

My project investigates how black Chicago residents have used communal Christian institutions to engage with environmental issues, and the ways their perspectives differ from conventional environmentalism. This inquiry is set from the late 1960s to the early 2000s. I chose this range because I am interested in describing how the African-American Civil Rights movement, especially from 1954 to 1968, contributed to the founding of churches that currently promote minority participation in discussions about the environment. I am also drawn to explore the ideological underpinnings of these churches, because scholars have shown that black Americans largely have a different relationship with their environments than white Americans.¹ These relationships with nature are also likely to differ within each assembly.

As early as 1919, but especially in the last several decades, a number of black churches have emerged as an important source of black environmentalism.² Though little has been written about these efforts, it is possible that the infrastructure left after the civil rights movement has contributed uniquely to the emergence of a minority environmental consciousness. This is a great opportunity to learn more about black environmentalism because so much of the church infrastructure of the civil rights movement still exists today.

This summer, I will carry out my project by exploring the modern histories of the United Church of Christ (UCC), a mainly white, Protestant denomination, and a number of predominantly black churches in the south side of Chicago that operate under the UCC, including the Trinity United Church of Christ (see Appendix 1). Trinity United Church of Christ is the largest assembly in the UCC and was founded near Washington Heights, Chicago in 1961, during significant civil rights activism in Chicago. Throughout this upcoming break and during spring quarter, I will begin contacting this group of churches to learn more about their environmental initiatives, the role of the environment in the church's activities and discussions, and their associations with other churches or organizations in these efforts. In particular, I am interested in writing about their participation in *Mission 4/1: Earth*, a national event planned by the UCC to promote environmental awareness and activism.³ By the beginning of the summer, I will develop a rigorous interview guide with Professor Keith Woodhouse and a list of candidates for interviews. By the third week of the summer, I will complete in-person interviews with at least two members from each church interested in the project. By the fifth week, I will complete all supplementary interviews. Through oral history, books, sermons, and publications about black liberation theology⁴ written during this period (see Appendix 2 for a provisional list), I will be able to help explain black environmentalism in Chicago within the context of each church I am able to work with.

Oral history is a technique used by historians to preserve the "voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events."⁵ Though much of it is obtained through structured dialogue, oral history is a rigorous method of inquiry because it consists of examining, analyzing, and investigating all information discussed. It is one of the most accessible methods historians can use to learn more about a topic with few textual sources. In the context of this project, I will try to collect enough information to answer my inquiry comprehensively, and also archive my findings at the end of the summer with the help of Professor Keith Woodhouse so other historians can use it for future publications.

I believe I am well qualified to facilitate these interviews because of my experiences as an engineering student and as a Design for America team leader. In fall 2012, I conducted a number of client and expert interviews to create an ergonomic aid for patients at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago. In 2013, I worked with a team of four Design for America members to create both a tool for flooding victims to use in Midlothian, IL and Bangkok,

Thailand, and a website for parents of students in Evanston, IL. Both projects required several rounds of client and user interviews.

Most research regarding mainstream environmentalism tends to be about white environmentalists. Though some historians are scheduled to release projects about minority environmentalism in the near future, this research project aims to address questions of emerging scholarship in American environmental history. In particular, two books to be released in upcoming years will explore similar questions. Brian McCammack's *Recovering Green in Bronzeville: An Environmental and Cultural History of the African American Migration to Chicago* and Colin Fisher's *Urban Green: Nature, Recreation, and the Working Class in Industrial Chicago* both aim to describe Chicago minority environmentalism that would complement my inquiry. McCammack's work discusses the environmental values and heritage of African-Americans who moved to Chicago between 1915 and 1940. Fisher's work is written largely about working-class white and black Americans that sought out nature for recreation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My project will focus on black churches within a similar topic that has not been comprehensively written about yet. Neither publication investigates the time period or Chicago communities that I plan on working with.

Within scholarship regarding black environmentalism, much of the literature only focuses on the relationships between individuals and the environment.⁶ My research will shed light on institutional relationships with the environment. Literature that discusses urban black environmentalism also tends to be focused on complicated social clashes⁷; an example would be the 1919 Chicago Race Riots that had some grounding in environmentalism, but were largely a backlash to urban segregation.⁸ This project would contribute scholarship that focuses on social infrastructure (churches) with significantly environmentalist agendas, which is also difficult to find even in the context of white Americans.

My research inquiry would also consider much of the existing scholarship about the intellectual history behind black environmentalism.⁹ By comparing and contrasting what historians have understood about black environmentalism with the tangible initiatives pursued by churches, this research project will bridge the social, intellectual, and environmental history of black Americans in the late twentieth century. After working with professors Keith Woodhouse and Kevin Boyle, and our university librarian Harriet Lightman to create this historical question, I am confident that it will examine a field that historians of all three disciplines would like to hear more about.

I am interested in this project because I have focused my studies on American environmental history, mainly through the history department. I have taken classes specifically about environmental history (History 300: American Environmental History, History 392: American Wilderness). I am also on track to explore related disciplines, such as philosophy or political science (Environmental Policy and Culture 390: Environmental Justice, Philosophy 283: Ethics and the Environment) next quarter.

Outside of my previous undergraduate experiences, this project will enable me to pursue an extended research project over the upcoming academic year and continue it through graduate school. As someone who has worked with environmental organizations such as the Bronx River Alliance and the New York Parks & Conservation Association in New York's inner city, I am excited to learn about the initiatives unique to Chicago. The experiences of minority communities with nature are no less important than that of Aldo Leopold or John Muir, in discussions of humanity's relationship with it.

¹ Johnson, C.Y., J.M. Bowker, and H.K. Cordell. 2004 Ethnic variation in environmental belief and behavior and
² Gottlieb, Roger S. *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment* / Edited by Roger S. Gottlieb. New York: Routledge, 1996

³ "Mission 4/1 Earth: 50 Great Days | April 1, 2013 – May 19, 2013." *Mission 4/1 Earth: 50 Great Days | April 1, 2013 – May 19, 2013*. Accessed March 9, 2015. <http://www.ucc.org/earth/index.html>.

⁴ Glave, Dianne. "Black Environmental Liberation Theology: The Historical and Theological Roots of Environmental Justice Activism by the African American Church." *Griot* 23, no. 2 (2004): 61.

⁵ "Oral History: Defined." Oral History Association. Accessed March 13, 2015.

<http://www.oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-history/>.

⁶ Mohai, Paul. "Dispelling Old Myths: African American Concern for the Environment." *Environment* 45, no. 5 (2003): 10-26.

⁷ Glave, Dianne D., and Grim, Valerie. "Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage." *Agricultural History* 87, no. 1 (2013): 115-16.

⁸ Glave, Dianne D., and Stoll, Mark, Editor. *"To Love the Wind and the Rain": African Americans and Environmental History* / Edited by Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll. 2006.

⁹ Arp, W., and C. Kenny. "Black Environmentalism in the Local Community Context." *Environment And Behavior* 28, no. 3 (1996): 267-82.