

Black Environmental Memory:
Remembering Black Land
Relationships to Reimagine an
Otherwise

Rasheena Fountain

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2021

Committee:

Rae Paris

David Crouse

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English

©Copyright 2021
Rasheena Fountain

University of Washington

Abstract

Black Environmental Memory:

Remembering Black Land

Relationships to Reimagine an

Otherwise

Rasheena Fountain

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Rae Paris

English

Many Black people use our own enslavement history as a rationale for removing ways we might be implicated in the ongoing oppression of Indigenous peoples. Decolonization means resituating our beliefs about the so-called American Dream that has been such an embedded aspiration to freedom on what some call Turtle Island; and this dream is bound to ownership of Indigenous lands. This is a point I contend with in my multigenre memoir about land and family history. Eve Tuck and K.W. Yang's "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor", Nick Este's *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition* and Tiffany Lethabo King's *Otherwise Worlds* provide foundation for imagining an otherwise. Through my multigenre memoir, I explore Black environmental memory using the vehicles of Blues music, Black poetics, Black feminist and queer thought, call and response, oral tradition, the Black church, and Gospel hymns. I revisit my own land relationships and familial connections to push against the dominant wilderness model and to reimagine an otherwise.

Black Environmental Memory: Remembering Black Land Relationships to Reimagine an Otherwise

Unsettlings

I've learned that my environmental memory starts close to home—in Grandma's garden. Grandma's garden was a small patch of dirt in her backyard on Chicago's westside. Here the birds sang, called, and visited: Northern Red Cardinals, Blue Jays, American Robins, and American Crows. Butterflies, moths and bees flew in celebration of the sustenance they could find in the mostly concrete neighborhood. My memories of nature smell like city: gasoline mixed with meaty barbecue grill smoke, fresh cut grass, and tomato vines. Grandma never talked about nature or even said the words "environment", but my memories of environment center her in them. These memories with Grandma push against dominant environmental narratives that my study in environmental science and education taught me. I would learn that my environmental memories were taboo—outside of what was deemed acceptable environmental narratives because these memories push against the pervasive notion that Black people are devoid of relationships with nature. My memories with Grandma push against white savior mentality and tree-hugging, whitewashed ideas of conservation and upholding ideals of the pristine.

I haven't always felt like I had the permission of remembering, especially when it comes to my own relationships with nature. I think a lot of Black people don't feel the permission to remember environmental relationships. I have often thought that part of surviving in the United States is the act of forgetting as a response to centuries of trauma. Part of Black trauma has been connected to our experience with and on the land. Grandma was a sharecropper, and I don't think

getting her grandchildren more connected with nature or even into gardening was on the top of her list. She wanted us safe, housed, fed, and to have better opportunity than she had. Gardening was in Grandma's nature, and maybe her garden an act of remembering in her plot of land Up North far away from her southern roots in the fields. Her remembering wasn't a shared experience, however. So generation after generation we moved further away from those land connections that generations before had known. Mama and her siblings gardened less than Grandma, and so on. But, I want to remember; I feel the need to remember. The environment urges that remembering.

I am most driven by the urgency and scarcity in memory in my memoir. I realize I am beginning to forget and that memories are fading into the unknown and the untold. I am worried. I've heard someone say that there is danger in not knowing who you are or your history. I think white environmentalists have done a great job of saturating our psyches with hidden curriculums and false narratives about nature. The barrage of images perpetuated by environmentalists—white and all-caring of our landscapes—aids Black people in forgetting, even when we are not trying to forget. This concerted effort to erase Black relationships with the land mixed with the scarcity of memory helps us internalize the false narratives of land relationships as true. We are socialized to believe that the only avenue to close land relationships is to adopt the white models of the pristine that increasingly recruit us to join. And there is no freedom in adapting to this settler-colonial model that drives a lot of environmental efforts because these explorations erase not only Black land relationships, but also Indigenous relationships and the ongoing slaughter. Those in power fear our remembering because they profit off our collective amnesia and the continuous recycling of false environmental narratives. As Black people, our collective remembering of our relationships with lands, more than humans, and people has power. I believe

that one of the keys to reconciliation with the land and its inhabitants for Black people is in remembrance. I also believe that power lies in “otherwise worlds” as Tiffany Lethabo King describes in *Otherwise Worlds*.

