

# **THE INTERSECTIONAL ENVIRONMENTALIST**

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**LEAH  
THOMAS**

**HOW TO DISMANTLE  
SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION  
TO PROTECT PEOPLE + PLANET**



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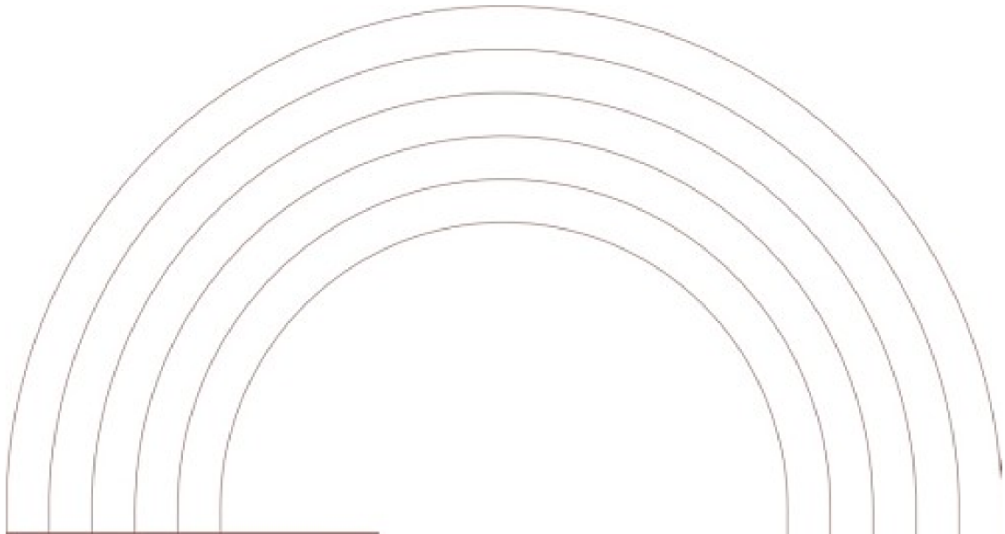
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# CONTENTS

COVER

---

TITLE PAGE

---

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---

DEDICATION

---

FOREWORD

---

INTRODUCTION

---

CHAPTER 1: Intersectional Theory, Feminism + Intersectional Environmentalism

---

CHAPTER 2: Environmental Justice: A Wider Lens

---

CHAPTER 3: Unpacking Privilege

---

CHAPTER 4: Who's Affected: The Reality for BIPOC Communities

---

CHAPTER 5: People + Planet

---

TOOL KIT

---

RESOURCES BY CATEGORY

---

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

---

DISCOVER MORE

---

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

---

NOTES

---

A NOTE ABOUT THE TYPE

---

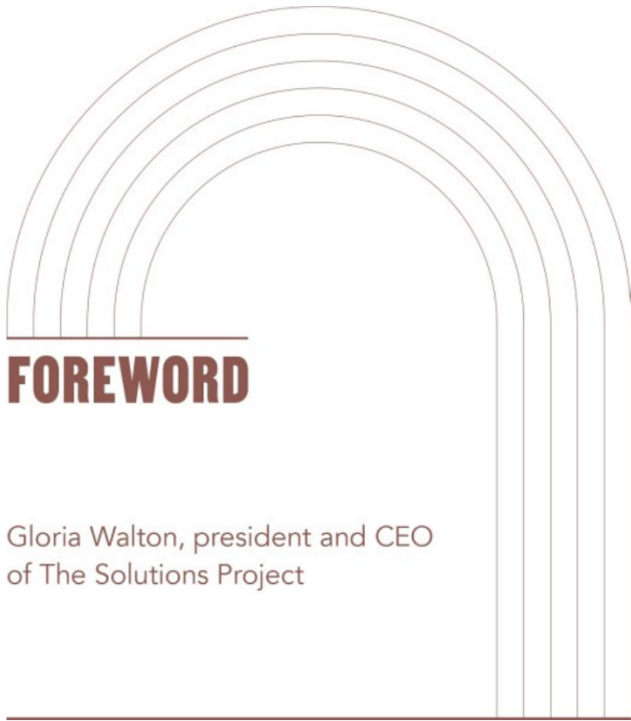
To Camara, because every younger sister knows their older sister  
is their very first and forever best friend

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**VORACIOUS**



## FOREWORD

Gloria Walton, president and CEO  
of The Solutions Project

**MY GRANDMOTHER**, a farmer and descendent of people enslaved in the United States, was one of my greatest teachers, instilling in me foundational values of dignity, community, and love. I remember walking with her as a small child and her saying, with the sweetest Southern charm, “Walk in front of me, honey. Put your head up! Roll those shoulders back, swing those arms, smile, and walk with purpose, ba-by!” And I did!

