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Environmental Repercussions of the Strange Fruit: The Implications of  
our Enslavement on Modern Black Experiences with Nature

By

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Honors Thesis

Submitted to:

Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Honors in Anthropology  
University of Richmond  
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Advisor: Dr. Jan French

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## **Introduction to Thesis**

When I was nine years old my dad often took me hiking at “Rosaryville State Park” in Maryland. Sometimes we would ride bikes, other times we would walk the trail and become mesmerized by the sounds and sights of nature. We would run down the path, play iSpy, or tell stories and sing songs. The trail led to an open field with acres of land in the distance. The only presence there was my dad, the trees, and me. We would take out our 7/11 sandwiches, sit on the ground, and enjoy our time together. It wasn't until I was in middle school that I found out how “taboo” this was. My Black friends at school didn't hesitate to inform me that “Black people don't go hiking.” My love for nature, despite my friends' admonishment, never diminished. I continued to love hiking, biking, learning about nature, water sports, playing in my grandma's yard, and reading on the porch. I tell this story to illustrate that I have always considered myself a naturalist, environmentalist, or tree hugger<sup>1</sup>. It is engraved in who I am and has played an integral part in my identity. I went to a high school in South Carolina, where our deans' motto was to “get out of your comfort zone.” My high school prioritized nature in every subject and each grade level took an elaborate outdoors trip.<sup>2</sup> It wasn't until I began my undergraduate career, where I double majored in Environmental Studies and Anthropology, that I was plagued with the complexity of the intersection of being an African American woman who also cares deeply about our natural environment. I go into my work with my thesis having this perspective.

The purpose of this paper is to explore Black environmentalism. I plan to discuss opportunities for leaders to effectively increase “green-ness” and environmental activism in Black communities. Black (as well as low-income and other minority) communities will be the

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<sup>1</sup> Even so, I am not immune to these stereotypes that Black people are not environmentalists. I still (to this day) poke fun at one of my friends, who is a black woman from South Carolina, who loves to go hiking and fishing.

<sup>2</sup> In 9th grade we went to Nantahala Outdoors Center in NC, where we went kayaking and had many outdoors activities. 10th grade was college visits, so not as nature related. 11th grade was Costa Rica where we immersed ourselves in nature and learned about dependence on the land and international environmental issues. There, we went rafting, hiking, visited waterfalls, and so much more. In 12th grade we went to Camp Chatuga where we camped, hiked, and had water activities.

first and most impacted by the effects of our climate crisis<sup>3</sup> (EPA, 2021b). The dissociation of Black people from our natural environment has been created through power: "Wilderness is shaped by Whiteness, the normative power to enjoy social privilege by controlling dominant values and institutions while occupying space" (Therriault & Mowatt, 2018, 15). It is not by chance or pure disinterest that Black people are not seen in the environmental movement. It is increasingly important to emphasize connection with the natural environment to work towards mitigating the effects of climate change and increase community activism against our climate crisis and environmental injustices. Amanda, the host of the "If She Can Do It, You Can Too" podcast explains the importance of connecting marginalized communities to the outdoors: "with climate change and conservation efforts... if people aren't outside they don't necessarily understand the value of preserving those areas... because it's not a part of their daily lives so they don't have the immediate connection to it" (Amanda, 2022, 22:30). This connection to the outdoors will allow for the creation of efficient techniques that meet the needs of the community to combat climate change. The goal of this thesis is to debunk the idea of African American "anti-environmentalism" and offer forms of understanding how African Americans connect with nature and as a result promote activities that will help mitigate the effects of our climate crisis for the Black community. I will do this through an analysis of the impact of modern Black environmentalism from our experience in slavery.

To begin, I will conclude my introduction with a background on environmental justice, general context setting, and how this thesis topic became meaningful to me. I follow this with my methodology. I discuss the three organizations that I worked with, interviews I conducted, and the "Nature Survey." Next, examine of how slavery and Jim Crow shapes the modern Black

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<sup>3</sup> On this, the EPA writes: "Black and African American individuals are projected to face higher impacts of climate change for all six impacts analyzed in this report, compared to all other demographic groups. For example, with 2°C (3.6°F) of global warming, Black and African American individuals are: 34% more likely to currently live in areas with the highest projected increases in childhood asthma diagnoses. This rises to 41% under 4°C (7.2°F) of global warming. 40% more likely to currently live in areas with the highest projected increases in extreme temperature related deaths. This rises to 59% under 4°C of global warming" (EPA, 2021b).

experience with the environment. This will be found through an examination of slave narratives and the lyrics to the popular song and poem "Strange Fruit." I continue this section with a discussion of redlining, the Great Migration, and historic Black cemeteries. These analyses guide my understanding of the factors that shape Black environmentalism. The next section includes my case studies and the bulk of my ethnographic research. Here, I use the case studies of three organizations (mentioned in methodology) to examine modern acts of Black environmentalism and the role that these play in their broader community. I conclude with an examination of Black environmentalism broadly, while incorporating recommendations on how to use this knowledge to mitigate the effects of the climate crisis. My argument is that the erasure of Black environmentalism is rooted in our enslavement and is, in the modern day, an act of environmental racism.

