



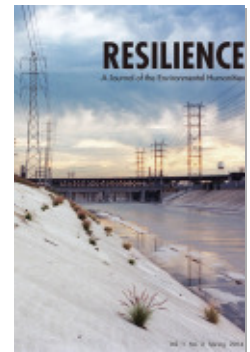
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Siobhan Senier, Anthony Lioi, Mary Kate Ryan, Pavithra Vasudevan, Angel Nieves, Darren Ranco, Courtney Marshall

Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities, Volume 1, Number 2, Spring 2014, (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press



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The Resilience of Race

A Cultural Sustainability Manifesto

SIOBHAN SENIER, ANTHONY LIOI, MARY KATE RYAN,
PAVITHRA VASUDEVAN, ANGEL NIEVES,
DARREN RANCO, AND COURTNEY MARSHALL

Milford, New Hampshire, is well known to students of abolitionist history as the home of the Hutchinson Family Singers, often hailed as the country's first protest singers. This celebratory history shows up the state's whitewashing of its own engagement with slavery, because Milford was also the hometown of Harriet Wilson, the first African American woman to publish a novel in the United States. *Our Nig* (1859) was the semi-autobiographical account of a young black woman's abuse in indentured servitude. Controversial in its own time, it evidently continues to challenge a New England ideal that would prefer to ignore the racism in its own midst. Although the novel itself was recovered in the 1980s—to considerable academic fanfare—it wasn't until 2006 that Milford welcomed a modest memorial statue in honor of Wilson. As of this date, the Harriet Wilson Project is still struggling to find a permanent, local place to explore and maintain Harriet Wilson's legacy.

Across the state, in Portsmouth, a 2003 city infrastructure project was halted by the discovery of the intact remains of eight women and men of African descent. According to a 1705 map, this cemetery was once swampland on the city's outskirts; ground-penetrating radar indicates that it includes as many as two hundred burials. For the past eleven years, the African Burying Ground Committee has fought to reclaim this contested space, now a residential street close to the center of modern Portsmouth, containing a black history marginalized, then

ignored, then lost. Their planned memorial still not been constructed.

These two projects encapsulate New England's great irony: having seen centuries of steady population and development expansion, the region assiduously erases the indigenous removal and chattel slavery on which its expansion (like that of the rest of the country) was inexorably built. The Harriet Wilson and African Burying Ground projects thus also exemplify the need for a critical sustainability studies that can understand race and public memory as thoroughly implicated in environmental change.

Resolved: We affirm that resilience studies, as a discipline in formation, should take race as a central category of analysis. Race is the node around which environmental damage, community vulnerability, and economic imperatives collide.¹ It (over)determines what (and who) gets protected, preserved, and stewarded. Race is, in fact, a wicked problem. To borrow from the language of another emergent discipline—sustainability science—wicked problems are phenomena, such as climate change and poverty, that are transhistorical, transcultural, and seemingly intractable. They require transdisciplinary work and critical thinking; they require academics to come down from their towers and enlist members of the public not only in the coproduction of knowledge, but in the coproduction of our very research questions. In the United States, the wicked problem of race drives two of our most ecologically destructive and nationally formative processes: indigenous displacement and chattel slavery. And in the New England, where the word “wicked” is more often heard as an intensifier (“Wicked awesome!”), race continues to underwrite white privilege, as an entire region maintains the fiction that slavery and racism never affected us, due either to our own enlightenment or the alleged absence of people of color.

We call for all work on resilience and sustainability to give primary consideration to race and racism. If resilience works to restore systems, communities, and people after disasters, it must always focus questions of inequality, domination, colonialism, and neoliberalism. Critical sustainability, with the study of race at its center, must creatively reimagine human relationships with a variety of environments—natural, built, local, and global. We affirm sustainability science's emphasis on partnering with the public in the coproduction of knowledge. In this model sustainability is not just something to be defined (à la the Brundtland

Commission's famous formulation) but is rather a method, an opportunity for institutional and societal transformation. It is an opportunity for academics to reconsider their traditional (some would say entrenched) positions as knowledge producers and disseminators.

Considering ourselves as stakeholders alongside members of the public we purportedly serve, resilience scholars—collaborating across disciplines, with a steady eye on racial dispossession—can do more than just theorize power; we can participate as much as possible in its redistribution. We also affirm the excellent work done in the name of environmental humanities. These scholars know that racism deforms land, and can read and interpret these marks. We would add that environmental justice is therefore a cultural issue, insofar as it has a component of public memory: it asks what is being sustained, by whom, and for whom; how space has been constructed to perpetuate systems of domination; and how capitalism maintains extractive economies of knowledge production.

We see the possibilities inherent in the race-based problem of cultural resilience uniting around place-based work. Far from being provincial, place-based work helps us reflect the full diversity of stories on the cultural landscape to help communities create tools for confronting changing ecological and global systems. Indeed, in the fields of cultural heritage preservation and planning, resilience suggests the inherent power of a place or historic site to transcend a moment in its particular life cycle or history—to move us to actively engage in contemporary community building practices and sustainable strategies for social betterment. In literary studies, too, resilience is about the preservation of written culture and its transmission into the future. One of the things humanism has in fact preserved is the memory of catastrophic events, such as the fall of Rome, that have threatened cultural resilience. The tradition is the memory of the crises of tradition. In this sense the contemporary environmental crisis is no surprise to us. Things fall apart. Because we are not surprised, the global network of literary scholars can draw upon our knowledge of past crises and traditional techniques of cultural resilience to address the problem of cultural resilience today.

