

Black Eco-poetics: Analyzing Scribes of the Black Experience in American History

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing  
Antioch University Los Angeles

Summer/Fall 2015

I certify that this document fulfills the requirements for the critical paper in the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program, Antioch University Los Angeles.

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surely i am able to write poems  
celebrating grass and how the blue  
in the sky can flow green or red  
and the waters lean against the  
chesapeake shore like a familiar  
poems about nature and landscape  
surely but whenever I begin  
“the trees wave their knotted branches  
and...” why  
is there under that poem always  
an other poem?  
-Lucille Clifton

In recent years, media outlets such as The Boston Globe have contributed to an emerging discussion about Black people in nature. Hiking groups, such as Outdoor Afro, target Black participants and organizers and have helped provide the impetus behind the rise of urban farming and gardening as well as the instruction of both of these activities ([yesmagazine.org](http://yesmagazine.org)). Because these activities are making waves in the media and the communities that are directly affected, it begs the question: Why is this a surprise? West Africans were able to easily adapt to the land they were forced to tend as slaves and were able to utilize their keen knowledge of nature in order to survive against enormous obstacles when fleeing a plantation. Not only is this shown in historical books, like *African People in World History* by Dr. John Henrik Clarke, poets of many generations up to the present have revealed their personal and cultural ties to land and have written passionately about the present lands which Black people inhabit. With this vital connection proven, why do many ecocritics leave Black communities out of discussions concerning land and the environment? Why are Black poets often excluded from anthologies of

nature poetry? Is it because Black poets, as Alan Gilbert argues in his essay “Form and Culture,” found in *Civil Disobediences: Poetics and Politics in Action*, “eschew rhetoric and conventional poetic forms in order to rely on careful observation rendered in an everyday language that places their poems within a particular set of historical circumstances?” (404) Or is the story more complicated?

It seems that the practice of not acknowledging the creative art of poetry within the Black community as an additional telling of American history is equivalent to practicing other systematic ideologies of erasure and racism which Black Americans have been fighting to dismantle since the end of slavery. *The Oxford Book of Nature Writing* suggests that eco-poetics is “a history of our views about ourselves” (Dungy xxvii). We can also view eco-poetics as poetry about nature and the environment in which one lives and observes. Keeping those definitions in mind magnetizes the benefits of restoring the Black presence to eco-poetics. It then goes beyond the personal and creates an additional storyline that makes America the country it is today. This paper will serve to prove that restoring accurate representations of diversity to anthologies and eco-poetics has the potential to dismantle racism and recondition American historical accuracy as well. The realities captured through the poetry discussed include slavery, sharecropping and the unjust practices to keep Blacks from owning land, Jim Crow practices, and the dismantling of preconceived notions that Black people do not participate in nor appreciate environmental activities.

## **Slavery**

The first slaves from Africa were brought to the United States in 1619. Slavery was not abolished until 1865 with the passing of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment. During those two centuries, generations of slaves were bought, sold, traded, learned to tend the land of their masters, and

figured out how to navigate the land outside of the plantation when necessary (history.com).

Slaves' connection to the land ensured their survival. According to Carolyn Finney's *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*:

[slaves]...girdled and fired trees, removed stumps and cultivated land, herded cattle...and planted, tended, harvested, and processed plantation crops throughout the colonies. In addition, they put to use the relevant skills and knowledge previously developed in the irrigated rice fields of West Africa. Working the land under the threat of whip and the sun was an integral part of the 'environmental experience' of enslaved Africans. Through backbreaking labor and general day-to-day interactions, enslaved Africans became more knowledgeable about their surrounding environment than their white slave owners. (57)

Beyond knowing how to care for the land for the benefit of America's economy, slaves had to have knowledge of the land for their own economy. Finney goes on to describe hunting and fishing as a means to build community, bring in money, materials, and food (58).

Understanding the land became a form of personal reclamation and power. Women were looked to for their use of root and herb medicines. Men were thought more important if they were able to utilize animals and passages through the woods and water systems that may serve beneficial to the master and the plantation. The slaves used these tactics to reconnect to their African communal principles of caring for self and land (Finney 58).

However, in some instances, slaves did not have a sense of pride for the land nor self. They often were weary and felt that the labor was too much for them to bear. In Claude McKay's sonnet, "Joy in the Woods," we find the speaker imagining the beauty of an ordinary day but quickly realizing that his only purpose is for work and cultivation of the master's land. The

internal struggle is quite evident, and the speaker concedes that wanting beautiful experiences does not matter because he is simply a worker.

