

Black Bodies, Green Spaces

Why is the image of an environmentally conscious African-American still hard for us to picture?

By Tiya Miles

Ms. Miles is a professor of history at Harvard.

June 15, 2019

“Black people — we need a better publicist,” the comedian Wanda Sykes declares in her new Netflix special, “Not Normal.”

Ms. Sykes has just told the story of a black security guard in Chicago who apprehended a gunman and then was himself shot by the police. Her solution for changing the perception of African-Americans as dangerous is a nationwide publicity campaign featuring photos of black people doing “fun, nonthreatening, frivolous” stuff — bowling, for instance, or “something environmental” like taking out the recycling. Ms. Sykes reaches for an imaginary waste bin and tips one foot at a perky angle that says she is ready for do-gooder action, sending the crowd into uproarious laughter.

I wondered, as I watched (and chuckled), what makes this image of Ms. Sykes taking out the recycling so funny? At least part of the laughter is elicited by an unspoken asymmetry that viewers can recognize regardless of their racial identity: the image of a black woman being “environmental” versus the picture of the environmentalist that most Americans carry around in their heads.

More than 30 years into the movement for environmental justice, and more than a decade into a global, multiracial campaign led by groups like 350.org to raise awareness about climate change and push governments into action, many Americans still do not associate black people with environmental engagement. But this notion of African-Americans existing apart from natural environments is more than just a contemporary stereotype ripe for satire; it all but ignores crucial aspects of American experience. The truth is that African-Americans’ relationship to the environment is complicated and runs deep.

The tension in American culture between black people and anything environmental does have a basis in history. Before 1900, 90 percent of African-Americans lived in the South, where many had been enslaved and then exploited as sharecroppers in rural areas. After two waves of migration between World War I and 1970, almost half of black Americans had relocated to the urban North and West. Blacks’ determination to flee the horrors of the Southern rural landscape played out in long-distance moves to cities like Cleveland, Indianapolis, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and San Francisco. Blacks became associated with gritty cities, disassociated from nature in the popular view.

As African-Americans moved in, white urbanites began moving out to spaces in between the city and country — rolling green suburbs with colorful flower gardens and tree-lined streets. White Americans with the means to settle into suburbs and vacation in state and national parks seemed to fit the picture of leisure-time naturalists promoted by white nature writers and conservationists described in the sociologist Dorceta Taylor’s “The Rise of the American Conservation Movement.”

It is true that African-American attitudes toward nature were (and remain) conflicted. For most of American history, land was a bludgeon used against the bodies of black people, who were forced to work it to raise tobacco, rice and cotton while being deprived of that bounty.

When African-Americans left the South en masse, they spat on the memory of life-stealing cotton fields. But they also cherished the memory of Southern pines, meandering rivers, tropical flowers and the delicious dishes made from local plants and animals. In “The Warmth of Other Suns,” the journalist Isabel Wilkerson captures the wondrous beauty of this environment that migrants abandoned, detailing the story of her own grandmother’s sweet-smelling, night-blooming cereus flower around which an annual neighborhood ritual formed. Black departure from the South, while necessary for safety and opportunity, was cloaked in the loss of that regional beauty.

The writer Margaret Walker summoned this collective nostalgia in her poem “Southern Song”: “I want to rest again in southern fields, in grass and hay and clover/bloom; to lay my hand again upon the clay baked by a/southern sun, to touch the rain-soaked earth and smell/the smell of soil.” Out of those mixed feelings of longing and relief, migrants remembered and remade connections with nature, reproducing rural lands in miniature through gardens and chickens kept in the yards. Cities are, after all, spaces of nature, which is why the collard greens from our grandmothers’ urban gardens always tasted so good. The grass in these cities, if not greener, was still grass.

More difficult to contend with, though, is the legacy of slavery, tenant farming and convict lease labor in rural locales. The African-American ties to this land, unfairly seized from Indigenous people, are ugly and thick. As the poet Robert Hass put it in an essay detailing the ebb and flow of African-American relations with the earth: “In the tradition of the spirituals, ‘black nature’ is slavery.”

But even in that long, dark tunnel of suffering, African-Americans recognized the capacity of nature to function as a resource — better still, an ally — in the fight for physical and psychological freedom. Like the Red Sea that parted to allow the Israelites' flight from Egypt, features of the environment could become instrumental in their escapes.

Nature often played a saving role as snake- and gator-infested swamps, moss-draped forests and rushing rivers sheltered their movements. Fugitives' use of stars in the night sky to navigate treks north is legendary. The natural world could support their escape attempts if only they watched and worked with it.

