



# Blackecologies

RUTGERS  
Institute for the Study  
of Global Racial Justice

Food is central to every culture, the practices and traditions developed around its production, preparation, and consumption is the defining factor and common foundation for all peoples. Food touches every aspect of our daily lives. With that in mind it should be no surprise that food insecurity and alienation from the food production process is an underlying factor of nearly every social and environmental woe we face today.

Adequate nutrition during childhood significantly improves academic outcomes and longterm economic wellbeing.

Healthy diets reduce the rates of mental health disorders, cognitive and developmental delays, anemia, asthma, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, premature deliveries and low birth weights, and implusivity in children.

Shifting to traditional gardening techniques, and localized economies would significantly lower carbon emissions, reducing the impacts of climate change.

Reconnecting with the land fosters a relationship of respect and understanding that leads to land stewardship as well as collective and individual wellness, and keys to a sustainable and resilient future.



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Paintings on pages 2, 8, 13, 14, 23, 26, 31 and 36 courtesy of Alissa Ujie Diamond, an artist, landscape architect, and Assistant Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at State University of New York at Buffalo

Lillian H. McC...

WASHINGTON  
DC



TAPPAHANNOCK +  
ESSEX  
COUNTY



RICHMOND



HAMPTON  
NORFOLK



GREAT  
DIBBOL  
SWAMP



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# Food is Free: An Interview with Ujamaa in South Africa

**tell us more about how your organization came together.**

1. Ujamaa was formed as a response to the socio-economic and political arena of South Africa where it seemed like the majority of South Africans were dormant in their oppression and the main concern amongst Ujamaa's five core members was why is it that many people do not seem to see the Back experience as we see it.

The answer to this question came from Cabral's notion that people are not and will not fight but for land where their food comes from. The idea of guerrilla gardening as a protest action came from being socially excluded.

**How have conditions in contemporary South Africa shaped your program?**

2. Ujamaa is located in Khayelitsha and Khayelitsha is the fastest growing township in South Africa. It is arguably becoming the biggest township in South Africa after Soweto in Gauteng and Mdantsane in Eastern Cape. The average household income in Khayelitsha is around R28, 000 (\$2000) per annum and this creates a condition for high levels of exploitation. Ujamaa in finding ways to respond to this came with a protest statement: Food is free. This was a response to a system that commodifies food and keeps the poor people under siege through food systems that are oppressive. Also, the very food that is available at the disposal of poor Black people was high chemically infused as well as GMO's and this Ujamaa viewed as chemical warfare. In response to this emerged the campaign forwarding that people should not buy what

they can grow lest they would engage in self sabotaging activity where they buy some very expensive poison to kill themselves.

**Ujamaa's approach is based on guerrilla gardening. Could you tell us what inspired this and how it works?**

3. Our approach is, that lack of space should not be an excuse.

In the context of the township it is rare to find an open space of land especially for gardening as there are always plans for the land. Some of the plans are at times backwards and some for good and bad reasons. One of the parcels of land that was occupied by Ujamaa was a dumping site in the community. Ujamaa occupied the space and started the gardening project. Within our work we ensured that the garden had no fencing which in itself was a statement against conditional access to food. Our philosophy around fenceless gardens was that there should be nothing that separates humanity from their food. It was from this initiative that the community saw that it is possible to do gardening in the community and so we encouraged our community members to utilize every available space that is in the community. We outlined plans to grow food on walls vertically (using old pellet wood) turning them into hanging planters. Basically, the idea of guerilla gardening was about using municipal public space for gardening without asking for permission from the powers that be.

This happened early in 2016 after having worked for a few months with the community to form gardening groups and after encouraging

*The idea for us was not just gardening. We were working towards a holistic approach to food sovereignty.*

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community members to apply for municipal government support for gardening implements like compost, garden tools, and seeds.

**What kinds of things do you all plant and why?**

Initially we started with planting vegetables depending on the season that it grew in. The philosophy and ideology of Ujamaa is against the commodification of food and therefore we relied on the intensive labor of the members and those who are sympathetic to the Ujamaa's ideals. At first the people were harvesting without taking time to take part in labor and financially contribute towards the dream. The ideals of Ujamaa in the very core upheld working together. The inactivity of community members in working presented the wrong idea of Ujamaa to the community presenting Ujamaa almost as saviors of the community. This meant that Ujamaa had to do some community outreach for popular education. The popular education was on differentiating between working and slavery, landlessness, the townships, Ujamaa, and also exploring Black resistance movements around the world.

**Who do you hope to reach through this effort?**

Our target group is the community. We had targeted 150 household with about 750 people in the area. The area as targeted was meant to be a prototype of what can be possible in creating alternative systems. The idea for us was not just gardening. We were working towards a holistic approach to food sovereignty. This we planned to do through what we called an Urban EcoVillage. We were working towards meeting our basic needs within our community through what we called Home Industries. The main objectives with Home Industries were to encourage and assist community members to establish various businesses in their houses. ■



# What Hurricane Katrina Revealed about the Social Dimensions of New Orleans, Louisiana

by Justin Hosbey

vents of environmental catastrophe reveal the core dimensions of the social sphere in which they occur, and Hurricane Katrina exposed the racial violence and class domination that structures New Orleans and the broader US South. As argued by Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, “the storm brought into clear focus, at least momentarily, a legacy of uneven geographies, of those locations long occupied by *les damnés de la terre*/the wretched of the earth: the geographies of the homeless, the jobless, the incarcerated, the invisible labourers, the underdeveloped, the criminalized, the refugee, the kicked about, the impoverished, the abandoned, the unescaped” (McKittrick and Woods 2007, 2). Media coverage of Hurricane Katrina provoked a global conversation about the material conditions of racial inequality in the United States. Despite that discussion in the mid 2000s, Hurricane Katrina was not the first time in recent American history that the region’s racial and class inequalities brutally structured both the state and civil society’s response to disaster recovery. America’s “uneven geographies” were previously exposed when Hurricane Betsy devastated New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward in 1965, as well as during the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1944.

In these moments of ecological crisis, the racial violence that low income and working class southern Black communities have historically faced from both the state and white communities of all classes re-emerges, in excess. In the wake of Katrina, organized white militias, individual white vigilantes, and New Orleans police officers killed several unarmed Black Louisianans (Thompson 2008). In the midst of the chaos

and uncertainty induced by the storm, and the lethargic federal response to the humanitarian crisis in New Orleans, Democratic Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco issued an order to the recently arrived Arkansas National Guard to shoot to kill any “looters” or “hooligans” that they saw. New Orleans police officers responded locally to this state-level directive, resulting in the killings of eleven unarmed Black civilians in the days immediately following Katrina. On September 5, 2005, in response to reports of gunshots in the general area, New Orleans police officers fired at an unarmed Black family walking across the Danziger Bridge. The police killed 17-year-old James Brissette and 40-year-old Ronald Madison, and wounded four other members of their party. In the years since the storm, federal prosecutors have indicted over twenty current or former New Orleans area police officers for murder, perjury, police brutality, and other civil rights violations related to their actions in the wake of Katrina. Denise Ferreira da Silva (2009) argues, “Raciality immediately justifies the state’s decision to kill certain persons – mostly (but not only) young men and women of colour – in the name of self-preservation. Such killings do not unleash an ethical crisis because these persons’ bodies and the territories they inhabit always-already signify violence.” The extrajudicial killings that happened in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina were partially triggered by media outlets who reported unsubstantiated stories of murder and rape that were allegedly occurring in the Superdome football stadium and the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, where thousands of low-income and working class Black New Orleanians were sheltering from the storm. To quote da Silva



*“Events of environmental catastrophe reveal the core dimensions of the social sphere in which they occur, and Hurricane Katrina exposed the racial violence and class domination that structures New Orleans and the broader US South.”*

(2009) here again, low income and working class Black families were confronted with the horizon of death in the immediate chaos of the storm. The state’s need to reconstitute itself in the face of its sovereign failure post-Katrina required that violent brutality be enacted on working class Black New Orleanians who inhabited places like the Lower Ninth Ward, the Superdome, and the Convention Center. These geographies were seen as signifiers of inherent violence and pathology because of the racial and class composition of their inhabitants.

When Katrina devastated the region in 2005, killing at least 1,464 people in New Orleans alone, a lethal dyad of racial and economic violence emerged to structure the post-Katrina redevelopment of the city. In the midst of the physical violence and death-dealing from the state and white citizens, devastated low income and working class Black communities also became preyed upon as sites of raw capital extraction by the elite, white dominated economic forces that structure corporate disaster recovery. The *longue duree* of this violent, extractive racial-economic dynamic should be foregrounded in discussions of disaster recovery in the US South as we are bearing witness to the ongoing articulation of the racial-economic regime of the plantation economy, in which African persons were trafficked, violently warehoused in forced labor geographies, and made to exist as fungible sources of capital and deemed unassimilable to the community of rights-bearing (white) citizens. New Orleans is, and always has been, a plantation geography. Loïc Wacquant’s work helps historicize this nexus of racial and class

exploitation in his analysis of the US three key race-making socio-spatial-economic configurations: racial slavery, Jim Crow, and the ghetto. He argues that these ‘peculiar’ institutions, “were all instruments for the conjoint extraction of labour and social ostracization of an outcast group deemed unassimilable...rather than simply standing at the bottom of the rank ordering of group prestige in American society, they were barred from it *ab initio*” (Wacquant 2002, 44).

In this ‘peculiar’ political economy, capitalist accumulation (i.e. property valuation) is maintained by the forced marginality of Black working class neighborhoods like the Lower Ninth Ward, which was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. In New Orleans, racial ostracization manifests as a distinct form of spatial marginality – marginality becomes coded alongside the geographies of risk in a highly flood prone, hurricane vulnerable topography. From Louisiana’s colonial period to the present, people of African descent have been forced to live outside of the French Quarter, which rests on a natural high-elevation crest of the Mississippi River, into what was termed the “back of town,” alongside and behind what is now Rampart Street in New Orleans. Many of these neighborhoods are below sea level and are particularly vulnerable the flooding that accompanies the hurricanes that disproportionately threaten the region. ■



-painting by Alissa Uujie Diamond



# The Sacrifice

by Wandeka Gayle

Everton stepped up to the crest of the hill at the edge of his family land. He held an old cookie tin tight in his grip. He still couldn't believe the size of the red craters he'd seen on his way there, still with the teeth marks of large excavators and crisscrossed tire tracks imprinted in the dirt. They looked like gaping wounds in the land. Now, he stood looking down at what his community had called the great mud lake, the vast remnants from the imposing bauxite plant nearby. To Everton, it may well have been the pit of hell, his own lake of fire and brimstone for his part in it. He watched the red dust rising on the wind like steam and he held the tin a little tighter.

"Send the boy," his uncle had said years before when the American businessmen had met with the politicians and the politicians met with the farmers and filled the farmers' heads with talks of checks and scholarships to America for their children.

"So, all we must give them in return is our land and our children, right Fitzroy?" Everton's mother, Marlene, had said.

"The boy not going nowhere," his father's voice filtered in from the doorway. Earl was a small man, but his voice boomed louder as he came into the little room. "They mining bauxite in this country for over fifty years from Trelawny to right here in Saint-E and you see any benefit come to people like we yet?"

"You all too short sighed and small minded," Uncle Fitzroy said, hissing his teeth. "They bringing jobs to us, to the whole of this

community. Farming not doing what it used to. People need steady work."

"You speaking for this community you don't live in no longer?" Earl, added. "This blasted bauxite everywhere now—in you tea, in you hair, in you drawers, and the sweet sop-dem growing black and hard like rock on the tree."

On the other side of the room, Everton pretended to read his biology book for the upcoming GCE exams. At that time, he did not have any feelings either way about the whole evils of bauxite mining they were chatting about, but his ears had perked up when he heard he could try for a scholarship, that he could go to America. He could become an engineer. What did it matter if he had to work for the plant? He had not seen himself tilling soil and trying to eke out a life like that. Was he to become a farmer because his father was a farmer and his father's father was a farmer?

"They have farmer assistance," — Fitzroy tried again.

"Yes, they giving us water tanks and making it seem like they doing us a favor," Earl said. "They create the problem and then they make it seem like they is the solution."

Uncle Fitzroy said he had seen the greenhouses. It would be some ways away from the red dust plaguing their lands and their lungs. He joked that Marlene could wear white again for her night-meetings. without fear of clinging red dust.

"And you know that papa turning over in him grave after all him do for we, for this land, come back from fighting over there in England and build up this place and you just want to leave it behind?" Earl said. Everton had heard this often before, in the same tight way he imagined his grandfather had said it to his sons about how he had traveled to a country that called themselves mother country but did not know its children, how they had forced their language into their mouths and then rejected them once black people's blood had been spilt to save them.

"The government done give them the lease, so might as well we make the best of it, and plus, is my house too," were Uncle Fitzroy's parting words that night.

Even then at seventeen, Everton had seen the farm yield less and less each year, more of the yams misshapen and inedible, the bananas small, the Otaheite apples, tasteless and tart. He had heard his parents lament about the residents in Sweet Land, how rainwater caught in barrels after a storm turned red just like some biblical plague. "They taking something out the earth they can't never put back," his father had said to no one in particular, long after Uncle Fitzroy had gone. Everton looked up at his mother.

"My bright boy," she said, her eyes sad. He knew this was more wish than a truth.

By some miracle, Everton did manage to get one of the scholarships, a gift where the talk of red dust was nowhere near him at that school in Maryland. So, Everton told himself that his mother had always wheezed, even when she laughed; how he could hear it when she reprimanded him at age seven, when she'd stilled his little fingers halfway in her cookie tin to snatch freshly made coconut drops; how the phone lines must be distorting her voice, making her cough sound deep like that. Even when she went back to her maroon village, to Accompong to breathe fresher air and bathe in mineral-rich

water, he did not trouble himself. His mother was made of tougher stuff than his father, who had died trying to coax life from the dying earth they had given him, with the hilt of the pitchfork still in his hands. The money they'd saved was spent to bury his father. The money Everton earned when he returned was used to keep his mother alive for as long as he could.

He stood there clutching the old tin, surveying a corrosive lake and thinking how the Tainos had dubbed the once untouched island, *Xaymaca*, land of wood and water, land where enslaved Africans had crouched inside caves and on the side of mountains and defended the new land with spears and arrows against British soldiers, conspicuous in their stark red jackets. He thought of how the descendants of these Maroons, now marched and beat drums, when the American businessmen threatened to come to their community too, to test their consecrated land, unspoiled for hundreds of years.

He wished he could have been as militant when his mother was given the first inhaler and told her asthma-turned sinusitis-turned lung disease was no one's fault. He looked up toward the distant mountain where he had lain her to rest weeks before. He could still hear the drumbeats and the abeng and smell the white rum they poured on the earth for her travel to the ancestors.

Everton had come back to the abandoned house and found his mother's cookie tin in the rubble. Now, he opened it, almost expecting to see the sweet confections he had loved as a child. It held instead old buttons that he fingered like precious stones.