There is joy in the woods just now,  
     The leaves are whispers of song,  
 And the birds make mirth on the bough  
     And music the whole day long,  
 And God! To dwell in the town  
     In these springlike summer days,  
 On my brow an unfading frown  
     And hate in my heart always—

Here, McKay uses birds, leaves, and “springlike summer days” to express the speaker’s connection with beauty. These aesthetics go beyond the imposed world and mirror the freedom which the slave is longing. As the poem continues, we see how the imagery becomes darker, exposing the lost hope the speaker feels.

A machine out of gear, aye, tired,  
 Yet forced to go on—for I’m hired.

Just forced to go on through fear,  
     For every day I must eat  
 And find ugly clothes to wear,  
     And bad shoes to hurt my feet  
 And a shelter for work-drugged sleep!  
     A mere drudge! but what can one do?  
 A man that’s a man cannot weep!  
     Suicide? A quitter? Oh, no!

But a slave should never grow tired,  
 Whom the masters have kindly hired.

\* \* \*

For a man-machine toil-tired  
 May crave beauty too—though he’s hired. (*Black Nature*, 97)

Here, we find that McKay’s work is written as a traditional sonnet form. His diction is formal, and his connection to the land is clear. While it is written from the viewpoint of an

identifiable speaker, there is no denial that this piece is ecopoetry. It does not agree with Gilbert's reasoning that poets tend to abandon conventional poetics in order to focus mainly on the issue at hand, however, it does out rightly confess emotions from the view of a slave, which is part of American history.

While slavery is one of the many facets of American history, which most of today's society finds uncomfortable, the brave poets and writers, many of whom are not mentioned in this paper, saw the necessity of telling about slavery as a true part of their history. They did not count it as Black history alone but as a new perspective in the history of the United States, which is not adequately covered in history text books. Their honest telling paved the way for many writers who helped shape contemporary poetry of the early twenty-first century.

### **Post slavery: Sharecropping**

After slavery was abolished, over forty thousand former slaves were displaced, and it was unclear how they would resume living in the United States. The Freedman's Bureau was designed to accommodate the freed slaves with land that was taken from the Confederates after surrender. However, "former white owners of the land, who were pardoned after the war, began to pressure President Andrew Johnson to allow their land to be returned to them. They were afraid that black land owners and farmers would start to accumulate wealth and power in the South" through the acquisition of land, which shows the significance of land ownership (Finney 36-37). With this pressure the land granted to former slaves was reclaimed by their previous owners. Former slaves were also denied access to the land available via the Homestead Act of 1862. Because of these denials, former slaves stayed on the land of their former masters as sharecroppers. As Carol Anderson, Associate Professor of African American Studies at Emory University, states, "sharecropping was just a step above slavery...They didn't own anything

except their labor. They didn't own the shacks that they lived in. They didn't own the mules. They didn't own the land."

The denial of land ownership was one of the ways that white Americans began to impose systematic oppression onto black Americans. Because of these practices, Black Americans stayed economically further behind in the United States. The effects of these decisions "are imprinted on our psyches and in our present day economic, social, and political relationships" (Finney 23). This imprinting also shows up in literature. Isabel Wilkerson shares many sharecroppers' stories in her historical biography, *The Warmth of Other Suns*. She states that:

Fewer than one out of five sharecroppers ever saw a profit at the end of the year. Of the few who got anything, their pay came to between \$30 and \$150 in the 1930s for a year of hard toil in the field, according to a leading Yale anthropologist of the era, or between nine and forty-eight cents a day. The remaining eighty percent either broke even, meaning they got nothing, or stayed in debt, which meant they were as bound to the planter as a slave was to his master. (167)

In "A Black Man Talks of Reaping" by Arna Bontemps, the sacrifice and unjust feelings of sharecropping are documented. Bontemps speaks of the rigorous work put into caring for the land and crops but also of the hurt that growing the food produces. The second stanza alone alludes to those who built America with no credit given and nothing to show for their work. The word "bitter" not only describes the fruit which the speaker's children eat but solidifies the underlying tone of Bontemps's poem.

I have sown beside all waters in my day.  
I planted deep, within my heart the fear  
that wind or fowl would take the grain away.  
I planted safe against this stark, lean year.

I scattered seed enough to plant the land

in rows from Canada to Mexico  
 but for my reaping only what the hand  
 can hold at once is all I can show.