As a Black writer, I am fighting to remember my own environmental relationships through creative nonfiction and poetry in hopes that my work can counter heterosexism, racism, homophobia, settler colonialism, and respectability politics embedded in “nature” and “environment” that is rampant and to reconcile my own relationships with and on the land. The premise of my multi-genre memoir is to reflect on my family relationships with and on the land and to undo the whitewashing that I have learned voluntarily through higher education and those narratives that I had been socialized to believe. I had believed that much of my environmental collection would be responding to systemic racism and oppression that I had experienced while working in the environmental field. As I wrote, and unpacked the trauma I faced, I found myself wanting to be less reactive to the trauma and the oppressor and more wanting to connect with my ancestors and their ways of knowing. I realized that the trauma I faced to be historical trauma—ongoing trauma. I also realized as I reflected that my family’s historical narratives pushed against the mainstream environmental narratives—that indeed my family’s history was more connected to the land than I had previously thought. My history is connected, yet nuanced and complicated, spiritual, and at times filled with myths that need undoing and a reimagining.

I am tentatively defining Black environmental memory as the recollection landscape of Black human relationships and interactions with the lands they construct, which includes the flora and fauna on lands and shared waters. I am especially interested in how Black writers, musicians, and artists push against the dominant wilderness model to reimagine an otherwise. In revisiting my own environmental memory on the page, I wanted to explore Black memory as a

whole and ways that Black people have communicated relationships with the land, oppressive systems, joy, and more. I wanted my reflections, utterances, and narratives to reflect and incorporate Black artistic expression. Black artistic expression holds maps and devices into widening the scope of my familial exploration on the page. Blues music, Black poetics, Black feminist and queer thought, call and response, oral tradition, and the Black church, and Gospel hymns are all windows with which I sought to revisit my own land relationships and familial connections. I had often been looking through a window of whiteness when thinking about environmental experiences; my understanding of my environmental experiences were filtered out to fit into the mainstream notions of environmental relationships. As a writer and musician, Black artistic expression has been my way of knowing, but my freedom of expression has been penalized, ostracized, and encouraged to be kept separate, especially in my explorations of the environment. Remembering and utilizing these forms of Black expression throughout my multi-genre memoir helped awaken my environmental memory and gave me more freedom in my expressions and aspirations of land connections. My power is in this rebellion and reimagining. Remembering my environmental relationships through writing has meant revisiting Black traditions of my upbringing. Revisiting these Black traditions like blues, negro spirituals, gospel, and Black poetics has aided me in constructing my multigenre memoir and helped me find environmental narratives within my own family and the nuances and tensions that exist in these narratives.

Black Spiritual Geography and Queer Blues

Dianne D. Glave's *Rooted in Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage* points to the nuances in Black land relationships and the hesitancy to embrace nature the way mainstream environmentalists consume nature. She argues that environmental traditions

were embedded in Black culture, even after slavery, but terror-filled experience through slavery limited and shaped Black environmental experience in the United States (Glave 5). The stereotype that African Americans are antienvironmentalist, are ambivalent and apathetic toward the environment has some truth and is embraced in the African American community (5). Due to history, the Black community has a more pragmatic and realistic view about the wilderness (6). “Enslaved people did not stumble upon the wilderness. Instead, African Americans actively sought healing, kinship, resources, escape, refuge, and salvation in the land”(8).

In revisiting my environmental relationships in Illinois and Down South, I have realized how important religious experience have been to my family’s relationship with the land in the United States. Africans brought religious practices with nature to the New World as slaves (Glave 44). Even as Black people like my great grandparents became Protestant Christians, natural spiritual relationships were common. My great grandparents on my father’s side began a Church in the Church of God In Christ, one of the largest Pentecostal founded by Bishop Charles Harrison Mason in 1907 after attending the Azusa Street Revival (Bletson). Bishop Charles Harrison had previously been a part of the Baptist tradition, which, along with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME), was a leading tradition for enslaved and newly freed Black people (Glave 49). “While walking down the street in Little Rock Arkansas in 1907, Mason had a revelation from God instructing him to name his church organization the Church of God In Christ. According to Bishop Mason, this name was given to him by God as a way to distinguish the true believer from those who had left the true doctrine of the church received by the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost (book of Acts)” (Bletson). These religious experiences outside are very common in the Black Pentecostal tradition. My great grandfather was often on the road, traveling to outdoor revivals, where church happened outside under tents. These revivals were heightened

