

Hikers That Look Like Me: An Analysis of Mainstream Environmental Organization's Latinx Youth Engagement

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Abstract:

Awareness of the racial disparity in Pacific Northwest (PNW) outdoor engagement is growing and mainstream environmental organizations are looking to provide opportunities for youth of color to experience the "outdoors." As organizational members identify needs, develop programming and establish frameworks for their engagement work they are making important rhetorical decisions in how they frame, describe and articulate their efforts. This report examines communication and programming to Latinx youth surrounding outdoor enjoyment to better inform how growing efforts in the PNW should be addressed moving forward. Conceptualizing the "REI" outdoors as historically racialized space, the emergent efforts to incorporate Latinx youth in mainstream outdoor activities and experiences constitute a critical discourse that is challenging historically narrow conceptions of who gets to enjoy the PNW outdoors. The research finds that nascent efforts are far from actualizing the inclusive future we wish to see and where environmental organizations are taking some steps to learn and be better, meaningful circle back and engagement with communities of color is still lacking. In beginning to meet this need, mainstream environmental organizations need to hire people of color, shift how they name nature and the outdoors, and engage non-traditional stakeholders. In analyzing these organizations environmental communication, those who love the outdoors can better understand how to create a Pacific Northwest outdoor culture that is as diverse as those who call the region home.

Keywords: *dominant/critical discourse, pragmatic, constitutive, symbolic action, rhetorical framing, naming*

I. Introduction

Moving to the Pacific Northwest (PNW) for university, I was excited to make the most of Oregon's nature and outdoor recreation activities. Where the PNW wonders never disappointed, I quickly came to realize that whether it be out on local trails, visiting state parks or forests I rarely came across people who looked like me, a Latina. My personal experience and identity has motivated me to think critically about the ways people are included and not included in the outdoors and specifically influenced the research that follows on Latinx youth outdoor experiences. The term *Latinx* is used throughout this piece as the gender-neutral alternative for Latino.

Though nature and the outdoors seem a mainstay of PNW culture, people of color in general, and for the intents of my research, the Latinx community, are often missing from these spaces and **dominant discourses**. Though the history and context of why this is in the PNW will be enumerated a later, it is essential to understand that for many people, lifelong outdoor engagement starts early in life, as a kid.

As awareness of this racial disparity grows, organizations are looking to provide opportunities for Latinx youth to engage and experience the "outdoors." These efforts can broadly be divided into two main categories, historically white mainstream organizations looking to involve new stakeholders and Latinx organizations creating their own outdoor opportunities. As organizational members identify needs, develop programming and establish frameworks for their engagement work they are making important rhetorical decisions in how they frame, describe and articulate what they do and how they do it. Conceptualizing communication as **symbolic action** per Pezzullo and Cox' definition in Environmental Communication and The Public Sphere, these organizational efforts are both **pragmatic**, meaning they convey purpose, and **constitutive**, which

establishes something and creates meaning. These efforts thus merit comparative rhetorical analysis. Only through critically examining the efforts, or lack thereof, of these organizations can we figure out how to make sure all members of our communities are included in recreational outdoor experiences. In this research I strive to examine communication and programming to Latinx youth surrounding outdoor enjoyment to better inform how this growing niche in the PNW should be addressed by organizations and communities moving forward.

II. Context

It would be impossible to understand the current absence and exclusion of the Latinx community from nature and the outdoor **dominant discourse** without contextualizing their experiences historically. In fact, for many Latinx communities in the PNW, their history and lived reality is intimately entwined with working in the outdoors. Latinx labor, be it on farms, in forests or factories is essential to PNW history, economy and race relations. Mario Jimenez Sifuentez, in his book Of Forests and Fields: Mexican Labor in the Pacific Northwest illuminates through **critical discourse**, the history of Mexican laborers as one of resistance. Critical discourses like Sifuentez' challenge the dominant rhetorical frameworks that are circulated and widely accepted. Sifuentez critiques PNW environmental communication in writing his book and articulates that in not challenging this dominant **rhetorical framework** we, "risk perpetuating the myth that the economy of the Pacific Northwest is nature's gift and not the product of human labor" (7). Though the current Latinx community in the PNW has expanded beyond solely Mexican laborers, Latinxs continue to be excluded from nature and outdoor discourses, both economic and recreational. This raises important questions about how we push back at the erasure of Latinx labor in "wilderness"

areas while also advocating for these spaces to be enjoyable for everyone rather than limited to spaces of exploitative labor.

Though the history of Latinxs in the PNW is inextricably linked to the outdoors, contemporary communication geared toward “outdoor activities,” are notably void of brown people. It is important here to operationalize and acknowledge the importance of naming something as the “outdoors” and/or “nature.” Though broader and more diverse **namings** are needed, for the intent of this research I use mainstream PNW conceptions of the outdoors (think REI; camping, hiking, biking) to analyze how Latinx youth are excluded from and or included in these dominant discourses. Pertinent to understanding this conception of the outdoors is the theory of racialized space. In her book, Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors, Carolyn Finney, articulates the concept of racialized space as it applies to the outdoors writing, “...national parks and forests, as spaces and places that reflect national identity, environmental values and American history are not immune to processes of representation and racialization” (28). The Oregon outdoors is very much a racialized space.