Yet what I sowed and what the orchard yields  
 my brother's sons are gathering stalk and root;  
 small wonder then my children glean in fields  
 they have not sown, and feed on bitter fruit. (*Black Nature*, 95)

Here, we also have a poem written in traditional American speech which tells of the speaker's relationship to the land. Bontemps, like McKay, was a poet writing during the Harlem Renaissance and understood the importance of reclaiming Black experiences. While both men played into the common American dialect, their ecopoetic works still were not seen as having a true connection to the land but were commonly interpreted as being more about the speaker's life or point of view.

While McKay and Bontemps openly speak of workers' experience with the land, Alice Walker reminds readers in her essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," that many Black women were treated as the "mule of the world" after the Reconstruction Era. She goes on to say that "they forced their minds to desert their bodies and their striving spirits sought to rise, like frail whirlwinds from the hard red clay. And when those whirlwinds fell, in scattered particles, upon the ground, no one mourned." The community expected these women to work and raise children, yet, there are many instances where women felt the need to be more than a worker, which is all they had been constantly, generationally since their ancestors' arrival in America. Women felt the call to express themselves artistically and most times, that was seen through the tending of the land. The conclusion of Walker's essay claims that her mother's garden was her individual work of art when she was unable to express her being, in the United States, as a creative woman. (8)

Kendra Hamilton expresses similar sentiments in her poem “Southern Living.” Hamilton, who is an Assistant Professor of English at Presbyterian College, not only actively gardens but also has a strong sense of connection to the land that was given to her grandparents during Reconstruction after the Civil War. In reading her poem, one cannot be sure if it is a retelling of a story or a firsthand account.

I am cut and bruised, my nails broken.  
 I have found love and my lover is ungentle.  
 There’s a many-hued bruise beside my left knee,  
 three on my right leg at the ankle and the thigh,  
 a new-formed scar on my left shin where she cut  
 me—she didn’t mean to. But I fear  
 I grow obsessed, neglect my looks—my hair  
 grows wild. This is what it is to love in middle life  
 and I praise God that She has blessed me  
 with a love like this before I die.

This next stanza resembles the longing for a creative outlet or reward that is seen in Walker’s essay. The garden here is also a symbol of joy and pride. In the following stanzas, the speaker seems to care for and know by name every plant and flower in her garden as if they were her children, as if she conceived them herself.

I lavish this passion on my house and garden.  
 I have never felt this for any man. To walk  
 through my own picket fence, to climb  
 my steps, survey what I have done...  
 the painted ferns and adder’s tongue dappling  
 the shade bed, the azaleas and lilacs  
 resurrected from the dead, each bed bug  
 and planted myself, the quartz-hard clods  
 broken with these two hands, on my knees,  
 pouring sweat like a baptism---  
 here I’ve come to know rapture at last.

The house I had before was small and dark  
 and I loved a dim, cramped love while I lived there.  
 The man who shared that space loved nothing  
 that I loved though in his way he was devoted.  
 On this barren ground I made my first garden

and watched it fail unsprouted seed by withered stem  
by blighted stalk.

\* \* \*

To love a garden is to be in love with words:  
with potageries and racemes, corymbs hispids, and corms.  
To love a garden is to be in love with possibility:  
for it can never, almost by definition, ever be complete.  
To love a garden is to be in love with contradiction:  
ravished by order yet ever open to the wild.  
But more than all these, to love a garden is to find  
your one true lover: for a garden can't survive its maker,  
will die with the one who loved it, with only a sudden  
spray of roses in June amid a derelict tangle of wood sorrel  
and sumac to tell an eye that can read the land  
that either of you was ever there. (*Black Nature*, 344)

There is a connection to a writing life and gardening found in these lines. As a reader, one may or may not know what “potageries” and “corms” are, but Hamilton makes it known that as a writer, these two terms intertwine both of her loves. Hamilton writes “Southern Living” as a love letter. The love in the letter is sincerely felt with how the speaker compares her former lover to her new love. Witnessing this, it is evident that the connection between Black poets and their surroundings is unbreakable.

We see that Hamilton uses Anglophone rhetoric in her poem, which makes the speaker's emotions and experience visceral regardless of community affiliation. As the poet, she also conveys the feeling that “even during the most difficult periods of African American history, the natural world held potential to be a source of refuge, sustenance, and uncompromised beauty...[these] were aspects of physical and spiritual communion with the land” (Dungy xxv). “Southern Living” serves to prove that women were intended to be more than just “mule of the world” as well as sets a standard for what a pastoral from Black ecopoetics may look like.

