

African American Environmental History

AN INTRODUCTION

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Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

—“Strange Fruit,” sung by Billie Holiday; music and
lyrics by Abel Meeropol (better known as Lewis Allan)

“To Love the Wind and the Rain”: African Americans and Environmental History evolved from a frustrating sense that African American perceptions of the environment—illustrated by metaphors of nature as lynching in “Strange Fruit”—remain invisible for the most part.¹ Critical elements in the development of American environmental history, particularly the complexities of race, ethnicity, gender, and class in which African Americans have had to live, work, and play, are revealed in the songs and stories of many lives.

One such story is that of Thomas Calhoun Walker, an African American who was the Advisor and Consultant of Negro Affairs for the Virginia Emergency Relief Administration in the Richmond office during World War I. Walker launched several environmental programs in the African American community, working to promote public recreation spaces, encourage cleanliness in homes, advocate gardening, and control rats on wharves. In each one of his endeavors, notions of race, ethnicity, gender, and class shaped his assumptions and his approach. For example, across the country throughout the first half of the twentieth century, segregation limited African Americans’ access to parks and other public spaces. Walker’s office responded locally by providing a model recreation center with plans to build similar facilities

throughout the state. This project gave African American children admission to a swimming pool and a ball field, and, by extension, the outdoors.

Walker and his office also launched a visiting housekeepers program that employed African American women to teach hygiene. Yet it reinforced stereotypical gender and ethnic roles in an inequitable social hierarchy, since these women cleaned their own homes at night and whites' bathrooms and kitchens by day. Each woman visited six African American family cabins, promoted standards of sanitation and cleanliness prescribed according to middle-class standards, and put forward a model of housekeeping designed to reduce germs.

As part of a plan to raise more food for the war effort, Walker campaigned for rural gardening, but he found his work had to overcome racism institutionalized in a local government controlled by whites:

I had always preached, year in and year out, that *if* the Negro was actually shown the advantage of a garden and *if* this idea was itself planted and made to take root by providing teachers who would cultivate it and show the owners how to make a success of it, the plan might work. . . . I went about talking gardens to individuals who were key people and those who were just keyhole owners of uncultivated tracts, to church groups and others wherever I went and whatever else I was doing. . . . So, in every case, it was the white people who were put in charge of the gardening movement for the Negroes.

Local governments did not think African Americans capable of supervising successful programs in their communities. Ultimately, however, Walker shifted the supervisory responsibilities to African Americans with gardening expertise, since he found that inexperienced whites impeded progress in the gardens.²

Walker's grimmest project, a rat-catching scheme on the wharves of Virginia, clearly illustrates how race, gender, and class discrimination worked against poor African American women. Walker and his office hired women with narrow employment options to trap rats consuming food on the wharves intended for American soldiers on the European front. The women flushed the rats out with sticks and led dogs to devour the pests. The fact that such work was not offered to a white man or woman, or to an African American man, reflects the prevailing racism and sexism that these rat catchers faced. Local, well-heeled African Americans rejected the proposal, arguing that the work would humiliate and demean their women—an unusual contention for the period. Yet Walker pushed his plan to publicize “a dangerous and disease-carrying plague that the public officials had too long taken for granted,” re-

flecting the more prevalent chasm between a middle class comprised of men like Walker, who delegated work, and working-class rat catchers, who labored for others.³ He declared the project a success, claiming that it had eliminated disease-ridden rats, saved food for the troops, and most importantly, at least to Walker, provided wages to African American women and heightened their self-esteem.

Like Walker's endeavors, the work of Mary L. Oberlin also served as an inspiration for this collection, specifically the title, "*To Love the Wind and the Rain.*" Her article, "Learn to Live on the Farm," appeared in the April 8, 1916, *Negro Farmer and Messenger* and promoted Progressivism for African American farmers:

Successful living in any place depends upon the spiritual and mental attitude. One must be in sympathy with the natural environment in which he finds himself. The family on the farm must have a feeling of permanency. They must believe that it is the best place for them to live, the ideal place for a home, the place where the children have the best opportunity to develop strong bodies, sound minds, and the characteristics that make for efficiency. They must be open minded and try to learn whatever they can that will improve farm conditions. . . . When they are convinced of these things and have learned to love the wind and the rain, the growing things, the birds, and all the rest, the dawn, the early morning ordo[r] [*sic*], and to find each part of the day, each twilight, and each nightfall filled with wonders, they will know how to live on a farm and how to make a living on a farm will be less of a problem.

Through a relationship of body, mind, and nature, Oberlin promoted an agricultural evangelism of practical conservation, recommending a mixture of a farmer's conservation of the soil with a preservationist's appreciation of warbling birds, towering trees, and cool breezes.