And when Everton lifted his eyes again to the mountain where his mother lay, he thought he saw the slight haze of rising red dust, but if he listened closely, he could also hear the drums. ■



# Neptune in Pisces

by Arielle John

ev made the mistake of sprinkling sea kelp on my salad once  
and I am still working to forgive the taste of underwater weed  
wanting to escape my mouth and my body's refusal of swallowing  
a fishy plant in the name of nutrition. And how funny we live

by the beach now. So for our backyard, the regular garden rake  
won't do. Give us the industrial-sized one, it's metal fangs  
fawning a foot or two across, to catch the rum bottles better.  
Especially when they are filled with the piss perhaps of some man caught

without a urinal in the Gulf, and just enough fire water for his woman troubles.  
He tossed it out his boat, and now it is here. We need an oversized comb kind  
of cleaner that doesn't twist its teeth under the weight of half-full  
buckets of eggshell white oil paint danced down by the waves. A forklift

perhaps, for the time jeep tyres floated in. A vacuum, able to seize  
the size of that deflated boat. Endless gloves to throw the dead eel, the dead shark,  
the dying grouper, the expectation of my people to do better, back into the water.  
Get the garbage bags and start taking up what tragedies the high tide has made

of the coast this morning. And yes we already did this yesterday. And yes, I know  
the bags are too big for the trash receptacle, but line them up,  
against the wall and the pick-up people will understand that here is the ocean's  
mouth of riddles, and the answers come with prizes of waste, what must have been  
the treasure of someone else how many ever days before the last heavy rains. It all comes here,  
-the answers; made of plastic, made of rubber, made of careless us, made of smoothened glass  
and more plastic. Here on evenings the fish feed, and we pray their tiny stomachs  
refuse our refuse; that they forgive us. For everything our too-small rake could not catch today. ■



# Forests are Black Futures

by Danielle Purifoy

What I read / heard was that at nightfall, or maybe daybreak, or when nobody was looking, they slipped away. It was just within reach, but still a different world, still inside the property line but past the rows. Past the open sight line. Past the space the planters could feasibly control. Those trees disappeared them, sometimes for a few moments, sometimes for good.

What happened after they crossed into the forest is mostly with the ancestors, but what we think we know is that they spent time gathering and praying and plotting and laughing and weeping and running to another plantation to see a mother or cousin or lover or running on their way to find some other place to be alive. Because they weren't dead.

What must it feel like to cross the ecotone of your own vitality? The choreography to the line—crouching, crawling, sliding, dipping, pulling, climbing—the adrenaline of that first tree in the summer, its thick cover tucking you in a shady embrace, your eyes adjusting to the dimmed light where they can set into their actual mood. Relief? Rage?

What was time without a keeper? Perhaps the body decided: this is how many hours I need to speak to my gods, this is how many breaths my heart takes to recover from the terror-delight of this line. This is how many days my spirit needs away before it can continue under these conditions.

Maybe the trees kept time too. I wonder if the dendrochronologist's tools are now sharp enough to detect the ceremony under the oak tree, 200 years ago. What if the thickness of a ring from the 1820s was due not just to the rainy season, but also to the frequent pouring of libations? How wide might a cypress ring stretch if they sang underneath its branches every night for a year? How many maples and pines bear the fire scars of flight, of destroyed evidence, of plantations set ablaze?

When the environmentalists said we don't care about the forest, what they meant is that they didn't want us to remember. They stole our witnesses and our bones buried beneath them. They turned sacred grounds into their playgrounds, museums of conquest and species surveillance.

But the erasure was not total. My daddy knew Michigan forests because his daddy knew Alabama forests. The medicines still find their way from the underbrush to the hands of Black douglas, healers, foragers following what their great grandma told them to do when they had cramps or congestion or when they didn't sleep good. My great grandma cut the bark off the sassafras tree for tea. My mom will find an herbal remedy for almost anything.

Now, forests can be almost anything but forests. Now, we are meant to believe that forests are fuel instead of oxygen or shade or shelter for thousands of living beings. Now, we are supposed to think of the 300 year old trees that saved our great ( x 8 ) grandparents as renewable energy. Right now, in the 21st century, we are not meant to discern between timber plantations and forests. If there was anything our ancestors had to know for sure, it was the difference between a plantation and a forest.

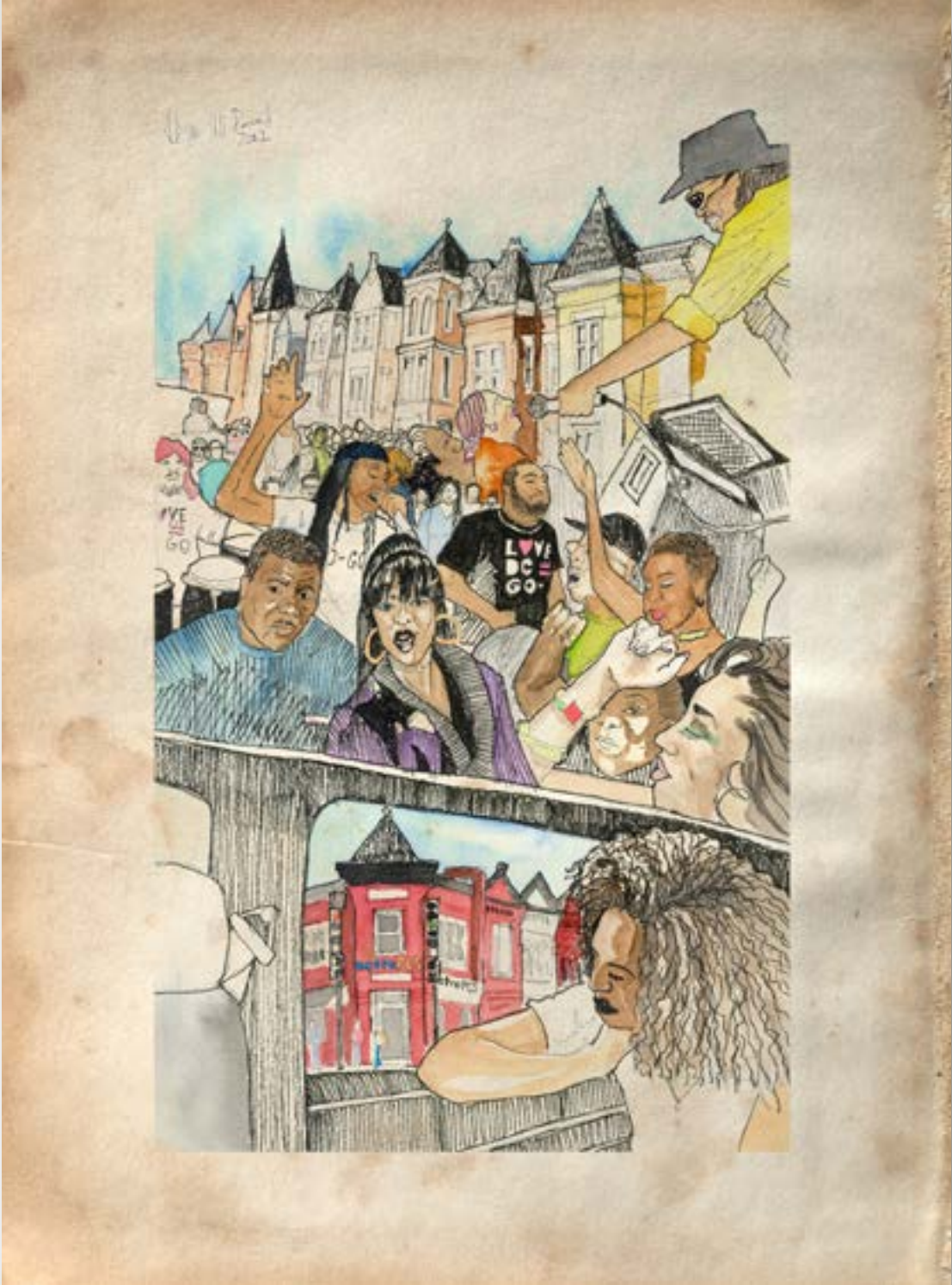
Let's review. European colonizers tethered our bodies to lands from which we built their empire and now they want to burn the evidence in their power plants in the name of saving the planet, which for them, has always been their empire.

Now it is for us to bear witness, to keep time, to make safe harbor for the forests, for our ancestors. Now it is for us to draw the line of our future vitality, which is, not incidentally, the same boundary as our ancestors' vitality.

Now it is for us again to dance a fire trail through their plantation and never look back. ■



-painting by Alissa Uujie Diamond



-painting by Alissa Uujie Diamond





# For Anacostia Park and My Father Upon Gogo's Return to the River

by Nina Angela Mercer

My father is my compass to this city because he taught me to walk its blocks as a way to know its ways and people better, but also as a way to know myself better as indigenous to this land of taxation without representation, and as a girl-child born in 1973, just in time for the tap water to inform my stride on a cellular level; and before George Clinton sang lovingly of our land as CC, Chocolate City. My father taught me to drive through slow on a Sunday and wave out the car window. He taught me to call out the names of bamas who was also my friends, and how to stop over Mama Lu's house at just the right time for when dinner is about ready like I ain't even try. He taught me to know these streets as arteries leading to the city's heart, as if its heart could be absorbed through the soles of my feet, becoming my own. I think that may be why I went barefoot on the sidewalks of my childhood neighborhood of Fort Lincoln. I really believed I was home. I felt it, knew it in how the city seemed to reflect how I was raised at a kitchen table where my father expected me to discuss current events culled from the *Washington Post* daily. We was Black folk with opinions and ready to do something about it. DC.

Recently, I came home because my father is my compass, and he has Alzheimer's disease. Sometimes I think that as my father journeys ever deeper into the recesses of his mind, I lose my city, my rootedness, my certainty that there is a place where I have people I come from, people I

belong to who will always claim me. But this is not because of my father's Alzheimer's. Instead, it is another kind of forgetting, one we call gentrification. The houses are painted beautifully vibrant colors now, but frequently, I am doubtful of where I am as if I have walked into a dream and only know it is a dream because something just beyond my recognition is off the flow of sidewalk traffic, the strange repetition of Starbucks. It is that sense of vanishing coordinates I used to know as well as I know my own palms. Like the day I had my mom drop me off at Brown's Bakery on Georgia Ave so I could get some coco bread, and it was a sidewalk beer garden instead. Certainly not Brown's.

I moved from DC after an illegal eviction that targeted single mothers in a cooperative apartment after my marriage ended. Also, after my neighbor called the cops on me after we got into an argument over my choice to host a rehearsal for my play in the back of our apartment building in a small clearing next to the parking lot in the alley. I went from that to substandard, emergency housing in Mt. Rainier, Maryland, just outside of DC, and then on to the Bronx. It felt like the city spit me out. My mistake was thinking it was only me, or that it was personal. If it was personal, it was a crowded yet intimate violation of a Black city and its people, where our own music got grown — Gogo.



A view of a bridge in the Anacostia River in Maryland.

Y'all know that drum has always talked resistance. This is DC. You know, the DC where a gentrifier chose to try and get Central Communications/Metro PCS, a 20 year business, to stop playing gogo music at the corner of 7th and Florida Avenues in 2019. The DC where the entire city stood up birthing a multi-stream movement with gogo music at the center, galvanizing the city with mobile stages, protests, and rallies. In fact, part of the reason I am home is to attend.

Don't Mute DC's gogo event at Anacostia Park. It is the first time gogo has played live at the park in thirty years. Thirty years ago, violence was the reason for removing gogo from the park. Today, gogo returns to the park with organizers to gather people intent on increasing awareness about issues impacting our health – the opioid crisis and the corona virus pandemic. It is also an opportunity for organizations to partner and support local artists in an intentional campaign to keep

gentrification from displacing residents east of the Anacostia River in DC.

Before I leave my parents' house to go hear gogo at the park, I try to get my father to understand that I am going to the place he took me to years ago, that I am going because it is the first time any band has played in the park in 30 years; exactly the number of years it has been since I graduated from DC public school as a high school senior, and exactly the number of years it's been since I worked for DC Parks and Recreation's Showmobile through Marion Barry's Summer Youth Employment Program. We danced a Black music revue while other youth artists performed as our band at Anacostia Park among many local parks throughout the city each summer. It's been 30 years, and more time than that since I was at the park with my father for Malcolm X Day. He was one of the organizers then. I want to tell

*“Today at the Anacostia River, we call on the names of the ancestors first, stand in a loose circle and witness our city dance. Wiley Brown growls, ‘I’m your Hootchie Cootchie Man’ from the stage in his blues-man hat; and my cousin calls my name from the crowd.”*

him the culture bearers are still showing up at Anacostia Park. I want to tell him, though Chuck Brown, The Godfather of Gogo, has become an ancestor, his family still leads the band. I try to tell my father, but his eyes are vacant. He is further down inside that hole Alzheimer’s makes. It takes longer to get him out. Sometimes I can’t get him out at all.

Still, when the Chuck Brown Band plays “Moody’s Mood,” and everyone sings, “Ohhhhhh, when we are one, I’m not afraid,” my skin thrills. I am touched by spirit. I am witnessing our city in a moment, demanding our space, our culture, our truth. I am here.

And I am remembering wearing my sky-blue Pumas and two-tone jeans to Malcolm X Day. I am standing next to my father, and he is talking forever, because he is one of those brothers who knows everybody, and I am always waiting and listening. This is another version of school. He also works with one of the gogo bands playing, Experience Unlimited. I play their vinyl albums on the record player in our basement at home, and when I am lucky, my dad lets me bring the vinyl to my friends’ houses when they have birthday parties. We are here at Anacostia Park to celebrate Malcolm X and the spirit of self-determination he passed on to all of us Black liberation lovers and their babies. I am waiting for the band to play

while standing on stage with my father, feeling the pulse of roto toms and cowbell, Sugar Bear’s voice rich with the soil that grew us here, and I feel that in my gut-muscle it is how we learned to do; and it is like sipping water from the hands of elders. Today at the Anacostia River, we call on the names of the ancestors first, stand in a loose circle and witness our city dance. Wiley Brown growls, “I’m your Hootchie Cootchie Man” from the stage in his blues-man hat; and my cousin calls my name from the crowd. She has come to find me near the stage before she leaves the park. We sway and bounce. I tell her, “I can feel our ancestors with us.” It is true. We are third generation DC. My grandfather came here to this river to fish. Maybe her mother, his sister, joined him sometimes. Maybe she took walks here as a young woman, watching the sunset.

This ritual is our release. We are in touch with each other and the land, organizing around issues impacting the community, but also building the community through social dance, making and enjoying culture in this moment, a healing. This music is our heart-beat for true. ■



# Field Notes at the End of the World

by Ashanté Reese

*What follows is a series of fieldnotes—two excerpts from my research and two speculative fieldnotes from the future. These notes were brought together around the questions: What changes if our ethnographic or research practices are reconceptualized as simultaneously being archival practices that capture imaginings and ruptures in real time before (or as?) they become traces of themselves? What if our work is guided not by saving or preserving a space forever but rather by building the conceptual and methodological tools that will help catapult us into our place in the stars? What if our fieldnotes are planned to be read by others – and not only other researchers, but by others who are looking for a path forward? What if the notes, fragments, images that we capture are all that was left at the end of this world and the beginning of the next?*

## **Fieldnote: Planting the Future** **25 October 2013**

When we opened the door, first thing I said was, “wow!” This man has turned his apartment into a greenhouse. Plants in recycled (plastic) juice containers, planters, and seeds and leaves in recycled plastic jello/fruit containers crowded the single window in the living room. He’s growing various peppers, tomatoes, lemon trees, orange trees, and a pine tree...all in his apartment! He’s also growing a plant that he calls “the mother tongue,” though he’s not sure if that’s the proper name for it. He started those plants from a cutting he took from his grandmother’s garden--the person who taught him about gardening. One of his neighbors was so excited about the garden at Lincoln Heights, he ordered seeds from China. Neither he nor his neighborhood know what those seeds are. I googled it and nothing came up. Anyway, it’s truly amazing. He told me they tried to get funding for a greenhouse, but did not receive it, so the next best thing? He cares for each

plant in his home. Moves them around to get more light. Waters them. Repots them. The plants spill over into his kitchen. I wondered does he have any space to cook.