### **Environmental Justice**

The neglect of Black environmentalism in the modern environmental movement is illustrated in the very ideas of environmental justice and environmental racism. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice as "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies" (EPA, 2021a). Environmental racism is a subset of environmental justice with an examination of race. The EPA has environmental justice activism beginning in 1968 on its timeline with the Memphis Sanitation Strike as the indicator. However, we can trace the beginning of environmental justice initiatives in the US before the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, such as in the 1940s "wade-in" for access to the public beaches for Black people in Virginia Key Beach in Miami, Florida (Finney, 2014, 63). The EPA only began environmental justice-focused programming over fifty years later, in 2016, and the movement has only continued to expand. Too often are environmental justice issues defined as those having to do

with toxic substances or over pollution in marginalized communities. Many environmental justice books have to do primarily with, if not solely, pollutants, public health, or energy disparities. Even today it appears that the work for African Americans in environmentalism is concerned with environmental justice rather than allowing African Americans to be interested in nature for the sake of nature. After defining my thesis work as examining “Black environmentalism”, many people would follow up by sending me energy justice-related sources though my topic has very little to do with such work. I would argue that the separation of Black environmentalism from the broader environmentalist movement is an act of environmental racism.

Why is it vital to acknowledge diverse forms of environmentalism? During the summer of 2021, I planned and implemented a Davis Project for Peace entitled: Promoting Clean Energy in Eco districts. I worked to empower residents and students throughout Virginia to recognize instances of environmental injustice and to advocate for reform, supplied them with free resources to mitigate risks in their homes and helped to establish working groups to continue the discussion throughout the community. Throughout my project, I found that many residents had a multitude of other factors influencing their disinterest. Many expressed how they were on their way to their night job, taking care of a sick relative, or simply did not have the time. While environmental racism connects directly to the issues they were expressing (such as income disparities, disease, and food access), many were overwhelmed by the numerous injustices that they faced daily. I was placing another burden on the residents in expecting them to solve a problem they had no part in creating.

However, the residents had a natural connection to nature. This was illustrated by the abundance of people at the local recreation center, the obvious appreciation of its beauty through the upkeep of their lawns and garden, and using nature as a resting place or place as a communal setting. A majority of the people I talked to were sitting on their porches talking with friends and family, enjoying their gardens, or eating lunch outdoors. One resident told me about their monthly neighborhood lawn competition where everyone votes on whose lawn looks the

best and the winner gets a prize. They had plans to recreate some of their outdoor spaces as ones for communing with one another and to have recurring cookouts and other events. Through this space, one resident told me, they would be able to teach their youth to be engaged community members. If I could return, I would have taken more time to appreciate the connection many of those residents had with nature. Through this project, I have learned the importance of meeting people where they are to achieve common goals. My overarching goal for this paper is to promote the recognition of diverse forms of environmentalism.

During an interview with Monica Esparza, a resident of Richmond and leader in the environmental justice movement in VA, she told me an anecdote of how the disregard for Black environmentalism has negative impacts. Monica told me that there's an "industry-funded organization" that wanted to help increase environmentalism in a predominantly Black school. Their idea was to plant trees to help establish that connection with nature. Monica said "Now who could be upset with planting trees? Nobody could be upset with planting trees. Trees bring carbon to the air. It's one of the things I did, you know, years ago... it's a wonderful act." Monica continued that the organization hosted a great community event where they planted nearly 30 trees around the school, including on the local track. In her response to this story, Monica asked me: "What do you think is going to happen to that oak tree 50 years from now when it's big and it's huge and it's sitting on the running track?" This was a rhetorical question. She went on to describe how the running track would no longer stand if there are of trees in the middle of it. This running track, which previously acted as a place for many kids to get fresh air, exercise, and connect with nature is now being destroyed to plant trees. Monica would not let me look further into who exactly the group was as, aside from this, she does like the organization and "they do great work." This group failed to acknowledge the track as a place for connection to nature, especially for the Black community. Monica said this is "what happens when people from the outside come inside, meaning to do good, but don't hear the people who've been there doing the work." This story illustrates the contradictory nature of many environmental efforts.



The lack of appreciation and acknowledgment for Black environmentalism is the inspiration behind my thesis.

Barnes (2011) comments on the disregard of Black people in mainstream media: "Black history is quite alive in African American communities... [it] appears missing because it is being interpreted through the lens of white America" (29). Moreover, Black environmentalism is very complex and can seem contradictory. Throughout my life, I have seen people within Black communities experience nature and practice environmentalism in ways that are not acknowledged or appreciated in the broader environmental movement.<sup>4</sup> These examples do not comport with the dominant, white ideas of environmentalism, at times described as "granola", but are forms nonetheless.<sup>5</sup> As Finney (2014) would describe, my goal for this paper is to "push mainstream environmental institutions and the society at large to consider alternative understandings and experiences of the outdoors" (6). Through this, I hope to encourage Black communities to continue and increase participation in environmentalism, which is crucial as our communities are the most vulnerable to our impending climate crisis.

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<sup>4</sup> These activities include Cookouts; playing basketball or hanging out at REC centers; (particularly older people) sitting out on their front porch; sports; spirituality practices; especially while living in the apartments all of the kids walk around the neighborhood; gardening.

<sup>5</sup> The "granola" lifestyle is generally what people conceptualize when they think of mainstream environmentalism. It includes typical outdoorsy people who love to hike and wear brands like REI or Patagonia.

## **Methodology**

Richmond especially has numerous illustrations of this complexity between race and space. Environmental justice issues are prevalent throughout Richmond: the lack of access to the James by "riverside" communities, Dominion Energy's energy injustices, and the Mountain Valley Pipeline. Today, we see numerous instances of environmental injustices (ex. lack of clean water) and more specifically environmental racism (ex. denying access to parks). Communities most impacted by environmental racism are often largely minority groups, persons of color, and/or low-income families; this includes but is not limited to Black, Asian, Native American, Hispanic, and Latinx groups. The term environmental justice often refers to toxic substances and pollutants. People rarely consider the implications of the lack of access to green spaces or distance from healthy food options as a form of environmental racism.

