings that inform the current study of trauma theory. This presentation, however, is limited by the narrow frame from which trauma has historically been viewed. While efforts by academics and medical professionals continue to reveal and disseminate the detailed nuances of trauma and traumatic experience, a critical reframing of the historical underpinnings that serve to inform our collective knowledge is necessary. More specifically, this includes consideration of the distinct ways that race and racism impact exposure to and experiences of trauma for people of color in the United States. Many scholars have already pushed for this shift in the trauma paradigm (Allen, 1996; Bryant-Davis, 2007; Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Carter, 2007; Daniel, 1994;



Manson, Beals, O’Neill, Piasecki, Betchold, Keane, & Jones, 1996; Scurfield & Mackey, 2001; Spanierman & Poteat, 2005; Speight, 2007; Thompson-Miller & Feagin, 2007; Utsey, Payne, Jackson, & Jones, 2002), among others. Therefore, this research will attempt to synthesize these histories. This will be done by first providing a brief history of the rise and transformation of trauma theory. Providing the historical context of trauma theory will help to situate trauma and traumatic experience within its current definition. Next, a review of the academic literature that seeks to expand our understanding of trauma to include the racialized experiences of people of color living in a racist society will be presented. Given that this research attempts to explore how trauma theory can help us to better understand environmental racism and its effect on individuals, a more descriptive discussion of race-based traumatic stress will be provided. This will be accomplished by situating the reader in the discussion with a definition of race-based traumatic stress. Following, a discussion of how experiences of race-based traumatic stress are rooted in cultural and institutional racism as discussed in chapter three will be presented. Further, a consideration of internalized racism as a source of race-based traumatic stress will also be reviewed. Finally, and in keeping with the research-at-hand, a consideration of the similarities and distinctions of environmental racism as a form of institutional racism, and as a source of race-based traumatic stress will be presented.

### **A Brief History and Definition: Psychological Trauma**

The academic study of trauma emerged in the nineteenth century. During this period, formative interpretations of trauma were focused on exploring physical symptoms believed to be representative of physical illness. Toward the latter part of the century, theorists such as Janet, Freud, and Breuer understood these physical symptoms instead to have a psychological—an *unconscious*—etiology (Basham, 2008; Herman, 1997). Following this shift, aspirations to reveal

the deeper role of the unconscious in people's lives became a central focus of trauma theory; as well, it mapped the trajectory of the study of trauma for the next two centuries:

Both Janet and Freud recognized that the somatic symptoms of hysteria represented disguised representations of intensely distressing events which had been banished from memory. Janet described his hysterical patients as governed by "subconscious fixed ideas," the memories of traumatic events. Breuer and Freud, in an immortal summation, wrote "hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences." (Herman, 1997, pp. 12)

This discovery also encouraged treatment to focus on buried traumatic experiences through the patient's narrative exploration of the traumatic incidents or events that served as precipitating factors of physical symptoms; this would commonly become referred to as the "talking cure" (Herman, 1997). Still, ideas about what constituted a traumatic experience continued to center around the implications of physical impact and injury too incomprehensible for the mind to process, and therefore, memory of such trauma would bury itself at the unconscious level. The First World War elicited a further exploration of the physical manifestations of psychologically encapsulated traumatic experiences by medical professionals concerned with treating traumatized soldiers of war. This exploration of "war neurosis" was central to early trauma work by Sándor Ferenczi, who began to make distinctions among the physical reactions in terms of their respective representations of the moment of traumatic impact. More specifically, Frankel (1996), who chronicled Ferenczi's extensive work on trauma, recognizes that like his contemporaries, Ferenczi theorized trauma to be physical responses to a traumatic event:

This idea of traumatic neurosis as directly reflecting impulses that cannot find discharge, rather than reflecting conflict, is consistent both with Breuer and Freud's (1893-1895) earlier hypothesis that hysteria resulted from actions to trauma that have not been abreacted, as well as with the earlier work of Janet, who proposed that the traumatized person continually seeks to complete the action that the shock interrupted but is unable to do so (Ellenberger, 1970, p.384; van der Hart, 1994). (p. 42)

Frankel (1996) notes, however, that Ferenczi also theorized about a second type of war neurosis—one that focused on the residual effects of trauma that resulted in diminished self-esteem and a “shattered” sense of confidence in previously self-confident soldiers (p. 42). This work was successful in reaching beyond the boundaries of previous trauma discourse that was mainly concerned with interpretations of the physical manifestations of various types of trauma. Additionally, it informed Ferenczi's future work investigating the effects of psychological development of children who had suffered physical and/or sexual abuse by a parent. Ferenczi addressed both the necessary role that adaptation played in the abused child's survival and development, as well as the traumatic stress caused by the other nonviolent, but instead, apathetic or negligent parent who does nothing to confront the child's abuser and/or protect the child from future abuse (Frankel, 1996). Ferenczi observed that in both situations—the adaptation to abuse for survival, and the effects of the negligent, apathetic parent—there was an element of mental “power” that the perpetrator had over the child, and that this power contributed significantly to the child's experience of trauma. Ultimately, “what had begun as an exploration of the psychological effects of sudden physical shocks led to [Ferenczi's] discovery that one person's power over another can have similar consequences” (Frankel, 1996, p. 46). The

significance of this finding should be noted: Conceptualizing traumatic stress as a response that can be induced in an individual through systems of psychological power or dominance—inflicted by a person, group, or political entity—largely informs our current understanding of the deeply intricate nature of traumatic experiences and as will be presented in this research, includes those derived through racialized systems of dominance. However, until recently, with the focus of research on race-based traumatic stress, trauma literature has not been reflective of this understanding. Ferenczi’s theory of power and dominance as a source of traumatic stress, however, remains a crucial aspect of the progression of trauma theory. This progression of trauma theory, with its explorations and understandings of “war neurosis,” continued to influence an understanding of trauma through the Second World War but, for the most part, it remained peripheral research.

Trauma theory took up permanent residence in broader social consciousness in the 1970s through a confluence of the necessity to treat the influx of traumatized soldiers returning from the Vietnam War and growing public awareness of domestic violence. During this period, mental health clinicians sought ways to treat the mental health concerns of Vietnam War veterans whose physiological and psychological response to the atrocities of war echoed the narratives of the physical and emotional suffering experienced by Holocaust survivors and their children (one aspect of the effects of intergenerational trauma), long after the end of the Second World War (Basham, 2008; Herman, 1997; van der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996). At this same time, collective efforts of the feminist movement enjoined the national conscience to take notice and carry out preventative efforts to curb domestic violence being inflicted on women and children (Basham, 2008; Herman, 1997). The cumulative impact of these social events revived medical interest in deepening the clinical understanding and categorization of trauma. In 1980, in the revised

publication of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition* (DSM-III), descriptive categories of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder were added (Basham, 2008; Friedman & Marsella, 1996). Since then, the definition of trauma has been expanded and redefined, and specific nuances of the causes and experiences of trauma continue to be meticulously explored in an effort to broaden our understanding of the complexity of trauma as an experience that is inherent in the human experience.

Although here the chronology of trauma may read as a fluid evolution of medical research and definition, many scholars acknowledge that, historically, there is a tendency for the study of trauma to be lost in the periphery for significant periods of time (Basham, 2008; Herman, 1997; Scaer, 2005; van der Kolk and McFarlane, 1996). In Judith Herman's influential and moving body of work, *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), she contends:

The study of psychological trauma has a curious history—one of episodic amnesia. Periods of active investigation have alternated with episodes of oblivion. [...] This intermittent amnesia is not the result of the ordinary changes in fashion that affect any intellectual pursuit. The study of psychological trauma does not languish for lack of interest. Rather, the subject provokes such intense controversy that it periodically becomes anathema. The study of psychological trauma has repeatedly led into realms of the unthinkable and foundered on fundamental questions of belief. (p. 7)