He explained every single plant to me: where it came from, how he cares for it, how it behaves inside versus outside. He’s trying to keep the plants alive until the next planting season. We spent about 45 minutes inside his home talking about the plants. Ms. Dinkins arrived about fifteen minutes after us. She came in, took a seat, and seemed to be just as awed by the explanations of the plants as I was, even though she hears about them fairly regularly since they work together.

Mr. Harris recycles plastic containers and uses them as planters. The gardeners compost. They save the seeds from peppers, apples, and oranges and those have been used to plant the current crop. Now, it is unclear whether what they are doing is a result of not having much money

(making a way out of no way), but I don't think that matters at all. The current interest (obsession?) with sustainability in this country is so marked by visibility. If there once was a period of "conspicuous consumption" that marked middle classness, then I'd say we're in a period of conspicuous sustainability now. But the folks here aren't doing this for air time. They are trying to keep their gardens alive by any means necessary. They sure fit well within a legacy of creating opportunities and sustainable lifestyles that is so much a part of Africana history. How amazing is it that even in the face of being relocated and having their homes torn down, members of this community are still planting life?! (literally and figuratively)

**Fieldnote: Today We Plant**  
**17 May 2114**

They try to feed us intravenously. We refuse. They laugh, but we still refuse. They think that we do not know that there are other ways. They think that we do not remember that food grows in the ground, not only in labs. They talk about efficiency. They tell us we do not have to be hungry. That is one point on which we agree. We do not have to be hungry and we will not be. The books and guides that teach people how to grow food on their own have all been destroyed. Except the ones we have. Our ancestors who were growers saved seeds, and some others documented their practices. Some artists created art with seeds, which turned out to be a good thing, because they were hidden in plain sight. About a hundred years ago, researcher, writers, artists, and activists began creating archives outside of traditional institutions,—collecting and storing things in vessels buried under the ground. That is why we have the seeds and know what to

do with them. We dug those up and along with the knowledge of the elders who still live, we have planted. Harvest soon comes.

**Fieldnote: Farmer's Market**  
**17 May 2014**

Andrea\* suggested we walk inside to see the artwork there. It was called "The Visual Harvest." There was a sign describing the exhibit as, "the visual harvest is a collection of art from artists who are community minded, environmentally friendly, and visually intrigued. The art represented in this exhibition is that of what Harvest really is, a pulling together of community to celebrate life...." Our favorite piece looked to be an African woman with a baby on her back...the artwork looked like it was made from seeds.

As we were walking out of the room with the artwork, we ran into who we came to know as Christine. She walked up to introduce herself, and since she seemed like someone in charge, I assumed she was the woman I had contacted on facebook about interviewing. I introduced myself, said I was the one who emailed her, and we embraced. That's one thing I really like about Black people. We like to hug. Anyway, we started talking about the market. This is the first year she has organized it, and she has big plans. She sees it as something that can bring community together, even though there are people hanging out (potentially doing illegal things) right across the street. Honestly, I didn't pay much attention to the men hanging out in the park. The Market itself had a great little vibe. We didn't stay to witness it, but the man who was at the raw food and juice table brought his saxophone to offer a little music. Black folks are some of the most creative and talented people in the world. This is



*“food is just the glue...it’s the nexus between culture, music, and health.”*

one of the reasons why food can’t just be about food for us; it has to encompass nourishment beyond the body because, in a lot of ways, we seem to understand life more holistically.

The event was marketed as a “Farmer’s Market,” but there were more vendors than actual produce. Vendors, vegetable or otherwise, could participate free of charge, an experiment to both increase participation and reduce barriers to access. Strawberries, watermelon, potatoes, bell peppers and apples rounded out the produce available today (which isn’t very much). The bell peppers didn’t have a price, strawberries were 5 for \$1, and apples were .50 each. There wasn’t much, but what was there, locals were coming over to buy them. The organizer, who I met for the first time today, talked about the people who hang out in the park. She mentioned that some of the men bought most of the strawberries, at least twenty dollars worth. As we were getting ready to leave, a man who appeared to be intoxicated came over from the park to buy an apple. The organizers and vendors welcomed him and others, and it was nice to see them not ignoring or pretending that the park, the site of a former, well-known open air drug market, was not also part of the community.

**Fieldnote: And to Survive**  
**16 April 2014**

There is no more space to build. Here, on this bridge between starshine and clay, one cannot buy more space. One cannot buy relevance or stature or important. Here, on this bridge between starshine and clay, we marvel at our survival. The elders say that the end of the world was not sudden, but that is hard for me to believe. One day we were there, and today we are here, trying to make a way out of no way. But they tell us that it took years for Monsanto to own the patents to almost every seed that exists, except the ones held by us and our indigenous kin. They say we only have those because of something called a seed swap back then. They also tell us that the Gates corporation didn’t always own 85% of the arable land in the world; that they first made people believe they cared about others through modernizing the world through technology, and then through philanthropy. And one day they looked up, and they were buying land. But our elders say that they and our ancestors trained for this, that this making a way is not new to them and there are signs all around us. Those ancient ways are how and why we survive. The ancestors braided seeds in their hair; they painted paths to this bridge in their artwork; they practiced systems of exchange that were not based on money so that those practices would carry on in memories. They knew we would get here. They knew that we could not depend solely on the earth to contain us or our secrets. So they hid and carried them – in their hair, in their bodies, in their art, in their stories. We planted those seeds. We hung that art. They tell us we were never meant to survive, but I don’t believe them. If we were not meant to survive, how and why did the ancestors leave us so much? God is change, but thank god for roadmaps. ■



# Prophetic Black Ecologies: Liberatory Agriculture on Beulah Land Farms

by Priscilla McCutcheon

The Pan African Orthodox Christian Church (PAOCC) completed the purchase of Beulah Land Farms in 1999 with a cash payment of \$10 million. This land acquisition was the result of the longstanding efforts of church leaders and members, which included a struggle to even purchase the land from property owners, one of whom was vehemently opposed to selling land to Black people. However, the church persisted and in doing so, insisted on a model of sustainability rooted in self-determination. The PAOCC pooled the church's resources and paid off the land in full, committing to a longstanding tradition among Black farmers of cooperative agriculture. This over 1,000 acre piece of land sits on a lake in Calhoun Falls, South Carolina, a small town that borders the state of Georgia. On the farm, church members are dedicated to growing sustainable fruits and vegetable, sustainable catfish farming, and raising grass fed cattle. The church also has horses on the land, which contributes to the awe-inspiring feeling that one gets when stepping onto the land.

Beulah Land Farms is a vision, a place where the past, present and future coalesce onto the same landscape. I contextualize the PAOCC's work at Beulah Land Farms in the context of Katherine McKittrick's "Plantation Futures," where the plantation becomes a site to interrogate Black resistance. McKittrick contends that "these alternative worldviews were not sealed off from or simply produced in opposition to the plantation; rather, they were linked to the geographies of the plantation economy and the brutalities of slavery." <sup>3</sup> While McKittrick does not center present day agrarian spaces in this

work, her explanation of alternative worldviews is instructive to my conceptualization of Black agrarian spaces and the work at Beulah Land Farms. Black self-determination, as evidenced by Beulah Land Farms is occurring within the context of and on the site of oppression and land dispossession. Simply, this is not a liberation story that operates in isolation from the fraught history of Black agriculture. Rather, it operates within it, making the distinct ideology that guide the PAOCC's work even more enlightening.

At Beulah Land Farms, the past is based on strong ideological beliefs in Black liberation, beliefs that are written onto the material landscape of the farm. The Shrine of the Black Madonna was founded by Rev. Albert B. Cleage Jr., a former Presbyterian minister who was disillusioned with the church's hesitancy to directly confront racial injustices and white supremacy. When Cleage formed the Shrine of the Black Madonna, he envisioned an institution where Black leaders preached the liberation of Black people. Simply, he did not see Black liberation and God as separate, but rather preached through Black Christian Nationalism that Jesus is Black, God called Black people to be free, and also called Black ministers to preach Black liberation. In 1970, the Shrine of the Black Madonna was changed to the Pan African Orthodox Church to reflect the church's strong held beliefs that the experiences of Black people in the United States are intricately connected to the experiences of Black people across the Diaspora. Cleage also changed his name to Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman. Agyeman preached that Black people should fight for and deserved freedom and liberation





-painting by Alissa Uujie Diamond



*“The forced planting of blacks in the Americas is coupled with an awareness of how the land and nourishment can sustain alternative worldviews and challenge practices of dehumanization.”*

— KATHERINE MCKITTRICK 1

on earth. Importantly, Beulah Land Farms is a material representation of freedom and liberation. The history of the church and the farms suggests a careful attention to how each moving and breathing organism relates to one another.

Working in harmony requires respect for the land, and how this ideology of freedom and liberation is imbued into the land.

The farming practices at Beulah Land Farms are not just concerned with a sustainable food source for future generations, but ensuring that people are able to reap the benefits of the farm in the present. This is difficult, in part, because farming is a delayed process that requires that one wait for the material output. However, the rewards for those who work on the land are not only material, but also psychological and cultural. In a recollection of my own fieldwork experiences at Beulah Land Farms, I note a feeling of freedom and peace that came the moment that I stepped foot on the land. This feeling never left me, even

when the work was difficult. Beulah Land Farms is a farm that embodies self-determination among Black people. In their story of the farm, the PAOCC says:

“Our goal is to build a productive, sustainable and positive model of self-reliance and self-determination that can inspire a generation to learn to live as a free people by seizing the opportunity afforded them in a competition society in which no one is going to help us, we have to help ourselves. We can and we will. — The National Farm Project of the Shrines of the Black Madonna of the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church.”

Self-determination is a key component of sustainability at Beulah Land Farms. In many ways, the farm is representative of what Dr. Ashanté Reese defines as a “geography of self-reliance,” which “centers Black agency, particularly considering how this agency become

*“On the other hand, Black ecologies names the corpus of insurgent knowledge produced by these same communities, which we hold to have bearing on how we should historicize the current crisis and how we conceive of futures outside of destruction.*

— J.T. ROANE AND JUSTIN HOSEBY 2

spatialized within the structural constraints of food inequities.” Beulah Land Farms is self-determination, and reflective of the ways that Black people and Black communities have created life in the context of a hostile rural southern landscape.

Perhaps the most instructive ideological feature of Beulah Land Farms is that it is a landscape where the present and future converge, as church members dream, in the Black radical tradition, of a better food and land future for Black people. In *Freedom Dreams*, Robin D.G. Kelley discusses his mother’s ability to see with her third eye. He says “she dreamed of land, a spacious house, fresh air, organic food, and endless meadows without boundaries, free of evil and violence, free of toxins and environmental hazards, free of poverty, racism, and sexism...just free.” Kelley’s mother’s dreams of the futures are concrete, and include dreams of environmental sustainability. Beulah Land Farms necessarily has utopian dreams and this dreaming is based in a knowledge of a broader agricultural system that is not sustainable. My time at Beulah Land Farms taught me that members were growing food in the present, while preparing a sustainable food source. They knew that the present system was broken, and what to

them were obvious cracks in the system, would one day become apparent to all of us. In their present work, they are creating what J.T. Roane and Justin Hosbey define as “alternative worldviews,” which are based in a nuanced understanding of Black agrarian history, grounding in present day food and land needs, all the while creating plans for a distinct future.

Beulah Land Farms, and Black agrarian spaces are important focal points of Black ecologies. It is within these spaces that Black farmers seek to work within the constraints of nature to sustain Black life and create Black futures of liberation. It is important that we acknowledge living and breathing landscapes; agrarian spaces are the perfect avenues to do so. If the land is viewed as dead or lifeless, then the people and their work to build community on this land are rendered lifeless. In *Black Food Geographies*, Reese argues against the use of the term food deserts as it renders these places absent of the people who live and make community in them. Likewise, while Black farmers are characterized by their well-documented struggles of land loss, groups like the PAOCC continue to utilize such spaces to produce food through sustainable growing practices that center liberation. ■

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” *Small Axe* 17, no. 3 (November 2013): 11.

<sup>2</sup> J.T. Roane and Justin Hoseby, “Mapping Black Ecologies,” *Current Research in Digital History* 2, (2019): <https://crdh.rrchnm.org/essays/v02-05-mapping-black-ecologies/>

<sup>3</sup> Katherine McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” *Small Axe* 17, no.3 (November 2013): 11.

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Priscilla McCutcheon, “Prophetic Black Ecologies: Liberatory Agriculture on Beulah Land Farms,” *Black Perspectives*, July 27, 2020,

<https://www.aaihs.org/prophetic-black-ecologies-liberatory-agriculture-on-beulah-land-farms/>



-painting by Alissa Uujie Diamond



# On Dying Land: the Afterlife of Toxicity in an Afromexican Community

by Jayson Maurice Porter & Meztli Yoalli Rodriguez

In an early morning of September 2017 in a little fishing village on the Pacific coast of Oaxaca, Mexico, called Zapotalito, thousands of dead fish cobbled the water surface of the Chacahua-Pastoría lagoons. The Black and Indigenous community has called for environmental justice but believes their racialization has influenced government inaction and that legacies of environmental racism are killing their lagoon.

Environmental discourse and governance in the Americas tends to associate Indigenous groups with fights for land, but the Black and Afro-Indigenous communities of the Costa Chica fight similar struggles. Latin American multicultural governments understand land as criteria to define Indigeneity, which can erase Afrodescendientes' historical connection to land and reproduce exclusions to collective land rights. Mestizos of the Costa Grande are often considered the epicenter of the region's environmental activism, but this essay underscores how Afrodescendientes in the Costa Chica have shaped a Black ecology and burgeoning Black environmentalism in southern Mexico.

## **A Black Pacific Ecology**

Colonial ideas about race and the environment first cast the Costa Chica as a zone of extraction, but Afrodescendientes soon reshaped the region into a zone of refuge. After bringing diseases, which decimated and displaced indigenous populations, the Spanish brought thousands of enslaved Africans to the Costa Chica in the 16th and 17th century to primarily work on plantations or in militias. As soon as Afrodescendientes reached the region, however, they sought freedom

and tested the limits of Spanish control in the region by forming cimarrones, or communities of runaways.<sup>1</sup>

By the 18th century, the Costa Chica was dominated by numerous Black and Indigenous pueblos. After Mexico gained independence, Afrodescendiente leaders Juan Álvarez and Vicente Guerrero, the first Black president in the Americas (1829), came to embody the idea of coastal Guerrero as a Black place beyond state control. In the wake of colonialism, Mexico's early republic continued to marginalize Black politics and that region with differential development.

Even without racism, the dry tropical climate of the Costa Chica is unkind. Rain stops for months, only to fall with destructive force in a span of hours. The Pacific has preponderant hold on the climate, but annual droughts and monsoons shape people and plant life on the coast. For local Black, Amuzgo, Chatino, or Mixtec populations, lagoons became central to life and sustenance in these otherwise dry scrub lands. More savanna than tropical forest, the Costa Chica's drought stress encourages plant life to develop oils, toxins, or thorns to protect its precious water supply from insects and animals. This adaptation or resistance helps oil-producing plants thrive in these environments, but as the expansion of oil plant cultivation contaminated local water sources, local populations also had to adapt to maintain their ecologies, home, and way of life.

Five major freshwater lagoons line the Pacific Ocean from Acapulco, Guerrero to Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca, offering essential sources

of food and water for drinking and irrigation. Lagoons and the rivers that feed them also have been sites of generations of oilseed plantations of cacao, cotton, and coconuts. As these oil crops modernized the world, they relied on and influenced local Afro-mexican experiences.

