Black Bodies: It’s Time to Reclaim Our Green Space Freedom

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I just recently moved to a historic neighborhood in Baltimore where the tree canopies swaddle, the smell of grass soothes, and the sound of birds greet me on my morning walks. As a Black woman, I do not take these nature pleasures for granted because just six miles away disparities in green space access and quality fall sharply on a black-white divide. In Southwest Baltimore where the percentage of Black residents is over 74%, barely 15% of the land is covered by green space, a sharp distinction from other majority White neighborhoods, like Roland Park or Mount Washington, that have more than four times as much green space (BCHD, 2017). With this nature gap reality for so many Black Baltimoreans and throughout the country, it is easy to forget that nature is intrinsically a part of our being.

Although Black bodies were pilfered from Africa through the Atlantic slave trade as commodity, it is important to understand that there were human beings taken from a land where they had intimate relationships with nature as hunter-gatherers, farmers, cattle herders, and just as men and women who respected and honored nature as life-giving. These Black bodies, who were forced into the chattel slave system, needed to develop and enact a new nature pact within America, a far-off land that represented betrayal, brutality, exploitation, and subjugation. Nature learnings were gained from the unfamiliar land, when combined with the wisdom carried over from Africa, bondpeople garnered a knowledge of the wilderness that was detailed, practical and gave them a sense of freedom and identity. For example, bondwomen found comfort and delight in nature by using environmental elements to dye their paltry clothes with roots, tree bark, and plant leaves (Fabien, 2014). This brought color and life to their otherwise shabby garb for church, a mandatory event for bondpeople on many plantations during the antebellum era. For many enslaved men and women, nature was a place of escape or refuge from the realities of their lives. And like Nat Turner, an enslaved preacher who led a four-day rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, bondpeople were sometimes successful in running away and forming maroon societies. American maroon communities, ranging from ten to more than one hundred members, maintained an intimate understanding of nature for the purpose of food, shelter and hiding and with this knowledge they lived together deep in the woods or swamps for many years and even generations (Diouf, 2014).

After the American Civil War and the emancipation of bondpeople, sharecropping became one of the most effective farming choices due to the fact that former slave masters no longer had free labor to cultivate thousands and millions of former slave laborers, trained in anti-Black racism with statements such as “one energetic White man, working with a will, would easily pick as much cotton as half a dozen Sambos and Sallys” or “but idle Negroes were prowling about everywhere, and I was afraid” in A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf, his diary account of his travels across the southeastern United States (Muir, 1916a, 1916b). Formation of impenetrable racialized spaces for leisure, such as national parks, or for living, such as redlined neighborhoods, was fundamentally used in order to secure and uphold White racial identity, purity and supremacy. As a result, Black Americans have been denied equitable opportunities for enjoying and living in nature embedded areas. To illustrate, in areas of the country that were redlined and hence occupied predominately by Black Americans, investments in parks, green spaces, and trees were diverted away from these neighborhoods. Current research has revealed that formerly redlined neighborhoods (graded D) have nearly 50% less tree canopy and far fewer parks compared to areas formerly graded A, which were predominately occupied by American born White residents (Locke et al., 2021; Nardone et al., 2021). Other policies, like urban renewal, have also adversely impacted the access and connection of green space with Black Americans throughout the country, Watts Branch Stream Valley Park was a green space in the Washington DC area visited by many Black Americans until it was destroyed by the urban renewal efforts of the 1950s and 1960s (NRPA, 2011).

An abundance of research has demonstrated the mental and physical health benefits of nature. However, low-income and distinctly Black American and Hispanic communities, are nearly three times more likely to reside in “nature deprived” areas, or those with no access to parks, trails, and green space, in comparison to White communities, which ultimately limits their ability to receive the therapeutic health benefits of nature (Rowland-Shea et al., 2020). Headlines such as “Segregated parks linked to higher COVID-19 deaths for Black and Latino Americans” (USA News) or “What outdoor space tells us about inequality” (BBC) emphasized the negative effects of this nature gap. Throughout the pandemic, public health officials encouraged people to spend more time outdoors and specifically the Centers for Disease Control and Preventions listed visiting parks and recreational facilities, particularly those “parks that are close to your home”, as a way to be safe against the COVID-
19 transmission. While this pandemic revealed the true value of nature and open public spaces, it unfortunately reified the toxic presence and persistence of racism in and throughout American institutions. As exemplified in the Christian Copper incident, for many Black Americans, nature and park access is more than just proximity because often these spaces are racialized and stained with a historically complex and collective trauma experienced over time and across generations (Sheehy, 2020). By taking a look at a majestic piece of nature not too far from my home in Maryland, it is easy to forget the terror that occurred here (Figure 1). Four days before Christmas, a mob seized Henry Davis, a semi-disabled farmhand, from his jail cell in Annapolis, paraded him along the street, shot him and then hanged him from a tree along College Creek on December 21, 1906 (Pitts, 2018).

Figure 1 – Site of Henry Davis Hanging in Annapolis, Maryland

Photo by Karl Merton Ferron / Baltimore Sun

Despite the obstacles put before us and the legacy of terror in some areas of wilderness, I challenge Black Americans and my other sisters and brothers who feel that there is no place for them in nature to reclaim our green space freedom. Organizations like Outdoor Afro, “a network that celebrates and inspires Black connections and leadership in nature” have pushed for this reclamation. It may be more challenging for some, but knowing that we are just as deserving of receiving the benefits and enjoyment of nature as anyone else is the first step. Until this is acknowledged, policies and practices will not be designed to ensure nature accessibility, connectively, and safety for everyone.

Conflict of Interest Statement:
We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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