Herman (1997) posits that academic lulls in the study of trauma reflect society's resistance to confronting the unsettling reality of the atrocity of trauma. Herman explains this can happen in two different ways: First, the perpetrator's rejection of "accountability" is enabled through the vehicles of "silence" and "secrecy," and, should those attempts to disown responsibility for the

assault fail, the perpetrator seeks to discredit the victim (p. 8). Although Herman (1997) neglects to ever mention race or the effects of racism as a form of trauma, these same tenets of rejection of responsibility and attempts to discredit can be applied to incidents of race-based traumatic stress. Perhaps the most enduring phase of *anathema* reflects dominant society's unwillingness to recognize ongoing, insidious forms of racism. It is not uncommon for people of color to be told they are being "too sensitive" or "paranoid" regarding incidents of racism—most specifically, when those incidents are covert forms of cultural and/or institutional racism. The second reason for academic lulls, as proposed by Herman (1997) is the sheer overwhelming responsibility inherent in acknowledging the source of someone's reported trauma. Herman articulates this complexity by recognizing that at times it is difficult to face the horrific nature of a traumatic event because it requires the bystander to "take sides." In taking sides, essentially, there is an acceptance of some responsibility for the horrific even that just occurred:

To study psychological trauma is to come face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature. To study psychological trauma means bearing witness to horrible events. When the events are natural disasters or 'acts of God,' those who bear witness sympathize readily with the victim. But when the traumatic events are of human design, those who bear witness are caught in the conflict between victim and perpetrator. It is morally impossible to remain neutral in this conflict. (Herman, 1997, p. 7)

Unfortunately, the racially constructed United States social and political structures (of human design) have, in fact, fostered an immoral race-*neutrality*—one that continues to deny the validity of the subjective experiences of people of color. This race-neutral perspective is evident

in Herman's eloquent and detailed study of trauma and trauma recovery, which neglected to ever mention race or racism. An example of this is Herman's (1997) assertion that, "three times over the past century, a particular form of psychological trauma has surfaced into public consciousness. Each time investigation of that trauma has flourished in affiliation with a political movement" (p. 9). Herman attributes these political movements to be: Hysteria associated with the political republican, anticlerical movement; shell shock and combat neurosis following World War I through the Vietnam War era, which ultimately gave rise to the antiwar movement; and finally, the feminist movement which brought forth recognition of sexual and domestic violence as trauma (p. 9).

Many scholars have taken issue with Herman's historical account of our understanding of trauma because it omits and silences the lived experiences of people of color, and attempts to draw definitive historical frame based only on dominant cultures historical presence. A reframing of the historical context will elucidate these concerns.

### **Reframing the Historical Context**

In direct response to Herman's (1997) explanation of our current understanding of psychological trauma as the "synthesis of these three separate lines of investigation" (p. 9), as well as Herman's lack of awareness regarding the racialized traumatic experiences of people of color, Daniel (1994) challenges the lack of "ethics" applied when a historical account of psychological trauma in the United States neglects to include the narratives of people of color—both the race-based trauma inflicted through de jure and de facto law and governance, as well as the grassroots political movements that arose to combat such oppressions:

A summary of psychological traumas and their affiliative political movements over the past century is incoherent without the inclusion of: (a) racism as a form of psychological

trauma and the Civil Rights movement as the associated political movement, and (b) political, cultural, and economic oppression as psychological trauma associated with colonization and political movements expressed through the formation of independent nations throughout the world (e.g., the dissolution of the European colonial empires as the political component). (p. 230)

Intersections of race, gender and class bear heavily on our definition of trauma as well. Because the potential for the occurrence of psychological trauma is dependent on one person's power over another, oppression in all its forms is a factor. However, the impact of intersecting, oppressed identities can intensify the prevalence and experience of trauma. Allen (1996) and Daniel (1994) question the validity of Herman's historical account of violence against women because, again, it lacks any discussion of race. Allen (1996) notes that historical intersections of racialized and gendered stereotypes are intricately woven through dominant narratives of white males who have sought (and seek) to maintain their grip on power.

It is not possible to understand the violence against women in this society without considering race. One justification for the subjugation of European American women has been their presumed need for protection from the African American man (see Kovel's, *The Fantasies of Race*, 1995). (Allen, 1996, p. 232)

Daniel (1994) expounds on the discussion by detailing the lack of historical narratives of people of color, and of women, and by highlighting the ways that Herman's work reinforces dominant narratives and ascribed stereotypes by regenerating Eurocentric cultural, political and historical perspectives to be its starting point for discussing trauma, both by revising history and by neglecting crucial aspects of history altogether.



The contents of *Trauma and Recovery* fail to foster (a) integrity, due to the revisionist portrayal of history; (b) respect for people's rights and dignity, due to an inappropriate emphasis on the stereotype and lack of attention to the intersection of race, gender, and class in the case of rape; and (c) social responsibility, due to the miseducation of readers about the connection of psychological trauma and political movements. (Daniel, 1994, p. 235)

While a detailed discussion of a historical conceptualization of trauma that incorporates the complex entanglement of race and gender—so eloquently explicated in Daniel's response—reaches beyond the scope of this research, her arguments cannot be left out altogether. Daniel's discussion provides a broader and more accurate base of knowledge from which our definition of trauma can be authored. Readers who draw an understanding and knowledge about *trauma* and *recovery* from Herman's definitive body of work are encouraged to utilize Daniel's reframe in its entirety as a starting point for reconceptualizing their understanding of the history of trauma in the United States. Other scholars speak to this need as well (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005a, 2005b; Daniel, 1994, 2000; Spanierman & Poteat, 2005). Each draws attention to the Eurocentric lens from which the current definition of psychological trauma has been authored. The work of these scholars reminds us that while current and extensive literature on trauma theory has stretched our capacity to recognize and address specific symptoms and manifestations of trauma, these understandings are all framed by the subjective experiences of dominant society.

Traditional definitions of trauma emerge from a narrow view about what trauma is and is not; therefore, our knowledge of the trauma (and other mental health) experiences of diverse groups is necessarily truncated. Because we are primed to view the constructs we

investigate through the lenses of our social and formal learning, we may not even have the language yet to describe what these groups experience. (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005a, p. 576)

Further, if our capacity to recognize and accept evolving definitions of trauma has historically been garnered through social movements, we need to consider how current social movements—such as the environmental justice movement—can deepen our current understanding and broaden the definition of trauma. This discussion of this will be further explicated in Chapter Six. Reframing the historical context elucidates the need for race-based traumatic stress to be both incorporated into, as well as exist independently and distinctly from the larger theory of trauma. Before discussing this trend in race-based trauma research and literature, a working definition of race-based traumatic stress will be provided.

### **Race-Based Traumatic Stress**

As suggested in its name, race-based traumatic stress refers specifically to stress and/or trauma that can occur because of one's oppressed racial identity. Reflective of the discussion in Chapter Three regarding racial construction in the United States, when referring to racism we are referring to white racism, and we are speaking about the deleterious effects of racism in the lives of people of color. Experiences of race-based traumatic stress, therefore, refer to single incidents, and/or the cumulative effects overtime, of racialized incidents perpetrated by whites or systems of whiteness (i.e., cultural and institutional) against people of color. To better ground our discussion, we will utilize the definition of race-based traumatic stress articulated by Bryant-Davis (2007):

(a) an emotional injury that is motivated by hate or fear of a person or a group of people as a result of their race; (b) a racially motivated stressor that overwhelms a person's capacity to cope; (c) a racially motivated, interpersonal severe stressor that causes bodily harm or threatens one's life integrity; or (d) a severe or interpersonal or institutional stressor motivated by racism that causes fear, helplessness, or horror (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Carter, 2007; Loo et al., 2001). (p. 135-136)

Researchers of race-based trauma continue to work to carve out a space within the larger discourse on trauma that addresses the specific ways that racism causes and is experienced as, trauma. Consideration has been given to the ways that both overt and covert forms of racism may result in psychological trauma (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005a, 2005b; Neville & Carter, 2005; Spanierman & Poteat, 2005; Speight, 2007). Identifying the distinctions between trauma that results from overt forms of individual racism and the cumulative and compounded traumatic effects of covert forms of cultural, institutional, internalized, horizontal and intergenerational racism that occur on a daily basis, and over a lifetime, has prompted dialogue about trauma definitions and trauma diagnosis. Researchers have sought to examine whether current definitions and criteria for establishing a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder already suggest incidents of race-based traumatic stress, or whether a more accurate approach would be to formulate independent categories and definitions for incidents of race-based traumatic stress. This discussion has influenced the trajectory of race-based traumatic stress research. Through his seminal body of work, Carter (2007) conducts a thorough and meticulous exploration of "what specific aspects of racism are related to emotional and psychological harm given a person's unique way of responding and coping with such experiences" (p. 14). Cautious that an adaptation

of the current designations of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder would only lead to the pathologization of people of color who experience stress and traumatic stress as a result of racism, Carter (2007), referencing Carter and Helms (2002), formulates a classification system to address the unique nuances of race-related stressors as follows: *racial discrimination*, *racial harassment*, and *discriminatory harassment* (p. 76-79). Carter (2007) asserts, “The rationale for unpacking racism is to reduce some of the ambiguity associated with various kinds of race-based experiences” (p. 75).