Like communities of the African diaspora around the tropics, many Afro-mexicans grew the oilseeds necessary for these global vegetable oil industries. Increasing national and global demand for oil-producing crops to make vegetable oils, plastics, and soaps after World War II applied more economic and ecological pressures on the Costa Chica, which became the nation's largest producer of cotton, sesame seeds, and coconuts at three different points in the twentieth century. As the region became the largest producer of coconuts in the Western Hemisphere in the 1950s—and Acapulco emerged as the globe's hottest tourist attraction—did development in Costa Chica improve the lives of its inhabitants?

Oil crops contaminate Pacific coast lagoons like petroleum has damaged Gulf coast lagoons. Rather than benefit from the expansion of historic and contemporary companies in the Costa Chica, such as Anderson Clayton, Afro-mexican communities have suffered from inequitable development and environmental damage. Along the Oaxaca's Chacahua-Pastoría lagoons in particular, historical cycles of oil-related and tourist development came at the expense of environmental health and justice in the region. Local environmentalists have waited decades for government help. Today, the Mexican government has begun to recognize the locals' Blackness, but will they acknowledge their environmentalism?

#### **Ecocide of the Chacahua-Pastoría lagoons**

President Lázaro Cárdenas designated Chacahua-Pastoría lagoons as a national park in 1937, but being a protected territory did not save surrounding communities from environmental degradation. Subsequent state efforts to control the lagoons socio-economic development also tended to prioritize the economy over local communities: Zapotalito, Cerro Hermoso, Chacahua, and El Azufre.

State officials began building the waterworks that undermined the integrity of the lagoons in the 1970s. First, a breakwater that officials intended to stabilize the lagoon brought neither fish nor fisherman. Next in 1992, the damming of the Río Verde for irrigation only diminished the locals' access to fresh lagoon water. The following decade, tourist developers added two more breakwaters across the inlet to create a bay to attract visitors, which disconnected the water flow by producing sand dunes in between the lagoon and the ocean. The new bay was never realized and the community of Cerro Hermoso cannot ignore their decreased tourism due to a failed state project.

This infrastructural rive of coastal waterways was compounded by an influx of toxic chemicals from the local oil-crop industries. Without tourism, those industries increasingly produced papaya, lime and coconut in the region, which has accelerated deforestation, erosion, and agrochemical runoff in the area. Moreover, a multinational lime-oil factory some miles away from Zapotalito has been discarding chemical waste directly into the lagoons since the early 2000s. In addition to access, water contamination is now a public health hazard and water sovereignty issue.

Cristina, a Black fisherwoman, said in an interview, "There are days where we don't even earn enough money for food, we come out of the lagoon with nothing, not even with something to eat." The ecocide of Chacahua-Pastoría Lagoons resulting from failed state projects directly undermines locals' principal source of livelihood. With dying lagoons, these communities struggle without fish, proper drinking water, and profits from ecotourism.

Even without consuming chemicals from the lagoon's fish or water, the decaying body of water is an affront to other sensibilities. Touching the water can lead to skin problems, and the smell of rancid and inert water has produced headaches, dizziness, and nausea. Claims of heightened cancer rates also demand further investigation. In a 2018 interview, for example, local fisherman Fernando described an increase in stomach cancer cases in several lagoon communities.



photo by Meztlí Yoalli Rodríguez Aguilera

Since the early 2000s, residents of the Chacahua-Pastoría lagoons have solicited government support to save their lagoons. Locals have sent letters to Mexico City and protested outside of state capitol buildings in Oaxaca de Juárez. They have even successfully reported human rights violations at national and international levels. On the ground, locals act to survive and protect life in their territories. Among other things, they cooperate in mutual aid programs, such as collective cooking for their families, exchanges of food, childcare during fishing trips, and collective community work (tequio). In addition to protesting for state support, locals also want the government to acknowledge and address its environmental racism in Costa Chica in general and in the Chacahua-Pastoría lagoons in particular. Demands for land rights have mounted since the national government began to officially recognize and integrate its Afrodescendientes citizens into the federal constitution in 2019, but, like tourists, environmental justice has yet to arrive to the Costa Chica.

Sitting along the lagoon one summer day in 2018, an Afro-Mixtec woman named Yolanda insisted that, “If we don’t do anything right now about this lagoon, when the children of our community

grow up, there is not going to be anything, Zapotalito will be a ghost town.” Unfortunately, Mexico is not a safe place for environmentalists. Since 2012 alone, over 80 Mexican activists have been murdered protesting infrastructure projects or resource extraction. Many lagoon communities want the right to defend their lands, but they also realize they face a brand of state racialization, which ignores their solutions and disregards threats to their lives.

Amid this ecocide, another Black woman from Zapotalito, Dalia, supports her family by producing batches of coconut oil to use and to sell in the community. She collects and then dries the coconut for days. Pressing the dried coconut into coconut oil takes her 8 to 14 hours depending on the quantity. However, due to her experience, the result is always of the highest quality. To keep up with global demand for coconut oil, the state and developers have invested in modern dry technologies rather than skilled women like Dalia. A better future for these communities demands an environmental justice that highlights more than the presence of these communities, but rather their contribution to Mexico and the contemporary world. ■

<sup>1</sup> Cimarrones have many names across Latin America. In Jamaica they are Maroons; in Brazil they are quilombos; in Colombia and Ecuador, they are palenques.

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Jayson Maurice Porter & Meztlí Yoalli Rodríguez, “On Dying Land: the Afterlife of Toxicity in an Afromexican Community,” Black Perspectives, September 16, 2020, <https://www.aahs.org/on-dying-land-the-afterlife-of-toxicity-in-an-afromexican-community/> •



# From Extractive Agriculture to Industrial Waste Periphery: Life in a Black-Puerto Rican Ecology

by Hilda Lloréns & Carlos G. García-Quijano

or the last two decades, our research has focused on the lives of rural and coastal Puerto Rican families in the predominantly Black/Afro descended southeastern part of the archipelago's large island. Both together and separately, we have studied and witnessed the lived experiences of race, gender, fishing and coastal foraging, migration and return, procuring livelihoods, environmental justice activism, engaging with and resisting capitalism's market forces in Puerto Rico's southeast. In doing so, we have learned that rural Black Puerto Rican residents and the ecosystems where they live share common trajectories and plights in the way they are seen and treated by the elites and neoliberal establishment in the archipelago and beyond. The presence of said neoliberal establishment is concretized in the form of multinational corporations, such as the coal-power plant Applied Energy Systems, whose noxious effects on the human, non-human inhabitants and ecosystem are often hidden to the naked eye but lethally toxic and life-threatening.

*The following is a vignette by Hilda, from her ethnographic fieldwork on July 4th 2018:*

*"I was standing alone on a damaged pier in the Las Mareas Port watching the Sophie Oldendorff, a container ship sailing under Portugal's flag but owned by a German company, unload its cargo, coal from Colombia, into a chute and pipeline system that transports it several hundred feet from the ship to the grounds of Applied Energy Systems coal-power plant. A light breeze was blowing, and the typically unrelenting rays of the southern coastal sun hung high above my head. Looking down between the pier's broken planks, I spot several needlefish in the water beneath me. I took photographs and short videos of the ship, the fish, and this quintessentially Caribbean seaside landscape with a small point and shoot camera aware that the company's security cameras placed strategically throughout the entirety of the complex, were also recording me. I imagined that someone was looking at me through a monitor located in the plant's security control center wondering, "what is that woman doing out here, in this lonely wreck of a port?" I was anxious because I know how unsafe empty, out of the way places can be for a woman by herself in Puerto Rico."*

*"I got in the car and drove the lonely dirt road towards the beach hoping the car didn't get stuck in the sand. This Caribbean Sea lagoon looks like a wilderness,*





-painting by Alissa Uujie Diamond

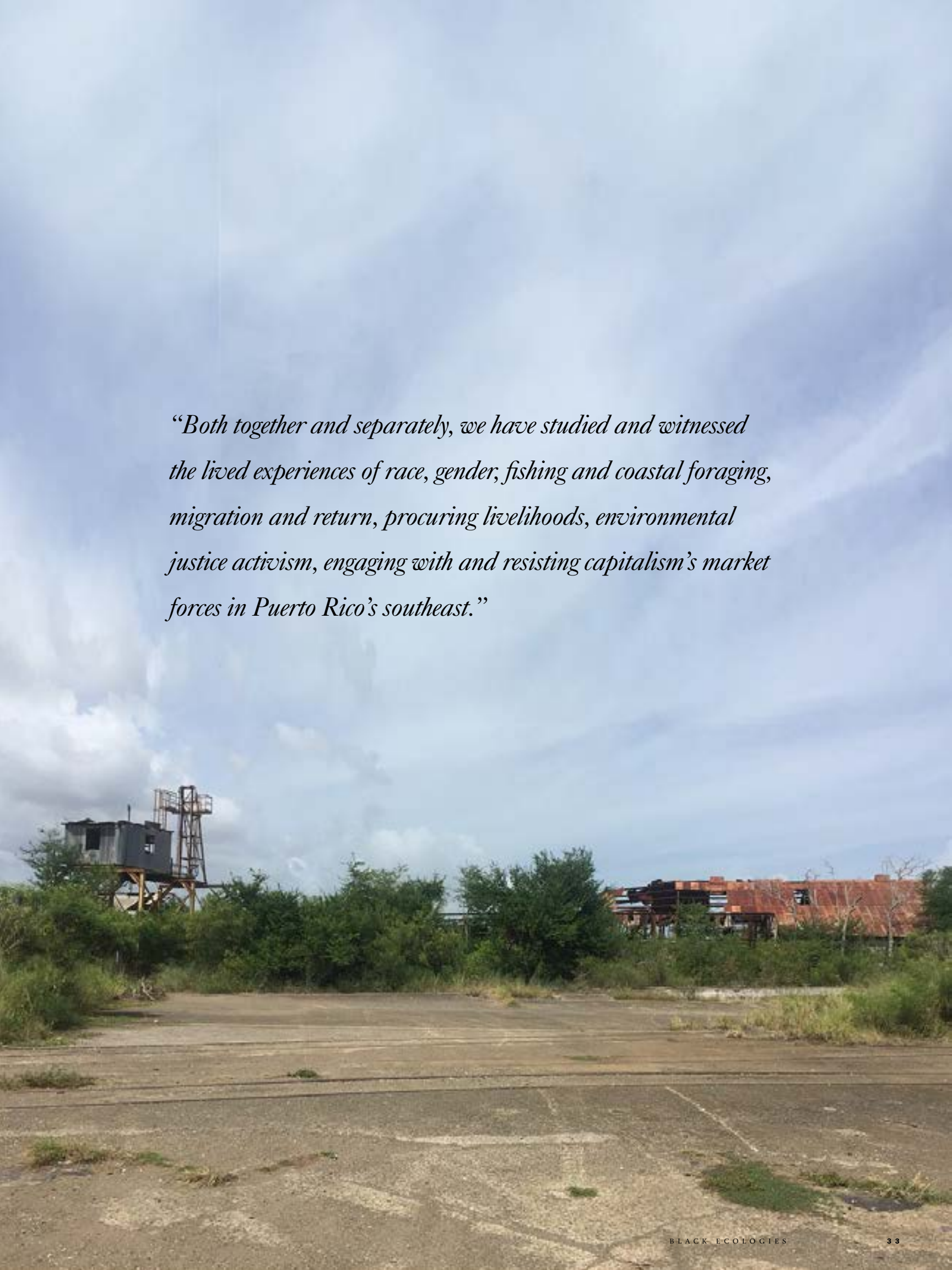
*an untamed rural beach bordered by wetlands and mangrove forests. It is a place known and frequented mainly by locals. Though I am no longer considered a local but rather a member of the diaspora, I remember this place vividly from a childhood spent bathing in its water and foraging for land crabs with my family. I parked the car and walked the rest of the way to the shore. Several stray dogs lift their heads lazily to regard me from their sandy beds. As I neared the water's edge and saw groups of families grilling, listening to music, and children playing in the sand and bathing in the bay's calm waters. In the distance, but right in front of us, I see it: a pile, large enough to drive on, of coal-ash. I pull out my camera and take more photos. I hear when a man nearby, looking in my direction, asks another, 'que estará buscando?' ('what might she be looking for?'). And, I wonder, whether they see it too or if in their view, the coal-ash mountain has become part of the background in this otherwise idyllic tropical coastal landscape? As I stand on 'my ethnographic ground' looking northward from the seaside the view of the verdant central mountain range is encumbered by the AES plant and the toxic waste piled there."*

### **An Extractive Resource Periphery becomes a Black-Puerto Rican Ecology**

After Spanish conquest, the fertile soils and easy access to a calm Caribbean Sea in the southeast coastal plain proved desirable for the development of proto-industrial sugar cane plantations. The southeast region of PR is characterized by both intense heat and desertic-arid conditions to the west, dense forests and steep mountainside to the north, and ocean side ravines to the east. Enslaved Africans, and later, mixed-race indentured laborers, toiled in these plantations and populated what would, with the passing of time, become a predominantly Black cultural zone. The region's wetlands, mangroves, and dense-rural steep mountainsides, considered "uninhabitable" by European settlers at the time, became Black communities where residents lived unencumbered by whites. Historically these undesirable "Black places" became home to fugitive and freed Black people seeking to

make lives away from the harsh constraints of plantation life. In so doing, they sought closeness to "natural" or "wild" spaces/places because a sense of freedom could be found in the density of the steep mountain side or in facing the expansive view of the sea from the shore or from the mangrove lagoon, bordered by a tangle of trees, opening up to a blue sky above. Left to fend for themselves, these "out of the way" places protected residents from the relentless force of Puerto Rico's brand of antiblack racism. During the twentieth century many of these environments became objects of capitalist desire and development, first for industry and later for outdoor leisure, exposing local residents to land grabs, exclusion from coastal access, and other forms of dispossession.

Though enslavement on the island was officially abolished in 1873, plantation agriculture, with its staggering racial and wealth inequalities, continued there until the last half of the twentieth century. At this time the sugar mills began to shutter one by one, leaving thousands of men, sugar cane workers, unemployed, sinking many of their families into extreme poverty. In 1973, the Lafayette Sugar Mill in Arroyo closed its doors, followed, in 1974, by the Central Cortada in Santa Isabel. The Central Aguirre Sugar Mill, largest of all sugar mills in the southeast, limped along citing economic losses until it, too, closed in 1990. The closing of the sugar mills in this region was a catastrophic economic blow from which many families never recovered, and this particularly affected the thousands of cane cutters, many of whom were Afro-descendant, who could not find employment in other sectors of the economy. But sugar mills were a source of pollution and habitat destruction too: there was the burning of wood to boil the sugar cane, and in many cases the charcoal used was made from local mangroves. Spent sugarcane fiber, called bagazo, choked streams and small waterways. Later on, as the mills modernized there were oil spills of various sizes. Particularly important in



*“Both together and separately, we have studied and witnessed the lived experiences of race, gender, fishing and coastal foraging, migration and return, procuring livelihoods, environmental justice activism, engaging with and resisting capitalism’s market forces in Puerto Rico’s southeast.”*

*“Geographic and spatial segregation gave way to the creation and reproduction of Black-Puerto Rican cultural traditions, ways of life, and local ecological knowledge. Many of these were based on more than three hundred years of reliance on fishing and coastal resource foraging.”*

local environmental history were the molasses spills that caused massive fish and shellfish mortality in the bays.