This volume expands on the conservationist and preservationist ideas behind Walker's efforts and Oberlin's observations, drawing upon the racial, ethnic, gender, and class implications contributing to the fragmentary scholarship and new historiography of African American environmental history. Until recently, race in America has been defined according to such common physical attributes as skin phenotype. Historically, American social and cultural constructions of race used or distorted science to categorize and thereby oppress people because of their skin color and facial features—even though all humans were and are fundamentally and genetically the same, with only small variations. Many early-twentieth-century African Americans, ironically, identified themselves as "race" men and women, imbuing the word with meaning

that empowered them and inverting the racist interpretation and manipulation of the term as used by many whites. The African Americans who did this, notably Ida B. Wells-Barnett and W. E. B. DuBois, transformed the language of inequality to equality and served as models for civil rights activists who dismantled segregation during the mid-twentieth century.

“Ethnicity,” another complex word central to contemporary African American studies and African American history scholars, is a “consciousness of solidarity beyond real or fictitious kinship, based on shared symbols or images.”⁴ Individuals have, historically, chosen to identify with a particular ethnic group or been categorized by others based on many and sometimes muddled variables, including country of origin, history, and religion. As a result, ethnicity remains as problematic and contested as race. African Americans differed from others in the African diaspora because of assimilation into the American mainstream: most had roots in slavery, whereas others arrived in the twentieth-century wave of African and Caribbean immigrants; most were Protestant in the African Methodist Episcopal and black Baptist traditions, while some were members of the Nation of Islam and Seventh-day Adventist church. The contributors to this collection interpret race and ethnicity, and their expressions in racism, as fundamental categories by which to understand the control, uses, and abuses of the environment in agriculture, industry, urban parks, homes, and gardens. These categories reflect diversity among people of African descent, distinctiveness from the white mainstream, and syncretism of African and American influences.

The modern language of feminism and womanism lends tools for interpreting historical experiences of African American women. Such language helps scholars recount the stories of women both burdened by and defiant toward sexism and racism. Although such African American women as Fannie Lou Hamer and Rosa Parks acted as essential links in their communities and families, men often relegated women to invisible or diminished supporting roles that reinforced inequitable gender roles. Hamer lived in such a world—she spearheaded voter registration in Indianola, Mississippi, only to be beaten by African American prison guards directed by whites defending segregation. Marginalized in the male-dominated civil rights and black nationalism movements, and often barred from the ranks of the women’s rights movement by its white and privileged architects, some African American women turned to black feminism as early as the 1960s. Black feminism became a politicized means for seeking sex/gender, race/ethnicity, and class equity in the public realm, particularly in the workplace, school, and politics.

Alice Walker coined the post-civil rights and postmodern term “womanism,”—depending on one’s politics, a counterpart or alternative to black femi-

nism—from the nineteenth-century word “womanish.” As language-turned-into-practice, womanism expanded the meaning of feminism to embrace African American women, families, children, men, the church, and community. Walker defined a “womanist” this way: “A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health.” Long have such African American women as Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells-Barnett expressed a nascent feminism and womanism. As freedom fighters for women’s rights and suffrage, Truth and Wells-Barnett were feminists. As caretakers, they were also womanists, serving “the African American church, the community, the family, and the larger society” of women, men, and children.⁵ From an environmental perspective, African American women expressed feminism when they actively sought to clean up urban environments by promoting and improving sanitation through the black women’s club movement in very public roles on behalf of the community.⁶

Class shaped the African American experience further, as African Americans labored for life, for food, for clothing, for housing, for leisure. Slaves were forced into unpaid labor in fields and kitchens. After the Civil War, former slaves worked in an environment of racism, violence, and segregation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries they were primarily rural, working-class sharecroppers and domestics living only somewhat better than their enslaved predecessors in the American South. During the Great Black Migration, many African Americans escaped a neo-slavery of southern peonage to work in northern industry, along with a small professional class of teachers, doctors, and lawyers.

“*To Love the Wind and the Rain*” builds upon the first wave of the historiography of African Americans and the environment, itself part of a broader American environmental historiography. Donald Worster defined environmental history in his widely cited comments, printed in “A Roundtable: Environmental History”: “The field of environmental history began to take shape in the 1970s, as conferences on the global predicament were assembling and popular environmentalist movements were gathering momentum. . . . Its goal is to deepen our understanding of how humans have been affected by their natural environment through time, and conversely and perhaps more importantly in view of the present global predicament, how they have affected that environment and with what results.”⁷

The nascent African American environmental historiography owes much

to environmental historians Mart A. Stewart, Nicholas Proctor, and Andrew Hurley, who have documented under-, lower-, and working-class perspectives of slaves, sharecroppers, and industrial workers against the backdrop of fields, forests, and smokestacks. Stewart's *What Nature Suffers to Groe: Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680–1920* explores how the cultivation of rice had distinct connotations for slaves and slaveholders. Stewart argues “that planters used the environment and appropriated knowledge about it to reinforce their own class interests, and that slaves created counterstrategies to promote their own class interests.”⁸ The daily experiences of slaves and sharecroppers, slaveholders and landlords came together in an untidy tangle within a southern agricultural system in which whites exploited African American labor to work their land and plant their crops for their profit. Although caught within this inequitable system, African Americans skillfully refashioned Georgia's environment according to the culturally distinctive practices of planting and harvesting learned in Africa and preserved under slavery. Never passive or waiting, nature resisted human encroachment with pests, weeds, and creeping woods, always pressing to take back cultivated fields.