Conversely, Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2005b) highlight the ways that various incidents of racism mirror current forms of “acknowledged traumas.” The authors explored the ways that incidents of racism compare to incidents of rape and domestic violence. Discussion of these traumas *parallels* included considerations of: *effects; survivor responses; secondary trauma responses; consequences for perpetrators; and societal responses* (p. 487-494). Through this comparison, the authors highlight that “similar to rape and domestic violence, racist incidents are the problem and are the root of the disorder [...]” (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005b, p. 486). By providing a thorough comparison, Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2005b) lay a solid foundational argument that supports the case for expanding current notions of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to include racist-incident based traumatic stressors. Additionally, and in reflection of the inherent complexities of doing trauma research, Bryant-Davis (2007) offers clarification that:

While trauma and PTSD are not synonymous, researchers and counselors often merge the two, assuming that a person has only experienced a trauma if, as is noted in the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, he or she has experienced a physical violation. This view of trauma is unnecessarily narrow and disregards the severity of such stressors as *nonphysical*

violation experiences of sexual harassment, partner/spousal abuse, and racist incidents.  
(p. 137)

The prevalence of *nonphysical* incidents of racism that may result in trauma remains a salient and organizing concept in reconceptualizing trauma theory. Emanating from this discussion, mental health professionals, concerned with race-based trauma, have forged discourse around the *multidimensionality* of trauma resulting from racism (Harrell, 2000; Speight, 2007). Specifically as it relates to environmental racism, nonphysical traumatic incidents can stem from several different types of psychological assaults. Examples of one dimension include the psychological suffering associated with grief relating to poor health of self or loved one's; stress, anxiety, and/or depression instigated by society's overall apathy or collective denial of the harmful effects of racism, as well as the complete lack of awareness and/or apathetic response regarding the civil and human rights violations around environmental issues that people of color face on a daily basis, and, "[...] the psychological and social disruption caused by fear of an industrial accident or the chronic threat of pollution from a landfill or incinerator (Bailey, Alley, Faupel, & Solheim, p. 35), among other causes.

Relative to this discussion is that individuals exposed to environmental racism are burdened by multiple and simultaneous risks and/or experiences of trauma that compromise both physical and psychological health. This point emphasizes a distinction between environmentally rooted race-based traumatic stress and other forms of race-based stress because in the case of environmental racism, the physical threat or illness is the cause of the trauma, whereas other experiences of race-based traumatic stress would instead be the cause of physical illness. In like manner, this distinction also underscores the ways environmental racism is both a form of and

distinct from other forms of institutional racism. Boyd-Franklin (2008) articulates the compounded nature of race-based traumas sourced by environmental racism with a harrowing reflection of the events of Hurricane Katrina:

There has been an ongoing debate within the mental health field as to whether racism can qualify as a cause for posttraumatic stress disorder (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Kelly, 2006). For thousands of African Americans clinging to rooftops for rescue, attempting to find safety themselves by navigating treacherous waters strewn with bodies, and left with no food and water for days in the Superdome and Convention Center, there is no such debate. Hurricane Katrina stands as a vivid example of the double trauma that can occur during disaster situations for African Americans and other people of color: (1) the disaster-related traumas of loss of life, loss of home and community, physical dislocation, and separation from loved ones; and (2) a second level of trauma caused by the effects of racism and poverty. (p. 344)

Culturally competent trauma research has made clear that oppression stemming from an individual's or group's racial identity can result in race-based trauma, and that the trauma experienced has multiple dimensions. An added dimension of race-based trauma that is especially relevant to the current study is internalized racism. Speight (2007) states "Internalized racism is all about the cultural imperialism, the domination, the structure, the normalcy of the 'way things are' in our racialized society" (p. 129). This could be particularly dangerous when considering environmental racism, because the acceptance of the "way things are" could inhibit a person and/or community from seeking environmental justice. Additionally, while there is an epidemic of collective denial by dominant society regarding existing racism—and the trauma it

causes—internalized racism can cloud the perspective of a person of color, causing a denial on some level about racism and its insidious effects (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005a; hooks, 1995; Sanchez-Hucles & Jones, 2005; Speight, 2007; Sue, 2005). In turn, this can lead a person of color to judge self or other persons of color harshly about unrecognized experiences of racial subjugation. Bullard (2005) notes “The internalization of negative feelings, images, stereotypes, prejudices, myths, and misinformation promoted by the racist system contributes to self-doubt and mistrust within and among other groups of people of color” (p. 33). Specifically as it relates to environmental racism, internalized negative feelings or harsh self-judgment might arise around the idea that a parent of color is unable to provide a more environmentally safe neighborhood for their children to live and play in, for instance. Yet, the historical, political and social contexts that inhibit that privilege might not fully be recognized. As it relates to the environmental justice movement, Padilla (2001), as is quoted in Bullard (2005), explains:

“[...] patterns of internalized oppression cause us to attack, criticize or have unrealistic expectations of any one of us who has the courage to step forward and take on leadership responsibilities. This leads to a lack of the support that is absolutely necessary for effective leadership to emerge and group strength to grow. It also leads directly to the ‘burn out’ phenomenon we have all witnessed in, or experienced as, effective ... leaders (Bullard, 2005, p. 33)

Ultimately, this outcome of internalized racism could undermine the ability of the movement to grow and/or retain its membership, as well as inhibit its capacity to uphold the momentum of collective resistance (Bullard, 2005).

A final dimension, important for consideration herein, is that “while not all persons who experience racist incidents will be traumatized, some persons develop posttrauma symptoms in response to racist incidents” (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005b, p. 479). This further complicates the process of assessment of clients with existing race-based stress and/or trauma. Basham (2008) explains, “Stress is typically triggered by a stressor that may range along a continuum of intensity from mild to moderate to severe. Trauma refers to an event or an experience that involves the imposition of severe (or traumatic) stressors” (p. 414). Extending this description to experiences of race-based traumatic stress requires additional acknowledgment that racism is chronic, and ongoing. On a *continuum of moderate to severe*, if race-based stressors, like other traumatic stressors, induce emotionally repressed responses to traumatic stress, overtime the build-up of stress can intensify psychological harm and/or provoke an intensification of symptoms following a traditionally defined traumatic event. However, trauma sourced by racism has an added dimension because racism occurs and injures on multiple levels and in multiple ways and, as a result, these injuries have deeply profound impact.

[...] Racism is pervasive, operating at the interpersonal and institutional levels simultaneously, its effects are cumulative, spanning generations, individuals, time, and place—encompassing much more than discrete acts. Consequently, psychological injury that is due to racism is not limited to that caused directly by one perpetrator, at one time, in one place. (Speight, 2007, p. 126-127)

### **Healing Race-Based Traumas**

“Though the field has in fact an abundant and rich tradition, it has been periodically forgotten and must be periodically reclaimed” (Herman, 1997, p. 7). With respect to this, any



current reclamation of the study of psychological trauma is gravely remiss to not include a thorough investigation of the social, political and cultural constructs that engender racialized oppression and the psychological trauma—the race-based traumatic stress—that results. Erbes (2004) contextualizes the ways therapists know what they know about trauma as well as the ways this knowledge influences both the clients’ and the therapists’ perspective relating to the treatment of trauma that remains unique to the individual and their internal experience of the traumatic occurrences or event. Erbes (2004) notes,

Therapists work with a client to re-create meaning about trauma, as well as to re-narrate (or perhaps begin to narrate) a traumatic event, the significance of that event, ways of coping with the event, and so on. In such work, a therapist’s views and constructions about trauma necessarily contribute to the meanings that are created (p. 2).

Extending this notion to discussions of race-based traumatic stress, a *therapist’s views and constructions* about race and racism in the United States is of crucial importance when re-creating meaning and narratives relating to racialized trauma(s). Acknowledgement and expanding the profession’s awareness of incidents of racialized trauma, and the varying ways the impact of such incidents can present in clients of color, highlights an important need for clinicians to offer treatment methods and alternative-healing options that remain specifically attuned to the unique experiences of racialized traumas. In this way, healing from race-based trauma demands that we “connect political injustice to psychological pain” (hooks, 1995, p. 142).