At a theoretical and rhetorical level Latinx communities are historically and continually excluded by the communication of the outdoors as a white space. Not only are people of color absent from visible participation in mainstream outdoor activities, but as Finney (2014) articulates the naming of the outdoors is defined by whiteness and founded on a Euro-American experience of the environment. As this exclusion becomes more broadly known, people and organizations are looking to address this historical and continued gap, by reaching out to Latinx communities, creating new programming, and/or starting new organizations. Knowing that environmental

communication, in creating meaning and conveying purpose shapes discourse, the ways that these organizations convey their mission is important in creating a more inclusive #PNWonderland.

III. Methods and Sources

Especially pertinent to understanding how this context impacts current rhetorical framings is the way organizations conceptualize and address this need. Guiding this research was a few key questions: *What are organizations doing to engage Latinx youth? How do different organizations communicate their engagement efforts with Latinx Youth? What rhetorical strategies should be utilized moving forward?* In my research to answer these questions I analyzed the websites of the organizations themselves as well as any related popular media activity. Specifically, I emphasized the ways that the organizations themselves communicate their purpose, verbally and non-verbally. I focused on their mission statements, programming descriptions, staff, photos and events. I rhetorically analyzed these sections of the websites, looking for audience, exigency or urgency and constraints, both limitations and possibilities. I grounded these efforts in academic research and theory, some of which I have introduced already.

I also spoke with Antonia Decker, a Latina Outreach and Engagement Coordinator at the Straub Environmental Center, about her ongoing work at the white-founded outdoor-education service provider. As the organization continues the hard internal work to better reflect and serve all the Salem community, Antonia is in the process of using her language, cultural and local knowledge to help develop programming that focuses on the Latinx community in Salem. I intended to focus both on the PNW and on youth engagement, but given the emergent nature of

these organizational efforts I more holistically looked at the ways in which environmental organizations include and or don't include broader "diversity" in their outdoor engagement efforts. I also chose to focus on Oregon and specifically the greater Portland to Salem area. Though this research was *by no means* extensive it is motivated by a desire to draw attention to the lack of outdoor opportunities for Latinx youth, and youth of color in general. I explored the differences and similarities by which organizations frame and attempt to address this problem, and hoped to elucidate better rhetorical tools for future Latinx youth engagement.

IV. Findings

In doing this research I quickly encountered a few key things. First, unsurprisingly, there are quite a few environmental organizations, loosely defined, in the PNW and specifically greater Portland and Salem area. These range in size and scope of course, from a few people supporting a trail, to branches of large environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club and 350.org. The second thing I found was the lack of efforts to engage Latinx youth. I found some broadly defined mission statements that listed inclusivity and being accessible to everyone. Often staff pictures would include one to two non-white people, maybe a black woman or someone with a Hispanic last name, rarely both. But I wasn't seeing the targeted programming that I expected. So what did this mean? Do organizations not know they aren't engaging all communities? Do they not care?

In talking with Antonia from Straub Environmental Center I learned that part of what explains my findings, or lack thereof, is not that organizations aren't aware that there is a diversity gap in their organization and community engagement, though there are organizations who aren't. It also isn't that organizations are noticing this gap and doing nothing, though that of course is also happening. Instead where the issue seems to lie, and what Antonia explained to me, is in the circle

back. I will use an example to try and illustrate what I mean here. Say you sit on the board of directors for a white-led environmental non-profit, your organization realizes, or is informed, that they are not meeting the entire communities needs and or doesn't have a staff that reflects the community you work *in and for*. You reach out to a coalition or organization, such as the Center for Diversity and the Environment or the Intertwine Alliance in Portland, and some of your staff, preferably, but rarely, all of them, participate in one on of their Diversity, Equity and Inclusion trainings. You all have the opportunity to learn about Oregon's racist history, structural racism, racial equity, etc, you leave with new information, a new resume bullet and hope to be better moving forward. But what really changed? The harsh reality is that it **is** possible to implement strategies of "diversity, equity and inclusion" without actually speaking, hiring or interacting meaningfully with any people of color, whom these programs are purportedly supposed to be helping.

V. Conclusion

Though the PNW may be thought of and founded as a white utopia, the reality is that the area is beautifully diverse, peopled by folks of all ethnicities, races, nationalities, abilities, sexualities, religions and genders. Contextualized historically, the emergent efforts to incorporate Latinx youth in outdoor activities and experiences constitute a critical discourse that is challenging historically narrow conceptions of who gets to enjoy the PNW outdoors. But as we have seen, these very nascent efforts are far from actualizing the inclusive future we wish to see. Where environmental organizations are realizing what I came to find in my first semester at Willamette and taking some steps to learn and be better, meaningful circle back and engagement with communities of color is still lacking. These environmental organizations don't need to reinvent the wheel, instead

they need to hire people of color and support those already doing the work. White-led environmental organizations need to center environmental justice, thinking about environmentalism and social justice in tandem. They should share and give resources to support organizations of color and build coalitions across non-traditional environmental stakeholders. The dominant discourse needs to shift, all people need to be included in rhetoric, organizations and efforts to make the outdoors enjoyable for everyone but more than just discourse shifting, who is doing the talking also needs to change.

As these efforts evolve organizations are actively making decisions on how to fill this historical gap and meet their diverse communities needs, with varied intents and successes. In analyzing these organizations environmental communication, those who love the outdoors can better understand how to create a Pacific Northwest outdoor culture that is as diverse as those who call this region home. So that maybe next time, when I head out to hike I see more people who look like me.

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