Whether the experiences were first hand or passed down through oral tradition, sharecropping began the climb of Black Americans' rise out of slavery. As unfortunate as it is to

know how oppressed most sharecroppers were post slavery, it is wonderful to have a collection of stories to turn to in the form of ecopoetics. These stories do not just account tales of the land through workers' eyes or women who found their voice by the transformative act of gardening, they help to give direction to the generations who follow: the generations who came to know systematic oppression more closely and name it unjust, the generations who fought to end Jim Crow segregation.

### **Jim Crow Segregation**

Slavery was the ultimate denial of life as a human. Sharecropping was the slow undoing of the wrong actions against former slaves. Jim Crow was the mix between forward motion as a just nation and the backwards motion of the few who feared their personal and economic demise. In the era of Jim Crow laws, many were persecuted for simply being. Historically, the tales of Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, and the bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama stick out when one thinks of the effects the imposed system of segregation had on black Americans. These laws, which were enforced mainly in the South, declared that White Americans and any Americans that were not White, mainly Black Americans, were to use separate facilities. These rules denied non-white Americans access to specific recreational areas, shopping and dining venues, and even schools. With the Supreme Court ruling in the case of *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954, legal segregation of schools became outlawed. This act started an uprising amongst Black Americans who wanted total freedom and justice in their everyday lives (history.com).

The uprising turned into what is known today as the Civil Rights Movement. This movement produced many activists such as Stokely Carmichael, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Bayard Rustin, to name a few. These activists felt they had the right to a life that was equal to that of

white Americans. Being “denied the right to vote...and [being] forbidden to hold religious services without the presence of a licensed White minister” was not the life that Black Americans were going to agree to (Finney 83). An excerpt by Richard Wright, that is included in Camille T. Dungy’s *Black Nature* anthology, expresses that “before we black folk can move, we must first look into the white man’s mind to see what is there, to see what he is thinking, and the white man’s mind is a mind that is always changing” (72). These inconsistencies have fed the mentality which plagues Black Americans today just as much as it did during the Jim Crow era. It supports the notion that “whiteness, as a way of knowing, becomes *the* way of understanding our environment, and through representation and rhetoric, becomes part of our educational systems, our institutions, and our own personal beliefs” (Finney 3). Also, “the ideas, thoughts, and solutions that arise from an African American experience of the environment are mediated by differential access, needs, privilege, and history,” which is the direct result of Jim Crow segregation (Finney 4).

June Jordan speaks of these issues in her poem “Jim Crow: The Sequel.” Using speech that stems directly from Black communities as opposed to traditional rhetoric that help make meanings universally American, Jordan’s poem supports Gilbert’s argument of combining daily language within the context of an era’s events. We see how Jordan recounts history from a Black American viewpoint then progresses towards demands.

An angry Black woman on the subject of the angry White man:

We didn't always need affirmative action  
 When we broke this crazy land into farms  
 when we planted and harvested the crops  
 when we dug into the earth for water  
 when we carried that water into the  
 big house kitchens and bedrooms  
 when we built that big house  
 when we fed and clothed other people's

children with food we cooked and  
 served to other people's children, wearing  
 the garments that we fitted and we sewed  
 together, when we hacked and hauled  
 huge trees for lumber and fuel, when we  
 washed and polished the chandeliers,  
 when we bleached and pressed the linens  
 purchased by blood profits from our daily  
 forced laborings, when we lived under the  
 whip and in between the cuffle and chains,  
 when we watched our babies sold away  
 from us, when we lost our men to  
 anybody's highest bidder, when slavery  
 defined our days and our prayers and our  
 nighttimes of no rest--then we did not  
 need affirmative action.

Like two-legged livestock we cost the  
 bossman three hundred and fifteen dollars  
 or six hundred and seventy-five dollars  
 so he provided for our keep  
 like two-legged livestock  
 penned into the parched periphery of very  
 grand plantation life. We did not need  
 affirmative action. NO! We needed  
 freedom: We needed overthrow,  
 revolution and a holy fire to purify the air.  
 But for two hundred years this crazy  
 land the law and the bullets behind the law  
 continued to affirm the gospel of  
 God-given White supremacy.  
 For two hundred years the law and the  
 bullets behind the law, and the money and  
 the politics behind the bullets behind the  
 law affirmed the gospel of  
 God-given White supremacy/  
 God-given male-White supremacy.

The first two stanzas connect Black Americans to the land immediately, calling for  
 recognition of forced labor and then the recognition that black Americans were equally treated as  
 cattle and not as human beings.