She, alongside my mother and the matriarchs in our neighborhood, taught me that dignity comes from within—from the love I have for myself and my community. I was born into poverty, but I was raised by proud, resourceful Black women who took care of themselves, their people, and the land. I remember vividly how concepts like conservation and sustainable living were not theoretical to us, nor were they burdens to our way of life. They were how we got by, how we flowed in relationship to one another and our environment. We practiced the models that were passed down from generations before us, and we integrated

our own experiences into lessons for the future.

My mother and grandmother made sure we didn't waste electricity or water. We reused grocery bags and canning jars, and we recycled hand-me-down clothing among our cousins. We carpooled with our neighbors to save gas and carefully stewarded what we had. We shared eggs and milk with neighbors, and we composted leftover food. We did this because we cared for one another and cared for the places we called home. I learned that caring is a practice that is good for people and good for the earth.

These grassroots values were specific results of our Black, mostly feminine, and poor lives, which of course also included immense pain and hardship as we were on the other end of every stick wielded by those in power and upheld by race, gender, and class.

I was reminded of this time and these intersections in my life when I read Leah Thomas's childhood stories of waste-free living out of necessity, when I read about her own relationships and joys living among three generations of Black women. I feel some of my experience and analysis reflected in short form on her Instagram feed and smile with recognition. Our paths first crossed when I was CEO of a grassroots climate justice organization in South Central Los Angeles and Leah was an intern at Patagonia. I am grateful that Leah helped elevate the term and meaning of "intersectional environmentalism," inviting all of you, dear readers, into its life-affirming vision and values during a global pandemic, an escalating climate crisis, and popular uprisings for racial justice.

*Intersectionality* is one of those breakthrough academic concepts—this one coined by the inimitable Kimberlé Crenshaw—that, for millions of people, including Black women like her, and like me and Leah, is simply how we live. Just as Kimberlé Crenshaw's own lived experience gave rise to this foundational framework of critical race theory, her story and scholarship have offered the world a glimpse into our daily reality. Seeing how we, as Black women, can transmute terror and trauma into a vision for something beautiful, collective, and strong is what



makes intersectionality so critical to solving the global climate crisis. It is also what makes critical race theory so scary to those clinging on to treacherous power. Because if we can create the future we want despite the realities of not only racism, but also sexism, poverty, and other oppressive systems, imagine what all of us can do and be when those systems crumble and we are all free. As Leah says, the future is intersectional—just as the past and present are too.

The era of a single-savior, top-down, and siloed approach to change is over. The old way of thinking about environmentalism as a single, distinct issue is long gone, because people are seeing that the solutions to our problems come from within ourselves, and from within our communities. People are empowered and coming together to create the change they want to see, the future they want that reflects their values and visions. And our intersectional lives are at the center of it.

As Leah lays out in the book, it is up to us to change the status quo, because many gatekeepers in the climate movement are still catching up and most of their ideas continue to benefit the few. Intersectional-focused organizations working for climate equity and justice still receive less than 5 percent—by the most generous accounting—of the total \$2.4 billion granted annually for the environment. Within *that*, an even smaller fraction goes to nonprofits led by Black people, Indigenous people, immigrants, and other people of color. Women of color receive just 0.6 percent of total philanthropic *benefit* in the United States across all issue areas, despite being the backbones of most communities.

This is why, as Leah explains in this book, the fundamental truth is that we cannot save the planet without uplifting the voices of those most marginalized. These solutions are already being born from organizers in communities of color on the front lines of the climate crisis, many of whom have lived experiences that give meaning to intersectional environmentalism, even if they've never called it that.

As CEO of The Solutions Project, I've had the privilege of working with many of these organizers as they address the issues

facing their communities. Take Louisiana's "cancer alley," where over two hundred petrochemical plants line eighty miles of the Mississippi River. The EPA says the cancer risk for the area's majority Black population is up to fifty times the national average. When the local government quickly granted permits for a new \$1.25 billion plastics plant that would further poison the area with toxic chemicals, former teacher Sharon Lavigne and the community-based organization she leads, RISE St. James, organized, mobilized, and ultimately stopped the plant from being built. They gained recognition from the United Nations, Sharon was honored with the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize, and her story was covered in *People* magazine.

Other everyday heroes come from the Four Corners region of the western United States, where fifteen thousand Hopi and Navajo families live in homes without electricity. This is despite decades of outsiders benefiting from coal, uranium, oil, and gas extracted from reservation land. Two Navajo women—organizer Wahleah Johns and engineer Suzanne Singer, PhD—started Native Renewables to design and deploy affordable solar photovoltaic arrays and storage systems that can, for the first time, bring electricity to far-flung off-the-grid homes on the reservation. Native Renewables also trains Indigenous people for clean-energy jobs. Now Johns is senior advisor for the Department of Energy's Office of Indian Energy Policy and Programs, seeking to apply her experience to helping the more than five hundred other Indigenous nations within the borders of the United States.