In September 2021 I began ethnographic research on three case studies: RVA Community Fridges, Broadrock Community Garden, and Black Girls Hike RVA. With these three organizations I wanted to examine how Black people were connecting with nature. These three cases were chosen based on their different scopes. Richmond Community Fridges (RVACF) is a program, organized by Taylor Scott, that installs and upkeep fridges that supply free food for anyone who may need it. RVACF relies exclusively on community based aid. Broadrock Community Garden (BCG) is an urban garden, managed by Bri, located within a Broad Rock neighborhood, supplying residents and local community members with fresh foods and experiences with nature and gardening. Although heavily reliant on community engagement, BCG receives funding and resources from the government and other organizations. Finally, Black Girls Hike (BGH) is an LLC run by Nicole and Shara. BGH targets women of color to increase their participation in nature through making the activity of hiking more accessible and safe. They plan multiple monthly hiking trips for women of color and guide hikes throughout

Virginia. These three cases look at environmental racism from three different perspectives all working toward the goal of sustaining the Richmond community.

I also conducted several interviews with the goal of understanding the interviewee's connection to both nature and our three case groups. Many of the interviewees were leaders of Richmond based environmental organizations (Bri, Nicole, and Shara). Other interviews were carried out with the goal of understanding how specific individuals may or may not resonate with ideas of environmentalism. The interviews took place over zoom and lasted about one hour. These interviews will be incorporated throughout the paper to gauge modern, African American perceptions of nature. The participants were informed of risks, including that it is possible that subjects may encounter emotional or psychological discomfort when discussing racism so close to home. I have also benefitted by the interviews conducted by individuals for the Library of Congress in their creation of the Slave Narrative Project. Using these sources I will illustrate the disregard for Black environmentalism as a form of environmental racism and emphasize its negative impacts on the Black community.

### **Slavery and Beyond: Historical Examination of our Complex Relationship with Nature**

The African American experience in America and perceptions of the modern world are highly influenced by our history with slavery. However, it is critical to mention that the story does not start there. Our history in Africa, prior to enslavement, shapes our time in slavery as well. Moreover, we came to America to work land that was stolen from the Native Americans. Our enslavement history, and everything that surrounded it, has resulted in a complex relationship with nature. On one hand, trees went in tandem with our lynchings, we were brutalized in cotton fields, and murdered in the woods. On the other hand, forests played an integral role in our protection and escape from enslavements; we depended on herbs for survival, and used elements of nature within our spirituality (such as water for baptisms). Miles (2019) emphasizes the contradiction that is inherent to Black environmentalism: "When African-Americans left the South en masse, they spat on the memory of life-stealing cotton fields. But they also cherished the memory of Southern pines, meandering rivers, tropical flowers and the delicious dishes made from local plants and animals." (Miles, 2019). This illustrates the conflict inherent to the connection between Black people and nature. Glave elaborates on this:

Wilderness evoked both fear and comfort for African Americans. The woods, forests, and swamps were natural places where Blacks were hunted and mauled or lynched and hung from trees... But the wilderness was also a refuge, a place to live long-term or a place of transition for runaways (Glave, 2020, 60).

African American history is rooted in being brought over in ships to a new country where we had to understand a completely new landscape and work foreign lands. This plays an important role in our current position both in America and within natural spaces. Glave describes it as an "alien landscape" and justifies the logical nature of this perspective. In this sense it is understandable to assume that African Americans may be disconnected from nature, and consequently from environmentalism. However, when African Americans were given a trace of representation post-enslavement, their priorities were understandably more concerned with

furthering civil rights and the political and economic freedoms for all African Americans rather than the preservationist ideals of early white, American environmentalists like John Muir and Aldo Leopold which played an important role in the separation of Black and white environmentalism.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the post-enslavement need for an African American identity may play a role in the hesitancy to engage in matters that are considered “white” (in the granola sense of environmentalism). This may continue to explain the widespread distance from stereotypical forms of environmentalism that are kept by members of the Black community. These separations provide some explanations for how Black people were left out of the conversation on environmentalism.

We not only depended on the land during our enslavement but “had to survive off the land” emphasizing the necessity of connection with nature (Glave, 2020, 65). Harriet Tubman had to be connected to the land and understand the landscape in order for the Underground Railroad to be successful. Miles (2019) emphasizes this message: “rushing rivers sheltered their movements. Fugitives’ use of stars in the night sky to navigate treks north is legendary. The natural world could support their escape attempts if only they watched and worked with it.” (Miles, 2019). Thousands of Africans, known as the Great Dismal Swamp Maroons (in Virginia and North Carolina), had to learn to survive in uninhabitable conditions, in dry patches of swamps, where food was scarce. Theriault & Mowatt point out that “Despite the risk of beatings and death for leaving plantations... enslaved Africans often escaped to the wilderness to temporarily relieve their oppression or plan rebellions” (Theriault & Mowatt, 2018, 16). Author of “Collards Are Just as Good as Kale” Heather Toney emphasizes that there are lessons to be learned about how to thrive in our changing climate in our history with slavery: “the ability of my

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<sup>6</sup> Glave (2020) calls them “purists who embraced an aesthetic ideal of nature” (73). This emphasizes the distinction of early white environmentalists and those who were Black. Illustrating the different values, one group depends on nature for life, to survive. While the other may value nature for its beauty or even what they can gain from the earth. This group may want to preserve nature solely to continue, or increase, production values. Especially as the desire for government control during slavery, to perpetuate its justification, played a significant role in the separation of early American conservation efforts from Blacks in America (Smith, 2021).

ancestors to adapt to wholly new environments offers wisdom to embrace" (Johnson & Wilkinson, 2021, 75). Understanding how our ancestors survived in a new climate can offer us solutions on how we can overcome the impending climate crisis. This will be examined further when discussing the consequences of the Great Migration.