Geographic and spatial segregation gave way to the creation and reproduction of Black-Puerto Rican cultural traditions, ways of life, and local ecological knowledge. Many of these were based on more than three hundred years of reliance on fishing and coastal resource foraging. The histories of hemispheric American maroons and their communities have long captured the academic imagination, but accounts about their counter-hegemonic practices often overlook how their cultural values that developed in these rural-coastal refuges still persist and are practiced today among many of their descendants. These include the cultivation of subsistence agricultural plots, fishing and foraging, using plant and herbs for medicinal purposes, maintaining familial and community networks of sharing, exchange, reciprocity and mutual aid as defense strategy and as alternative livelihoods from wage-labor peonage and debt, the stewardship of non-human animals as well as the local environment, while still eating and drinking from it, and rejection of metropolitan ways of life, politics and values, all systems which were built and passed down intergenerationally. These “maroon” cultural values are not a relic of the past but are still practiced

today in coastal and mountain rural communities throughout Puerto Rico. In the southeast, a rural coast, many inhabitants do not aspire to what they perceived as capitalist and hurried ways of lives of the San Juan metropolis for instance and instead hold definitions of success in life and well-being based on community solidarity and livelihood independence.

#### **Living in an Industrial Waste Periphery**

The archipelago’s mid-twentieth century modernization project sited many of the heavy, large, and contaminating industrial projects in “hinterland” regions far away from San Juan’s metropolis. Across the region, Afro-descendant residents endure high rates of air, water, and land contamination. Without ever consulting or taking into account the people who live from fishing, from mangroves forests, and from growing food in subsistence plots and gardens, in the twentieth-century these low income coastal communities became home to oil refineries (Guayanilla-Peñuelas, Yabucoa, Guayama), energy generating plants (Salinas, Guayama, Peñuelas, Guayanilla), pharmaceutical manufacturers (Guayama, Salinas), and today, there are over 10,000 acres devoted to the development and testing of genetically modified organisms (GMO) seeds and agrochemicals (Guayama, Salinas, Santa Isabel, Juana Diaz). The region’s transition



Antigua Central Coloso, Aquada (Photo: courtesy of Carlos Varela)

from extractive agriculture to a waste periphery occurred while the mainly Black rural-coastal campesinos who live there continued to forage in the mangroves, fish, garden, and build robust mutual aid networks that sustained them through enslavement, brutal agricultural labor, and continued dispossession. These ways of life, which began during enslavement, have persisted, even in the face of episodic migrations to the PR capital or even the continental US.

The mostly Black coastal residents have been left with a conflicted relationship with agricultural and industrial development, both historical and present. On one hand, these activities have provided much of the income available in the region. On the other hand, they represent sites of violence and oppression, both historical and ongoing. Even at their best, they have proven to be unreliable employers, as they are prone to massive layoffs due to downsizing, factory closing,

and relocation of operations in search of tax breaks and cheap labor. When employed, locals tend to be employed at the lowest levels of salary and job security. Entire communities have been relocated to make space for coastal industries, which has impacted the ability of communities to access the coast for fishing. They have also polluted local waters and damaged local habitats. Respiratory health problems are common and at least some of the incidence is attributable to industrial emissions from the power plants sited there. Since the late 1960s, residents have organized to protest against environmental injustice and seek redress. Through continuing to practice their cultural lifeways, such as foraging, fishing, tending gardens, and recreating on these rural coasts, residents continue to resist their displacement, as well as encroachment from coastal gentrifiers. ■

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-image of Zora Neale Hurston by Alissa Uujie Diamond



# On Black Women's Ecologies

by Carlyn Ferrari

*“Oh to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom!”*

Janie Crawford, the protagonist in Zora Neale Hurston's seminal novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, spoke these words as a young Black woman coming of age. This novel is hailed as the quintessential Black feminist text, but Janie's identification with a pear tree also reveals a legacy of Black feminist environmental consciousness, one that invites us to pay attention to Black women's ecologies.

Ideologies about African Americans and their relationship to the environment were being developed at the same time as other racist stereotypes and myths. The pervasive misconception is that Black people have no interest in the natural world and are environmentally apathetic. This sentiment stems from African Americans' traumatic, coerced relationship with the natural world during enslavement that presumably impeded their ability to cultivate an autonomous interest in and connection to the natural world. Both in American society and in the American literary imagination, the natural world is represented as a white space with Black people existing as ecological pariahs and environmental outsiders. However, Black people are deeply, intimately, and historically connected to the environment. Their stories have yet to be told, and their environmental imaginaries have yet to be considered.

This is particularly true of Black women's poetics. New Negro Renaissance women writers often infused their poetry with natural world imagery and consequently faced criticism that their “feminine” writing was raceless and apolitical. Nature is a fitting symbol to articulate and theorize Black women's intersectional oppression because they bear the common scars of colonization and patriarchal white supremacy and capitalism. We need only to look at the writings of such Black women writers as Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Jesmyn Ward, and Dionne Brand to see that there is a rich tradition of Black women articulating their ecological experiences, one that continues into the present.

Scholar Katherine McKittrick, author of *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, underscores the importance of the conceptualization and creation of geographies in understanding Black women's oppression, identifying it as both a source of Black women's knowledge and domination writing, “the category of black woman is intimately connected with past and present spatial organization and that black femininity and black women's humanness are bound up in an ongoing geographic struggle.”

During enslavement, Black women and their bodies were inscribed with oppressive myths and stereotypes, ones that rendered them grotesque

vessels of biological and economic reproduction. Ecofeminists and ecowomanists rightfully caution against women's assumed connection to the land and the conflation between "woman" and "land." Most notably, womanist theologian Delores S. Williams, articulates how the legacies of colonialism are mapped onto Black women's bodies and how Black women, like the land, were colonized and positioned as a natural resource to be exploited. However, for Black women, race, space, and gender are inextricably linked to their lives and knowledge production.

Indeed, the natural world represents a fraught contradiction of beauty and pain for Black people. Black people have been systematically and institutionally denied access to the environment just as they have been excluded and alienated from other facets of American society. Black artists' attention to the natural world, reveals the important representations of trauma in Black literature and culture. In "Strange Fruit," Billie Holiday sings of "Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze/Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees." In *Beloved*, Sethe's "Chokecherry tree" scar on her back is a reminder of the physical abuse she endured during enslavement. The photojournalism project *Without Sanctuary* is a visual testament to the public celebration of lynching and is filled with images of brutally-murdered African Americans hanging from trees. Furthermore, such scholars as Jacqueline Goldsby have called our attention to tropes and histories of trauma via lynching in African American literature, illustrating how nature can be a difficult and dangerous place through which to render Blackness. These are only a few examples of how the natural world functions as a site of trauma within African American literature and history. We should not negate these perspectives, nor should we accept them as the sole narrative.

I will admit that as I write this essay from my New York apartment, I am a nature-loving Black woman who is afraid of going outside.

(Truthfully, amid a nationwide shutdown, there is not anywhere to go.) And I am still reeling from the California wildfires that left my community in ashes. It is ironic – or perhaps fitting – that I would be writing about Black women's ecologies during a pandemic that has caused all of us to reimagine our relationship to space and made us aware of how spatialized our existences are. However, this pandemic is not just a medical issue. It is an environmental issue, too, one that lays bare this country's legacy of environmental racism and renders Black women especially vulnerable.

I opened with Hurston's quote to signal how Black women have reimagined the natural world beyond the lens of trauma. As a Black women's studies scholar, I am interested in the ways that Black women position the natural world as a generative space, a space that allows them to theorize and articulate their lived experiences. This generative perspective allows for an engagement with the natural world that is not rooted in Western Christian notions of dominion that justify human authority and exploitation of the earth—the same notions that also justified enslavement.

Black women's ecologies guide us toward a more restorative relationship with the natural world, one that invites us to understand how environmental issues are Black community issues as well. This framework also enables us to push back against the myth of Black environmental apathy. Black women are—and have been—on the front-lines of climate change and environmental justice issues while the face of these movements remains largely white and male. Foregrounding Black women's ecological materialities is necessary because it is one of the many ways Black women theorize their oppression. And, indeed, "if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free." ■





# In Front of the Water Tower

by Lavinia Jackson

August 26, 2021

he Marsh that feeds us  
Muskrats  
Names the street  
Dotted with Sacred Blackness  
First Baptist  
The only public pool  
Recycled Segregation and packaged it as the middle school  
Leading to planes  
We neither fly nor own  
Exodus  
Wedge between a ball field  
And a nursing home

We battle depression differently  
Layered in undercommons,  
Church basements and empty fields,  
We corral our kin  
Bleeding stories of almost moving,  
Bias, barely making it  
Until we taste nothing but Old Bay  
On steamed crabs.

On Saturdays,  
Respectability relaxes  
Toothlessly smiling  
Gets drunk  
In traditional social ritual  
Dances so the community can see  
Explicit change  
Only needs a gogo beat,

God granted us the serenity of place  
Teachers are deacons  
Deacons are coaches  
teaching  
The sovereign and the contaminated  
Publicly  
Valuing Black bodies  
Celebrating how much bigger we are

Than the remnants of a plantation turned Elastic plant

We are new and clean  
Breathing lung's full of celebration  
Tainted with fecal fertilizer  
Stepping in with canning jars to  
Memorialize our integrity  
When we can't return.  
Anti-Black death isn't a commodity today.  
Black Joy is legal  
Is an invitation  
Down a street  
Where we gathered switches  
Conceiving ourselves  
Creatively  
As a practice  
For generations ■





# Trouble in the Water: Maroon Arrangements of an Insurgent Ecology

by Kathryn Benjamin-Golden

ver the course of three decades following the War of 1812, an enslaved man named Moses Grandy labored in several maritime trades throughout Tidewater Virginia and North Carolina. As a young man in his 20s, he ran boats up and down the Dismal Swamp Canal – a 22-mile-long passage running through dense cypress and cedar rich swamp. The canal had been built between 1793 and 1805, an outcome of the grueling forced labor of enslaved men and boys, who waded through deep mire and mud to hand cut and dig it into the service of the plantation economy. While working in the swamp, Moses hauled shingles or wood boards onto lighter boats he steered to transport the staves and lumber out of the Great Dismal Swamp, and into domestic and foreign markets. He also operated a river ferry in Camden County, North Carolina, and captained boats and barges moving exports by way of rivers and canals to harbors at Norfolk and Portsmouth in Virginia, and to the wharves of Elizabeth City and South Mills in North Carolina.

opposite page: Dismal Swamp Canal at South Mills, North Carolina

Shingle getting, as it was called – or the cutting down and gathering of the swamp’s naturally abundant cedar (juniper), gum, cypress, and pine trees – was the principal industry companies and local elites could extract from the swamp moving into the nineteenth century. This work was predominately carried out by enslaved labor, and men like Moses would have lightered millions of shingles across the canals to reach nearby ports in their lifetimes. Shingles were a staple in the construction of buildings and homesteads that comprised local townships, and by the mid-nineteenth century, shingles from the Dismal Swamp region had become a leading source of the nation’s supply.

Of course, the profitability of such a lucrative extractive economy overwhelmingly benefited companies of white men, their families, and enslavers, and this at the expense of both the natural environment and enslaved people forced to labor in the swamp’s timber camps, feeder ditches, and canals. Companies like the Campania Company, the Lebanon Company, and the Dismal Swamp Land Company claimed thousands of acres of swamp in their eagerness to drain and develop it for easier transportation, since the export of shingles and staves was dependent on navigable waterways. And while the completion of each canal imperiled the swampland to face further exploitation and harm, it also imperiled the lives of Black people brought there as captives. Moses attested to the severity of canal building and shingle getting when he recalled the difficulty of swamp laborers to “keep their heads above water” as they struggled to cut away roots and dig out mud, as they were commonly flogged and brined as a result of failing to accomplish the previous day’s task, or as a result of frequent suspicions that they were plotting to run away.<sup>1</sup> The swamp, then, was of value to the enslaving class only so long as it could be controlled as a space of extractable resources and exploitable labor. From this vantage, the swamp signaled a space of ecological domination inextricable from the domination of humans of African descent.

But the Dismal Swamp held competing meaning composed by enslaved people whose designs and movements throughout its vast recesses transformed it into a “rival geography,” and one that both overlapped and transgressed the interests, ideals, and authority of slaveholders and the broader landscape of capitalist exploitation.<sup>2</sup> Black environmental knowledge – deep understanding of, and even soul connectedness to ways out: the

roads, paths, creeks, swamps, rivers, and woods – comprised the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual building blocks of an insurgent ecology. These were the natural routes and refuges that enslaved people and the maroons they became valued as spaces of fleeting or permanent escape. The waterways and forested swamps were opportunities to construct alternative lives of perpetual evasion and sociality against captivity, exclusion, and premature death. For people of African descent ensnared in the Tidewater’s slaveholding, capitalist societies that rendered them expendable laboring property, or else subjects of “two zones of death – social and corporeal,” the swampscape invited insurgent imaginings of social life and possibility where it was otherwise not meant to exist.<sup>3</sup> It provided the means to make elsewhere not merely a state of mind, but a tangible and material space of home and belonging outside of and in conflict with the terrain of captivity. Even as thousands of enslaved people were forced to labor in the swamp’s extractive economy leading up to the Civil War, and even as some maroons did work illicitly and voluntarily as shingle getters in the swamp in exchange for victuals and other precious resources, thousands of other Black women, men, and children chose to arrange the swamp in the defense of their will to exist outside of the predicaments of coerced labor and bondage.<sup>4</sup> These fugitive decisions to choose life in the wilderness, as opposed to lives of death in the plantation world, should be interpreted as deliberate and strategic political acts in the formation of a rivaling insurgent ecology.

As someone who experienced this shifting arrangement of ecological significance, Moses Grandy understood that the Dismal Swamp was contested ground. As a child, his mother took flight into the swampy woods that encroached upon their enslaver’s home at the swamp borderlands, escaping with him and his young siblings in tow. Moses recalled that when he and his siblings were thirsty while lying out for “a time,” their mother sought water “in any hole or puddle formed by falling trees or otherwise.” He described the water there as being “often full of tadpoles and insects,” to which his mother “strained [it], and gave it round to each of us in the hollow of her hand. For food, she gathered berries in the woods, got potatoes, raw corn, &c.”<sup>5</sup> Providing her children with sustenance, love, and protection by way of the swamp’s ecological offerings, Moses’ mother had also provided them a crucial lesson: the swampland itself could be utilized to withdraw from the



Shallow swamp floor, Great Dismal Swamp at Gates County, North Carolina. (Source: Author's Photo Collection, 2013).

plantation world just as it could be a place, that through their own ingenuity, could fundamentally disrupt slaveholding power.

Such fugitive, insurgent knowledge possessed by enslaved and maroon communities throughout this Tidewater region certainly had a home in the ecological life force of the two thousand square mile Dismal Swamp. Enslavers unquestionably sensed this and feared their powerlessness in the presence of the foreboding swamp. With frustrated pens, they noted the indestructibility of the swamp's ecology — an indestructibility that matched that of its maroon inhabitants' wills to live freely. One 1805 account, for example, described the swamp as being "scarcely possible to pass through," for "the foot, at every step, sinks not less than twelve or fifteen inches deep into the soil. The trees... grow very thick together... and composed of such tenacious, perplexing, and thorny wood... the flesh wounded and torn at every point, and a path only to be made by the incessant use of the hatchet." The author concluded that "no condition on the earth's surface [was] more wild and irreclaimable than this." <sup>6</sup>Another account described it as "closely intermixed with a matted body of strong fibrous roots, vines, and vegetative productions everywhere," it's "dark and dreary shade altogether impervious to the rays of the sun," a place where "no noise, clamour, or hallooing... can be heard," save for the unending raucous of

insects, reptiles, and the constant rustling of jungle-like vegetation. Unless tamed and controlled, the swamp was repeatedly described as dreadful, dangerous, and unsuitable for human habitation. The real peril of the swamp, however, was Black people's concealable movement in, and knowledge of such an untamable place. The real peril was the realization that these very ecological attributes were especially useful for executing and devising Black people's safety and independent interests — interests that worked against the exploitation of both the subaltern and the natural world. Moreover, practiced and studied maroon mobility, subversive survival against bondage or death, and social life in the swamp did not only represent a loss of labor and economic power, it also directly threatened the supremacy of precarious white social power.