religious experiences where the healing happened. Black natural experiences have historically happened outdoors, even during slavery. “Holy Ghost conversions in the fields often shared common elements: working the land; hearing from, acknowledging, and being chosen by God; and accepting the call to ministry (Glave 52). These allusions to God and nature can often be heard in negro spirituals and gospel hymns. The excerpt below is an anonymous African American spiritual, “Deep River”, popularized by Henry Buleigh’s 1916 collection, Jubilee Songs of the USA.

Deep River,
My home is over Jordan.
Deep River, Lord.
I want to cross over into campground.

Deep River.
my home is over Jordan.
River, Lord,
I want to cross over into campground.

Oh, don't you want to go,
To the Gospel feast;
That Promised Land,
Where all is peace?

Oh, deep River, Lord,

I want to cross over into campground (Deep River).

The environmental depictions contain familiar words that many white environmentalists reflect on, but here, the river, the land, and the campground are safe havens away from the atrocities that Black people in the United States face due to racism and systemic oppression. There is a plea for peace—not necessarily away from the urban world, as many white environmentalists find they need to escape through camping and hiking. The plea to the Lord is for peace and for a Promised Land. The Negro Spiritual also uses repetition, specifically the ABA structure, as many Black traditions like blues use to invite a call and response and to trouble refrain. Similar to “Deep River”, Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” poem contains similar repetition and alluding to the soul searching through as a deep river. In the Black aesthetic, nature and spirituality are in unison, a place where God shows up and we can freely reflect hope. Nature is not scary, but the oppression that happens on the land is what Black people need to be delivered from. In my essays “Our Bodies Aint Protected Outside”, “A Difficult Trek with My Daughter”, “Can You Imagine Freedom in Alaska?”, and “Holy Ghost Blues”, I try to explore this nuance in Black land relationships—a yearning to be closer to nature, while also understanding the trauma that has happened to Black bodies on land within settler colonialism.

Exploring the Black Christian tradition in my work also gives me a way to explore inner and outward tensions as a Black woman who grew up in church. Within the Black Christian tradition are clues into class divides, heteronormativity, and ideas of womanhood. The AME was composed of middle and upper class Black people, while Baptist and Church of God in Christ were dominations that appealed to lower class Black people (49). Mason Temple, the headquarters of the Church and God in Christ was financed by church members who were sharecroppers, cotton pickers, and domestic servants (Bletson). My grandmother on my mother’s

side, a former sharecropper and a huge presence within my memoir was Baptist. One side being Church of God in Christ and the other side being Baptist play a role in how I experienced the world and speaks to some of the tensions in my memory. “Smaller denominations like the Church of God in Christ, emphasize charismatic elements of prophesy and healing more so than the African American Baptist and the AME church do,” (Glave 4). My grandmother on my mother’s side was considered less “holy” and more “worldly” because she was Baptist and didn’t ascribe to the strict notions of spirituality that my father’s side in the Church of God in Christ believed was the path to eternal life with God. This played a role in my upbringing and some of the tensions between my father and mother that I explore throughout my memoir. I specifically choose to write through my mother’s lineage as I explore womanhood, because I am considered outside of the respectability in the role of the woman that one side of my family believes. All sides of my family have reverence for the Black church, but how spirituality is expressed looks different and has implications within the larger context of beliefs about sanctification and holiness. And this exploration of Black spiritual geography is important as I explore Black environmental memory because Black Church has been instrumental in the Black tradition, so much so, that it has been an often targeted institution in the fight toward liberation.