It is crucial to acknowledge the immense diversity among enslaved people. Kimberly Smith, in "African American Environmental Thought" (2007), writes "that slaves' cultural context made available different belief systems, allowing the individual to take up whichever one seemed appropriate in a specific context" (23). In other words, diversity and the mixing of cultural perspectives amongst enslaved people allowed the expansion of frameworks of knowledge, fostering a diverse worldview influenced by the specific event at hand. Intersectionality plays an important role in this: "Given the complexity of racial identities, there is unlikely to be a single 'African American perspective' on wilderness any more than there is likely to be a set of wilderness experiences common to every African American" (Therriault & Mowatt, 2018, 17). These ideas reject the common generalization of all enslaved persons as one body.

In the remainder of this section, I will discuss three diverse experiences of the natural environment by enslaved Black people in America. This will be accomplished through the analysis of two slave narratives and the lyrics of the song "Strange Fruit." I want to examine these differences in order to find patterns and to analyze overarching similarities in environmental sentiments. It must be emphasized that even those similarities or patterns that can be found do not constitute an entire body of people. This is further illustrated as most enslaved people were never allowed to read or write and thus their frameworks of knowledge are unable to be captured in this study. The similarities that I will discuss may account for a majority, however, it is not a complete work of all sentiments of every enslaved person in America during this period. The slave narratives that I will examine have come from the Library of Congress slave narrative project. Miss Moore and Charles Grundy are both from Virginia. First we will examine a story told by Miss Moore.

## Miss Moore

I will never forget dis boy com' up to me while I wus dancin' wid another man an' sed, "nobody knows where you ar', Miss Moore, dey is lookin' fer you, an' is gwine kill you, so yo'come on wid me." ... I couldn't move. You know de gals an' boys all got 'round me an' told me to go wid Squareball, dat he would show me de way to my old Mistess house. Out we took, an' we ran one straight mile up de road, den through de woods, den we had to go through a straw field. Dat field seem' like three miles. After den, we met another skit of woods... if it is setch a thin' as being so scared yo\* hair stand on yo' head, I know, mine did. An' dat wasn't all, dat boy an' me puffed An' sweated like bulls. Was feared to stop, cause we might have been tracked... An' do you know, I didn't leave day 'oman's house no more for fifteen years? (Federal Writers' Project, 1936, 6-7).

This piece tells the story of Miss Moore, who goes out to a dance and finds out that her enslavers are looking for her. A friend named "Squareball" offers to show her the way home and the two run through the woods and a straw field, about three miles, to get her back home. Miss Moore recalls being "so scared [her] hair stood on [her] head" (7). During the time of her interview, the annotator inserts symbols of laughter (denoted "haha") after this story alluding to this being a funny memory compared to the traumatic experiences that can occur in the woods. We can further assume this as Miss Moore continues that "Dey telt me dem Masters down South wuz so mean to slaves dey would let 'em work dem cotton fields 'til dey fall dead wid hoes in dare hands, 'en would beat dem. I'm glad to say, we had good owners" (11). Miss Moore makes several other references to her physical safety during her time in enslavement, even mentioning that her enslaver would protect her from white vigilante groups. This fact ensures the reader that the messenger may have been exaggerating the story that her enslavers were "gwine kill" her. This anecdote is one example of an experience of an enslaved person which happens to be a more light hearted story of young adults staying out later than they were supposed to.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, along with this playful experience, Miss Moore enjoyed going fishing

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<sup>7</sup> I say this not to perpetuate the "happy slaves" trope but to simply illustrate Miss Moore's experience. As we continue looking through the narratives of enslaved people we will notice the diversity in their thoughts, perceptions, and experiences which is the goal of this portion of my thesis.

when the weather was nice (18). Moreover, she recognized the woods as a place of safety, although not of preference, during this time: "it makes me shudder when I think of some slaves had to stay in de woods an' git long best way dey could after freedom done bin' clared" (17). Although the woods did play a role in safety, she describes those who depended on the woods as just "getting along" as if it's the best they could do and they were simply surviving. We see this dependence on the land in a more crucial way through the story of Charles Grandy.

### **Charles Grandy**

Charles played around the plantation "big house", doing small errands until he reached the age of five, then his play days ended. While playing on the wood pile one morning, his master called him, "boy do you see this grass growing along the side of the fence? Well pull it all up." When his first task was finished, he was carried to the field to pull the grass from the young cotton and other growing crops. This work was done by hand because he was still too young to use the farm implements. Now he went to his task daily; from early in the morning until late in the evening. The long toilsome days completely exhausted the youngster. Often he would fall asleep before reaching home, and spend a good portion of the night on the bare ground. Awakened, he would find it quite a problem to locate his home in the darkness of night. (Federal Writers' Project, 1936, 27)