In the following chapter, consideration for the ways in which psychological suffering that results from systemic racial oppression (internalized racism) can be addressed in clinical work

will explored through the lens of liberation theory. Examining the core components of this theory will provide a basis for the discussion of healing aspects of race-based traumatic stress sourced by environmental racism, and will include strategies for promoting psychological liberation for both target and agent communities. Additionally, the discussion of liberation will provide a foundation for discussion regarding the *social justice* component of the profession.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Liberation**

At its core, liberation theory is concerned with eradicating dynamics of power that oppress people and groups. It is both a theory as well as a dynamic process that seeks to engage both the oppressed and the oppressors to be self-reflective about our current sociopolitical status in society, and to critically examine the *unintentional* ways our attitudes, behaviors and/or actions perpetuate the function of oppressive systems and institutions. It also seeks to engage each of us to make a conscious attempt to attune to the impact that sociopolitical systems have on people who have a different group identity (i.e. race, class, gender, age, sexuality, and ability) than our own. Finally, the theory holds that critical thinking alone is not enough to promote change; eradicating oppressive power dynamics requires rigorous social action. Importantly, however, achieving liberation does not mean following a fixed set of strategies. On the contrary, liberation, at its strongest and most effective, is an ongoing dialogue between people of all socioeconomic classes, races, and genders. It is an ongoing dialogue that respects and dignifies the subjective experiences of individuals. And, it provides socially and culturally diverse groups with equitable space in the social dialogue and decision-making processes, ensuring the presence of diverse perspectives, and the nurturance of creative strategies to remedy social ills.

In the following pages, liberation theory will be contextualized through a brief exploration of its historical roots as a long-time psychology of Latin America to one that is more recently being adapted to Western psychology paradigms. A presentation of this history will make apparent the ways in which the theory is being applied to confront oppression in the United

States. Through its adaptation, the theory has maintained some of its foundational components, and these concepts will be identified. The final section will consider clinical implications of liberation theory.

### **Historical Underpinnings and Theoretical Influences**

Liberation as a psychological theory was developed in, and explored throughout, many Latin American countries, drawing on strong inspiration from the work of Paulo Freire (Macedo, 2010). In the United States, liberation theory has been adapted to address issues of racism and classism, as well as other forms of oppression (sexism, ableism and ageism) that occur here in distinct ways. In adapting liberation psychology to current Western theoretical practices, many scholars have considered various ways to integrate the central tenets of liberation theory into existing branches of Western psychology—namely depth, community and ecological psychologies (Comas-Díaz, 2000; Moane, 2003; Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003)—and into current social justice paradigms. As it is an emerging theory that does not have fully defined boundaries within social work and the helping professions in general, framing a discussion of liberation theory is a theoretical journey that requires certain flexibility on the part of the reader. Much the same as Watts and Serrano-García (2003), the current research acknowledges that “[...] creating a just society is more than a discrete disciplinary endeavor” and following threads of oppression and liberation in the United States warrants one to “freely [trespass] boundaries between the political, sociological, historical, psychological, economic, and cultural disciplines” (p. 74). The literature provided throughout this research, including the literature to be presented throughout this chapter, will ask this of the reader, as, ultimately, this research is motivated by a desire to advance efforts towards social—and specifically, racial—justice.

As a route to achieving social justice, the theory of liberation has its deepest roots in the field of education. Specifically, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2010), educator Paulo Freire articulated the imperative for socially oppressed people to develop a *critical consciousness*—or, *conscientization*—of self-in-relation to one’s sociopolitical environment, if efforts to resist social oppression were to ever be realized. At the time, Freire’s work focused specifically on class stratification, and the plight of working-class poor and illiterate people of Brazil. Freire’s work was informed through his own critical examination of his self-in-relation to his middle-class upbringing contrasted with that of his peers from working-class poor backgrounds (Macedo, 2010). Freire sought to confront class oppression by educating the poor and illiterate. However, Freire made distinctions between functional literacy and social literacy (Diemer, Kauffman, Koenig, Trahan, & Hseih, 2006; Macedo, 2010). Functional literacy is the ability to read and write, while social literacy speaks to each person’s innate (but undeveloped) critical thinking skills necessary to “‘read’ social conditions that perpetuate injustice and marginalization among the oppressed, such as inequitable distribution of resources and access to opportunity” (Diemer, et al., 2006). And, while his core educational commitments and energies were directed towards teaching functionally and socially illiterate poor people to harness and hone social literacy skills, he also challenged society’s more privileged classes to begin to practice methods of introspection to reveal what anchored their sociopolitical privilege to systems of benefits that are enabled through a process of exploiting people of lower socioeconomic classes (hooks, 1994; Macedo, 2010; Moane, 2003).

Exploitation—a residual, persistent, and insidious symptom of colonization—occurs not only through economic means but also through psychological captivity (hooks, 1994). Reflecting here on the discussion of internalized racism that was presented in Chapter Four, exploitation of

a population's racial and cultural identity to embolden the success of a racially and socially oppressive society potentiates devastating psychological suffering and injury for those so exploited. According to Freire, the process of critical consciousness becomes the first line of defense against chronic colonization of individual and collective mindsets. Freire's development of the theory, and his dissemination of the theory in *Pedagogy*, spoke to the core experiences of oppressed people, and in so doing, initiated a social dialogue that vocalized and validated the shared experiences of oppressed people by evoking "a language to critically understand the tensions, contradictions, fears, doubts, hopes, and 'deferred' dreams that are part and parcel of living a borrowed and colonized cultural existence" (Macedo, 2010, p. 11). Even so, the theory of liberation, at this crucial intersection of constricted and emerging consciousness remains a theory alone if it does not incite resistance against oppression (Freire, 2010; hooks, 1994; Macedo, 2010). In the eloquent articulation of hooks (1994):

Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask it to do so and direct our theorizing towards this end. [...] The possession of a term does not bring a process or practice into being; concurrently one may practice theorizing without ever knowing/possessing the term, just as we can act in feminist resistance without ever using the word 'feminism.' (p. 61-62)

Further, echoing Freire's assertion, hooks (1994) "emphasizes that [conscientization] is the important initial stage of transformation—that historical moment when one begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one's political circumstance" (p. 47). In order to not stagnate the development of critical consciousness, "people need to experience the veracity and adequacy of their awareness by engaging in actions that both feel right and prove

effective” (Watts & Serrano-García, 2003). This invites discussions of critical (liberatory) consciousness and praxis; the following sections will provide these discussions in respective order.

### **Liberatory Consciousness**

As stated above, a central concept of liberation theory is the development of a critical consciousness. Acknowledging its deep roots in Freire’s theory, Love (2000) refers to this process as developing a *liberatory consciousness*, and notes that the concept has been utilized broadly in seminal bodies of work including “Carter G. Woodson [whom] described it as changing the ‘miseducation of the Negro,’ Michael Albert’s humanist vision and bell hooks’s feminist critical consciousness” (p. 471). As it is understood herein, Love’s (2000) concept of liberatory consciousness wholly embodies the self- and social-reflection and action praxis. It embodies the symbiotic relationship of these three crucial elements of liberation, and promotes transformation at the individual level. This is because, as will be explored below, Love’s (2000) framework consists of tools for engaging in critical consciousness development, and, as a verb, the word *liberate* denotes action. More than just developing a critical consciousness, it suggests active engagement in the evolutionary process. As a conscious choice, from this point forward, the current research will embrace the use of liberatory consciousness in order to emphasize the dynamic nature of the liberatory process.

Although influenced by Freire’s concept of critical consciousness, Love’s (2000) concept is distinct in its ambition to promote a liberatory consciousness development in both the oppressor and the oppressed, by acknowledging the socialization process that informs beliefs and behaviors of us all. It accepts as its starting point that “all humans now living have internalized the attitudes, understandings, and patterns of thought that allow them to function in and

collaborate with these systems of oppression, whether they benefit from them or are placed at a disadvantage by them” (Love, 2000, p. 470). Not to be confused with social and political contexts that impact one’s access to equitable rights, resources and recognition within society, socialization is instead the process which “works to insure that each person learns what they need to know to behave in ways that contribute to the maintenance and perpetuation of the existing system, independent of their belief in its fairness or efficacy” (p. 470). As will be described in greater detail below, one of the central tenets of liberation is the imperative element of collective resistance (social action) that is meant to occur as a result of a developing liberatory consciousness. The success of any movement towards psychological—and, in turn, social—liberation remains critically reliant upon the element of resistance against oppression that carries forward a vision of social transformation that respects and dignifies all individuals and groups. It would be counterproductive to the overarching goal, however, to participate in collective resistance without first deconstructing the ways in which we each are socialized. Because of its significance to incite effective collective resistance that results in social transformation, this point has taken prominence in much of the literature on liberation. From a social justice lens, Pharr (2000) contends often well-intentioned social action focuses too much attention on the outcome of the movement when instead our perspective should remain on the people the movement seeks to liberate.