Maroons in the Dismal Swamp walked, ran, slept, played music, sang, gave birth, buried the dead, prayed, laughed openly, gardened, hunted, fished, cooked, practiced medicine, and advanced insurgent plans in the great morass. Maroon women and men made use of the swamp's boggy and dense forests, low-hanging branches, and vines as both a cover for bodily concealment and protection, and as a source and shelter of Black sociality — forbidden community exchange and lifeways that were only possible through fugitivity.<sup>8</sup> Maroon



The interior Dismal Swamp in Gates County, North Carolina.

subsistence and self-sustenance was dependent upon the swamp's rich wildlife, teeming as it was with raccoon, deer, possum, duck, partridges, pheasant, fish, muskrats, frogs, turtles and snakes. Maroons raised rice, grain, and other vegetation natural to the swamp, and grew corn and potatoes on the drier patches not perpetually flooded and under water. Moses Grandy recalled a "strong weed" that grew wild throughout the swampland called the Oak of Jerusalem, used to treat fevers, intestinal worms, and muscle spasms.<sup>9</sup> Juniper bark and roots, saturated as they were in swamp water, also produced a protective tonic against malaria. One rare account of maroon life, recorded by two Norfolk merchants there to transport clapboards and shingles out of the swamp, described "a negroe man ran away from his Master" who for 13 years in the swamp had "rais'd Rice & other grain & made Chairs Tables &c. & musical instruments" — the latter of which were likely made from the very juniper, cypress, gum, or pine trees the merchants sought to exploit as capital.<sup>10</sup> Maroons, conversely,

arranged and rearranged the swamp's natural resources toward emancipatory, and thus, fugitive ends: maroon knowledge of the swamp's healing properties afforded Black mutual aid against death and recapture, just as the sharing of food and supplies procured in the swamp provided the very "currency for forms of insurgent Black social life."<sup>11</sup>

Maroons also arranged the insurgent ecology by invigorating the swamp as a retreat for secreting information, harboring active plotting and planning, concealing weapons, and physically encouraging the organization of attacks and rebellion against slaveholding society. One group of maroons, who had "for a long time been depredating upon the property of the good citizens of" Edenton, North Carolina, were discovered to have been living in the swamp outskirts "in a hollow gum, sufficiently large to contain six persons with much comfort." One of these maroons, "commonly called Jack Stump," died in an exchange of gunfire, but not before "he

fired twice, and was in the act of loading again.”<sup>12</sup> Alternative use of the swamp ecology included enslaved and maroon rebels who hid at least fifteen guns and ammunition “in the wood on the swamp” as they consorted in the dense swamp to strategize the Easter Rebellion of 1802, to liberate the state.<sup>13</sup> Another group of maroons, captained by a male leader alongside an “old woman,” was described by the *Norfolk Herald* as “all armed and officered,” having “[gone] about committing the most atrocious outrages and depredations on persons and property” in and out of the backwoods behind Black Water, Princess Anne County, Virginia — the northeastern edge of the Dismal Swamp.

Enslaved people and the maroons they became made the Dismal Swamp a source of trouble for dominant plans of capture and exploitation. Maroon pathways through the insurgent ecology constructed and sustained an alternative world of competing meaning and purpose of the swampland. Maroon knowledge of the natural environment of the swamp, refusal to toil as captive laborers, and boldened resistance practices including armed evasion and defense transformed the

forested morass into an ecosystem that nurtured Black autonomous life, security, and wellness. This liberatory re-spatialization of the swamp was an insurgency against systemic Black death, domination, and capitalist exploitation.

Today, the surviving Dismal Swamp remains alive with this insurgent energy as local descendants of maroons and the enslaved continue to hunt there, trap there, fish there, collect turtle shells to make toys for their children, and make spiritual sojourns to connect with ancestors and the “sacred” swampland. Against recently cancelled plans to construct a natural gas Atlantic Coast Pipeline that would have run through the northwest edge of the swamp, and against an ongoing lack of public facing historical recognition of Black people’s diverse relationships to the swampland, descendants continue to fight to protect the swamp from further development, and work to keep alive community memory of those who rejected and defied both enslavement and the swamp’s destruction in the years before the Civil War.<sup>14</sup> ■

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<sup>1</sup> Moses Grandy, “Narrative of Moses Grandy,” in *North Carolina Slave Narratives: The Lives of Moses Roper, Lunsford Lane, Moses Grandy, & Thomas H. Jones* (Moses Grandy, edited by William L. Andrews (University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 26 (June, 2008): 12. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on the illicit economy of “petit” maroons in tandem with the industrialization of the Dismal Swamp, see Marcus Nevius, *City of Refuge: Slavery and Petit Marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp, 1763-1856* (2020).

<sup>5</sup> Grandy, “Narrative of Moses Grandy,” 159.

<sup>6</sup> “Some Account of the Great Dismal Swamp,” *The Literary Magazine and American Register* Vol. III, no. 18, (March 1805), 170.

<sup>7</sup> John D. Smyth, “A Tour in the United States of America: Containing an Account of the Present Situation in that Country; The Population, Agriculture, Commerce...” (1784) Vol 2., 64, 147-148.

<sup>8</sup> Works by Fred Moten, Tina Campt, and Saidiya Hartman have suggested that fugitivity provides a useful theoretical framework for considering possibilities for Black sociality in the midst of capture, social death, and ongoing anti-Blackness, and that Black social life is itself necessarily fugitive. Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, 2 (2009): 177-218. Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham, ND: Duke University Press, 2012). Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Moses Grandy, 170.

<sup>10</sup> William Aitchison and James Parker, Account Book, 1763-1804 (Original unpublished manuscript is housed at Bookpress Ltd., Williamsburg, Virginia), 51.

<sup>11</sup> JT Roane, “Plotting the Black Commons,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society* 20, 3 (2018): 247.

<sup>12</sup> *The Edenton Gazette*, March 2, 1819.

<sup>13</sup> Bertie County Slave Collection, 1802 Conspiracy, North Carolina State Archives.



# And To Mud You Shall Return

by Arielle John

Church women say how  
three in the morning is devil time, and  
Christ did dead three in the afternoon, Good Friday,  
And in the versus battle of light and dark,  
the early hours before  
the Sun rises again after its death,  
is time so for horned gods with  
long teeth, unmanicured nails and heavy hooves  
to do their work behind the curtain of a dozed village.

We leave the capital in a four-wheel drive,  
my friend finds the shrine without a map.  
The neighbors here must all be in the yard too.  
Sleep impossible, as the drums talk all  
the way through the forest, spouting onto the main road.  
Rain fell some hours before and the muddy track  
here, eating the shoes of the well-dressed aunts,  
hiked up linen skirts and using their phones for flashlights,  
half-awake children taken up in arms by the men,  
until the line of candles do their ushering work,  
from the slushy end of the compound  
to the heap of shoes near the entrance.

The shrine already sweaty with visitation,  
cutting in the middle of the music to give messages.  
Palm oil on the threshold,  
where you will slip if you are not careful,  
especially when barefoot.  
The lead singer already telling people  
how much louder they must sing,  
call the rest of the spirits in,  
not because they cannot hear  
how deep the songs carve themselves  
into the dewy breeze,  
but to show how eager we are to cross  
the threshold of this world,  
slip into theirs. The mothers already sitting

with their babies asleep on wide laps,  
drummers already swapping  
instruments between chants,  
my arms already frustrated at how  
rude it would be to fold them.

Osain, the Orisha of herbs  
and healing gets his songs next.  
One of many broad-backed men  
rolls another in on  
a wheelchair from the tent outside.  
I think of how we always look out for us.  
Say if one of your gods has one hand and one foot,  
then you do not shape a yard with steps.  
Them escarpments so is for big churches  
and other places without ramp access  
or contact with their preferred God.  
The house of worship here has always been  
flat-floored on the open earth.

Osain comes and says there is a time coming  
that we must prepare for.  
Shakpana closer to sunrise says  
there is a season of sickness,  
visiting the earth. Says we must return  
to the ciphers of the soil.  
Osain touches the forehead  
of the man on the wheelchair  
For a blessing, and the man does  
not get up and walk or dance.  
And who is to say he is not healed?  
The drums pick back up  
and the immortelle trees rattle  
in the early morning gusts.  
Roosters lull all the people  
back to their own doorposts,  
dust on their tired feet. ■





# The Commodification of Black Resistance and Black Death in the Revolutionary Era Chesapeake Bay

by Adam McNeil

uring the American Revolution, Black Virginians' survival and resistance efforts rested on how they manipulated their positioning along or near the Chesapeake Bay's intricate waterways. Throughout the war, controlling the Bay's revolutionary potential became a monumental power struggle between the enslaved and enslavers. The enslaved used the Bay's marshes, swamps, woods, and rivers to challenge the institution of slavery as enslavers sought to impede their revolutionary freedom dreams. Ultimately, the Bay's ecology served as a major staging ground for this violent struggle over Black freedom and the commodification of Black people's bodies, minds, and souls, even in death.

From the Revolution's earliest moments, Black Virginians tapped into the insurgent ecological potential of the Bay.<sup>1</sup> On April 14, 1776, nearly ninety enslaved women, men, and children challenged the authority of their enslaver, John Willoughby, by escaping in mass to the marauding British ship, *Norfolk*, near Willoughby's Point, off the coast of Norfolk, Virginia. This unprecedented collection of twenty-one women, twenty-three girls, twenty-seven boys, and sixteen men formed a mass group of Black refugees that found sanctuary on the ship of Virginia's last royal governor, Lord Dunmore. Dunmore's presence in their area of Norfolk hastened their escape due to his proclamation

from the previous year that famously freed "all *indentured servants, Negroes, or others* (appertaining to Rebels) *free*, that are able and willing to bear arms, they *joining his Majesty's troops*."<sup>2</sup> Many of the runaways fleeing toward him would have known that Dunmore armed Black men in battle against their enslavers during the nearby Battle of Great Bridge a few months earlier.<sup>3</sup>

John Willoughby, on the other hand, did not welcome Dunmore's presence. Willoughby did not accept being deprived of enslaved laborers worth hundreds if not thousands of pounds without a fight. He took his plight to Virginia's Patriot courts. Virginia's General Assembly allowed enslavers like John Willoughby the opportunity to seek compensation for runaways that successfully escaped during the war or died while laboring for the commonwealth. In this case, if Willoughby proved his case well enough, he stood to profit from Black resistance. In his claim, Willoughby blamed local public safety officials for providing cover for his enslaved laborer's escape when he insisted the enslaved freed themselves when "rather than be removed deserted and went on board Lord Dunmore's Fleet."<sup>4</sup> To accomplish this monumental feat, the enslaved relied on a sophisticated communication network to ensure their escape plan did not become known to Willoughby.

<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Benjamin Golden, "Armed in the Great Swamp": Fear, Maroon Insurrection, and the Insurgent Ecology of the Great Dismal Swamp." *The Journal of African American History* 106, no. 1 (2021): 1–26.

<sup>2</sup> "Lord Dunmore's Proclamation," *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser*, December 6, 1775

<sup>3</sup> Woody Holton, *Liberty is Sweet: The Hidden History of the American Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 202–205.

<sup>4</sup> John Willoughby, Jr.'s Petition for Reparations, Legislative Petitions of the General Assembly, 1776–1865, Accession Number 36121, Box 181, Folder 4, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

Black insurgents that challenged the local and regional social order during the war faced an uphill battle to win their freedom. Most Black insurgents did not experience the same fate as the group of John Willoughby's formerly enslaved laborers. Rather, a significant number of Black freedom-seekers perished not from a bullet discharged in the heat of war, but from the unmitigated disease it allowed to run rampant. In particular, smallpox killed many Black freedom-seekers in British refugee camps like Dunmore's on Gwynn Island, Virginia. One eyewitness recounted seeing the gruesome scene of a child "sucking at the breast of its dead mother" and "others endeavoring to crawl away from the intolerable stench of dead bodies lying on the sides."<sup>5</sup> Surviving behind British lines meant being lucky enough to either not contract smallpox or any other debilitating disease, or outlasting the disease after contracting it.

Disease also played a role in Black survival attempts in the Tidewater at war's end during the fateful Battle of Yorktown five years later. As the Revolution's decisive battle neared completion, British military commander Lord Cornwallis decided to deport countless Black refugees out of British lines and forcefully disbarred runaways that yearned to (re)join them to blunt the spread of potential disease. In particular, one patriot soldier remembered seeing sickly refugees "with pieces of ears of burnt Indian corn in the hands and mouths, even of those that were dead."

<sup>6</sup>Refugees still alive at the battle's end encountered blood-thirsty enslavers and whites attempting to financially benefit from Black people's vulnerability outside of British lines. Enslavers pleaded to patriot forces for an opportunity to purchase refugees and runaways made vulnerable

to capture.<sup>7</sup> During this moment, the ecology of Chesapeake Bay's watershed served as a springboard for a colossal tug of war over freedom and unfreedom between the enslaved and those hell bent on depriving them of their liberty.

The Chesapeake's waterways provided enslaved people both the means to escape labor exploitation and the means for their enslavers to weaponize their labor in service of the patriot cause, even in death. On June 15, 1776, Lucretia Pritchett petitioned Virginia's Patriot legislature seeking reparations for Minny, the recently killed enslaved pilot she loaned to Virginia's Navy. Pritchett declared that Minny "voluntarily entered himself on board a vessel commanded by Mr. Hugh Walker." Pritchett painted Minny as a sympathetic and patriotic character, different from the supposedly villainous Black people that joined Dunmore by emphasizing how "bravely and successfully" Minny "exerted himself against the enemy, until he was unfortunately killed."<sup>9</sup> Pritchett probably thought she could strengthen her claim by placing Minny's maritime exploits within a patriotic frame and show her dutifulness to the patriot cause.

Lucretia Pritchett learned how the Virginia Convention perceived Minny's supposedly patriotic efforts thirteen days later. On June 28, 1776, the Virginia Assembly awarded her one hundred pounds for Minny's "uncommon bravery in an engagement with a piratical [sic] tender," when he "was killed by the enemy."<sup>10</sup> Minny's maritime labor expertise and death while supposedly serving the patriot cause personifies what historian Daina Ramey Berry calls "ghost values," or "the price tag affixed to deceased enslaved bodies in postmortem legal contestation."

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<sup>5</sup> Virginia Gazette, July 20, 1776.

<sup>6</sup> James Kirby Martin, *Ordinary Courage: The Revolutionary War Adventures of Joseph Plumb Martin* (John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2012), 153-54

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Saturday June 15, 1776, "The Proceedings of the Convention of Delegates for the Counties and Corporations in the Colony of Virginia (Ritchie, Trueheart & DuVal, (reprint) printers, 1816), 165.

<sup>11</sup>Ultimately, Minny's death became profitable to his former enslaver and provided her the means to purchase another enslaved pilot capable of performing the same duties as Minny. We do not know whether Minny intended to join Virginia's Navy but we do know that other enslaved people during the same period used their experiences laboring for the patriots as a rhetorical strategy in their freedom claims. Around the same time nearly ninety enslaved people fled to Dunmore's fleet, an enslaved man named Aberdeen showed that not all Black Virginians saw Dunmore as a liberator. Defying his enslaver's orders to join him on one of Dunmore's ships in Norfolk in 1776, Aberdeen decided to offer his services to a patriot militiaman. In the process of this act, another patriot abducted and deported Aberdeen hundreds of miles west into Virginia's frontier to serve as a lead miner for the balance of the war.