This excerpt recounts the story of five-year-old Charles Grandy's premature transition from childhood to adulthood symbolized through his newly found responsibility to tend to his enslavers' fence. We see that Grandy works directly with the land as "he was still too young to use the farm implements." Charles does not use tools like a hoe or a plow. Instead, he had to use his bare hands, day in and out, to pull grass and cotton from growing up the fence. He worked all day until he passed out from exhaustion in the grass as he could not make his way back to his home at the end of the day. This is an instance of communing with the environment through necessity. This connection with the environment *can* be seen as environmentalism, using the natural ground as a resting place and using one's hands to work directly with the earth. However, that would be to ignore to the extreme exploitative working conditions and genuine exhaustion that slaves



were expected to endure day in and day out. Grandy states that "he would fall asleep before reaching home, and spend a good portion of the night on the bare ground. Awakening, he would find it quite a problem to locate his home in the darkness of night." Imagine a five year old, who woke up in the middle of the night, to find that he is in complete darkness and can't find his home. I could assume that this had to have been horrifying for Charles. Although he does not state whether that affected the way he perceived nature and may have played a role in his ability to connect with nature in a positive sense. Instead, we can continue and push further into Miss Moore's description of the dependence on nature. Charles is not connecting with nature because he loves the smell of grass before going to bed. He isn't "getting along" or surviving either as Miss Moore may have alluded to. Charles has no other options but to fall out of exhaustion and cannot change the fact that he must work with his bare hands. Charles has created a relationship with nature out of coercion and desperation.

### **Strange Fruit**

- [1] Southern trees bear a strange fruit  
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
 Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze  
 Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees
- [5] Pastoral scene of the gallant South  
 The bulgin' eyes and the twisted mouth  
 Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh  
 Then the sudden smell of burnin' flesh

These are two verses of the poem and lyrics to the song Strange Fruit written by Abel Meeropol and popularized by Billie Holiday. The entire song makes references to both nature and the body by making a statement on the lynchings of Black people. It is most interesting, for our purposes, to witness the juxtaposition of a beautiful scene mixed with a disturbing tone. We see this from the shift between the "pastoral scene" and the "scent of magnolias" being followed directly by "bulgin' eyes" and the "smell of burnin' flesh". Meeropol defines the smell as "sudden"

illustrating how it comes from nowhere. While one may be enjoying the natural breeze there's a sudden smell of burning bodies that interrupts the pleasantries. These lines, as they go back and forth from positive to negative imagery, emphasize the complexity and paradox that is the African American relationship with nature. On the one hand we have the southern breeze, pastoral scene, and sweet magnolias. This is what Isabel Wilkerson and potentially Miss Moore experienced in nature. They connected with its beauty and serendipity. On the other hand we must also acknowledge the sudden smell of burning flesh and the fact that there are bodies swinging from trees. This is most similar to Grandy's experience, which have the same undertones of horrifying injustice and discrimination. It is interesting that Meeropol chose for a positive, beautiful scene-making to be followed by such horrifying visuals. This stylistic choice emphasizes that behind the beautiful landscape and sweet smell of the flowers, there's a stench lingering in the air of burning bodies and a "strange fruit" hanging from the trees. Although some may see the beauty in nature, there are also horrifying things that happen within it. This is what the complexity of Black environmentalism is rooted in.

## **Analysis**

Tiya Miles continues this conversation about enslaved people's perception of nature in her New York Times opinion piece "Black Bodies, Green Spaces" (2019). Miles discusses Isabel Wilkerson's "The Warmth of Other Suns" as Wilkerson "captures the wondrous beauty of this environment that migrants abandoned, detailing the story of her own grandmother's sweet-smelling, night-blooming cereus flower around which an annual neighborhood ritual formed." (Miles, 2019). Wilkerson discusses her grandmother's connection with nature after migrating from the South to Chicago during the great migration. Wilkerson conceptualizes the beauty that her grandmother finds in her neighborhood despite the circumstances that surround her placement.

The experiences of all of our authors have been very different and meaningful in their own way, illustrating the true diversity in African American environmental thought. Grandy isn't able to look back fondly on his childhood experiences in nature the way Miss Moore could. Miss Moore had fond memories running home after staying past curfew. Grandy was exploited by the same nature that Wilkerson's grandmother attempts to keep in her life after her Migration. Wilkerson has a love and appreciation of nature for its beauty.

As we have seen through Miss Moore, Charles Grandy, Tiya Miles, Isabel Wilkerson, and "Strange Fruit," ideas concerning Black environmentalism are complex and far from binary. Some have horrifying experiences which may foster a disconnection while in others there is a love of nature despite such experiences. Toney writes "My Black, southern, rural ancestors connected to land and soil in ways that are both good and bad but almost always, most of all, powerful" (Johnson & Wilkinson, 2021, 75). Black environmentalism is intertwined with the association of slavery, both the good and the bad. However, a common theme that I have seen through these readings is some type of dependence on nature, whether intentional or not. In the next sections about redlining and the Great Migration, I will explore how the ambivalence about nature has continued out of enslavement and into the urban lives that most Black Americans experience today.

### **Redlining in Richmond**

Duron Chavis<sup>8</sup>, a Richmond-native environmental leader, defines redlining as "the process of denying access to mortgages and finances on the basis of race... not only in Richmond, Virginia but all around the country" (Chavis, 2022). Redlining was expansive in the during the Jim Crow era as laws and policies were enacted to incorporate the idea of "separate but equal." We can examine Richmond's historic redlining as evidence of the parallel exclusion of Black people from green spaces. Capitol Square, Richmond's first established green space, was opened in 1824 with the prospect of being a green space for (white) residents and visitors to enjoy. Black people could only access the land if they were "accompanying a white child or laboring on the grounds" (The Valentine Museum, 2021). The integration of the new, green space was a landmark for Richmond parks. African Americans were legally excluded from being able to take part in the benefits offered by the green spaces in Richmond. This is a pattern that continues throughout Richmond's history of parks and recreation. However, this story of segregation is not unique to Richmond: "several states maintained legally racially segregated park systems, whereas several northern and midwestern states maintained segregation through extra-legal means" (Theriault & Mowatt, 2018, 20). If a state did have parks for African Americans, they were of poor quality or allowed for violence of African Americans by white vigilante groups.