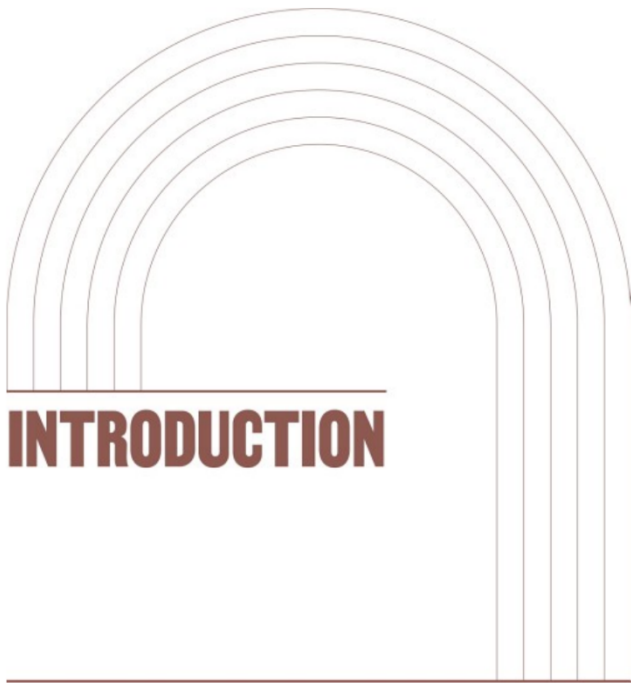
The success of these women, alongside their communities, shows that a people-powered movement works—and benefits everyone. We need big, sustainable solutions that benefit the many, not just the few. And all of us can be a part of it. We all live at various intersections, and when we can see that, the invitations to participate are everywhere.

We can also hold on to the grassroots values that will create a regenerative, healthy, and equitable planet. These values connect us to our family, to our communities, and ultimately to

one another. It is audacious—and requires tenacity—to have a vision for a world one cannot materially see. It takes courage to challenge old ways and create new ones. And it requires love. After all, love is the source of this transformational power. Love for ourselves, our people, and the land. My grandmother, my mother, and the grassroots leaders I've worked with have shown me that courage, dignity, and love are abundant no matter the circumstance.

Leah Thomas's vision and this book are powerful testaments to this truth, and beautiful invitations for all of us to be a part of the future we want. Every day, more and more people are responding to a society mired in racism, sexism, injustice, and inequity by showing the rest of the world how justice is done. And this is just the beginning.

I look forward to seeing *your* contribution.



**WE CAN'T** save the planet without uplifting the voices of its people, especially those most often unheard. We should care about the protection of people as much as we care about the protection of our planet—to me, these fights are the same. As a society, we often forget that humans are a part of our global ecosystem and that we don't exist separately from nature; we coexist with it each and every day.

Unfortunately, as with other animals, some humans are endangered and facing a multitude of social and environmental injustices that impact their ability to not only survive but also thrive in liberation and joy. Why, then, are conservation efforts not extended to the protection of endangered humans and their human rights? This is a question I've struggled with as a Black environmentalist for years, because in my environmental practice, caring for the earth means caring for its people.

The earth shouldn't be taken for granted, nor should its people, and the drivers of this exploitation—greed, racism, capitalism, and other systems of oppression—should be rejected and dismantled. If we combine social justice efforts with

environmental awareness efforts, we will harness enough power, representation, and momentum to have a shot at protecting our planet and creating equity at the same time.

When I studied environmental science and policy as an undergrad at a predominantly white institution, social issues were perpetually separated from environmentalism, sustainability, and conservation. Learning about environmental justice wasn't mandatory in my liberal arts education, nor did I ever have a professor who looked like me—a stark contrast to the equity- and liberation-centered environment intertwined in curriculums at many historically Black colleges and universities. As a Black student in STEM, I had to search beyond the classroom to learn about the contributions of people of color to sustainability, and I had to conduct independent research projects to explore the social determinants that caused environmental injustice along racial, class, and gender lines.

This became increasingly frustrating over time, because I knew that my identity informed the way I cared for the world, from the cultural traditions passed down by my family to the realities of living in a country built from systemic oppression. I knew, even if it wasn't acknowledged, that the overwhelmingly white and middle-class identities of my peers, professors, and textbook authors influenced both what they prioritized as the most “urgent” issues facing the planet and what solutions they proposed. These often excluded the advocacy of racial equality.