I found Priscilla Mccutcheon’s “The ‘Radical’ Welcome Table” exploration of spiritual geography within the within the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina helpful in my approach in working with environmental memory. Mccutcheon explores the historical context of Black Churches. The author discusses the organizing within them, the violence that is targeted at them, and how they are not necessarily utopian spaces. Mccutcheon also explains that the Black church is not monolithic, as some try to assert. The article’s title incorporates Alice Walker’s 2011 short story, “The Welcome Table”, whose main

character is a Black woman who finds out that she is not welcome in the Black or white Christian church (Mccutcheon 16). “While it is oftentimes assumed the welcome table is found in the afterlife or in heaven, the welcome table is also an earthly and tangible space that many fight to find and have a seat at” (16). For the purposes of this paper, I am using Henderson’s definition of spiritual geography that Mccutcheon uses in “The Radical Welcoming Table”: “the way in which humans ‘organize reality to account for the disparity between the known and the unknown’.” “Spiritual geography largely considers how individuals utilize internalize motivations to rationalize and actively transform the landscape” (18). This inward reflection on spiritual geography has been important to my memoir, as spirituality has been armor that aids my ability to interact with the outside world and how I hope for a better future. In the excerpt from “The Radical Welcoming Table,” shows how spiritual geography and Black Christian tradition has been a way of reimagining and moving toward an otherwise.

In *Freedom Dreams*, Robin D.G. Kelley (2002) writes about the importance of dreaming and imagining in Black radical movements of the past. He learned to dream from his mother. He says, with her eyes wide open my mother dreamed and dreamed some more, describing what life would be for us. She wasn't talking about a postmortem world, some kind of heaven or afterlife, and she was not speaking of reincarnation. ... She dreamed of land, a spacious home, 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 (qtd.in Mccutcheon 21).

Kelley’s recollection of his mother’s dream was encompassing of environmental justice and a yearning to live more in harmony with the land and without the constraints of oppression as a

Black woman. The stories in my memoir are an attempt at this, using Black Christian tradition and spiritual geography to reimagine, as I attempt to do in my collection.

Of note, one aspect that I do not see in the imagining of an otherwise in Mccutcheon's work is freedom for Black Queer bodies. Matt Richardson's "The Queer Limit of Black Memory" begins from a reflection of his visit Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD) in San Francisco in 2005. He noted how the portrayal of the Black family consisted of heteronormative depictions only. He concluded that, "Black familial pathology requires the suppression of any echo of queerness. In this content queerness would be unmelodic, improvisational, unpredictable, and irresolute" (Richardson 3). Because of a fight to be considered respectable and assert humanness without the assumption of deviance, queer depictions of the Black memory are considered a threat to the collective (Richardson 4). He calls for an embracing of the messiness in the African Diaspora that queer narratives provide (Richardson 5). Black queer voices allow us to reenvision Black poor working-class through improvisation and not respectability politics. Though many of my stories rely on my knowledge of blues guitar. Richard mentions that "In jazz, the improvisation solo moves with and in contradistinction to the melody" (16). A working class woman, single mother, blues is a tool I use to queer my narratives, as blues has been a way for Black queer women to express sexuality and a form where we find acceptance. "Black queer people find creative ways to remember each other and to grieve for ourselves when others do not. In our grief we create an ever-expanding archive of Black queer innovations in Black experience, resistance, and self-making (Richardson 20). In my writing about my family's environmental memory, the Black hetero family is still important, and I approach it from a Black feminist queer reading, as shown in The "Combahee River Collective Statement" where Black people of all sexualities are included in liberation because of our collective struggle.

The essay “Holy Ghost Blues” heavily relies on the tensions within the Black Christian traditions I face as a queer Black woman navigating the secular world and in search of belonging. I used Audre Lorde’s “Sister Outsider” as a way to explain my positionality inside the Black church and in the queer community as a Black woman. “Holy Ghost Blues” is about finding a place at the “welcome table” and geography—of my body, my family, and Chicago, as shown in this excerpt below:

