

## Personal Statement – Evergreen College

I believe in the transformative power of storytelling to foster deep connections between people and the environment.

It was a cold, wet day in Seattle and I was sitting in a rented library room with my interviewee, the teapot with a floral tea and two clay cups to match the pot. They agreed to participate in an oral history project highlighting and uplifting the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (POC) and their connections to Washington's public lands.

Within minutes, the tea was gone and I was captivated by the memories of their first outdoor experience in Washington, the rituals and traditions they engage in as the seasons transition. They found themselves enchanted by the rainforest, filled with reverence and humility for the mountains, and at peace knowing the greenery around them was ancient and resilient. I realized they weren't just telling me stories of things they remembered, but rather I was getting to witness their relationship with the natural world as part of their personhood as a non-binary Palestinian American.

I had it described to me once that all of our experiences as individuals are just topsoil to the layers and histories of the land. The land and waters hold centuries of their own histories. Our human footprint has tilled the soil of these histories with man-made policies, social constructs that have influenced social movements. That, for example, have made decisions about who gets to steward the land and who has access to natural spaces and why. Our stories are interconnected to each other and all beings that inhabit Earth.

My own layers of soil and stories have led me to pursue a path at the intersection of science, policy, storytelling, and connection, with the goal of cultivating a right relationship with the natural world. As a queer Black, Alaskan Native (Tlingit), Guatemalan, Filipina woman raised in a Hindu household, I have often felt like I don't fully belong to any single identity. This sense of unbelonging extended to my professional interests, where my passion for history, social science, and humanities felt at odds with traditional conservation. It wasn't until my college studies in Ethnic and Environmental Studies that I began to see myself reflected in the fields and spaces I was drawn to, realizing that the intersection of social justice and conservation lies in the stories and experiences of all beings, including the Earth itself.

As the interviewee reflected on the ways violence inflicted on nature are the same ways society in the context of the United States has been taught to treat each other, I made the decision to continue my education. I would pursue a graduate degree that would allow me to continue to have conversations with people of historically- and-continuously-excluded identities about their real-world experiences and relationships to water and land.

In my career goals I'd like to pursue work as an oral historian with a focus on environmental dis/connections for POC to ultimately promote environmental and marine education and connection through the stories that I witness. I'd marry this goal by working with community-led environmental justice organizations run by communities of color. In my current capacity this looks like taking my learnings and directly applying them to the current oral history project I'm working on that centers POC and public lands. Attending the Environmental Studies program at Evergreen College would open potential possibilities for expanding this work to fit in the context of National or State parks.

I want to do storytelling research that honors and amplifies the voices of marginalized communities, particularly communities of color, in the face of environmental injustices. I'm drawn to oral histories because they allow me to witness people's deep, lived relationships with land and water—relationships that are too often overlooked or erased. My goal is to explore how these stories can not only shed light on the realities of environmental degradation but also empower communities to advocate for their rights and resilience. Through my research, I hope to bridge the gap between personal narratives and policy change, using storytelling as a tool to help others connect more deeply to the environment and to one another.

Evergreen College offers exactly what I'm looking for—a space where environmental policy, storytelling, and community-driven action intersect. The interdisciplinary and intersectional nature of the program will allow me to dive into the complex, multi-layered issues of environmental justice from multiple angles, while its commitment to real-world impact aligns perfectly with my desire to engage directly with the communities I study. I'm drawn to the Environmental Studies program's focus on hands-on research and policy advocacy because it will equip me with the skills to turn my research into meaningful action. The program's focus on justice and inclusion, coupled with its collaborative, diverse community, makes it the ideal environment for me to refine my approach and grow into the kind of scholar and advocate I aspire to be.

It is imperative, now more than ever, that we center the knowledge and lived experiences of those who face the brunt of governmental neglect and climate change vulnerabilities. Evergreen will equip me with the tools and skills needed to make meaningful contributions. My studies will provide me with real world experience and opportunities to conduct relevant research with demographics that are the most neglected in environmental conversations to collaborative solutions. I aspire to take my learnings and apply them to my own community. We need community care. We need spaces where voices, human and more-than-human, are not only heard but profoundly felt. We need to cultivate deeper, more intimate relationships with the natural world. And I intend to be a part of this movement, on the right side of history.