

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

Jennifer D. Roberts¹

¹ University of Maryland, School of Public Health, USA

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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 these 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 this unfamiliar land and, 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 their land and millions of freed Black Americans needed employment. The creation of sharecropping was intentional in providing land and maintaining the wealth and superiority for members of the White planting elite, but the system sustained the unique connection of the land and nature with Black Americans. In the early 20th century, Zora Neale Hurston, a pre-eminent author of African American literature, published two of her classic literary works, *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and spoke of a deep respect for Mother Nature's power and gifts (Hurston, 1935, 1937). The natural environment had at times been the gist of Black American indignity, but during this period many still regarded the creation of earth as a space of freedom, humanity, and spirituality. Specifically, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a lively banter between two characters involved a reference to nature as a vessel that holds the essence of omnipotence and omniscience; "It's de strongest thing dat God ever made, now. Fact is it's de onliest thing God ever made. He made nature and nature made everything else" (Hurston, 1937).

The massive exodus of over six million Black Americans from the rural South to urban centers in the northeastern, midwestern and western parts of the United States was known as the Great Migration. Occurring over six decades and beginning as a quiet pilgrimage in approximately 1915, this migration was instigated by poor economic conditions, prevalent racial segregation, discrimination, Jim Crow terror and simply the desperate need to

experience the "warmth of other suns" (Wilkerson, 2010). Just as the migration was beginning to swell, the United States National Park Service, a bureau in the Department of the Interior subject to preserving national parks and monuments, was signed into law (The Organic Act), on August 25, 1916 by President Woodrow Wilson. During this time and under the direction of federal legislation, many new parks were created in southern parts of the United States where segregation was legalized. Therefore, the reconciliation of the Organic Act's purpose, to "conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment", with legalized segregation was challenged. For example, National Park Service Director Arno B. Cammerer embraced plans for racially separate facilities at the Shenandoah National Park in Virginia despite pushback and criticism from Black American citizens and leaders within the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Engle, 1996). Along with the Organic Act, the subsequent Wilderness Act of 1964 used language in a comparable fashion that described the preservation of resource integrity and created the National Wilderness Preservation System to protect over 100 million acres of wilderness throughout the country. However, with segregation ingrained within the fabric of American society, Black bodies were prohibited from "the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness" with the enactment of this legislation (US.Congress, 1964).

The quest to preserve American wilderness, a classified White space, began in response to the social transformations of emancipated Black Americans and the influx of immigrants toward the end of the 19th century. John Muir, the "Father of Our National Parks" and founder of the environmental organization Sierra Club, planted the seeds of a whitewashed wilderness dogma that was rooted 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 Sallies" 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 vital 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.

Correspondence should be addressed to

Jennifer D. Roberts, DrPH, MPH
Associate Professor of Kinesiology
2136 School of Public Health Building
College Park, Maryland 20742-2611
301-405-7748

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