I knew Grandma’s, Mama’s mother’s storefront church on Chicago Avenue more. Hymns seemed to drag a little longer at Lively Stone than True Vine’s fast-paced guitar, organ riffs, wailings, and always imminent shouts. This was my distinction I made between Baptist and COGIC church services. I never saw Grandma shout like Dad’s side of the family at True Vine. Shouting scared the hell outta me, dancing and overtaken by an uncontrollable spirit I ain’t wanna catch. I had been told that catching the Holy Ghost was a sanctified privilege and a sure sign of sanctification and freedom from sin. I will admit that most of the popular 2020 dances look like the Church of God In Christ Holy Ghost, except the music when catching the spirit was fast-tempo runs that made eyes roll into heads. Instead of Tik Tok teens, most people Holy Ghost shouting were in their thirties on up to the elders with canes. My days at all churches were mentally trying to avoid the ghost. I was scared, but I knew fear was a sin, so I was stuck somewhere in between Zen and constipation sitting in my church pews. I often had a lot to hide—sin that I was scared would be sniffed out of me like a blood hound following a scent trail. The secrets were my hidden blues before I picked up the guitar and started playing them in church. I didn’t talk a lot in my youth and the

blues guitar gave me voice. I could express myself on guitar freely—without judgement as long as I rode the riffs and stayed on key.

I was a guitarist in my great grandfather's church and other Church of God in Christ churches, and I saw fit to approach the collection of memories in "Holy Ghost Blues" through musicality and spirituality. This story acknowledges tensions, but also honors the historical significance of Black Churches as Safe havens, a place for community organizing, and places of collective healing from an oppressive outside world. Storefronts churches, in particular, are staple in my community in Austin and in Chicago in general. Emmett Till's funeral was held at a Church of God in Christ storefront on the West Side of Chicago. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also was a presence at them during his stay on the west side of Chicago in the North Lawndale community where many of my family members live. The tension this passage brings up is the comparisons of spirituality, my grandmother's Baptist traditions and my great grandfather's Church of God in Christ depictions of "sanctification". These church walls were road maps to freedom—a spiritual uplifting that often is not found in the outside, evil world. My tension is understanding that my ancestors see these rituals and offerings within the church as a gift, but I saw the Holy Ghost as something that might condemn me, given my inability to fit in with the cis hetero expectations of womanhood and Church Black spirituality. I find my voice and acceptance in blues riffs: it temporarily becomes my safe haven. Even though the story is largely about freeing my body from this type of spirituality and judgement, I felt the need to do so in spiritual context because of how tied the Black Christian tradition has been in the fight for Black liberation. I yearn to be in community with the collective and traditions of my family, and I see Black feminist thought as a way forward in remembering and reimagining and otherwise. My

final paragraph in “Holy Ghost Blues” expresses that adoration for my family legacy while also calling for Black Queer bodies to be free as well.

In “Holy Ghost Blues”, I also use blues to reimagine or improvise within the constraints of settler colonialism, as shown in the following excerpt:

And still, I long for Chicago blues: the repetition, the bass, rhythm guitar, and drums. In slow blues, the longing and the sorrow, the constant could go slow and steady. I’ve played rhythm guitar, bass, and a simple shuffle on drums, but I have always loved to improvise over the constant with lead guitar. Improvisation in blues is still confined to the notes in that key—the constraints. But how you improvise over that melody is spiritual—a reimagining of the constant. You can pluck and stomp on frets with fingers like church shouts and preachers stepping on the devils—on the constant legacy of enslavement—racism—the slow steady bassline that changes pitch but never dissipates. The constant in Austin is mass incarceration, War on Drugs policies, over-policing, and police brutality. It was my friends and family lost in crack addiction and thrown in prison. Chicago blues is disinvestment in Austin, food deserts, and a lack of Black ownership in the community. Blues is redlining us to death. Blackness is that stomping, the improvisation, the refusal, the resilience, the creativity, the unexpected—the guitar riffs. Improvisation is summer block parties, Fred Hampton, backyard barbecues, house music, Jesse White Tumblers, icy cups, and Grandma’s garden.

In this excerpt, I use the structures of blues music to show Black resistance as a improvisation to systemic oppression—the ability to improvise within the systems that have remained constant through. I show the Black Joy and creativity that I witnessed and have learned

about in my family and in my community on the West side of Chicago. I use the ABA structure often used in blues music in other essays, “Cabbage Worm Blues” and “A Road Trip Up and Down My Memoryscape” and it allows for me to imagine new ways of liberation through writing, while honoring the melancholy blues mood that lives in the Black imagination.