Instead of succumbing to the death that met many enslaved people engaged in lead mining, Aberdeen lived long enough to petition Virginia's General Assembly in late 1783. Aberdeen attempted to show Virginia legislators that the seven years he endangered himself while serving at the Chiswell lead mines aided their cause by showing that he defied his loyalist enslaver and chose to aid the patriot cause. Which ironically resulted in being deported to Chiswell. For his service, Aberdeen pleaded that "your Honourable House will give him his freedom."<sup>12</sup> In the end, Aberdeen received his wish. On behalf of his "public service at the lead mines, and for

his meritorious services, the General Assembly awarded Aberdeen his freedom.<sup>13</sup>

One of the most unfortunate aspects of Aberdeen's petition is that his captors forced him into an ecologically destructive relationship with the earth which in turn, laid the foundation for his later freedom claim. Aberdeen's relationship to statecraft provided him the impetus to petition Virginia's General Assembly. As a result, Aberdeen's freedom claim predicated on going against anti-colonial Black ecologies and writing with "settler colonial ideologies of ecological degradation, extraction, and accumulation."<sup>14</sup> Aberdeen's labor and subsequent freedom claim forced him into an entangled relationship with statecraft and extractive economies that taxed the earth. Both features are central to my understanding of how liberal constructions of freedom forced Black people into destructive relationships with swamps, woods, and marine landscapes.

Although the service that granted his freedom occurred hundreds of miles into Virginia's interior, Aberdeen, and countless others during the war, mapped new possibilities for their lives that both challenged and aligned with empire and colonial power regimes. Ultimately, the Revolution presaged an enduring complicated relationship between Black communities founded in slavery and the land and waterscapes that both confined and provided refuge for Black freedom dreams. ■

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, "Friday, June 28, 1776," 183.

<sup>11</sup> Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Petition of Aberdeen, Montgomery County, Va., November 5, 1783, Folder 12, Box 171, Legislative Petitions.

<sup>13</sup> An act directing the emancipation of certain slaves who have served as soldiers in this state, and for the emancipation of the slave Aberdeen." (October 20, 1783). <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/an-act-directing-the-emancipation-of-certain-slaves-who-have-served-as-soldiers-in-this-state-and-for-the-emancipation-of-the-slave-aberdeen-october-20-1783/>

<sup>14</sup> Justin Hosbey and J.T. Roane, "A Totally Different Form of Living: On the Legacies of Displacement and Marronage as Black Ecologies." *SouthernCultures* 27, no. 1 (2021): 70. *Gale Literature Resource Center* (accessed January 11, 2022). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A663880863/LitRC?u=new67449&sid=bookmark-LitRC&xid=94ca286d>



# Honoring Tappahannock historian and writer, Mrs. Lillian H. McGuire

The book, *Uprooted And Transplanted: From Africa To America; Focus On African-Americans In Essex County, Virginia; Oppressions-Achievements-Contributions; The 1600s-1900s*, authored by Mrs. Lillian H. McGuire of Tappahannock Virginia, was initially published by Vantage Press of New York, New York, with a publishing release date of March 3, 2000. Since that time, Mrs. McGuire's writing contributions have remained fluent. The following notations reflect some of the contributions to the effort to promote and preserve African-American history since the publishing of her signature book in the year 2000:

- Mrs. McGuire has written an additional two books since the publishing of her book, thus bringing her total number of books written to five. One of the additional books, is the genealogy of her family, titled *Roots and Branches*, and covers seven generations beginning in the mid-1800s. The book was researched and written in 2005.
- Through the past twenty-one years, Mrs. McGuire has been a contributing guest-writer for numerous magazines and books authored by others, including the book of *The Dictionary of Virginia Biographies*, published by The Library of Virginia in the year 2006. Her entry was the biography of a former Essex County slave who became a shoemaker and climbed to the height of leader of the Essex County Grand Jury, later elected to the General Assembly of Virginia for two terms.
- As a contributing guest-writer, Mrs. McGuire has had poetry published through various books including 1) *Poets of the Heartland* published by Famous Poets Press in Talent, Oregon 2) *Twilight Musings* published by The International Library of Poetry in Owings Mills, Maryland in 2005 3) *Songs of Honour* published by Noble House Publishers in New York, New York in 2006 and 4) *The International Who's Who in Poetry*, also published by the International Library of Poetry in Owings Mills, Maryland in 2007.
- Between the years of 2004 and 2009, Mrs. McGuire has been honored with the publishing of her biography in the following Marquis publications: *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who of American Women*, and *Who's Who in the World*. In the year 2010, she was honored with the presentation of the History Preservation Award by the Essex County Museum and Historical Society, and she was presented a plaque of recognition by the International Biographical Center of Cambridge, England in the year 2015.
- In the year 2009, Mrs. McGuire became the Curator of the First Baptist Church's "Gallery of History." The Gallery is located in the lower level of the church and displays pictures, artifacts and relics of the church from its beginning in 1867 through the present time. ■

*And through it all, her motto remains "To know one's history is to know one's self."*



# Fishtail from *The Boy beside the Woods:* *A Childhood in Essex County*

by Larry D. Giles

But as water or even the sky, I often wondered why my grandfather never went to the river. Or going over the hill through a patch of briars, as if remembering, he would suddenly turn back. Though the river was only a few miles from my grandparents' farmhouse, mostly no one I knew went. Not the men at my great-aunt's store. Not any of my mother's people. Maybe not even the fish man red and dry as a rag.

Dragging behind the tailgate of the beat up truck not bothered on helping, the old waterman stood in the yard in a sudden tailwind of leftover odors. And though my grandfather, a praying man with steady hands, bought a few of the freshest for reasons I didn't exactly know, all week we ate looking across the field with few words as if something was missing. And the brim or carp, which perhaps a time or two had been bright, then also sometimes smelled.

They smelled both before we ate them and after, and sometimes a few days after that, surviving just a little like a life you wanted to remember but for the life of you couldn't. Scaling them at the well, grandmother said they had turned out to be a right nice mess, but would be even better with the right pinch of pepper and salt, something we often didn't have enough of. (We borrowed from our neighbors.) You take your medicine, she asked. Still got the breath of life in me even when they gon' away from here, she added as an afterthought. My grandfather's farmhouse was the end of his route.

I don't know if the fish man, whom she said was a kind of throw back from a family of well off siblings, always got them on time either. In the icy well water where Grandmother's hand could as well been a wand or oar, sometimes a tail moved, sometimes a colored eye looked back. Other times, even with the hay fever and divorce that kept me quiet and runny-eyed, I could see there was no sign of life or death. Her hand moved anyway, the guts oozing, flipping with a hopeless kind of gurgle. And out of nowhere, Collie, not then afraid of bones and scales, spun quickly. Suddenly retrieved them, barking with a half muffled gulp.

A little listless and looking a lot like she could have been the white fish man's sister, the drunk woman down the hill went to what was left of the swamp I think or somewhere behind her shack, her husband when he was not threatening her with a fistful of hooks went somewhere, too. For a string of perch, even the bottom feeders with the whiskers if he should be so lucky. But I don't think it was the river.

Slowly mashed into the hoecake of his hat, he would walk through the straggly locusts up the high sandy gate to the porch where we sat in the shade, his smoky, cigar lips turning themselves into the half-lighted shadows of long, uncast lines.

Got quite a batch today, Granddaddy would say, drawing with his stick in the unwatered yard, just to say something. Guess you gone slip me 'n



Sugie a quarter's worth. My oldest home from the service. He always like anything I catch. Grabbing the foot tub, his wife, scraggy as a switch or bag of old lures, had placed water and a few chinkles of ice on the sobbing boards. Halfway foaming at the mouth, the man, who had been kind of my grandfather's friend, was tired from the journey and groaned like two fishing sticks untangled from one another. Ar--ar--not-- today, Unc' Willie, ma' hole neb 'bout don' dried up. I went 'round dare and stole 'n. Hope they don't put me off yonder somewhere. I think he was speaking of the place they say Corn Puddin' went for stealing a chicken out of Fred Sampson's coop and also the run-off of the swamp, the then shallow black hole that gaped behind him out beyond the porch then trickled down through the dark woods. Beside the dangling porch, we were so close to the shrinking hole I thought we might fall in.

Dried up from the long, white summer, the fields that had come up slack, the wife had become a sack of straw or brown bean husks that were haunting the air without her wanting them to and the hooch she, and I guess one of my uncles too, had had up the hill wasn't helping. Down from

the porch, she struggled with the white enamel pan she was offering. I think she could tell her husband was his old self, not the glossy young teen she remembered asking her grandmamma for her hand in his one white shirt. The long, slow thrash from all sides where there should have been freedom and hope was more than she wanted to remember, but it stirred anyhow, in the wandering air somewhere between here and there. The Depression my father often spoke of when there were no shoes. The long war, maybe my eldest uncle barely missed but also kept fighting. The yellow Jim Crow trip to nowhere.

Not much of a talker if short on hooch, she didn't know the word or color, only the twinge of the nigger smell she could sometimes roll around like the words of a ghost between her red, parched lips. The parts of their life that had no name and were not in books, where the water dripped reluctantly under rusty hooks and chains and poked into the sides and knotty groins of banks already sucked dry. Skin retracted and singular, a fire barely teeming under an old, rusty pan of hope. If she turned her slack hips in her breeches to think, maybe she still loved him. Woman, put on some

clothes, he said. And for God's sake, fix dat hair, he added, slipping the blade into the soft white belly.

Alone, even more thin and scarce, the woman who looked like one of the Indian women I had seen in books pulled a chair out near the tub for the fisherman to marvel from, which he quickly jerked from her tattered reach and placed where he wanted on the ground. He didn't marvel, and I think she had a taste for something that could be comfortable along unkept oceans and, if she wished, reach all the way to the bottom where things grew freely. Up on the boards above a singular fern wanting to beautify the porch, one of the dead fish managed to move in the chilly water.

A shadow of trees, the boy swam out. Barely big enough for his cut-off pants, his clean, yellow abdomen floated sleepily from a back room, a corner or shallow maybe, the house that wasn't more than two rooms with channels that were slack and tattered as traps barely hanging on to the rising above the receding pool of the swamp. Not able to exactly look at either one of his parents, he blurted, Mar-mar-ma, can I go. Then with one last hope, wiped his mouth, that had also somehow hung onto a crumb.

They took him from his mar-mar, Grandmamma had said bent over the rack of the large tub. Maybe something happened to her, I forgit. A lot of things jist happen, you know. It's been so long, you forgits what might be ailin' ya'. My grandmother thumped against the old rack, needing more water and Oxydol to remove all the dirt from the fields grandfather sharecropped. I, I think, she went off somewhere, I reckon. Nothing for you or Collie to think on, child. Maybe somebody took her. Was right much takin' back then, and right much commotion. Been there since he was a teensy little minnow thing. Look just like her, though, and me, too, if you don't reckon. She was kind of laughing, but I felt the descent into a place that was shallow. The boy looking from the porch into the pool below. Barely big enough to hold onto the long, thin railing his father had skint bare.

Looking a little like me and his father, the boy still had guts. But the guts were stuffed in near his father, the big man who had shrunk. Dis the last day you kin go, the boy managed to anyone listening. That man from the old big house on the back road done bought up the place. I want to go, I gotta go, the boy again insisted still more telling my grandfather than the man in the pillaged hat. The size of a once ripe melon, the boy's face had shrunk somewhat into an empty bowl, and his father nor the drunk woman or my grandfather would put anything in. My grandfather drew a large circle of something but was slow to put his foot in. And if he did, he would have to tip. Somewhat absent myself because my eye itched, I felt the dry air against my jaw, a reluctant brine of salt and heat and sand wrenched out of many places in the earth, places which then held no light. Not sick that day and tagging behind my aunt in her new cut-off pants with a bathing suit on top, the young uncle home from service, I felt the release of the water as it pushed between my toes, the sounds of clean Black women laughing like before cool jungles and men touching them around their Sphinx-like necks. Barefoot, a boy was fishing way, way down the brown shore. Some of the women, maybe mothers, with long black elbows that rested on ledges looking out into forever. The air before the beach restaurant was going in and coming out like something new was breathing, and the women's bracelets glittered in the river sun, the brown, full lips of their husky lovers pursed possibly.

A little after my parents separated and I stayed a lot with my grandparents, I had gone once with my uncle when the tide had stretched out, the shells of many things shiny and fresh and glowing for picking, even if you weren't happy. Down from a floating cloud, I found, a big-eyed lady said, an arrowhead and later the tooth of a shark under my knee. I kept them whole and soft in my hand. Water between my toes, I was almost forgetting my mother lived in another house, my father's long trench coat blown away in the wind. If only for a moment, I was forgetting I didn't know where my little brother was and maybe he did not even

like me, and the new parents I seemed to be gaining were both good as bobbars and strange sometimes and far away as the land across. I gazed randomly into drunk woman's pool with no place to go.

No-place I had felt other places as well, the other uncle whom I loved and who hid his liquor under a bush in the yard, our black neighbor across the field sitting on a basket before the white family's house where he mysteriously lived, I think, in the attic or somewhere alone. He had driven the white children to the only school of more than two rooms or something, but there was no longer a family bus, and the county had made new arrangements. Across the long cornfield, which also belonged to the neighbors as did the small, isolated bungalow my parents rented on the dirt road, the huge, sometimes spooky house where my cousin whom I didn't know was my cousin lived with her mother and kinda crazy grandmother with a portrait of an old white man in the back room hanging wet-eyed under some clothes.

They say the beach gone shut down, the boy pleaded before the black hole that wouldn't talk back. To hear this the uncle I admired, though I didn't often see him, would have sunk like a brown stone in the receding current. He loved the beach, the few times I heard him say he went, and the man who ran it. The river is how we come. It belongs to all of us, he had said strutting with his chest full and high. And then, and then, even from California where my uncle had gone to live and serve his country, he nor any of us ever went again.

Though, all things said, there was a hole or something, I think, in the back of the flatlands not far from the Bullneck Road. It was a secret my grandfather kept tucked into the hanging trees. With no car it was often much too far to walk and grandfather said sometimes the man who owned the land could be funny. I guess a couple of times we went anyway 'cause he said everything was drying up and because my

grandmother could cook a lot of potatoes, too many, he said, and he might catch a whole grass bag of all kinds of stuff. When lucky, we toted them as though they were a gift from the earth, even a continent, a little nervous the old white man had seen us and would call the sheriff, the one whose land stretched for several miles back and forth behind the tomato factory that had closed. Was he the one buying the beach? I didn't know and I soon forgot the thought and maybe the secret, wondering if my own daddy was coming to see me and if the ones I loved would be saying things about my mother or her father, who maybe didn't exist, or grandfather whom she wouldn't ever say much about.

Nargh, you can't go, said the squashed hat. Git cho' little white ass back up in there. I thought the fisherman was talking to me, the light-skinned child my parents were sort of giving up, and my grandfather gave up drawing in the dirt for a prayer no one could hear, maybe something about Jonah and the whale or the city of Gomorrah, and I, not yet fully comprehending either story, stopped remembering the beach and maybe even my uncle entering the military and doing so well with so nothing much. The drunk woman, maybe sobering, may have thought of the water over the cliff from the shack, or what was left of it, anything that was cool, the burning throat and tongue, but she didn't say anything. From under my tongue I think I swallowed a tinkle of something which scratched and stung, and the black man who looked like a white man and had been her first true love and the admired elder of my father caught the one almost swimming in his large hand and squeezed it till it foamed out the last drop. (And though I don't think she knew for sure why, ragweed or something in the water, I guess, Grandmother said I and my runny eyes didn't say much for another two whole weeks after that.) ■

– Larry D. Giles





# Liberating Tappahannock and other rural communities from the shadow of the Confederacy: An interview with Activist Reginald Carter, Jr.