And neither the Emancipation Proclamation  
 nor the Civil War nor one constitutional

amendment after another nor one Civil Rights  
legislation after another could bring about a  
yielding of the followers of that gospel  
to the beauty of our human face.

Justice don't mean nothin' to a  
hateful heart!

The previous stanza is accentuated with the usage of Black vernacular. It proves the point that readers will not always empathize with divergent points of views if presented in formal English. The shock of new speech awakens the reader and allows them to truly understand what is being read. The last stanza serves to put history and declarations into tangible spaces. We see that the environment shifts from fields and trees to neighborhoods and classrooms.

And so we needed affirmative action. We  
needed a way into the big house  
besides the back door. We needed a chance at  
the classroom and jobs and open housing  
in okay neighborhoods.

We needed a way around the hateful hearts of  
America. We needed more than freedom  
because a piece of paper ain't the  
same as opportunity  
or education.

And some thirty years ago we agitated  
and we agitated until the President said,  
"We seek...  
not just equality  
as a right and a theory  
but equality as a fact  
and as a result." (feliciachamberlain.com)

The repetition, rhythm, and alliteration in Jordan's poem is a new expression of artistry, not found in the previous poems, on a subject that captures a historical moment. She may or may not be the speaker. She may simply be compiling the collective notions of the many Black women who were dealing with these issues when the poem was written. Jordan is one of the poets who "reminds us of the danger or futility of drawing too close a connection between our emotional landscapes and the realities and responses of the natural world," or she may be one of

the poets that “comfortably, sometimes aggressively, remind[s] us how our place in the ecological web implicates the black community and the human race at large in emotional, practical, and creative ways” (Dungy xxiv).

Continuing with the notion of personal struggle intermingled with communal struggle, some poets had a difficult task of deciding to write about the events of the times or to continue writing what moved them. In Nikki Giovanni’s “For Sandra,” we see the speaker, presumably Giovanni, struggle with writing about beautiful things or writing about the reality of black Americans’ situation.

i wanted to write  
a poem  
that rhymes  
but revolution doesn’t lend itself to be-bopping

then my neighbor  
who thinks i hate  
asked—do you ever write  
tree poems—i like trees  
so i thought  
i’ll write a beautiful green tree poem

\* \* \*

then, well, i thought the sky  
i’ll do a big blue sky poem  
but all the clouds have winged  
low since no-Dick was elected

so i thought again  
and it occurred to me  
maybe i shouldn’t write  
at all  
but clean my gun  
and check my kerosene supply

perhaps these are not poetic  
times  
at all (*Black Nature*, 151)

Keeping with the nontraditional form, punctuation, and language of Jordan, Giovanni captures the dilemma that most poets grapple with during civil unrest. She notices how the nature fades or disappears because of her locale as well as the events of the time in which this poem was written.

The disappearance of nature is not only a metaphor in Giovanni's poem, it was the reality of many Black Americans during the Jim Crow era. Wilkerson reports that:

across the South, someone was hanged or burned alive every four days from 1889 to 1929...for such alleged crimes as 'stealing hogs, horse-stealing, poisoning mules, jumping labor contract, suspected of killing cattle, boastful remarks' or 'trying to act like a white person' (39).

Lynchings being done that frequently was to put fear in the hearts of Black Americans. Not only did it serve as a reminder that Blacks were to never strive to be better than their caste position, it let them know that they were not welcomed in the world. These reminders kept the oppression and ideologies which derived from slavery alive in the psyche of many Americans, both black and white. The poem "Strange Fruit," written by Abe Meeropol, who was Jewish, depicts these constant reminders. His poem was later set to music and recorded first by Billie Holiday then later Nina Simone. This poem as well as many others depicting repercussions of Jim Crow segregation "point to the collision between nature and man, the manner in which the natural world has been used to destroy, damage, or subjugate African Americans. Given the active history of betrayal and danger in the outdoors, it is no wonder that many African Americans link their fears directly to the land that witnessed or abetted centuries of subjugation" (Dungy xxvi).