The lack of representation of Black, Brown, Indigenous, Asian, low-income, LGBTQ+, disabled, and other marginalized voices has led to an ineffective form of mainstream environmentalism that doesn't truly stand for the liberation of all people and the planet. If it did, environmental injustice outcomes wouldn't be so closely linked to different identity aspects—as we'll explore in this book. From the data, it's evident that social justice and environmentalism are deeply intertwined and that addressing this interconnection is crucial for attaining justice for both people and planet.

Social injustice and environmental injustice are fueled by the same flame: the undervaluing, commodification, and

exploitation of all forms of life and natural resources, from the smallest blade of grass to those living in poverty and oppressed people worldwide. It's a point that many ecofeminists, environmental justice scholars and leaders, Indigenous rights and land sovereignty advocates, and climate politicians have argued for decades, but it hasn't been embedded deeply enough in modern environmental education.

After years of dreaming about becoming an environmentalist, I was heartbroken to discover in my studies how the global environmental community has historically disregarded and silenced people of color, a breach that carries on today. In the largest environmental movements in the U.S. and worldwide, issues of race have been met with hostility, downplayed, questioned, and placed on the back burner. Because environmental justice activists, who are primarily Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and people of color, haven't been given the support from the global environmental community that they deserve, we are still fighting for climate justice all these years later.

I have stood alongside my white environmentalist peers at climate protests and worked alongside them in my environmental studies and while working in corporate sustainability and beyond, yet I felt abandoned by the environmental community during acts of unjustifiable violence against people of color. Even though I've witnessed the horrifying reality of Black people being mistreated during protests, I still showed up for climate protests. Even when the leadership of these climate protests wasn't diverse or when environmental justice wasn't on the agenda, I lent myself to the cause. I passionately adhered to the status quo of environmentalism because I felt like I was doing my duty for the planet and hoped that if I proved myself to be a loyal follower, then maybe advocacy of my people would be brought to the table.

But patience begins to run out and internal fires begin to burn when you're silencing parts of yourself. Did the environmental leaders I followed understand the gravity of risk associated with Black citizens across the world who faced

violence for public demonstration? Did they understand the fear that I felt at every protest I've attended since watching nonviolent protesters in Ferguson be beaten, maced, and terrorized and Black reporters harassed and jailed? This disconnect was isolating. I watched predominantly white environmental protesters chain themselves to buildings, illegally deface property, trespass, and flaunt their arrests on camera during their protests, and I started to wonder: how? When nonviolent protesters or innocent Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian citizens are met with injustice for smaller infractions, such as existing, I had to ask: how privileged must one be to so boldly participate in theatrical protests?

I had a rude awakening during the summer of 2014. While on break from college in my hometown of Florissant, Missouri, I received a call from a childhood friend asking if I'd known Michael Brown. I searched for his name in my memories and didn't find it, but little did I know that I, and the world, would soon know it forever. She broke the news to me that an unarmed Black teenager had been murdered by a police officer in an act of excessive violence (over six shots were fired from a significant distance); Brown's body lay in the street for hours as the surrounding community tried to piece together what had happened without communication from authorities or news outlets. Tension boiled and uprisings soon followed; my sister and parents headed to vigils and protests. But I had to leave to go back to Southern California to start work toward my newly declared major in environmental science.

While I was in my introductory environmental classes, I couldn't focus. How could I think about the Clean Air Act when my community was burning with smoke and tear gas? Spending time in nature during the aftermath of Ferguson helped me process the trauma that was unfolding back home, but I felt a deep sense of guilt at the same time and a kind of survivor's remorse. While I could easily go to the beach or hike in sunny California after my classes, my family and friends at home were dodging tear gas during protests to fight for my civil rights. Why was I entitled to clean air, water, and an abundance of nature in

this privileged and wealthy Orange County community when places, like Ferguson, around the country were not? This kind of disparity persists not only in times of unrest but in general, due to lack of environmental protections in communities of color, which inevitably results in higher instances of environmental hazards.

As I started exploring the data behind environmental injustice, I came to see that this perception of inequality was far from just a hunch. The more I turned the pages of textbooks and peer-reviewed articles on environmental injustice, the more I saw time and time again that people of color in the U.S. and around the world are bearing the brunt of the climate crisis and environmental injustice. Alarm bells were going off in my head, and yet my ideas were met with confusion or dismissal in my classes and in primarily white environmental spaces, both corporate and political. I witnessed cognitive dissonance and gaslighting and was made to feel like my acknowledgment of racial injustice or sexism was disruptive—that my very presence was disruptive, no matter how meek I was or how much I tried to shrink myself.

After the trauma of Ferguson, I was acutely attuned to subsequent events like the police-related murders of Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, and Breonna Taylor. Each headline filled me with heartbreak and left me wondering “When will it stop?” I hit my breaking point when I heard the last words of a Black father, George Floyd, streaming across social media. “I can’t breathe,” he repeated while a police officer kneeled on his neck as he lay handcuffed on the ground. He died by asphyxiation, and his death was later ruled a homicide.