Too often the end has justified the means, and we have failed to follow Gandhi’s belief that every step toward liberation must have liberation embedded within it. By concentrating on moving people to action, we have often failed to hear the voice of their spirit, their need for connection and wholeness—not for someday after the goal has been gained, but in the very process of gaining it. (p. 452)



Liberatory consciousness as explicated by Love (2000) aims to position people at the center of the process by affording “every person [...] a chance to theorize about issues of equity and social justice, to analyze the events related to equity and social justice, and to act in responsible ways to transform society” (p. 471). To operationalize the development of a liberatory consciousness Love devised a framework with four points of conscious engagement: awareness, analysis, action, and accountable/ally-ship (p. 471-472). Shadowing a key intention of Freire’s theory, which was to shift oppressed people’s understanding of themselves as an “object” of the oppressors possession to a “subject” in possession of their own will and determination (Macedo, 2010), Love’s (2000) points of engagement “enables humans to live their lives in oppressive systems and institutions with awareness and intentionality, rather than on the basis of the socialization to which they have been subjected” (p. 470). Again, the distinction being made is that Love’s model also places significance on the individual role/responsibility of the oppressor in dismantling systems of domination. Through its examination of both the internalized oppressor and internalized oppressed identities, and by offering conceptual guidelines that we each can apply to our thought processes, liberatory consciousness attempts to reject socialized roles of domination and subordination. In this way, it respects and dignifies each of us by acknowledging the process of socialization that affects all. And, it holds the potential to liberate us all by providing each of us with a choice to live mindful of the way in which our presence impacts the lives of those around us:

The development of a liberatory consciousness would allow us an opportunity to reclaim choice in our values and attitudes and consequently, in our response patterns. It would enable us to move from automatic response to system grounded in our socialization, to the capacity to act on a range of responses based on our own awareness, analysis and

decision making, and the opportunities we have to learn from our colleagues and others who are themselves embarked on a journey to liberation. (Love, 2000, p. 474)

A liberatory practice—both the development of a liberatory consciousness and praxis—highlights the significance of working to provide oppressed communities with an opportunity to engage in discussion and action against the social and political constructs that indoctrinate individuals into a set way of navigating within, reacting to, and/or responding to the world in which they have been socialized in.

### **Praxis**

Praxis remains a salient theme informing the theory of liberation. A concept directly drawn out of Freire's work, Webster's Dictionary defines praxis as, "translating an idea into action." As the process of developing a critical consciousness initiates, praxis becomes the vehicle of progressive action towards psychological liberation (hooks, 1994; Macedo, 2000, 2010). This is not to suggest that these components of critical consciousness occur in sequentially measured steps of critical consciousness development followed by progressive action (hooks, 1994; Macedo, 2010). Notably, Macedo (2010) informs that Freire sought to help people understand that the act of developing a critical consciousness is in and of itself a form (the first progressive action) of praxis. In fact, the symbiotic relationship between these two components is responsible for progressing the efficacy of the other. Additionally, people who participate in the action of both liberatory consciousness development as well as praxis intent on dismantling oppression—whether it is racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, or other 'isms' and the intersections of any of these—must realize that the process is dynamic. More specifically, they must realize that it is an ongoing process of self- and social-reflection and

social action, which transforms in relation to one's expanding liberatory consciousness and to the sociopolitical climate of the time. Thus, resisting psychological and social oppression requires a flexibility and diligence to "renew a commitment to a decolonizing political process" as one becomes more attuned to oppressive social conditions, and as those in power shift political doctrines to re-secure their grasp on power (hooks, 1994, p. 47). Specifically as it relates to the United States, shifting racialized policies and laws that have historically excluded people of color from leadership roles and decision/law-making processes have resulted in and maintained an unequal access to power. Additionally, as illustrated in Chapter Three, individual (overt) acts of racism represent only one dimension of racism, and it is often the elusive (covert) racist attitudes and practices that result in an unintentional participation in racist social structures. Because of this complexity, one can easily recognize the need for a constant "renewal" to such a process. Watts and Serrano-García (2003) and Watts et al., (2003) "[...] describe it as a 'process of growth in a person's knowledge, analytical skills, emotional faculties, and capacity for action in political and social systems'" (as cited in Watts & Serrano-García, 2003, p. 74). The continual deepening and evolving of this process often initiates an inherent response to take further action to resist one's own oppression and/or one's role as an oppressor. It is at this juncture that praxis is mobilized.

Some scholars suggest this occurrence towards resistance will often (and, should always) lead to activism at the community level, and ultimately will (and, should always) give way to collective action at the political level (Harro, 2000; Moane, 2003). This dialogue is further developed as scholars highlight the salience of resistance in liberation work. Most notably, Watts and Serrano-García (2003) draw eloquent distinctions in their description of resistance: "People resist oppression, and so it is a reaction. Yet at the same time resistance is an emergent liberation

behavior—it is some recognition of how things ought to be. Thus, resistance is at the boundary of both ideas” (p. 74). The “recognition of how things ought to be” illustrates resistance at the individual level; it is the vision of societal transformation before the vision is translated into action. Much of the existing literature gives prominence to this level of resistance, and indeed it remains crucial in the movement towards liberation (Watts & Serrano-García, 2003). It is imperative, however, that discussions of liberation also explore what is meant by, and how to engage in, collective resistance. Reflecting, here, that social change is determined only through the energies of both individual and collective resistance, Watts et al., (2003) remind us “Resistance is key, because analysis without action does not produce tangible change. Therefore, *activism*—doing something about oppression—warrants particular attention” (p. 186). Within existing liberation discourse there remains an ongoing dialogue centered on how those of us in the helping professions should promote and participate in these crucial components in order to ensure collective liberation. A more in depth exploration of this discussion will provide clarification on the issue of collective resistance.

## **Resistance**

Anchored by a central concept of collective liberation, the fully realized goal of resistance is meant to impress upon both the individual and the collective body of critically conscious individuals to work in alliance with one another towards the same goal. This shared goal, simply stated in the language of Freire (2010) is: “To opt to transform an unjust reality” (p. 174). Moane (2003), Comas-Díaz (2000), and Watts et al., (2003), among others, draw specific attention to the integral element of *collective transformation* that grounds liberation work. Collective transformation is the direct result of collective resistance. It is the collective mobilization by oppressed communities and allied communities to replace oppressive cultural

and institutional practices with humane systems and institutions. Mindful of the above discussion of the symbiosis of liberatory consciousness and praxis, transformation at the collective level works to dismantle current systems of oppression and implement systems of justice. In order for praxis to effectuate fundamental changes in structural (institutional) arenas clearly

[...] involves challenging gross social inequities between social groups and creating new relationships that dispel oppressive social myths, values, and practices. The outcome of this process contributes to the creation of a changed society with ways of being that support economic, cultural, political, psychological, and spiritual needs of individuals and groups. (Watts et al., 2003, p. 187-188)

Thus, while praxis honors as its starting point the development of liberatory consciousness, liberation is dependent on the action—the collective resistance—element of praxis. As it relates to the phenomenon of environmental racism, social inequities that cause physical and psychological injury are possible because systems and institutions have been constructed to benefit whites. Further, these oppressive practices are perpetuated generation after generation because as social workers we have only minimally engaged in *discussions* of cultural competence, but the profession has not dispelled regenerative oppressive perspectives and practices. Largely, social workers have yet to participate in liberatory consciousness development. On a broader scale, society as a whole also has not invested in self- and social-reflection and action. We have not engaged in developing a liberatory consciousness and its expressions of and towards liberation: praxis and collective resistance. This ethical deficiency that plagues our current society is, in part, attributed to the process of socialization. Reflective of the above discussion, the way in which we are each socialized serves as a barrier in individual

development of a liberatory consciousness, and as such, inhibits our ability to engage in meaningful action towards liberation. It is important to take pause and acknowledge that historically and currently our collective history is defined by the efforts of those seeking collective liberation and those who resist injustice against civil and human rights—whether or not this fact is acknowledged in mainstream accounts of history. Recognizing that a complete realization of collective liberation is naïve idealism at its best, it is important to acknowledge that the process towards liberation benefits the health and wellbeing of society as a whole. Acknowledging herein that liberation remains an ongoing process, it is evident that resistance movements—borne out of the necessity to confront oppression, in all its forms—are the embodiment of liberatory consciousness and praxis. A current example of this is the environmental justice movement that was borne out of necessity to ameliorate the trauma sourced by environmental racism.

