

## Black Lives Matter ... to the Planet

John Halstead



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I was recently talking to someone who works in the areas of both climate collapse and anti-racism. As she was explaining how she sees these two issues as interconnected, she told me about a workshop she was facilitating recently. About half of the White people gathered kept trying to push the conversation away from White supremacy and toward climate collapse, a topic with which they were apparently more comfortable.\*

It's been said that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism". Apparently, we might now also say, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of racism"—at least for some White people.

When I shared this story with others, a Facebook friend responded that she herself would have pushed the discussion away from White supremacy, too. Why? She explained:

"The climate change issue overrides everything and we cannot have sustained action if we tie the movement to politics. White people do not respond to accusations of white supremacy, they react to it, negatively. So, yes, are you going to insist on focusing on white supremacy and watch 60% of the dominant racial group walk away, ready to vote against your policies, or do you play the long game and work toward climate change mitigation, knowing that a majority of the ppl triggered by accusations of White supremacy today will not be voting in 20 years?"\*\*

— personal communication

In this article, I want to respond this argument that my Facebook friend raised that we need to set aside the issue of racism in order to prioritize climate change, in part because trying to dismantle White supremacy alienates White people who might otherwise be allies on the issue of climate change.

I've been involved in various activist causes over the years, from women's rights to immigrant's rights to prisoner's rights. But the two issues which have evoked the most passion in me are environmentalism and anti-racism. I didn't plan this. It just happened. But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense.

There are important connections to between systemic racism and environmental destruction. ["Environmental racism"](#) is a term which refers to the disproportionate impact of pollution and climate change on communities of color and how such communities are sacrificed to sustain the prosperity of White communities. A good example of this is the [severe lead contamination of both the soil and drinking water of East Chicago, Indiana](#), near where I live. East Chicago is about half Latino and half Black. When a much less severe lead contamination was discovered in another, predominately White town in Indiana, the official response was rapid. In contrast, the citizens of East Chicago were left by officials to live with a known problem for decades!

My Facebook friend mentioned above complained that "the Sierra Club has, for decades, advocated for minority groups. Yet no minority groups advocate for environmentalism." First of all, that's just not an accurate statement. Many racial justice groups have and do advocate for environmental justice, while the Sierra Club and other Big Green groups only became race

conscious when their overwhelming Whiteness became an public perception problem for them. Furthermore, a recent study found that [Black and Latino people are the ones who care the most about climate change](#), which makes sense because they are often the one's most impacted.

My friend's statement also reveals her privilege and tells us something about the privilege of many White people. People of color are sometimes forced by necessity to focus on racial justice, because for them, it's a matter of immediate survival. Most White people (and I include myself here) can't really comprehend what it means to be Black or Brown in a White supremacist culture. In some ways, climate activism is a luxury, one that many people of color don't have.

A friend of mine, [Patrick Farnsworth](#), has observed how privileged people talk about apocalypse as something the future, but for many people of color the apocalypse has already come. And for many, it is still going on. This includes descendants of slaves in America, indigenous peoples, and other people of color.

When you go to climate marches, you'll sometimes notice that the majority of people there are retired or otherwise economically privileged. They have the luxury of focusing their attention on the question of future survival, while many people of color have to think about surviving in the short term. If White people like my friend really want more people of color to involved in climate activism, then we need to be working to dismantle White supremacy so they can.

My friend isn't alone in thinking this way, though. Just this past spring, the Extinction Rebellion movement in the U.S. was fractured over the question of the intersection of racial justice and climate activism. A group calling itself XR-America broke away from XR-US and is now drawing criticism for de-centering the voices of people of color.

The XR-US had [four demands](#), the fourth of which is for:

“... a just transition that prioritizes the most vulnerable people and indigenous sovereignty; establishes reparations and remediation led by and for Black people, Indigenous people, people of color and poor communities for years of environmental injustice ...”

— Extinction Rebellion-US website

This demand was [replaced by XR-America with the following](#):

“4. ONE PEOPLE, ONE PLANET, ONE FUTURE

Government to work for global net zero and planetary repair by 2030 on the basis of equity and mutual survival interest for all communities, countries and generations.”

— XR-America website

This is the equivalent of “All Lives Matter” for the environmental movement. [As Josna Rege observed](#):

“... it highlights an important issue in single-issue political movements. By focusing on one overriding issue they hope to include as many people as possible; but in so doing they fail to draw attention to structural inequities and as such, they lose the ability to make transformative social change.”