His final words matched those of Eric Garner, another Black father, who was murdered by excessive force by New York City police after being detained in a chokehold for selling untaxed cigarettes in 2014. I hit my breaking point, as many environmentalists did during the Black Lives Matter movement uprisings of 2020. I felt alone and unheard, without much acknowledgment from the wider environmental community.

I couldn’t do it anymore; I needed to immediately depart



environmental spaces that ignored the urgent need for social justice reform. Advocating for the human rights of my people, and so many other oppressed identities worldwide, simply cannot be optional. I didn't want to be an "environmentalist" if that meant I had to choose between racial progress and environmental progress. Leaning into the theories of Black feminism and intersectional feminism, I found a home in what I call intersectional environmentalism. It would prioritize the concerns of my people and all marginalized people in addition to the protection of the planet.

So I thought about how a safer type of environmental practice could be defined, and I wrote it out a week after the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. Stuck inside during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, I took my protest art to the digital realm and created a text-based graphic that read "Environmentalists for Black Lives Matter" over and over in repeating rows. I created another slide with my definition of intersectional environmentalism, followed by a pledge with action steps for dismantling systems of oppression in the environmental movement, as well as steps for showing how to be an ally. I posted these materials online for anyone who wanted to join me. I was furloughed from my job and felt I had nothing to lose; I never could have imagined what followed.

Hundreds of thousands of people followed me on social media, reached out, and shared the pledge and graphic. Intersectional environmentalism grew on Google's search engines almost overnight, and some of the world's top environmental organizations—Greenpeace, Extinction Rebellion, NRDC, Fridays for Future, the Sierra Club, Patagonia, and beyond—shared the viral graphic and advocated for an intersectional approach to environmentalism. I suddenly didn't feel so alone anymore as I saw how millions of people around the world were ready to learn more about intersectional environmentalism and the legacy of climate justice and reshape the narrative of environmentalism to be more inclusive.

As I dove deeper into the history of environmental justice, I also realized that I was never alone in the first place—nor are

other environmentalists of color. As cofounder of the Intersectional Environmentalist council Diandra Marizet says, “Our ancestors are activists,” and even though we sometimes feel underrepresented or alone, our histories and cultures flow through the foundations of what is now considered “sustainability” and have done so since long before that phrasing even existed.

To ensure our organization would be rooted in community, we put together a collective of environmentalists for the first Intersectional Environmentalist council with varying perspectives and backgrounds, and we learned so much along the way. The first council included:

- \* **LEAH THOMAS**, founder of Intersectional Environmentalist
- \* **DIANDRA MARIZET**, cofounder of Intersectional Environmentalist
- \* **SABS KATZ**, cofounder of Intersectional Environmentalist
- \* **PHIL AIKEN**, cofounder of Intersectional Environmentalist
- \* **TERESA BAKER**, founder of the Outdoor CEO Diversity Pledge and founder of the In Solidarity Project
- \* **JOSÉ GONZÁLEZ**, founder and director emeritus of Latino Outdoors
- \* **PINAR SINOPOULOS-LLOYD**, cofounder of Queer Nature
- \* **ADITI MAYER**, labor rights activist, photojournalist, and sustainable fashion blogger
- \* **MARIE BEECHAM**, climate and racial justice advocate
- \* **SOPHIA LI**, multimedia journalist and film director
- \* **WYN WILEY / PATTIE GONIA**, drag queen and intersectional environmentalist / photographer,

creative director, and outdoorist

- ✳️ **RON GRISWELL**, founder and executive director of HBCUs Outside
- ✳️ **MIKAELA LOACH**, climate justice activist and cohost of the *Yikes* podcast
- ✳️ **ISAIAS HERNANDEZ**, creator of Queer Brown Vegan
- ✳️ **KEVIN J. PATEL**, founder and executive director of OneUpAction
- ✳️ **ABIGAIL ABHAER ADEKUNBI THOMAS**, environmentalist and environmental advocate
- ✳️ **ANUSHKA BHASKAR**, founder of Avritah and the HEAL Program
- ✳️ **JORDAN MARIE DANIEL**, founder of Rising Hearts
- ✳️ **KAMILAH JOURNÉT**, marketing strategist, writer, and distance runner
- ✳️ **ANDREA PEREZ**, Indigenous environmental justice advocate and geospatial analyst
- ✳️ **JORDAN CHATMAN**, brand strategist and multimedia environmentalist
- ✳️ **KRISTY DRUTMAN**, digital strategist and host of *Brown Girl Green*
- ✳️ **SAGE LENIER**, environmental educator

Our next step was to build a database and accessible media and resource hub with action steps, resources, and information to dismantle systems of oppression in the environmental movement and explore the links between climate and social justice from a variety of perspectives. Education is often the first step in taking action, and when educational resources tell a more diverse and holistic story of environmentalism, people feel empowered and are more prone to take informed and intentional action.