We can see an example of the interaction between Black Americans and access to green space through the case of Byrd Park. In the 1930s Byrd Park, originally created in 1875, received a "C" grade noting that "This area is yellow, largely because the school for white children is in the negro area, D-8, and because the negroes of D-8 pass back and forth for access to the William Byrd Park which lies to the west" (The Valentine Museum, 2021). Not only were African Americans excluded from green spaces, poor ratings ensured that the

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<sup>8</sup> Duron develops urban gardens and is the executive director of Happily Natural Day, the organization that houses Broadrock Community Garden.

discrimination would continue for future generations by labeling the neighborhoods as unsafe to live or build future projects, which inhibited economic growth. The ratings were meant to ensure that current and future Black residents would never have access to green spaces<sup>9</sup>.

Not surprisingly, those same areas who were labeled with poor ratings are the very neighborhoods that experience the urban heat island effect today. During a study of urban heat islands in Richmond, researchers at the Science Museum of Virginia have found that sites of extreme heat included areas that were historically redlined (Saverino et al., 2021). Denial of access to green spaces increased the amount of impervious surfaces<sup>10</sup> in Black communities which increased temperatures in these communities and created modern heat islands. The act of denying access to green spaces in 1824 in the creation of parks, perpetuated by redlining in the 1950s has had climate related effects that are felt today, in the 21st century. Redlining illustrates how history dictates modern connections to nature, this is an example of a negative way that Black people were kept from natural spaces.

Numerous groups are working to mitigate these issues. The Science Museum of Virginia states that "Richmond is one of the cities that would greatly benefit from mass tree planting and other efforts to mitigate heat" (Saverino et al., 2021,15). In April 2021 the museum opened their "ProtoPath" which, through partnerships with nonprofits, has planted 25 native trees in a .2 mile corridor to help combat urban heat islands. During my interview with Sheri Shannon, owner of Shannon Strategies and co-founder of SouthSide ReLeaf, she says: "there's a lot of things at play here that we at SouthSide ReLeaf recognize in our work towards environmental justice because planting some trees that's cute but it ain't gonna solve the problem." Although SouthSide ReLeaf dedicates efforts to tree planting, Shannon emphasizes the importance of

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<sup>9</sup> White people were poor too! There were sections of white communities with low ratings too. The only difference is that these communities were never rated poorly because of their race. Areas were rated poorly due to their poverty, low quality of housing, types of jobs available, and lack of activity or inability to be rejuvenated. See *Mapping Inequality* in bibliography to learn more.

<sup>10</sup> Impervious surfaces are those like parking lots and roads which water cannot penetrate. These surfaces absorb the sun's heat due to their dark color and thus low albedo. Absorbing more heat makes the surrounding temperature warmer, and with the lack of trees (shade) these communities are much hotter than the surrounding communities.

attacking the structural inequalities that result in issues such as urban heat islands, specifically at the governmental level. It is necessary to put more resources into mitigating the effects of urban heat islands, such as educating residents and implementing structures like cooling stations. Shannon continues that "we [at SouthSide ReLeaf] are trying to dismantle those systemic inequities and build something that is sustainable and centered by the people who live in south Richmond." Environmental justice initiatives are often misguided as a result of not taking into account the structural issues at play. Future environmental justice initiatives require work that operates against systemic oppression, deeper than surface level changes.

## **The Great Migration**

The Great Migration is the result of Jim Crow terrorism, however, the connection to environmental justice is rarely realized. The Great Migration generally marks a transition from rural to urban for many African Americans following emancipation starting in the early 1900s, mostly as a response to Southern Jim Crow laws and the Great Depression. A promise of job opportunities played an influential role in the Great Migration. Despite attempts at redlining, during the Great Migration, many Black people began to start their lives in the rapidly urbanizing Richmond, VA. Although not considered a "Black Mecca" in the way that cities like Atlanta or Chicago were, by the late 1970s, more than 50% of Richmond's population was Black up from 30% in the 1950s (Lombard, 2015). This illustrates the rate that Black people were coming to Richmond during this period. Wilkerson (2010) notes the demographic of people participating in the Great Migration: "it was made up of young people with no personal recollection of slavery - they were two generations removed from it... free but not free" (Wilkerson, 2010, 43). Richmond was an interesting area where many young, Black Southerners considered Richmond their destination due to its industry and economic opportunities; whites from Richmond fled to the suburbs due to the Black influx to the city (Lombard, 2015).

It would be correct to assume that this shift from rural to urban would foster a disconnect from the natural environment. There is much evidence that would support this, especially considering how crowded and unsanitary cities were and still are today. Toney mentions this in her article: "People wanted to believe the promise of jobs and economic security peddled by big companies, but their operations yielded polluted land and water" (Johnson & Wilkinson, 2021, 76). This fosters a certain stereotype about people who lived in the city. Miles elaborates how "Blacks became associated with gritty cities, disassociated from nature in the popular view" (Miles, 2019). This was one of the ideas that fostered the perception that Black people do not go out into nature. Theriault & Mowatt emphasize how segregation was perpetuated during this era

in natural spaces: "Parks designated for African Americans were smaller, fewer in number, had poorer facilities, and were poorly funded" (Therault & Mowatt, 2018, 20). However, many Black people, including those who moved to the North, attempted to stay connected to their natural environment. Interestingly, despite Jim Crow laws and the threat of violence "African Americans continued to visit local and national parks, beaches, and forest preserves" (Therault & Mowatt, 2018, 22).