— Josna Rege

Extinction Rebellion-UK has unfortunately adopted a similar position to that of XR-America. One of XR-UK’s founders, Roger Hallam, [has called for a “universalist” approach to climate activism and has criticized “identity politics”](#). One of XR America’s founders, Jonathan Logan, [explained the position](#):

“If we don’t solve climate change, Black lives don’t matter. If we don’t solve climate change now, LGBTQ [people] don’t matter. If we don’t solve climate change right now, all of us together in one big group, the #MeToo movement doesn’t matter... I can’t say it hard enough. We don’t have time to argue about social justice.”

— Jonathan Logan, Extinction Rebellion-UK

While I understand the feeling of urgency which inspires Logan and Hallam, it is truly disappointing hear statements like these from some of the leaders in the environmental movement. It betrays a profound misunderstanding about the intersection between environmental destruction and White supremacy, one which goes even deeper than environmental racism.

At it’s root, the cause of environmental destruction, including anthropogenic climate change, is *human supremacy*, the idea that human beings are somehow above nature, its masters, not its subjects, and not subject to its limitations.\*\*\* Human exceptionalism manifests in all kinds of ways, from our language—even the word “environment” implies a separation between the human and more-than-human world—to [our faith in technology’s ability to transcend the limitations of nature](#).

Human supremacy alienates us from the web of life and this permeates our daily existence. Even environmental activists are influenced by it, largely unconsciously. Because of this, we experience the rest of the web of life as “other”. This disconnection, this “othering”, is part and parcel of myriad other “otherings”, including patriarchy , hetero-/cis-normativity, nationalism, and White supremacy. One way to talk about the interrelation of these “otherings” is called [“intersectional environmentalism”](#).

The issues of environmental destruction and systemic racism are so interconnected that we can’t address one without the other. Climate change and ecosystem collapse are not merely technical or political problems. If they were, we would have solved them. They are problems of consciousness.

We’re not going to solve the climate change crisis until we fix this fundamental disconnect in ourselves, between us and all of those that we “other”. It includes human “othering” of all other-than-human beings on the planet. And it includes White “othering” of people of color.

I don’t believe we’re to “fix” climate change without fixing ourselves. And that requires that White people address White supremacy, men address patriarchy, and all the rest. What Chicago BLM activist, [Mariame Kaba](#), has said abolition of the police applies more broadly to both White supremacy and climate change:

“[It’s] not about changing one thing. It’s about changing everything, together.”

— Mariame Kaba

I know that sounds like an overwhelming task. It is certainly [a much bigger task than just transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy](#). It would take something akin to a religious conversion, and on a mass scale. I believe there is potential, though, in the present moment, for such a conversion. We are experiencing multiple crises, both environmental and social, which are calling into question much that we have taken for granted until now.

Jonathan Logan says, “If we don’t solve climate change, Black lives don’t matter.” But I would turn that around. [If Black lives don’t matter, we’re never going to “solve” climate change](#). Logan says, “We don’t have time to argue about social justice.” But I would respond, **we don’t have time *not* to fight for social justice.**

## Notes

\* To give credit where credit is due, she told me that the other half—generally the younger half—of the White people in the room, understood the connection between the two issues and took exception to the redirection of the conversation.

\*\* I really don't think there is a "long" game to be played with out climate. [I don't think we have 20 years or even 10 years.](#) I don't think voting of Joe Biden will change our fate. I don't think voting for *anyone* will change our fate. But that's a subject for another essay.

\*\*\* A closely related term is "human exceptionalism", the notion that humans are special, somehow exempt from the laws of nature which apply to all other living beings.

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John Halstead is the author of *\*Another End of the World is Possible\**, in which he explores what it would really mean for our relationship with the natural world if we were to admit that we are doomed. John is a native of the southern Laurentian bioregion and lives in Northwest Indiana, near Chicago. He is a co-founder of 350 Indiana-Calumet, which worked to organize resistance to the fossil fuel industry in the Region. John was the principal facilitator of "A Pagan Community Statement on the Environment." He strives to live up to the challenge posed by the Statement through his writing and activism. John has written for numerous online platforms, including Patheos, Huffington Post, PrayWithYourFeet.org, and Gods & Radicals. He is Editor-at-Large of HumanisticPaganism.com. John also facilitates climate grief support groups climate grief support groups affiliated with the Good Grief Network.

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