This fear's agenda morphed into what we as Americans know as racism. Finney sites Manning Marable as stating:

Since “race” is a fraudulent concept, devoid of scientific reality, “racism” can only be rationalized and justified through suppression of black counter-narratives that challenge society’s understanding about itself and its own past. Racism is perpetuated and reinforced by the “historical logic of whiteness,” which repeatedly presents whites as the primary (and frequently sole) actors in the important decisions that have influenced the course of human events. This kind of history deliberately excludes blacks and other racialized groups from having the capacity to become actors in shaping major outcomes. (95)

With racism as king, constant abuse, and fear tactics plaguing Black Americans in the South, the only solution to avoid death was to leave the land. The Great Migration can essentially be looked at as the springboard of how Black Americans lost their connection to the land. These upheavals began in mass around 1915 and lasted “over the course of six decades” in which “some six million black southerners left the land of their forefathers and fanned out across the country for an uncertain existence in nearly every corner of America” (Wilkerson 9). While mass exile seemed the best option for most Southern families, “Patrick West describes how in the 1970s, a city park in Chicago had signs that read ‘whites only; niggers keep out.’ Dorceta Taylor describes how African Americans prior to World War II were attacked when visiting recreation areas designated as ‘white’” (Finney 8). Even with the blatant discrimination among the parts of the United States which claimed to be friendlier than the South, “Guy Forchion, the Assistant Executive Director of the Virginia Key Beach Trust, emphasized the need to acknowledge that Virginia Key Beach was a ‘safe space’ where Black people could get away from racism” (Finney 63). The reclamation of these spaces as well as stories of these unfortunate events prove how

Black ecopoetics helps to mend the connection to environmental landscapes that eluded much of the Black community in the middle to late twentieth century.

Although there was a call for equality in the South and many families left because they feared for their safety and well-being, the longing for familiarity was not far from black Americans' minds. In "Sorrow Home" by Margaret Walker, the speaker acknowledges both the beauty and ugliness of life in the South. While not still residing in the South, the speaker feels out of place in a new habitat yet knows the risk of living in a hostile environment now regarded as home.

My roots are deep in the southern life; deeper than John Brown  
or Nat Turner or Robert Lee. I was sired and weaned  
in a tropic world. The palm tree and banana leaf,  
mango and coconut, breadfruit and rubber trees know me.

Warm skies and gulf blue streams are in my blood. I belong  
with the smell of fresh pine, with the trail of coon, and  
the spring growth of wild onion.

The imagery of mango, rubber trees, and the smell of fresh pine gives the reader a sense of place. It shows the speaker's familiarity with their past surroundings and sets up the unfamiliarity of the new space. Explanation of both scenes leaves the reader feeling the disconnection with both places which the speaker experiences.

I am no hothouse bulb to be reared in steam-heated flats  
with the music of El and subway in my ears, walled in  
by steel and wood and brick far from the sky.

I want the cotton fields, tobacco and the cane. I want to  
walk along with sacks of seed to drop in fallow ground.  
Restless music is in my heart and I am eager to be gone.

O Southland, sorrow home, melody beating in my bone and  
blood! How long will the Klan of hate, the hounds and  
the chain gangs keep me from my own? (*Black Nature*, 99)

Walker's eclogue is written in Standard English yet has some diversion from grammatical correctness. She also utilizes historical references to solidify the speaker's citizenship as a Southerner. While the speaker is freshly removed from the former landscape, the generation to be raised in the speaker's new home will not remember the scents of certain trees or understand when fruit is perfectly ripe by simply squeezing it. They will, however, possess the generational mindset that Black Americans do not participate in nature activities nor does writing about their urban landscape qualify their poetry to be worthily considered ecopoetry.

### **Urban Ecosystems**

Upon arrival to the new world, which included mainly the North, but also the West and East Coasts and even Canada, Southern Blacks found that living was easier but discrimination was still dominant. Finney shares:

nature photographer Dudley Edmondson, who completed a book that focuses on black people's experiences in wild places, interviewed African Americans who had a variety of environmental backgrounds. Edmondson came to the conclusion that you could not talk about nature and African Americans without addressing 'slavery, racial prejudice and personal safety.' For people of color, these issues are very real and are crucial to their participation in the outdoors. (90)

These issues are very evident in Wanda Coleman's poem, "Beaches. Why I Don't Care for Them."