This sudden grassroots momentum taught me that we are all

participants in an online ecosystem, and we have the potential to make a greener, safer, and more equitable future for everyone, through our social media clicks and even more so in our real lives. If we want to see more inclusive movements, we can unite to create them and forge a new future for environmentalism together.

Environmental movements in the Global North—the wealthiest industrialized countries, many of which have benefited from colonization and are primarily concentrated in the northern part of the world—have failed to be truly inclusive for decades, from the advent of the Earth Day movement to the present. The largest environmental organizations in the world are grappling with internal and external legacies of racism, even within environmental policies and government agencies. Black, Brown, Indigenous, and impoverished people, and many communities in the Global South—countries that are newly becoming, or moving toward becoming, industrialized and often have a history of colonialism—are facing environmental injustices at alarming rates. Those least responsible for the climate crisis are bearing the brunt of it.

I can no longer take part in a type of environmentalism that would allow these oversights and injustices to continue, and I invite you to join me. Without swift action and a deeper look at the ways social injustice flows through environmental movements and policies, the advocacy of my people will continue to be brushed aside. It is time to dismantle and reflect on what environmentalism means and reclaim the term so that it is inclusive of historically excluded and underrepresented people.

I once thought I had to choose between advocating for my Black identity and the planet, but now I know better, and it's something I will return to time and time again throughout this book. You never have to silence parts of your identity or force them to take a back seat in order to advance a cause. Our identities flow through our politics, our advocacy, what we care about—whether we realize it or not.

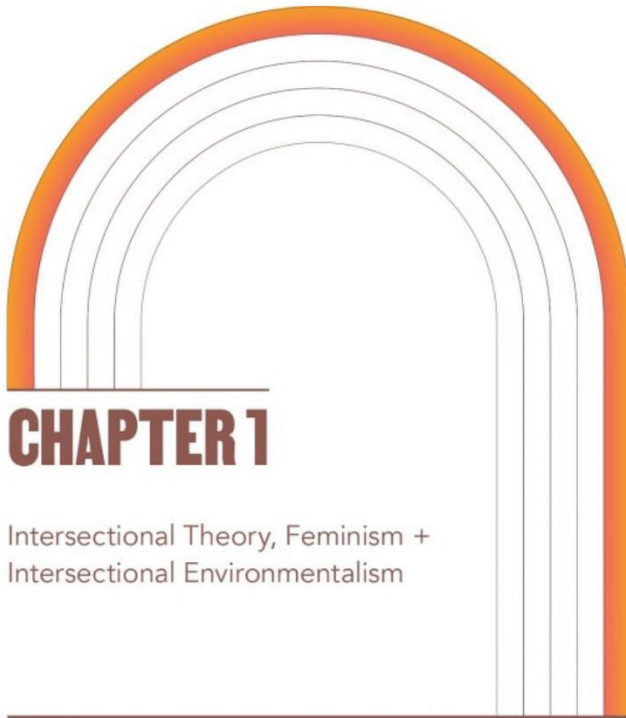
We don't have to *wait* to take up space. We can create our

own environmentalism that is intersectional in nature and that truly advocates for the protection of all people and the planet—an environmentalism that allows people of color to have their stories told, their cultural values reflected in environmental education, and their voices heard in environmental movements, organizations, and policies.

I also want to note that my experiences and take on environmentalism are firmly and proudly rooted in my Blackness and how it coexists with my womanhood. I am not, and will never be, an expert on every facet of equity and inclusion, and this text will be incomplete because the intersectional history of environmentalism is vast. This book is meant to be a foundation to start your own exploration and to give you a rough familiarity with the basics so that you can begin your own journey into the world of intersectional environmentalism (IE). We will never be perfect, know everything, or have an intersectional analysis for every topic, but that's the fun of intersectional environmentalism. There's always room to grow and more to find out, and I'm dedicated to the pursuit of learning more and more each day; I hope that you are too.

While this book is an argument for the need for intersectional environmentalism, it's truly my biggest hope that one day in the future we won't need to preface "environmentalism" with the word "intersectional"; we won't need to create separate safe spaces and curriculums that seek to be inclusive. One day I hope that when people think of an environmentalist, they'll automatically envision a person who cares very deeply about both people and planet. I hope that one day environmental programs will reflect all the world's people and uplift their stories. I truly believe that day will come soon if we wake up to the realities of the climate crisis and environmental injustice and begin to unite and advocate for those unheard voices, the voices of people who face the largest threats of the climate crisis. If that happens, I believe we can create the intersectional future that we want to see: one that is green, regenerative, sustainable, and more equitable for all people—not just a select few.