Imagining an Otherwise: Through Black and Indigenous Solidarity

As I remember my environmental relationships, I look toward reimagining Black land relationships outside of the norms of settler colonialism. One of the critiques that exists in my collection, is how the growing number of depictions of Blackness in the Outdoors operate in conjunction with settler colonialism. Exploring “The Great Outdoors” is a growing trend and some environmental and outdoor organizations are showing diversity and progression. Many of these depictions of diversity are set to the backdrop of National Parks and other occupied wilderness spaces, which might work to continue silencing Indigenous people who call those lands their home. For example, Outdoor Afro slogan suggests that, The Great Outdoors, and in National Parks, is where the “Black People and Nature Meet.” The slogan shows a reclaiming of the wilderness as a place where Black people belong. Nature is understood as a rightful place, that Black people need to occupy as well because they provide an escape from cities that do not offer a peaceful wilderness experience. A scroll through Outdoor Afro’s website and social media shows Blackness in wilderness backdrops. One contrast to wilderness models is that Outdoor Afro’s photos have many group photos—families and friends enjoying hikes together. This section exudes Black Joy, living joy within resistance. I wonder how this display of Black Joy works in conjunction with stories of the city. The wilderness appears to be an escape from those environmental injustices and oppression in the city. Other photos show women in the wilderness with their children in accordance with the woman as the nurturer. In tradition with

traditional wilderness renderings, children are a big presence in Outdoor Afro's media—the wilderness as a nurturer of childhood innocence. From a Black feminist queer reading, as described in The “Combahee River Collective Statement”, Outdoor Afro's representations of Blackness in nature models their vision of including the Black family across genders and sexualities. The Black familial depictions in Outdoor Afro's media could signal respectability that Matt Richardson's critiques in “The Queer Limit of Black Memory” that critiques the depictions of Black family a show of respectability. In my collection, I express repeatedly my desire of escaping and unlearning the settler colonial systems—a journey of unlearning that is ongoing.

Dina Gilio-Whitaker, author of *As Long as Grass Grows*, writes about the myth of the “human-free” wilderness that drives a lot of environmental conservation movements: "When environmentalists laud 'America's best idea' and reiterate narratives about pristine national park environments, they are participating in the erasure of Indigenous peoples, thus replicating colonial patterns of white supremacy and settler privilege” (Gilio-Whitaker). Racial justice cannot coexist with the wilderness myth in environmental conservation organizations (Gilio-Whitaker). My essay, “Our Bodies Ain't Protected on the Outside”, juxtaposes social media messages expressed from outdoor companies encouraging the myth of “The Great Outdoors” as safe havens, with messages of Black and Indigenous true experiences outdoors. The majority of my collection explores my experiences with violence outdoors and how that defines my family's ideas of the outdoors as safe spaces. In the excerpt of “Our Bodies Ain't Protected Outside,” I describe my Chicago neighborhood to express love for my neighborhood—if not for the systems that threaten my body and my future.

I love my Chicago—the one with vacant lots filled with wild grasses and milkweed as playgrounds, backyards with crates as basketball hoops courts, and Double Dutch in streets. I will admit that in my neighborhood on the west side, we ain't have the same opportunities as the kids in neighboring suburban Oak Park. We ain't have outdoor pools and trails to pristine nature. Outside was complex—filled with realities of a community where disinvestment and redlining had turned Great Migration hopes into nightmares for some. I witnessed these nightmares first-hand—the dark times that tried to swallow me, my friends, and my family. Nineties Chicago was in the height of a crack epidemic and mass incarceration fueled by the War on Drugs policies. To say that we did not notice the deficits or suffer trauma as children, would be farthest from the truth. But I love my Chicago—the one outside of the tourist views.