...mama threatening to beat me if I got  
my hair wet. curses as she brushes the sand out, "it's gonna  
break it off---it's gonna ruin your scalp."  
or the tall blond haired gold / bronze-muscled  
lifeguards who played with the little white ones but gawked  
at us like we were lepers (*Black Nature*, 303)

The poem continues to show the speaker's issues, in Black vernacular and nontraditional poetic form. Perhaps Coleman is using deviations from language expectations in order to disconnect the reader from the scene of the beach and encourage them to focus on the emotional attachment depicted in the poem than to the beaches themselves. Nonetheless, these lines of Coleman's piece are an extension of the ideals held in the minds of Southerners as well as the solidification of Black myths regarding environmental activities. Even with the access granted to Northerners to enjoy water activities, fears, which were instilled during the Jim Crow era, that, according to Dr. Crystal R. Sanders, a Pennsylvania State University professor, the "beaches were the perfect storm for segregationists who feared racial miscegenation" were still in newly migrated Southerners' minds. "To prevent integrated frolicking in the water, black access to public recreational swimming and fishing tended to be nonexistent, extremely limited or substandard. City and state beaches either prohibited African Americans altogether or relegated them to the far-from-ideal shores that whites did not use" (JDNews.com). Practices like these were rampant and the source of why a lot of Black people often do not know how to swim nor participate in water activities.

*Black Faces, White Spaces* proudly states:

There is no monolithic African American environmental experience. While there is arguably a collective experience of living in a country where racism is part of the nation's fabric, the personal experience for each African American (as it would be for anyone) is shaped by economic, generational, and gender differences, the place where you live, your social and educational background, and ultimately the choices you make. (98)

And it is these differences that further show the disadvantages Black Americans have encountered, not only systematically but also when it comes to enjoying environmental activities.

In Black ecopoetics, though, “when the poetry really gets going, it can be a kind of roving information analysis and production unit, documenting and helping to facilitate cross-cultural connections and ideological interventions, all while remaining flexible in its response to local environments” (Gilbert 408).

“Homeopathic” by Frank X Walker does such facilitating. The speaker explores the pride of growing one’s own food while not living in an environment typically conducive to such cultivation. He also sheds light on his family’s economic situation which proves that, although Black Americans’ situations vary, the connection to land and nature remain important.

The unripe cherry tomatoes, miniature red chili peppers  
and small burst of sweet basil and sage in the urban garden  
just outside the window on our third floor fire escape  
might not yield more than seasoning for a single meal

or two, but it works wonders as a natural analgesic  
and a way past the monotony of bricks and concrete,  
the hum of the neighbor’s TV, back to the secret garden  
we planted on railroad property, when I was just a boy.

\* \* \*

Enjoying our own fruit, we let the juice run down our chins,  
leaving a trail of tiny seeds to harvest on hungry days like these. (*Black Nature*, 309)

Walker’s descriptive storytelling keeps the reader engaged and keeps traditional American speech as well. It is clear that the speaker is connected to his history and the landscape in which he resides by acknowledging the level of poverty he experiences and the pride he and his mother exude by having the ability to grow their own food. The juxtaposition of chili peppers against brick walls and television is beautiful. It emphasizes the predicaments encountered when families leaving the South for a better life only get to experience it in a slightly better, yet still poor, capacity.



difficult to relate to it as an urban pastoral. This raises the issue Dungy calls to attention in *Black Nature*:

The pastoral as diversion, a construction of a culture that dreams, through landscape and animal life, of a certain luxury or innocence, is less prevalent. Rather, in a great deal of African American poetry we see poems written from the perspective of the workers of the field. Though these poems defy the pastoral conventions of Western poetry, are they not pastorals? Are these not meditations on nature? We find poems set in urban streets. Can these not be landscape poems? (xxii)

If the poems that have been used as examples here cannot be considered pastoral or ecopoetic, then there is a giant divide that needs to be dismantled within the poetic literary world. Because pastorals were “solidified by the Romantics and Transcendentalists [as] informing the prevailing views of the natural world as a place of positive collaboration, refuge, idyllic rural life, or wilderness,” who is to say that the views in which Black poets see and write about are not their refuge and wilderness (Dungy xxi)? The idea in itself can be likened to Jim Crow ideologies. It already seems that Black poets are misunderstood because we tend to defy Anglo-American canonical standards of poetry. But is it fair to say because Black poets write in such a way, the work is not of equal caliber to their White counterparts?

In a discussion at The New School in 2000, in which the topic explored was “What’s African American about African American Poetry?,” Elizabeth Alexander, a founding member of Cave Canem, a poetry organization that mentors and promotes Black poets, spoke about an interview she heard on National Public Radio, NPR, with John Hollander. Hollander was asked if he admired any work of Black poets. He responded, “I suppose there will be some good African American poets when they stop writing about their experience.” Alexander explained her

shocked reaction to such a response because it is a “particularly dangerous use of the idea that personal subjectivity is somehow passé. I think there is talk, which has currency in more than one place, that really is saying, ‘I don’t want to hear that story; I don’t want to be confronted with what that voice is presenting to me.’” This exact practice on Hollander’s part makes the “articulation of one’s lived experience in the material world stunted and constrained by that interpretation/vision” (Finney 72). Dungy also confesses:

regardless of their presence, Blacks have not been recognized in their poetic attempts to affix themselves to the landscape. They haven’t been seen, or when they have it is not as people who are rightful stewards of the land. They are accidentally or invisibly or dangerously or temporarily or inappropriately on/in landscape. (xxvii)