The future can and will be intersectional.



# CHAPTER 1

Intersectional Theory, Feminism +  
Intersectional Environmentalism

**AS WE** dive into what intersectionality means, it's important to note that this theory stems from the thoughts, experiences, and emotional labor of Black women. It may evolve and take shape in different ways past its original intent, as with environmentalism, but this theory, defined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, is rooted in the duality of her experience as both Black and a woman. Any advancement or more broad adoption of intersectional theory should start with the fact that it was bred from the Black experience and was developed as a tool to help Black women feel seen, heard, and validated in their everyday lives. This theory reflects their experiences as they grappled with those two marginalized identities and faced double, interlocking oppressions and judgment. As Malcolm X said in a 1962 speech,

**The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman.**

**The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman.**

**The most neglected person in America is the Black woman.<sup>1</sup>**

Black women deserve both protection and appreciation. So as we continue to explore and dive deeper into intersectionality and intersectional environmentalism in this chapter, hold space for Black women. Protect and respect their theories and their profound resiliency; know that even in their struggle, Black women have given their knowledge to us to grow and advance society. It is an immense privilege to create space for and hold a piece of their magic and legacies every time the word “intersectionality” is said or written down—so don’t use it lightly and please don’t dilute its origins.



## **DIVISION IN THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT**

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**THIS SECTION** will refer to the women’s rights movement, also called the feminist movement and the women’s liberation movement, in the United States. First wave feminist movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which predate the women’s rights movement, largely focused on the advocacy of legal rights for women (like the ability to vote, receive an education, and secure employment).<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, a recurrence through the different feminist movements in the United States is the lack of consideration for, and even hostile rejection of, racial equality within women’s rights efforts.

The women’s rights movement in the 1960s and ’70s, considered second wave feminism, broadened the idea of what equality could look like for women and included sexual liberation, workplace safety, reproductive rights, the



deconstruction of gender roles, and more.<sup>3</sup> But even with this broader feminism, the advocacy for women of color was not a focal point of the mainstream movement at large—nor did the movement give special consideration to queer and trans women. The dire need for safe spaces for women who weren't represented in the mainstream movement led to an emerging Black feminist movement that advocated for both race and women's equality during the height of the civil rights and women's rights movements. This is where the seeds of intersectional theory were planted—which was later defined in 1989 by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw.

What was the key goal of the second wave feminist women's rights movement? I think a fair answer would be the equality of women in all sectors of life. This is an admirable goal, but if those who are setting these goals aren't representative of all women, all women won't be equally protected as a result. Even if everyone is united by the common thread of being women, there is a danger when what's being considered a universal women's experience is only reflective of those who are privileged in other crucially defining areas in society, like race, class, and sexuality.

The understanding of a "universal women's experience" within the mainstream women's rights movement did not include strong consideration for the role that race played in that experience. This led to the emergence of Black feminist theorists, activists, and scholars who wanted to challenge the notion that the goals of racial equality and women's rights should be kept separate. As Audre Lorde perfectly stated, "I am a Black feminist. I mean I recognize that my power as well as my primary oppressions come as a result of my Blackness as well as my womanness, and therefore my struggles on both of these fronts are inseparable."<sup>4</sup> Inseparable, intertwined, and intersectional.



## WHAT IS MISOGYNOIR?

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**MISOGYNOIR**, A concept originally defined by Black queer feminist Moya Bailey, is a term to describe a specific type of sexism that Black women face.<sup>5</sup> It stems from the term “misogyny”: the hatred of women.<sup>6</sup> Misogynoir examines how race interacts with and compounds the impact of sexism and misogyny. Some examples include:

- ☀️ **RACIAL DISPARITIES** for Black women in the health care system and increased maternal mortality rates.<sup>7</sup>
- ☀️ **THE ANGRY BLACK WOMAN STEREOTYPE**, which contributes to the perception of Black women as threatening when they voice emotion.
- ☀️ **THE STRONG BLACK WOMAN STEREOTYPE**, which discourages Black women from showing emotion.
- ☀️ **THE HYPERSEXUALIZATION** of Black girls and women and the policing of their style choices. For example, natural hairstyles such as braids, locs, and Afros being banned in schools and workplaces.
- ☀️ **THE DOUBLE STANDARD** when styles or features are perceived as “ghetto” when worn by Black women but praised when worn by white women.