In this essay, along with other essays in the collection, I juxtapose myths, the tourist and pristine notion of spaces, with the very real trauma that has been intentionally imbedded in those spaces to kill Black and Indigenous people. In terms of my neighborhood, these systems are mass incarceration, the War on Drugs, and redlining. Dr. Drew Lanham, Ornithologist and Author of *The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature*, explained in a 2017 interview that the study of bird ranges and their needs is helpful in looking at human needs in a habitat. Lanham explained, “We want clean water, security, fresh food, and a good education” (Saha). These needs are much like the birds he studies, but for Black people in the United States, social factors limit Black people's ranges—the ability to travel across geographical locations safely. “There are the generalists that can tolerate and are tolerated everywhere; then there are the specialists that can't tolerate and aren't tolerated by all. Being black, my habitat is further

compromised by these social situations” (Saha). While dealing with oppression in lands set up systemically to oppress in our cities, Black people must also navigate the outdoor spaces that explicitly have excluded our presence. Later in the essay I try to find answers in Black and Indigenous solidarity because of the different, but shared traumas we have faced at the hand of settler colonialism.

The intentional indoctrination of false Indigenous history in the United States is something that I am still unlearning and is a big part in my relearning and re-envisioning Black relationships with the land. In *Our History is the Future*, Nick Estes recounts the Dakota Access Pipeline protests and the numerous Indigenous wars and movements against settler colonialism. This recount gives needed context for my understanding where we find ourselves in 2021 in the middle of an uprising for Black lives. Though Estes’s focus is mainly on Indigenous genocide on Turtle Island, Estes shows how the inception of the United States and the social construct of Blackness on this land stems from the ways in which settler colonialism fuels the systems we find ourselves in currently. Estes highlights the connections between settler colonialism and the loss of animal habitat and populations are due to settler colonialism, and ending it is the key to righting the many imbalances related to people, animals, and the land. I found Estes’s writing accessible because his prose reads like a recounting of experiences.

Estes has influenced my writing to reflect how Black progression in our settler colonial capitalist society often means that upward economic and social mobility involves enabling white supremacy. In the book, Estes explains how President Obama participated in the long trail of broken promises to Indigenous people when he failed to protect Indigenous people during the #NODAPL protests and failed to respond to Indigenous calls for help to shut the pipeline down. He had previously made promises of solidarity with Indigenous youth and then ignored

Indigenous youth's requests in stopping the pipeline. Obama's implication in the violence against Indigenous protestors makes me think about the E. Tuck and K.W. Yang's "Decolonization is not a Metaphor". As a Black woman in the United States whose family has suffered in slavery, I can't use my own family enslavement history in a way that makes me complicit in the ongoing oppression of Indigenous people. Because oppression against Black people is on this land is so horrid, people can find it hard to recalculate outside of the mainstream norms of fighting this oppression in society. Decolonization means resituating our beliefs about the American Dream that has been such an embedded aspiration to freedom, which is why in my essay, "Can you Imagine Freedom in Alaska?" I write, "Maybe I will still visit Alaska, but I won't go in search of some freedom. That freedom has long been colonized, and I want to imagine my way out of those constructs that we have been forced to dream within."

Estes highlights how this dissonance between Black and Indigenous movements in the United States is prevalent in the Civil Rights Movement and the Poor People's campaign headed by Dr. Martin Luther King. Like Obama, Dr. King sought to operate within the confines of settler colonial capitalism. The 1960s' Red Power movement under leadership of people like Philip Deloria identified more with the Black Power movement and leaders like Kwame Ture. The Red Power movement focused on peoplehood, "an understanding of unique tribal or national status—were a step toward national self-determination; Black and Indigenous people taking charge of their own lives and destinies" (Estes 175). This was and still is often deemed as a radical idea, even though we continue to live the cycles of violence in not investing fully in decolonization from the white supremacist systems. Settler colonialism is romanticized in environmental narratives of self-discovery promoted in depictions of Lewis and Clark, although the real narrative is that United States' creation was through racial capitalism, as described by

Cedrick Robinson (Estes 39). Indigenous youth catalyzed the #NODAPL protests, and large NGOs that tell this lie of nature and environment did not join the fight against an environmental threat to water sources and human rights. Estes argues that state sanctioned racial terror against Black and Native people and ending settler colonialism will take radical change in the form of decolonization, the repatriation of stolen lands, and stolen lives (Estes 255).