Isabel Wilkerson captures the perspectives of three individuals in their first hand experience of the Great Migration in her narrative nonfiction book, "The Warmth of Other Suns." Ida Mae Brandon Gladey was from Mississippi and arrived in Chicago in 1937. Wilkerson states that Ida Mae "cooks no differently than if she were in Mississippi" (Wilkerson, 2010, 481). Ida Mae actually attempts to connect with nature in the same ways that she did in the South: "Ida Mae sets honey on the window screen... to feed the bees... she gives away tiny seeds of four-o'clocks and morning glories" (481). She also rejects the processed foods customary of the North, such as self-rising meal for cornbread: "for generations, they had used plain old cornmeal, back to slavery days, when that was all that they had" (482). These practices are all she has ever known which makes it easier for her to continue them even in a new place. She is able to transition to the northern landscape similar to how our ancestors were able to transition and benefit from the foreign lands that they were brought to. Ida Mae continues to exercise Southern practices in the North, illustrating her effortless connection with nature despite the hectic new city life. Ida Mae demonstrates the way that Southern sentiments of nature, passed through generations of Black people, have made their way from the South to the North. Ida Mae is able to keep these traditions while navigating a new landscape, similar to how our ancestors had to do when they first came to America.

Miles focuses on the role of the Great Migration in Black environmentalism when analyzing Margaret Walker's "Southern Song," She states that "Out of those mixed feelings of longing and relief, migrants remembered and remade connections with nature... The grass in



these cities, if not greener, was still grass" (Miles, 2019). This quote illustrates how there was still an attempted connection with nature after the migration north although the landscape was not like the rural pastures of the South. Miles goes on to discuss how collards were grown in urban gardens, similar to Ida Mae's attempts to connect Southern practices to her new life in the North. Black communities continued to find ways to connect with nature despite this transition from rural to urban. Theriault & Mowatt discuss a 1928 survey "of African American migrants to Detroit (n = 1,000) revealed that hunting and fishing were the preferred leisure activities of approximately half of respondents" (Theriault & Mowatt, 2018, 20). In other words, Black people continued to hold on to, if not increased, their desire for nature after migrating to the northern cities. Williams (2018) emphasizes how the North allowed Black people to participate in outdoor recreation: "Chicago enabled African Americans to envision a new modernity where nature was a space of leisure, not labor. Nature became an escape from racial oppression, a stage for political activism, and even a training ground for nurturing respectable adolescents and young adults." Despite the contradiction, moving to the cities often had a positive effect on the ability of Black people to connect with nature in many ways.<sup>11</sup> This ranges from people feeling safer up North to Ida Mae's ability to hold many of her Southern practices after migrating. These experiences illustrate the way that our historic experiences continue to shape the way Black people live despite shifts in life experience and changes in location.

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that while there are positive experiences in nature as a result of the Great Migration, there are numerous negative ones. The book *Clean and White* by Carl A. Zimring encapsulates the environmental justice issue inherent to the packed cities where Black people were then associated with dirt and very little sanitation practices were put in place for their health and safety.

### **Black Cemeteries in Richmond**

The historically Black cemeteries and the numerous Black bodies buried throughout Richmond illustrate the governmental disregard for the Black experience including that in nature. Every day Richmonders walk on, drive over, and work near the bodies of deceased Black people. Friends of East End Cemetery state: "These cemeteries are among the hundred of historic Black burial grounds... harmed by generations of Jim Crow policy that starved them of funding and care" (Friends of East End Cemetery, 2021). From our bodies being ripped out of the ground to highways being built on top of us, Black bodies in Richmond have been constantly disregarded. Davis (2003) attempts to bring humor to this situation: "After being 'buried' under mounds of oppression in life, their graves were adorned with a cross made of sticks" (44). Davis points out how even after slavery Black people continue to be disregarded in death. In addition to our physical bodies, African American communities' culture and perspectives are also neglected through this. For instance, nature has historically played a major role in our everyday lives through our experiences during enslavement, the symbolism of nature in our lives and deaths, and depending on nature for our livelihood.

Today, descendants are discovering, and still searching for, the graves of their relatives. This is especially true when considering the emphasis of both spirituality and family in the historic and modern Black community. For many, ancestors are just as valuable as any other relative: "I feel like your ancestors make you who you are today. They raised the people who raised the people who raised you... in my mind caring for people in death is just as important as caring for people in life" (Friends of East End Cemetery, 2021). The historic Black cemeteries foster an emotional connection with the land. Spiritually, the outdoors played an important role in enslaved peoples' ability to worship and commune. The outdoors allowed Black people to congregate, we plant trees in honor of dead relatives, pour alcohol into the earth on behalf of a loved one, have baptism rituals, and put flowers, rocks, and shells at gravesites. Black burial

grounds did not allow families to commune or carry out nature-based rituals for their ancestors. Davis (2003) states that "Plantation owners and others alike could not make heads or tails of the customs; they could only say they were voodoo or savage like" (45). Although these nature-based rituals emphasize the importance of outdoor spaces for our community, our cemeteries and our bodies continue to be overlooked.