We do so not in a nostalgic way, but knowing that inherited techniques may not be adequate to contemporary problems like climate disruption. Our traditional tools of resistance—the library, the archive, the oral tradition, and the academy itself—may not be prepared for the



Fig. 1. Marker, future site of African Burying Ground Memorial. Photo by Angel Nieves.

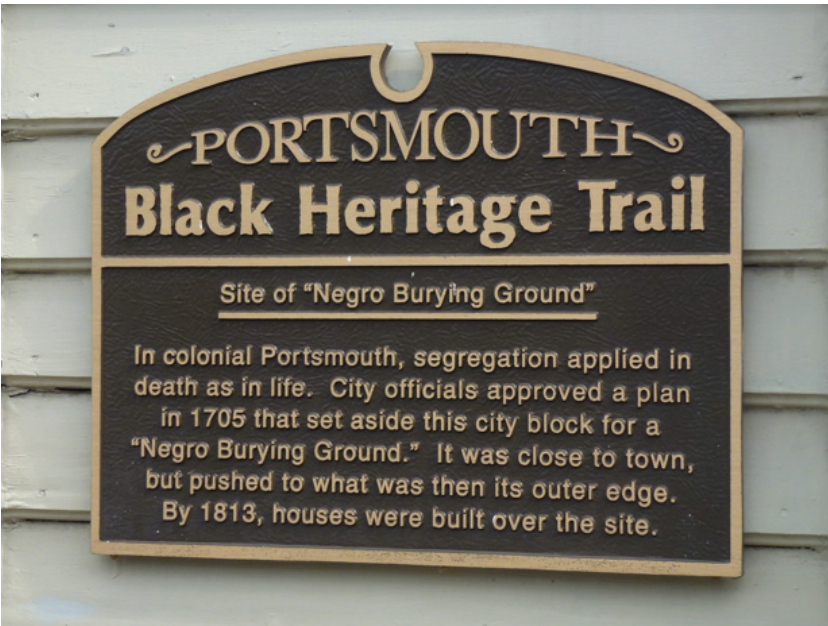


Fig. 2. Marker, Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail. Photo by Angel Nieves.

scale of the current crisis. How can we best help the Harriet Wilson Project find a permanent interpretive home, perhaps through adaptive, multipurpose reuse of a historic Milford building to contribute both to small-town and global life? How can we ensure that the African Burying Ground is properly recognized, understood, studied, and used as a model for recapturing lost or marginalized histories in other locations? We must use the heritage of critical reasoning to assess our prospects and innovate accordingly.

When we reach out and make connections across disciplines and with the public, we begin to transcend the academics and institutions that chain knowledge production to a status quo of systemic inequality. Our exchange of ideas then becomes a foundation for engaging in new models of producing knowledge, such as those advocated in sustainability science, in which scholars and professionals work with communities to define research questions and use their specialized skills to help build on traditional and community knowledges to answer them. Through these new channels humanities scholars can participate in and contribute to the creation of community resilience in our changing world while also creating resilience through ongoing relevance within the humanities themselves.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

In July 2013 we participated in the University of New Hampshire's first summer seminar on culture and sustainability, organized around the topic of ecology and ethnicity. The seminar is offered by the University's Sustainability Institute, which knows full well the gnarliness of terms such as "culture" and "sustainability." The seminar aimed to have humanities faculty consider how they might engage work in the new field of sustainability science, which is generating powerful new collaborations among scientists, social scientists, and community members around issues such as climate change mitigation and food depletion.

We looked at case studies in resilience: Wabanaki basketmakers' partnerships with scientists around the invasive emerald ash borer; a one-woman protest, maintained daily since March 2, 1988, by Jacqueline Smith, the last resident of the Lorraine Motel where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, against the museum that displaced her and other African American residents. We walked Portsmouth's Black Heritage Trail and talked with Jerrienne Boggis, head of the Heritage Trail and the Harriet Wilson Project, who told us of the challenges she faces in acquiring a physical space for sustaining Wilson's legacy.

We hail from at least two fields that have tiptoed around terms such as

“sustainability,” and that have thought deeply about cultural production and preservation—the environmental humanities on the one hand, and cultural heritage management on the other. Historic (or heritage) preservation is inextricably tied to the conservation and ecological sustainability movements, even when the connections may not seem obvious. We are all dealing with places people care about.

Siobhan Senier, University of New Hampshire

Anthony Lioi, The Juilliard School

Mary Kate Ryan, New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources

Pavithra Vasudevan, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill

Angel Nieves, Hamilton College

Darren Ranco, University of Maine–Orono

Courtney Marshall, University of New Hampshire

NOTE

1. We do understand race intersectionally, as inflected by gender, class, ability, and other factors. But we also refuse to allow racial considerations to be diluted by institutions (like universities or nonprofit foundations) that prefer to subsume it under weak rubrics of “diversity” or “inclusion.”