My essay collection piece “Melting Glaciers: Melting Facades” queers nature, presenting a less “pristine” examination of an environment that is often a different experience for marginalized people. I present flora as tainted: Lakes are murky killers, trees attack, environmental conservationists exclude people, and cornfields are mysterious lurkers. These ways of viewing nature in the essay, counter the myths that often are associated with nature in the Western world. I am critiquing the myth of the pristine in the United States, that tries to hide that nature in the Western world is colonization, genocide, environmental degradation, and exclusion. “Melting Glaciers: Melting Facades” displays how as a Black girl, I had long internalized my marginalization. Being Black and Indigenous means that nature in settler colonialism, comes with state sanctioned violence.

The sad thing is that we are socialized to run to the pristine—believe in its guise to save us from some impurity that lurks in our homes, in our minds, within our beings. I thought that. I thought that I could easily be a part of the environmental movement and that I had easy access to the land. I thought that helping conserve pristine nature would lead to reparation of my soul and the land. I was expected to see these lands in their natural beauty as the White supremacist John Muir saw them—like somehow the birds were going to sing me a tune different than “Whistling Dixie”. I couldn’t adapt to that tune. I can’t look at snow-covered

landscapes without seeing the history of Yellow Fever draped on Indigenous people, who were then casted away into the silent springs and the pristine views. I can't look at landscapes and not envision my ancestors tasked to build an economy in the fields, an economy that would then privatize traps that keep my family yearning for the pristine behind lock and key. These lands keep us running and reaching for the unattainable pristine.

The essay shows that Black and Indigenous peoples are overcoming systems and reacting to dangers outside: #Blacklivesmatter, stopping pipelines from being built on sacred Indigenous land, and natural water sources feeding polluted water into our homes.

Conclusion

I understand that environmental progress is only a myth without the interrogation of what is meant and who is included in "environmental progress". Settler colonialism is progress for settlers in the United States, and this conception continues to feed into environmental education and ideas of ecological progress. My progress in settler-colonial systems has often meant forgetting my own environmental memory and remembering means unlearning and relearning to connect with lands through the ways of knowing of my ancestors, other Black people, and Indigenous people. Black, Indigenous, and Queer studies and revisiting my family's own relationship with nature are the keys to interrupting settler colonial norms through my writing. Interrogating "environment" has been essential in my ability to connect with land, and Black creative expressions have been a means for me to be able to reimagine and remember my place across landscapes through the narratives in my poems and essay collection.

Works Cited

- BlackPast, The Combahee River Collective. "The Combahee River Collective Statement."
(1977) The Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977, www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/.
- Bletson, Dyshauntic. "Charles Harrison Mason (1866-1961) •." •, 6 Feb. 2020,
www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/mason-charles-harrison-1866-1961/.
- "Deep River." *The Library of Congress*, www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200215449/.
- Dove, Rita. *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Penguin Books, 2011.
- Estes, Nick. *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition*. VERSO, 2019.
- Gilio-Whitaker, Dina. "The Usual Story of the National Park Service Is Incomplete." *Time*, Time, 2 Apr. 2019, time.com/5562258/indigenous-environmental-justice/.
- Glave, Dianne D. *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage*. Lawrence Hill Books, 2010.
- Indian Country Today. "Treaty Defenders Block Road Leading to Mount Rushmore."
IndianCountryToday.com, Indian Country Today, 3 July 2020,
indiancountrytoday.com/news/treaty-defenders-block-road-leading-to-mount-rushmore-ctPNfZ1W0UiABOWreb-srA.

McCutcheon, Priscilla. "The 'Radical' Welcome Table: Faith, Social Justice, and the Spiritual Geography of Mother Emanuel in Charleston, South Carolina." *Southeastern Geographer*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2016, pp. 16–21., doi:10.1353/sgo.2016.0005.

Richardson, Matt. *Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution*. Ohio State Univ Press, 2016.

Saha, Purbita, and July 20. "Listen to Drew Lanham's Keynote Speech at the 2017 Audubon Convention in Utah." *Audubon*, 26 Apr. 2018, www.audubon.org/news/listen-drew-lanhams-keynote-speech-2017-audubon-convention-utah.

Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization Is Not a Metapor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–40.