In the following chapter, I will revisit some of the key points of environmental racism, trauma theory and race-based traumatic stress, and synthesize each of these with the above discussion of liberation. Such a synthesis will illustrate the synergistic relationship between liberatory consciousness, praxis, and successive strides towards collective liberation that defines the environmental justice movement. It will also illustrate how these elements may serve to ameliorate trauma sourced by environmental racism.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Discussion**

This theoretical study set out to explore the ways in which trauma theory can broaden our understanding of the psychological impact of environmental racism, and how liberation theory could be utilized to better prepare social workers to identify and understand the impact of environmental racism in the lives of clients. It sought to explore, as well, the role that the profession should play in alleviating this form of oppression. Aspiring to examine the phenomenon and each of the theories from a vantage point beyond a dominant lens, this study explored race-based traumatic stress as a crucial element of a comprehensive definition of trauma, and considered the healing capacity of the environmental justice movement in treating race-based traumatic stress that is sourced by environmental racism. Moving forward, this approach aspires to challenge social workers of both oppressed and oppressor identities to consider the impact a liberatory consciousness could have on the reconceptualization of dominant views of marginality to more accurately interpret the reparative capacity—both in preventing the perpetuation of systemic racial privilege and racial oppression, and for healing aspects of race-based traumatic stress—that is inherent in the collective resistance movement for environmental justice. To this end, this chapter will trace the elements of suffering, healing, and collective resistance that threads the phenomenon and the two theories to one another. Points of discussion presented in the sections of analysis and synthesis will help to contour a discussion of the clinical implications for social work practice, presented in the subsequent section. This will

be followed with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the current study, as well as future considerations for research and practice.

### **Analysis**

The foregoing discussions of trauma theory with its inclusion of race-based traumatic stress and liberation theory each encompass notions of psychological suffering that is sourced by manifestations of psychological power and/or systemic racial and social dominance. Reflecting on the historical context of environmental racism discussed above, social, cultural and political dominance remains the root cause of environmental racism. A consideration of the role of race-based traumatic stress has in the experience of those exposed to the effects of environmental racism illustrates how the outcome of such dominance takes its toll psychologically. It is important to note, however, that the impact of environmental racism includes added dimensions of suffering that occur as a result of physical ailments, as well as the psychological grief that results from losing friends, family and loved one's to illnesses caused by noxious environmental poisons, and deaths caused by economic, political and geographic vulnerabilities that intensify the severity of a communities' encounters with natural disasters (Boyd-Franklin, 2008; Bullard & Wright, 2009). Grief that results from these types of repeat offenses by negligent governments and industrial polluters, as well as the added element of pain and stress that may occur as the result of white Americas' lack of awareness, acknowledgment and overall apathetic response regarding the root and result of such atrocities (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1999; Harrell, 2000), may inflict a deeper psychological wound when one considers that this grief (complex grief) is caused by what are ultimately preventable deaths. This aspect of environmental racism, suffering and grief reaches beyond the scope of the current study; but without question, its severity warrants a research project of its own. Acknowledgment of this herein, however, helps to illustrate that



race-based traumatic injury caused by environmental racism, like other forms of racism-sourced injury, is enabled in multiple ways. This recognition has been threaded throughout the current research and has influenced exploration of the ways in which oppression is an entrenched aspect of current society, as well as an individual experience of suffering and psychological confinement.

In the discussion of liberation theory, it was illustrated that oppression is both a process and outcome (Watts et al., 2003, p. 187), and that outcomes of oppression, as outlined throughout this study, have multiple and complex manifestations as well. One such outcome is internalized racism, and the discussion of this as a race-based traumatic injury drew attention to the “elusive yet nonetheless damaging effects of believing that one deserves his or her own oppression” (Speight, 2007, p. 133). Utilizing the theory of liberation, the suffering of internalized racism was countered with a discussion of resistance at the individual level achieved through a development of one’s critical consciousness, which, in turn, fosters individual liberation. Simultaneously, we considered how, collectively, dominant culture lacks awareness of the ways historical suffering and oppression have transpired into modern racial and social inequities such as environmental racism. This lack of awareness was first conceptualized by considering the relevance white privilege has to environmental racism. This conceptualization was then broadened with a brief examination of the process of socialization. These conceptualizations were helpful in illustrating the unintentional means through which racism is perpetuated.

Embracing the vein of resistance that is inherent in liberation theory, this study paid specific attention to Love’s (2000) explication of liberatory consciousness. Utilizing a lens of liberatory consciousness made it possible to focus on two key components of liberation theory.

First, it directly addresses the unintentional means by which racism is perpetuated by operationalizing a counter-system to confront unintentional participation in systemic racism. Love's (2000) counter-system designates four points of conscious engagement—awareness, analysis, action, and accountable/ally-ship. As was discussed previously, these points of conscious engagement embody the notion of individual liberation through critical consciousness development and also serve as an instrument in assisting people, at the individual and collective levels, to transcend oppressive systems.

A liberatory consciousness enables humans to maintain an awareness of the dynamics of oppression characterizing society without giving in to despair and hopelessness about that condition, to maintain an awareness of the role played by each individual in the maintenance of the system without blaming them for the roles they play, and at the same time practice intentionality about changing the systems of oppression. (Love, 2000, p. 470-471)

This element of engendering intentionality elucidates another core concept of liberation—collective transformation (liberation)—and serves as our second point of analysis. Reflective of the above discussion, collective liberation was identified as the practice of seeking to replace oppressive cultural and institutional practices with equitable and humane systems and institutions through a process of collective resistance. Engaging in liberatory consciousness positions social workers (both of color and white allies) to participate in and recognize the potential for collective liberation that exists within the margins. This point of analysis has unique resemblance to the collective resistance of the environmental justice movement, and the gains the movement has made in transforming society. This is because transformative laws and legislations and, of equal

importance, strides made toward broadening social awareness and transforming collective consciousness, are manifest through the confluence of individual liberation of the oppressed and the collective resistance used to mobilize against and transform oppressive systems.

From various angles, these strands of connection—suffering, collective resistance and healing—have been followed through the discussions of environmental racism, trauma theory and liberation theory that were provided in previous chapters. The following section will synthesize these notions by challenging a dominant society’s common interpretation of marginality. Doing this will elucidate a key objective of this research, which suggests that collective resistance movements, like the environmental justice movement, may serve as a space of healing of race-based traumatic stress to which the helping professions are at most, passively attuned, if at all.