One woman who is fighting to combat these same practices that keep Blacks invisible within environmental spaces is Brenda Palms Barber. Palms Barber founded Sweet Beginnings ([sweetbeginningsllc.com](http://sweetbeginningsllc.com)), a nonprofit organization which partners with beekeepers within the Chicago area in order to train recently released convicted felons and enable the felons to make a living for themselves without the hassle of traditional jobs that require background checks in order to be hired. They harvest the honey and make high-end products that are typically sold at Whole Foods Markets. She believes that “people need to be reminded that they are important and can make a positive contribution” (Finney126).

While Blacks in environmental spaces have become more visible, the discussion of the issue of Black ecopoetics is still getting underway with people such as Camille T. Dungy, Katherine R. Lynes, and Tyrone Williams. Finney attributes memory, within the Black community, of one’s own history as one of the hindrances for its visibility in outdoor spaces, even in printed material. She cites:

memory also constitutes a body of knowledge for the individual, and community memory becomes a way its members claim and own their past, particularly when their narratives are relegated to the margins of social and cultural importance. Memory becomes increasingly valuable to a group whose values are perceived to be morally threatening to the status quo. (55)

This leads to Gilbert's point of being mindful of hybridity within cultural poetics. He takes Lawrence Grossberg's methods of historical research—appreciation of difference, understanding of context, and ability to make critical comparative judgments on the basis of empathy and evidence—when exploring contemporary poetry. Gilbert concludes that “pluralism means not making everyone conform to your own ideological viewpoint, aesthetic or otherwise” (404-405).

It seems that even with truthful historical storytelling, conforming to traditional rhetoric, and descriptive mapping of various landscapes, Black ecopoetics is only seen as a “Black thing” as opposed to being another perspective of American history. Poets such as Claude McKay, Margaret Walker, Kendra Hamilton, and Frank X Walker show America what it means to be a Black poet staying true to the narrative of the lives lived during the eras of slavery, sharecropping, Jim Crow, and urban reclamation of ecological appreciation. Agreeing with Dungy:

Perhaps, according to Elizabeth Dodd, “African American writers have not embraced nature writing” in the same manner as the dominant culture because “the literary attempts to deflect attention away from human beings...” might not be appealing for writers who already feel politically, economically, and socially marginalized.” This theory helps explain some of the differences in approach of certain poems, [which] suggest a distaste

for a disconnection from wilderness spaces, and takes a critical look at the natural world.

Such criticism does not mean equal dismissal but, instead, indicates caution. (xxv)

This same caution is what kept Black people from comfortably exploring beaches or enjoying camping in the woods, yet helped trigger the Great Migration.

Through these systematic oppressive ideologies, which are still visible today in both realms of ecopoetics and environmental appreciation and preservation, there are many Black people whose connection to the land remains a priority. Whether they are writing about it, making companies to benefit urban communities, or dismantling myths through information and knowledge sharing, Black Americans have and will continue to be tied to the land. Dr. Joy DeGruy Leary said it best in her book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*:

One-hundred and eighty years of the Middle Passage, 246 years of slavery, rape and abuse; one hundred years of illusory freedom. Black codes, convict leasing, Jim Crow, all codified by our national institutions. Lynching, medical experimentation, redlining, disenfranchisement, grossly unequal treatment in almost every aspect of our society, brutality at the hands of those charged with protecting and serving. Being undesirable strangers in the only land we know. During the 385 years since the first of our ancestors were brought here against their will, we have barely had time to catch our collective breath. That we are here at all can be seen as a testament to our will power, spiritual strength and resilience. (111-12)

While it has taken four hundred years to build unjust practices against black Americans, it does not have to take four hundred more to dismantle the exclusionary practices perpetuated within systems of America's democracy, especially within the literary world. To say that an additional point of view is not right or welcomed into the fabric of America's history denies the

privilege of why this country was initially sought after. Eco-poetics will remain part of a telling of the world as poets live, experience, or observe it. As long as there is a subgenre of eco-poetics, there will be anthologies produced featuring these pieces. As long as there is a world to experience, there will be Black people writing about it.

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