Margaret Garner, whose story was memorialized in Toni Morrison's novel "Beloved," depended on the cycles of the Ohio River to carry out a daring and ultimately tragic escape.

Enslaved in rural Kentucky and most likely sexually abused by her owner, Archibald Gaines, since her teenage years, Margaret married Robert Garner, an enslaved man on a nearby plantation. A mother of four, Margaret was pregnant again at 22. These children were the progeny of her husband and also, the record suggests, Gaines. In January 1856, the Garners sought freedom by crossing the Ohio River. The waterway had frozen over that month, forming what the scholars Nikki Taylor and Henry Louis Gates Jr. have called "a natural footbridge to freedom."

While the Garners did make it to the safety of a relative's home in Cincinnati, they were quickly surrounded by Gaines and armed officers. When Margaret Garner realized her family would be recaptured, she took the life of her toddler daughter to save her from slavery.

The perils of black life during slavery required a hyper-awareness of nature not only as a material resource but also as a spiritual one. Frederick Douglass, in his well-known escape from slavery, was also strengthened through this sort of partnership with nature.

The historian David Blight describes Douglass's flight, quoting Douglass himself: "Frederick found temporary safety in the woods, where the weary fugitive lay down on a bed of leaves, 'shut in with nature, and nature's God.'" Douglass, fleeing the farm of the sadistic "slavebreaker" Edward Covey, was discovered by an enslaved man, Sandy Jenkins, who was crossing the woods to visit his free wife. The couple sheltered Douglass in their cabin for the night. There, Jenkins acted as adviser, telling Douglass he had no way of evading Covey, so in the morning he should return to the farm, but fortified.

Jenkins, described by Douglass as a "genuine African," provided Douglass with a protective charm, or "root," procured from a different part of the woods and instructed him to wear it on his right side, to protect the teenager from being whipped by Covey or "any other white man." Later, when Covey attempted another assault, Douglass fought back and won, protecting his person and dignity. Douglass was unsure whether he believed in the magical powers of his new charm, but the exchange with Jenkins had set Douglass on a course toward psychological and physical freedom, a process he described as "how a slave was made a man."

Over time, the abundant natural environment that sustained this profound human drama itself became a casualty of it. As white planters and farmers extended the system of slavery west and directed enslaved people to clear more lands for cotton, forests receded, ecosystems changed, and familiar routes to escape and wooded areas used for the collection of special roots shrank. Enslaved people's knowledge of the natural world, though rich and bountiful, became less applicable in a drastically altered environment.

And this is where we — not just African-Americans but we as a species — find ourselves today, face to face with the complex and troubling source of the comedian's joke.

The journalist David Wallace-Wells is surely right when asserting in his book "The Uninhabitable Earth" that there is no analogue in human experience for this climate crisis. But in some ways, our present reality echoes that of enslaved black people. As we drastically reconfigure the land and climate, we undercut the environmental knowledge we have collectively gathered and curtail our own (and our children's) possibilities for freedom and security. We will all suffer that loss.



Brian, Fort Greene Park, Brooklyn, 2014. Naima Green, from "Jewels in the Hinterland"

Carolyn Finney has asserted in the book "Black Faces, White Spaces" that the notion of black people being aliens in the outdoors is a "whitewashing" of history. We should not accept this false narrative, but instead recognize the long tradition of African-American environmentalism, extending from the time of slavery to the farming cooperatives of the mid-20th century, the preservation of traditional food production, and even healing root work in the South. Today the innovative contributions of activists like the Midwestern food scholar Monica White, the South Bronx community organizer Majora Carter and the Sierra Club past president Aaron Mair carry on that tradition.

The African-American environmental consciousness is real, profound and hard-won. As the sixth mass extinction unfolds around us species by fragile species, as the rivers and seas rise above the sand bags and levees, there is no more escape into nature for the descendant of the slave or the descendant of the suburbanite.

But perhaps there is still an escape *with* nature from the storm we have wrought. As the Detroit poet Robert Hayden wrote in "Ice Storm," an elegy to the Northern environment that continued to witness black pain even after the change migration had brought, "The trees themselves, as in winters past,/ will survive their burdening,/ broken thrive."

Tiya Miles is a professor of history at Harvard and the author of "The Dawn of Detroit: A Chronicle of Slavery and Freedom in the City of the Straits."

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTopinion) and Instagram.

A version of this article appears in print on June 16, 2019, Section SR, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Black Bodies, Green Spaces