In *Bathed in Blood: Hunting and Mastery in the Old South*, Proctor, like Stewart, examines the meaning of labor and the environment in the South. Slaves and slaveholders did not hunt in “an atmosphere of egalitarian camaraderie,” according to Proctor. The slave system kept African Americans virtually invisible as hunter-slave-workers, exploitable human resources that buttressed the masculine recreation of the antebellum slaveholder. In the tradition of the heroic narrative, slaveholders hunted at their leisure, pointing and shooting at wild game. Behind the heroic role of the hunter-slaveholder was hidden the backbreaking work of slaves, lasting long after the final gunshot. African Americans “hauled, tracked, cooked, cleaned, and chopped,” and game almost magically appeared at the back door of the big house, or furs materialized to cloak the shoulders of the slaveholder and his family.⁹ Such an inequitable relationship between the leisure of the slaveholder and the labor of the slave was of course an oppressive means of controlling the bodies and labors of African Americans. Yet slaves asserted their autonomy, snatching back some power by hunting independently to supplement the family's meager slave rations, sell meat and fur for profit, and present gifts to other slaves. All of these actions were means of cementing their status and role in slave communities.

Some descendants of these slaves and sharecroppers traveled north seeking better lives, only to face segregated industrial employment, as illustrated in Hurley's *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary Indiana, 1945–1980*. Hurley explains that environmental “haves” and “have nots”—with the white middle class most favored, followed by European

immigrants, and people of color such as African Americans bringing up the rear—vied for limited environmental resources and access to environmental amenities, essential elements of better standards of living in polluted postwar Gary, Indiana. Hurley measures the impact of social and racial status on each of these groups, testing “liberal capitalism’s ability to reconcile competing environmental objectives and, indeed, its ability to balance the imperatives of industrial growth and social welfare.” African Americans competed in an inequitably parceled urban environment for equal access to recreation in the green spaces of parks and on the waters of polluted Lake Michigan; for promotion and upward mobility to safer workplaces in industrial plants; and for decent housing some distance from industrial pollution that sullied curtains, walls, and clothing. Hurley notes that, historically, African Americans concerned themselves little with protecting endangered animal and plant species, unlike some middle- and upper-class whites. Instead, they worried about the poor quality of urban life, especially inadequate sanitation, inferior housing, and disease-ridden pests.¹⁰

Drawn from history, ecology, economics, geography, and other disciplines, environmental history has always been interdisciplinary. In keeping with this tradition, historians of African American environmental history can become more interdisciplinary still by looking to the sources and methodology of African American studies. In the chapter “Stranger,” in her novel *Love*, Toni Morrison draws on different disciplines of African American studies as she interprets the environment as a naturalist, novelist, and historian. She describes The Settlement, an impoverished mountain village populated by beaten-down, underachieving African Americans during World War I in Anywhere, U.S.A. In one passage, in prose one might find in a nature writer’s journal, Junior Vivian, a young African American girl, races through the woods to escape punishment by her uncles: “She found herself in the kind of wood lumbermen salivate over. Pecans the size of which had not been seen since the twenties. Maples boasting six and seven trunk-size arms. Locusts, butternut, white cedar, ash. Healthy trees mixed with sick ones. Huge black cauliflowers of disease grew on some. Others looked healthy until a wind, light and playful, ruffled their crown. Then they racked and fell like coronary victims, copper and gold meal poring from the break.”¹¹ In this twisted paean to the woods—in the tradition of the African American novel, couched in history, chanted in spiritual tones, and pervaded by the disarray of nature—Morrison shows historians how they can expand environmental history through the interdisciplinary model of African American studies, which blends history, religious studies, and ecology. As just a few examples, the slave narratives of the Works Progress Administration, the writings of W. E. B. DuBois, and the art of Jacob

Lawrence—the historical, the literary, and the artistic, along with other disciplines—are sources that historians can integrate into African American environmental history, a subdiscipline with much to be written.

In this budding African American environmental historiography, *“To Love the Wind and the Rain”* explores the relationship of African Americans to their surroundings with essays on rural experiences, urban and suburban life, and environmental justice. The final essay looks to the future at ways to expand upon African American environmental history by exploring the African diaspora and interdisciplinary perspectives. These contributions complement well-known African American historiographical themes of race, ethnicity, and gender with an environmental theme as a necessary component in the narratives of African American lives.