Misogynoir explains the added level of specific discrimination that Black women face and how this discrimination permeates society. Misogynoir was very present during the women’s rights movement and caused confusion at the intersections of race and feminism. In her book *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, civil rights activist Angela Davis explained, “Black feminism emerged as a theoretical and practical effort demonstrating that race, gender, and class are inseparable in the social worlds we inhabit. At the time of its emergence, Black women were frequently asked to choose whether the Black

and the work of the Third World Women's Alliance, argued that the liberation of Black women would result in freedom for all people.<sup>10</sup> Black women were and are faced with racism, poverty, and sexism, and if Black women no longer bore the brunt of all these injustices, then everyone would benefit. This notion was revolutionary, because it is the opposite of white feminist ideologies that say that white women's liberation should come first and will eventually have a domino effect, and it is counter to some of the male-led civil rights organizations' positions that put Black women's interests second. The CRC believed that any oppressed group has the right to take up space and advocate for all aspects of their identity; as Black women, they were entitled to a political identity that centered around their Black womanhood, as any other oppressed person was entitled to a political identity that centered around their full personhood.<sup>11</sup> At the time, this was a radical response to being dismissed by other social movements that ignored the specific needs of Black women.

The CRC believed that oppressed people should be able to define their own political ideologies and organizations and advocate for their specific interests without silencing themselves; they termed this ability to self-determine "identity politics."<sup>12</sup> While the term has been misused since its inception, the intention was not to be exclusive, but to give oppressed people the right to advocate for their own self-interests and liberation. Black feminists did not view identity politics as a way to be separatists, but as a way to successfully unite and build stronger liberation movements.

**“We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives. Although we are in essential agreement with Marx’s theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his**

**analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.”**

—Combahee River Collective statement

The CRC’s stance was revolutionary because it expressed the complexity of overlapping identities and the sometimes double or triple marginalization that people with several oppressed identities faced. This multilayered approach to understanding oppression is the basis of intersectional theory.

## THE CHICANA IDENTITY

In this passage, Diandra Marizet, cofounder of Intersectional Environmentalist, unpacks intersectional feminism through the lens of the Chicana identity.

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With growing up in the Southwest came a blend of many identities I learned were attributed to myself, my family, and our community. The ways I heard people like me referred to and how we referred to each other often went ill-defined by a telling of history that smudged the relevance of each term. I was referred to as Mexicana, Hispanic, Latina, Chicana, Tejana, or mestiza. Carrying an ambiguity around all these terms as a child created a confusion about who I was in the context of culture, ancestry, and home.

It was later in life that I learned some of these terms were created to root people like me in the struggles, pains, joys, and triumphs of my ancestors.

“Chicana,” as an example, often refers to a Mexican American woman raised in the U.S. Being referred to as Chicano or Chicana was often held as derogatory; however,

the term 'Chicana' was eventually embraced as an identity that acknowledged the unique ways Mexican American women experienced various forms of oppression. While Chicano men fought for sociopolitical equality in the 1960s and '70s, Mexican American women were still expected to maintain household work in a framework that didn't compensate them, protect them, or empower them. Much like the Chicano movement, second wave feminism also failed to address the racial and class struggles Mexican American women faced.

Being a Chicana was an intersectional form of feminism that acknowledged how gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, race, and sociopolitical status played key roles in the oppression of Mexican American women and informed their fight for liberation. Both the Chicano and mainstream feminist movements wanted Chicanas to silence these overlapping issues to support the larger movements at hand.

In everyday practice, Chicanas aimed to push back against stereotypes that encouraged us to often be perceived as motherly, dutiful, and sexually pure—which would also contribute to issues around the oversexualization of young Mexican American women. The intercultural expectations placed on women like myself manifested into an ideology we refer to as "machismo," a way of thinking that aims to reinforce a male-dominated culture of leadership informed by male pride and a desire to be served by women. The imbalanced expectation to sacrifice oneself for their children left mothers experiencing machismo culture with little to no time for themselves and with little to no resources to fight the social, economic, and physical barriers preventing them from finding any form of liberation. Without appreciating the intersecting issues Mexican American women face, fighting back against this dynamic often led to Chicanas being accused of choosing gender over culture.

This ironic lack of consideration among Chicano and



feminist “revolutionaries” led to prominent Mexican American women in the Chicano movement leaving to create their own rebel space. In the 1970s, Gloria Arellanes was the first woman to resign from the Brown Berets—a Mexican American group historically likened to the Black Panther Party. Despite making her way into leadership among the Brown Berets as minister of finance and correspondence, she expressed, “We have been treated as nothing, and not as revolutionary sisters.” She was then followed by every woman in her segment and went on to organize efforts that would seek to liberate and empower Mexican American women.

This is a small sample of a history, unknown to me as a child, that I am now able to piece together so I can connect deeply to the legacies left behind for me and my community in hopes of proudly creating space for the complexities of our identities as they change and evolve through the continuation of this work.

—Diandra Marizet



## KIMBERLÉ WILLIAMS CRENSHAW AND INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM

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