### **Synthesis: The Politics of Healing**

Contouring this synthesis is the recognition of marginality that extends beyond a dominant perspective. This study recognizes that marginality signifies a place where inequitable access to political power has detrimental effects on people and communities of color. As a consequence of generations of racist laws and policies, this study acknowledges that marginality both causes and propagates physical and psychological suffering. However, regardless of these truths, holding such a narrow view of marginality only serves to further perpetuate racist attitudes and ill-informed beliefs about people and communities of color who live within the margins. More specifically, focusing only on the destruction and suffering caused by environmental racism perpetuates a paternalistic view of those subjected to such atrocities; in turn, this view reinforces the culture of domination. Utilizing a lens of liberation, one can shift the focus from the vacuum of suffering to consider how collective resistance through the

environmental justice movement serves as a vital force not only in confronting inequitable environmental laws and policies, but also in eradicating pervasive dominant narratives about both suffering and healing. As an informed and collectively conscious (liberated) space of resistance, the environmental justice movement can attend to experiences of race-based traumatic stress by serving as a space of healing which exists beyond dominant healing paradigms. One reason is that this site of resistance—this space of healing—never questions the interrelated relationship between psychological health and one’s historical, political and social contexts because the movement itself is fostered out of this recognition. This recognition is clearly articulated in the preamble to the Principles of Environmental Justice:

WE, THE PEOPLE OF COLOR, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands, and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to ensure environmental justice; to promote alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe neighborhoods; and to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice. (First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, 1991)

In this way, the movement lends itself to healing the core of the traumatic stress. Asking those who suffer from race-based traumas to heal within the walls (and mentalities) of institutions that currently do not honor a definition of trauma that recognizes racism as the root cause of this type of traumatic stress is counterproductive to the “soul-healing” that needs to occur. And honestly, it is unjust. Further, maintaining a focus on dominant interpretations of trauma and healing from trauma, limits our understanding of the vital aspects of “soul-healing” that occur within the margins (Duran, Firehammer & Gonzalez, 2008). This point of synthesis also draws our focus to the understanding that marginal spaces serve as cultural hubs in which people of color have opportunities to realign with ethnic, cultural and spiritual roots that thrive beyond the culture of domination; this is, in and of itself, healing (Duran, et al., 2008). Influenced by critical feminist and liberation theories, hooks (1990) thoughtfully identifies marginality not just as a place of suffering but also as “the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance” (p. 341). Reflecting here on collective resistance as a crucial function in dismantling systemic racial oppression, hooks (1990) notes that cultural hubs serve:

[...] As a central location for both the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. [...] Not as a space one longs to give up, or surrender as part of moving into the center, but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds. (p. 341)

Mindful that a central tenet of liberation theory is the transformation of an unjust society, this articulation of marginality speaks to the essence of moving towards collective liberation.

Another point of synthesis can be drawn through brief analysis of Herman's (1997) assessment of the three stages of trauma recovery: establishment of safety; remembrance and mourning; and, reconnection with ordinary life (p. 155). The ongoing, chronic nature of racism proves attainment of these three stages to be deeply problematic. Herman (1997) explains that establishing safety is a two-fold process—one that “begins by focusing on control of the body and gradually moves outwards toward control of the environment” (p. 160). Focusing control on the body takes on significantly different meaning and healing trajectory when the external environment is perpetrating the assault and making self and/or loved ones physically ill. Further, (and again) the challenge one faces in gaining control over these two realms is complicated by the overwhelming denial by dominant society of the fact that assaults are even occurring. In this way, the trajectory for healing from race-based traumatic stress sourced by environmental racism must first include recognition of assault by dominant society, as well as by the helping profession (Bryant-Davis, 2007). It is also important to keep in mind that inequitable access to positions of leadership and the decision and law making processes (political power), factors of lower socioeconomic status, and internalized racism, among other adversities, will often compound experiences of race-based traumatic stress. Aligning with a collective body of people whose circumstance has stimulated individual and collective critical consciousness development, and who share a common purpose of survival from, and transformation of, racially and socially oppressive systems moves individuals, communities, and eventually society, towards equitable access to rights, recognition, and as the theory suggests, liberation. The second stage, remembrance and mourning, concerns itself with the reconstruction of the trauma narrative. This proves problematic in a couple of different ways. First, it assumes that the traumatic incident is an occurrence of the past. In some cases this may be accurate. Based upon an understanding that

race-based traumatic stress can result from an isolated incident that might result from natural disasters, the traumatic experiences endured following Hurricane Katrina, or individual acts of overt racism (racially motivated hate speech or crime) constitute a few examples. Still, Herman (1997) informs of the crucial role of the therapist in reconstructing the trauma narrative:

The therapist plays the role of witness and ally, in whose presence the survivor can speak of the unspeakable. The reconstruction of trauma places great demands on the courage of both the patient and the therapist. It requires that both be clear in their purpose and secure in their alliance. (p. 175)

In this way, reconstruction of the trauma narrative is problematic if the therapist remains unaware of socialization processes that contextualize both the clients' lived experiences and the therapists as well. This study maintains that only therapists who actively engage in and honor a *renewed commitment* to the development of a liberatory consciousness can remain *clear in their purpose and secure in the alliance* in helping the client reconstruct their narrative of race-based traumatic stress. Second, the cumulative effects of multiple racist assaults overtime—whether they are sourced by individual, institutional, and/or internalized racism—compounded by the ongoing and chronic nature of racism, demands collective transformation. While members of the environmental justice community recognize collective transformation (liberation) as a core purpose of the movement, the mental health profession-at-large remains limited by a dominant narrative of suffering and healing. “Unfortunately, professional counselors are too often trained to further pathologize the members of [marginalized] communities by refusing to address the historical context, injustices, and subsequent soul wounds that underlie much of their psychological distress” (Duran et al., 2008, p. 290). This limitation of individual clinicians and

the profession as a whole means that reconstruction of a trauma narrative aimed at healing is compromised. Given our understanding of marginality as a site of resistance, and the healing capacity that exists through connection to cultural hubs and through collective resistance, reconstruction of an individual's narrative of race-based trauma sourced by environmental racism—one that might also be compounded by single and/or cumulative incidents of other forms of societal racism—might be better achieved when one has the opportunity to align with empowered people of color who, together, are engaging in processes of individual liberation and collectively transforming society. As white allies in the social work profession (and beyond), we must initiate and commit to our own processes of individual liberation in order to improve our emotional and social literacy. Doing so will better prepare us to join collective resistance movements aimed at transforming society.

The final stage, *reconnection with ordinary life*, invokes a certain irony when considering race-based traumas. If, as Herman (1997) notes, “helplessness and isolation are the core experiences of psychological trauma [and] empowerment and reconnection are the core experiences of recovery” (p. 197), then it is essential that we seek creative strategies to ensure empowerment and reconnection for people of color suffering from race-based traumatic stress—strategies that ensure we are transforming the *ordinary*. I suggest herein that such spaces and opportunities for healing already exist through the collective resistance movements for environmental justice. It is a marginal space that is a powerful site of resistance that moves with creative and focused diligence towards collective transformation. As members of the healing profession, social workers (and, speaking directly to those who share my white racial identity) need to shift our dominant focus to acknowledge these spaces, as well as understand how to advocate for the healing capacity that exists within the margins. Finally, and maintaining our



gaze through a liberatory lens, we acknowledge here that returning to *ordinary life* potentially connotes a return to the status quo of a racially oppressive system that exists as the root of the trauma being experienced. Such a return to the ordinary undermines any attempt at healing, as well as any lean towards collective liberation.

A final and noteworthy point of synthesis focuses the role of community in healing trauma. There is a heavy degree of poignancy when applying Herman's (1997) assessment of the "role of community" in the efficacy of trauma recovery to race-based traumatic stress caused by environmental racism.

Sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world. In this process, the survivor seeks assistance not only from those closest to her but also from the wider community. The response of the community has a powerful influence on the ultimate resolution of the trauma. Restoration of the breach between traumatized person and the community depends, first, upon public acknowledgment of the traumatic event and, second, upon some form of community action. Once it is publicly recognized that a person has been harmed, the community must take action to assign responsibility for the harm and to repair the injury. These two responses—recognition and restitution—are necessary to rebuild the survivor's sense of order and justice. (p. 70)

Given that both the mental health profession and society at large (external community) continue to deny both the presence of covert forms of racism and the types of trauma these inflict, the "recognition and restitution" that "are necessary to rebuild the survivor's sense of order and justice" become dependent on the environmental justice community, as well as the sense of

meaning the individual gives to their own experience of environmental racism. Further, lessons of liberation teach us that any *sense of order and justice* will only be achieved by applying creative strategies and collective energies to deconstructing current systems of oppression and rebuilding them anew—a collective purpose that embodies both the existence and efforts of the environmental justice movement.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

It has now been well emphasized that collective resistance, created and emboldened in marginal spaces, may increase one's capacity for healing race-based traumatic stress. These considerations should not, however, influence an assumption that all clients who are experiencing race-based traumatic stress sourced by environmental racism should be led in the direction of the environmental justice movement. Healing from any form of trauma is a deeply personal endeavor and, therefore, needs to be attuned to with a uniquely personal approach to recovery (Herman, 1997). Still, Herman (1997) also recognizes the relevance of activism for some survivors as well.