SEPTEMBER 12, 2021

Who am I? I am Reginald Carter Jr., Son of Doris and Reginald Sr. I was born in Richmond, VA, but have resided in Tappahannock, Virginia, for the majority of my life. I have two siblings Johnathan and Tameka, and I am the oldest. I attended Virginia State University for undergrad and The University of Richmond for graduate school. I currently work in human resources for the Commonwealth of Virginia. I would say a series of events galvanized me to become an advocate for change and pursue organizing work, starting with the death of George Floyd. I remember watching via Facebook as George Floyd was killed, not knowing what I was watching, but I distinctly remember feeling helpless. I was so demoralized and angry that I just cried as I watched George Floyd take his final breaths. As a result, the nation began to protest. Other than Minneapolis, Minnesota, Richmond, Virginia, was at the forefront of the nationwide protest. Ironically, the protests in Richmond were close to my residence, and I knew I could not stand idly by as my fellow Richmonders were demanding that the world acknowledge that our BLACK lives matter, too!

2. What inspired my initiation and ongoing involvement in the effort to remove the racist monuments in Tappahannock and in the Northern Neck Counties? While attending my first rally and protest in Richmond, VA, I felt proud to be an African American for the first time in my then thirty-one years of living. It was an indescribable feeling for me. I had the privilege of voting for the first African American President of the United States. I attended a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), and I am a member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Incorporated, one of the Divine 9 Greek Letter Organizations. All of these facts played an integral part in establishing my foundation as to what it

meant to be an African American, but still, during my first protest was the first time I felt proud to be an African American. I remember contemplating as to why this was my first time feeling proud to be Black. It may have been because I was in the presence of thousands of individuals shouting, Black Lives Matter, but I remember wanting to share this experience with my hometown of Tappahannock, VA. I wanted to raise awareness regarding the racial inequality that exists in rural towns such as Tappahannock, Virginia. Which, like other small towns in the South, is the real final frontier for the Confederacy's ideology of white supremacy. After the Governor passed a bill that made it legal to remove confederate monuments, I researched the monument in Tappahannock. Not to my surprise, just like many other towns in the South, I learned that the monument in Tappahannock was a confederate one as well.

At this point, protesters had liberated most of the confederate monuments in Richmond and had reclaimed the "Robert E. Lee Memorial" located on Monument Avenue to "Marcus-David Peters Circle." The Lee monument's liberated name is relevant because years prior, Marcus, a Biology teacher in Tappahannock, was killed in Richmond, VA, by a Richmond police officer while being naked, unarmed, and experiencing a mental health crisis. Although years had passed, Marcus-David Peters was Tappahannock's, George Floyd. He was another person that died at the hands of the police that should not have. So, on Wednesday, June 10, 2020, approximately 300 people gathered for what we have now dubbed the "March on Tappahannock." Prior to the actual march, local police had mandated that the protestors remain on the sidewalk while protesting. We verbally agreed to comply, but after gathering the pulse of the community on the confederate

monument's existence in Tappahannock while filming a documentary, I felt called to have the protestors gather around the monument (located in the middle of the street and in front of the courthouse and jail) to demand the monument's removal. I felt called because of the history of that monument. The inscription on the monument reads, "Erected to soldiers of Essex and those who fought with them. They fought for the principles of state sovereignty and in defense of their homes. To maintain these rights, the gallant sons of this gallant county marched gladly to the front and did their duty like men, from the opening guns first Manassas to the final chapter at Appomattox." However, we need not look any further than William T. Thompson's quote on what the confederate flag stood for. Mr. Thompson is the designer of the "Stainless Banner" Confederate flag. He is quoted as saying, "As people, we are fighting to maintain the Heaven ordained supremacy of the white man over the inferior or colored race. As a national emblem, it (the Confederate flag) is significant of our higher cause, the cause of a superior race." Since the Confederacy's national emblem, the confederate flag, is located on the monument in Tappahannock, we cannot help but believe that the soldiers of Essex and those who fought with them fought to maintain the Heaven-ordained supremacy of the white man over the inferior or colored race. No longer can we remain complicit in the fact that the soldiers of the Confederacy were treasonous to the United States.

3. It is my hope that in the aftermath of the removal of the Essex County Confederate Monument, that we can begin healing. For too long, we have only heard the white confederate story of history, which has been one-sided. The removal of the 112-year-old Confederate monument effort is part of a much larger contextualization project that includes renaming the county's intermediate school and placing a historical highway marker for Thomas Washington, a victim of the only documented lynching in Tappahannock's history. This new contextualized history will not only educate citizens and visitors about Mr. Washington's tragic fate and the history of violence against African Americans that is sadly a part of our past. They will help show us how far we have progressed to become the diverse, unified, and involved community. For 112 years, that monument has sat on Prince Street,

representing values that are not indicative of the Town of Tappahannock or Essex County's values as a whole. I do not know what you take the place of the confederate monument, but I believe the people should decide. During the monument's erection in 1909, the African American population did not have an equal voice on what the monument should look like or where it should be located. This decision was made when America stood for something that America no longer stands for today. Specifically, Virginia is no longer the capital of the Confederacy. Women and men of all races found that statue to be offensive. You place things that you are proud of on a pedestal. We will no longer be subjected to the confederate history that looms over Tappahannock and other localities in the South. The replacement statue should be indicative of what it means to be from Tappahannock in 2021 and beyond.

4. My vision for the future of our rural communities starts with the removal of the various confederate symbols within them. All confederate symbols should be removed within these rural communities. No longer should we as African Americans have to be subjected to viewing these "badges of slavery." However, I understand that removing the confederate symbols does not change the system upon which America was built. Removal of the confederate monuments is the removal of the symbols of the confederate ideology that still exists here today. That's just the beginning. A complete and accurate story needs to be told. For too long, society has only told a one-sided story of American history. Often, we do not even know our local history in the rural communities because those in power attempt to suppress information. We do not have the widespread media attention or the resources of the city, and often, rural communities go unnoticed. I think that no one understands the needs of a rural community than actual members of rural communities. I think the old-fashioned siloed approach has proven to be ineffective. Rural communities lack resources, but their respective county has the autonomy to run its county as it sees fit. There is an opportunity for rural communities to form a joint task force to collaborate with one another to help gather the resources needed to be successful. ■



Interview with

# Cherlanda Sidney-Ross

JANUARY 12, 2021

## **What are some of the issues our rural Black communities suffer similarly or distinctly from our urban sisters, brothers and kin?**

1. Food insecurity—due to COVID many food banks are not operating or have limited food offerings. A lot of families who were not eligible for food stamp/SNAP benefits really benefited from the federal Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) allotments while children were home learning virtually and did not have access to the free or reduced lunches being served in school. Now that in-person instruction has resumed those benefits have ended.

2. Supports for relative caregivers of youth and elder family members. Many individuals are caring for sick and/or incapacitated adult family members. There are also a number of grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. who are caring for young relatives whose parents may be incarcerated, or otherwise unable to care for them. These individuals often lack the support (financial, material or otherwise) to care for these vulnerable family members.

3. Mental health (MH) resources for uninsured/underinsured—Individuals who lack insurance or have insurance coverage that does not cover MH services are severely at risk in our community.

4. Public Transportation/Medical Transportation for the uninsured—Again, uninsured/underinsured individuals, and those who lack private transportation struggle to get to doctors appointments, etc. that may be in urban areas (Fredericksburg or Richmond). This often places an undue burden on community or family members.

5. Lack of safe and affordable housing for families—Mobile home parks and apartments with subsidized rental assistance offer housing opportunities to some individuals in lower income brackets but they are limited. These offerings often attract individuals from neighboring localities driving up the demand.

6. Organized Youth programs outside of sports.

## **What local resources organic to rural Black life and community gesture toward or already constitute alternatives/ solutions?**

1. For Food Insecurity: Harvest Home Food Bank, local DSS resources (i.e. Food Stamps/SNAP)

2. For Supports for relative caregivers of youth and elder family members: Kinship Navigator programs, local DSS resources.

3. For Mental health (MH) resources for uninsured/underinsured: Local Community Services Boards

4. For Public Transportation/Medical Transportation for the uninsured: Bay Transit, caseworkers for those receiving social, veterans, other services.

5. For Lack of safe and affordable housing for families: Mobile Home Parks, Fox Chase and Tappahannock Greens Apartments.

6. For Organized Youth programs outside of sports: Non-Profit organizations like iRemember, after school programs like Girls Rock and Boys to Men. Unfortunately there is not a standalone building for activities that are youth can participate in. ■



# The Past, Present and Future of Essex County, Virginia is Me

by Ronnie Sidney, II

Tappahannock, Virginia isn't just known as the birthplace of Chris Brown. In 1909, a twenty-seven foot tall granite statue was erected by the Essex United Daughters of the Confederacy in Tappahannock, Virginia. The monument lies in a median on Prince Street and was erected "in memory of the soldiers and sailors of (Essex) county who were killed or died in service of the confederacy." The monument was constructed long after the Civil War to perpetuate a lost cause myth rooted in terrorism and white supremacy. On bronze plaques there are 770 names of insurrectionist who "fought for the principles of state sovereignty and in defense of their homes." Those men fought and died to defend their right to own and inherit men, women, and children of African origin. One of the men they fought to own was Lewis Corbin, my great-great-grandfather.

Lewis Corbin was enslaved on the Ware plantation in Dunnsville, Virginia. My great-great-grandfather escaped from his plantation and walked over seventy miles to Hampton, Virginia. In Hampton he joined the Union Navy and fought to liberate his family from slavery. He was stationed on the USS Ella, a steamboat used as a picket and patrol vessel, as well as a dispatch boat, on the Potomac River. After completing his service for the Union Navy, Lewis moved back to Dunnsville, Virginia and helped form Angel Visit Baptist Church.

According to his records, Lewis Corbin enlisted in the Union Navy on May 25, 1864, and was discharged on May 15, 1865, due to an injury. He

received a \$12 per month pension that was given to wife after his death. Lewis departed on May 12, 1898, at his home in Wares Wharf. After his death, his wife of twenty years, Amanda Corbin, petitioned to claim his pension. My father, Ronnie Sidney, Sr. was able to retrieve those records from [fold3.com](http://fold3.com). The website is a great resource for individuals interested in genealogy. My father shared this information with me as I was in the process of organizing a march for racial justice and racial equity.

As protests rocked the United States and the rest of the world in response to the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and others, I was one of a diverse group of residents from Essex County and the Northern Neck came together to organize a protest of our own. The rally and march was held on June 10, 2020, in Tappahannock, Virginia. They were in honor of Marcus-David Peters, a biology teacher at Essex High School who - while unarmed and experiencing a mental health crisis - was shot and killed by a police officer in Richmond, Virginia on May 14, 2018. We also wanted to rally to remove the town's Jim Crow era monument.

A group of 250-300 protestors marched two miles from Newbill Drive to Richmond Beach Road and back. Protestors carried signs and chanted "Black Lives Matter," "Hands up. Don't shoot," and "No justice. No peace." During the march, protestors circled the Confederate monument on Prince Street, where they chanted "Tear it down." Many Black residents believe the monument could be argued as being a "badge of slavery" under

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cases interpreting the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution, as the Essex County Confederate Monument is located just outside of the Essex County Courthouse. Others likened the confederate monument to a burning cross.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, 168 Jim Crow monuments were removed across the nation in 2020, most after the heinous murder of George Floyd. Confederate statues were erected *en masse* throughout the southern U.S. in the late nineteenth Century as a reminder to Black Americans that white supremacy still had its knee on our necks. The statues romanticize a period when Black men, women and children were being worked to death, raped, and treated as if their lives had no value. The confederate monument on Prince Street symbolically affirms the centrality of white supremacy in our community.

Ironically, the confederate monument was placed on the same street as Tappahannock's historic "Third of April" celebration. Third of April was Tappahannock's Juneteenth and celebrated Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse. Third of April was one of the longest running Emancipation Day events, beginning in at least 1877 and continuing through the mid-1950s. The celebration attracted thousands of people from across the region and included parades, dinners, vendors, plays, speakers, dances, and religious services. During the formal program, the Emancipation Proclamation was read, along with music and patriotic displays.



Although the confederate monument erected in Tappahannock was created to divide the community, in the struggle to remove it, it united neighbors of all ages and races. Hundreds of residents wrote letters to the local newspaper's editor; spoke at town halls; signed petitions; and donated money to the statue removal gofundme page. Essex native Reggie Carter raised over \$10,200 from more than 130 donors to use toward the removal of the Jim Crow monument. Over 4,315 individuals signed my change.org petition to remove the Jim Crow statue.

After a yearlong battle with the Essex County Board of Supervisors and Tappahannock Town Council on the ownership of the statue, a decision was made. In June of 2021, the Tappahannock Town Council voted unanimously

*“In order to understand Essex County then and now, you have to understand the dynamics of race, power and privilege.”*

to remove the generic soldier and the confederate flag etched into a portion of the Jim Crow monument. The nameplate for the names of 770 insurrectionists who fought to slavery will remain at the base of the statue. Tappahannock’s mayor Roy Gladding said he felt it was a decision “everybody can be proud to live with.”

Last summer Dr. J. T. Roane asked me if I considered running for local office. Unbeknownst to Dr. Roane, I had considered it in the past. I was afraid to run. I was afraid what white supremacists would do to my family or my reputation. The deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery changed everything. On June 1, 2021, I announced my candidacy for the At-Large seat on Essex County Board of Supervisors. I moved past my fear to pave the way for those who represent this county’s future instead of its past. My decision hinged on my belief there are voices in Essex County that are not being represented by the current makeup of the board. The last year opened my eyes to a lot of things and made me realize I needed a seat at the proverbial table. Tappahannock is in the process of revitalizing its Main Street district and we need to be sure it’s done equitably, ethically, and inclusively.


Access to the Rappahannock River has been a hot button issue in our county for some time. A descendant of the family who owned my great-great-great grandfather Lewis Corbin deeded a piece of waterfront estate to the county. His intention was to provide access to African American’s and poor white families who lived in the area. The Essex County Board of Supervisors had a special meeting on June 25, 2014 and they voted to close Wares Wharf Beach. By November, the property was sold for \$55,000 to the Water View LLC and Wares Wharf LLC. I remember swimming at the beach as a kid and today a tall

chain link fence prevents the community from accessing it.

*Uprooted and Transplanted from Africa to America* by Lillian H. McGuire talks about a historic black beach in Essex County called Mark Haven Beach. The beach was established by R.A. Markam in 1947 and featured a hotel, cottages, and a public picnic area. The beach was featured in the *Green Book* and *Ebony* magazine. It provided. When waterfront access was restricted for African Americans during Jim Crow, R.A. Markam and other sought to provide safe spaces for Black families to access waterfronts. Sadly, African Americans in 2021 have less access to the waterfront than they did in 1947.

In order to understand Essex County then and now, you have to understand the dynamics of race, power and privilege. There are homes in the county with dirt floors and no running water and two miles you will find homes on the Rappahannock River selling for \$500,000. The public school system is prominently Black and nearly 65% of the students are at or below the poverty line. Economically advantaged residents send their children to local private schools or to a predominantly white school district in a neighboring county.

I will continue to stand on the shoulder of Lewis Corbin and other ancestors who endured lifetimes of racial terror. Removing the confederate statue may not heal the divide that exists within my community, but it’s a step. My campaign for the At Large Board of Supervisors may not heal the divide, but it’s a step. Hosting a Third of April celebration on Prince Street may not heal the divide, but it’s a step. Any step in the right direction is a step toward a more inclusive future in Essex County. ■



The Institute for the Study of Global Racial Justice  
welcomes your interest and support in the Black Ecologies  
project at Rutgers University.

To learn more, please contact J. T. Roane, Rutgers University:  
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