Most survivors seek the resolution of their traumatic experience within the confines of their personal lives. But a significant minority, as a result of the trauma, feel called upon to engage in a wider world. These survivors recognize a political or religious dimension of their misfortune and discover that they can transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action. While there is no way to compensate for an atrocity, there is a way to transcend it, by making it a gift to others. The trauma is redeemed only when it becomes the source of a survivor mission. Social action offers the survivor a source of power that draws upon her own initiative, energy, and resourcefulness but that magnifies these qualities beyond her own capacities. (p. 207)

Mindful here that collective resistance has implications for healing trauma that extends beyond the realm of the individual person, which is the movement towards collective liberation, we shift the focus to consider its implications for the field of social work.

The praxis component of liberation theory illustrates the need to replace current educational curricula with ones that more aggressively and sincerely educate social workers about various forms of racism and how these present in the lives of clients and communities of color. Social workers, however, need to aggressively and sincerely commit to these pursuits as well.

It is also important to become aware that a clear path toward healing must be undertaken by individual counselors, as well as the mental health professions as a whole if we are to realize new and untapped dimensions of our individual and collective health and psychological liberation. (Duran et al., 2008, p. 288)

The active engagement of social workers' liberatory consciousness at the individual level has the potential to afford us the opportunity to unearth the racist elements of socialization that are deeply embedded in our unconscious and limit our ability to ethically fulfill the fundamental values that define the profession, including: Social justice; Dignity and worth of the person; Importance of human relationships; Integrity; and, Competence (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008, pp. 5-6). And, reflective of the above discussion of liberation theory, a commitment to individual liberation initiates and supports movement towards collective transformation. An individual commitment to liberation might precede (and foster) institutional change; therefore, social workers might advocate for and participate in alliance groups that promote antiracist and/or liberation dialogue. In this way, collective resistance is operationalized to encompass the broader

purpose for social justice. Specifically, as it relates to the current study, social workers who condition and strengthen their liberatory consciousness can increase the integrity of the profession if we become advocates for environmental justice and promote significant social change by serving as members and allies of a collective resistance movement that is already motivated by a collective and creative vision for a more humane and just society, and consistently wages a powerful resistance (in the margins) to incite collective transformation.

### **Strengths, Limitations and Future Considerations**

Navigating through literature on the various and insidious forms of racism including environmental racism, and literature on trauma theory and race-based traumatic stress carries with it a heavy burden. At times it can (and, it did) feel hopeless and overwhelming. As I transitioned from these chapters into the discussion of liberation theory, I was reminded of Tatum's (1997) acknowledgment that, "Learning to recognize cultural and institutional racism and other forms of inequity without also learning strategies to respond to them is a prescription for despair" (p. 49). Consideration of liberation theory and praxis equips researchers and social workers with effective strategies for response—and resistance—to racially oppressive systems. This denotes a benefit of doing theoretical research. It affords the researcher a flexibility to thoughtfully consider points of cohesion in theories that may not have previously been considered. Many scholars have both theoretically and empirically considered liberation theory as an avenue for influencing cultural competence in the mental health professions. This study follows this progressive trajectory, and enhances the dialogue by looking at environmental justice as an inseparable component of the phenomenon of environmental racism, exploring trauma theory through an expanded lens of recognition that includes experiences of race-based traumatic stress, and applying a praxis of specificity of liberatory consciousness to operationalize

the theory of liberation. This fluid movement in and between theories represents a significant strength of carrying out a theoretical thesis.

An obvious limitation in the current study is its lack of any thorough consideration of the ways that intersecting social identities (i.e. gender, class, age, and ability, among others) in convergence with other factors such as language and/or immigrant status (to name a few), might impact one's experience of environmental racism. The way we are each socialized around gender and resident status influences both the weight and distribution of societal responsibilities, expectations and burdens. As a result, women and men of color, and those who hold US resident or immigrant status might be faced with varying aspects of environmental hazards due to residential segregation, gendered employment opportunities, and/or access to health care. This briefly alludes to one example of the relevance of intersecting social identities on experiences of environmental racism. It also represents multiple considerations for future research, as well as areas of vulnerability—and possible sites of resistance—to be considered by social workers serving clients from various social, cultural and racial backgrounds.

An additional limitation of this study arose directly out of its intended strength: This study placed significant emphasis on broadening our understanding of environmental racism to embrace the vitality and healing capacity of collective resistance. This emphasis, however, serves as a weakness to the extent that suffering and resistance become an enduring dichotomy by which people might define the life experiences of oppressed communities. This study stands in agreement with Watts et al. (2003) who assert:

As important as consciousness and resistance are, we contend that there is much more to the experience of oppressed people than their oppression. If this is the sole emphasis, we

do little more than substitute one deficit orientation toward human beings for another. (p. 187)

Still, due to the nature and scope of this type of research, an absence of the multifaceted life experiences of the study's chosen population represents a significant limitation.

Another significant limitation in this study is the brevity of discussion regarding the grief and complex grief experiences of those burdened by environmental racism. Continual reference to suffering throughout this study might result in an unintended dilution of the severity of environmental racism. In like manner, discussion of the successes of resistance movements towards environmental justice could undermine the dire circumstances that drive such a movement. This would be an unforgivable consequence of theorizing about suffering and resistance. In this country, on a daily basis, families watch loved ones endure chronic, yet preventable, illnesses as a result of environmental wastes and toxins that are purposely dumped in their neighborhoods. In this country, on a daily basis, people are told (and others blindly accept) that racism does not factor into decisions being made about the siting of industrial waste incinerators, recycling plants and city dumps. Yet few people living in (white) suburban areas ever consider the existence of these industries. All the while, and, on a daily basis, people and communities of color endure the loss of life of family, friends and loved ones. That these deaths are the result of systemic racism and these deaths are preventable adds a deeply complex layer to grief. Future research considering these distinct aspects of grief would provide a more accurate context of the politics of grief experienced as a result of environmental racism.

The nuances of lived experiences and personal voices are hauntingly absent from this study, and represent a significant limitation. As an unintended consequence of doing this

theoretical study, neglecting to include voices from the frontlines of the movement directly fails to adhere to a core principle of the environmental justice movement, which insists that people are given the opportunity and respect, in all arenas, to speak for themselves (Bullard & Smith, 2005). Qualitative studies hold the potential to personalize and provide space for voices to speak to the multifaceted aspects of peoples' experiences (hooks, 1990). Utilizing hooks' (1990) eloquent and precise call to action, I urge future qualitative researchers and social workers alike, and especially those of us who are white, to not perpetuate the culture of domination by only asking to hear stories "from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, and unfulfilled longing," and instead, be diligent in asking to hear equally of the stories "from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we [colonized *as liberators* and colonizers *committed to liberation*] recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer" (p. 343).

## **Conclusion**

Further into her dialogue exploring marginality as a site of resistance, hooks (1990) invites us—speaking here to those who share my white racial identity—who espouse our passion for critical thinking, for social justice, and for ending racism, to "Enter that space", that space in the margins "that is not a site of domination but a place of resistance" (p. 343). Holding us accountable to engage in individual processes of self- and social-reflection and action, hooks (1990) observes:

I am waiting to learn from them the path of their resistance, of how it came to be that they were able to surrender the power to act as colonizers. I am waiting for [colonizers seeking to liberate themselves] to bear witness, to give testimony. They say that the discourse on marginality, on difference has moved beyond a discussion of us and them. They do not

speak of how this movement has taken place. This is a response from the radical space of my [hooks'] marginality. It is a space of resistance.” (p. 343)

In order for us—speaking here to those who share my white racial identity—to answer this call to action and invitation to liberation and collective resistance, and in order to honor the core values of the profession, all social workers—but specifically, those who share my white racial identity—must expand our understanding and resist the dominant narrative of environmentalism which neglects to consider both the relevance of racism in environmental decision making, as well as the impact on individuals and communities of color. Following this same vein of resistance, we must educate ourselves about issues of racial oppression in ways that academics fail to, and in ways that agencies would rather we not. We must read into definitions the truths that have not yet been printed, and initiate our own exploration for depths of understanding that our privilege has prevented us from seeing. We must prepare ourselves to join in collective resistance against systemic racial and social oppression by engaging in a liberatory consciousness, or some form of liberation praxis. We must acknowledge, advocate for, and ally ourselves with collective resistance movements that emerge and draw strength from the margins. Finally, we must give recognition to the ways that the individual liberation and collective resistance of those who power the environmental justice movement—the same collective body of people who bear the heaviest burdens of environmental *injustice*—challenge those of us in the helping profession to invest in our own process of individual liberation, so that together we can forge collective transformation.



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