I attended a volunteer day cleaning up Woodland Cemetery here in Richmond. Davis (2003) writes that this cemetery has gotten to this point due to neglect and vandalism: "The cemetery was so neglected that trees acted as barricades preventing anyone from visiting it or burying their loved ones" (37). I expected this day to look like the removal of invasive species and general maintenance of the land. During my time there I worked closely with two other young ladies of color. Together we uncovered the grave sites of three individuals. Realizing that I had been walking over and digging near the bodies of these people brought me immediate anger and sadness. The fact that their lives have been covered by overgrowth and walked over feels immensely disrespectful. The organizer taught us how to carefully uncover the grave, clean it, and help him to document the name. The other girls and I reflected on this together, finished cleaning the graves, and were careful to pay attention to where exactly to walk. Later that day, I watched my white peers gossip and laugh at the thought of opening a casket and seeing a dead Black body. Black bodies are constantly disrespected, especially in nature. Similar to their enslaver ancestors, my white peers did not understand the spiritual significance of the events that took place during our time volunteering. In this way, the story of the Black historic cemeteries runs parallel to the discourse of the indifference of Black environmentalism. The two incidents are fatal to the prosperity of our community as this ignorance can cause the lack of support and provision of resources to help our communities to survive.

## **Case Studies**

Contrary to popular belief and despite efforts against it, Black people show up in natural spaces and illustrate our environmentalism in so many ways. However, since these forms are distinct from mainstream environmentalism, they are often ignored. At the same time, I am dedicated to avoiding relegating necessity to a white framework of environmentalism. For instance, during my time at Broadrock Community Garden, I noticed how more residents used bikes as a primary form of transportation. Over the span of a few hours, more than ten residents passed by on bikes while fewer than five cars passed by. Especially if studied at a grander scale, this *could* correlate with a decrease in carbon emissions and fuel consumption by the community which *could* reflect a broader community desire to decrease greenhouse gasses and combat climate change. However, it is more notable that this likely demonstrates the lack of accessibility of reliable (public) transportation and the cost burdens that are associated with having an automobile. Similar to Grandy, we see a conflict in how these processes can be understood. Although works of environmentalism in their own right, the two incidents have a historical overtone of systemic injustice. Instead of diminishing the necessities of these communities, I would rather highlight those as ways we participate in environmentalism unknowingly and unintentionally. Ignorance of Black environmentalism as a form of environmentalism disregards its importance for the Black community. This could be a hindrance in the climate crisis by impeding effective strategies that could be used against the effects of climate change such as urban heat islands and food deserts. This is environmental racism.

Still, it must be acknowledged that Black groups aren't showing up as much in the world of mainstream environmentalism. This is problematic especially in noting that Black communities will likely get the short end of the stick when it comes to our climate crisis and acts of environmental injustice. I have discussed this earlier concerning the Science Museum of Virginia's findings of the correlation of the denial of access to green spaces with increases in

urban heat islands. With the expanding consciousness of both systematic and overt racism in the US, initiatives to promote justice have been amplified. Today there are numerous environmental justice-focused organizations that prioritize the health, wellbeing, and safety of minority communities. There have been numerous attempts, at various scales, to increase Black environmentalism and connect Black communities to nature in a world where they have been kept from it. However, ultimately these will be unsuccessful without taking Black environmentalism into consideration. This section will continue by examining three organizations that highlight the importance of Black environmentalism.

### **RVA Community Fridges**

RVA Community Fridges (RVACF), whose motto is "take what you need, give what you can" is an initiative that depends on volunteers and donations, providing free food to Richmond residents. RVA Community Fridges was founded by Taylor Scott who actively relies on the local community to sustain and upkeep the several fridges found throughout Richmond. RVACF uses Discord, a group messaging platform, and Instagram to communicate with community members asking for donations and volunteers for various projects and needs. The Discord group has over 200 members who are dedicated to combating food insecurity in Richmond. As of today, there are nine fridges and one food pantry that Scott manages with a few others on her administrative team and with immense support from the local community. RVACF is not a non-profit, rather categorizing themselves as a mutual aid group, but hopes to transition to a 1023 non-profit.<sup>12</sup> Taylor stated that they were striving for a non-profit design for "access to money and access to do certain things." You can find Scott actively on Instagram having Live Streams, supporting Black owned businesses, or chatting in the Discord messenger asking for volunteers to take

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<sup>12</sup> A mutual aid is a less formal type of civic engagement where people use any resources they have to help others or to reach a common goal (ex. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief RVA). A non-profit is similar to a mutual aid but they are able to receive financial donations but none of the income can go to the administration or members of the group. A 1023 is the form that is filled out for a tax-exemption status of a non profit organization.

initiative on any given project. She depends on local artists to decorate the fridges, business and community groups to host the fridges, and volunteers to supply and clean them.

Community fridges are not unique to Richmond as Taylor actually mentioned during an event. Her friend's experience with fridges in California is what got her interested in starting an organization in Richmond. Although not a formal organization here in Richmond, community fridges can be found throughout urban areas of our nation. The Freedge Network, for example, connects organizers of 160 community fridges from nearly 30 states. Community fridges combat food insecurity, especially within food deserts<sup>13</sup>, and help to decrease food waste. Many local restaurants, who may have ordered too much food or have an abundance that's unneeded, often drop their overflow of food at community fridges which then provides free meals for community members. Although I wasn't able to get in touch for an official interview with any of the managers of RVACF, I have tuned in to several of their Instagram lives and their passion for community is inspiring. I watched as Scott attended a local market and connected with every vendor present, celebrating their hard work, sharing ideas, and overall showing her support. I have also had the opportunity to visit one of the several fridge locations.

I visited the community fridge hosted by Studio Two Three. The studio is a large building with a few different entrances which made the fridge slightly difficult to locate. However, depending on the RVA Community Fridge Instagram and related websites, I was able to locate the fridges much easier. After arriving, I checked both the Instagram page and Discord channel for instructions and if anything in particular was needed from my visit. In this case I had to report whether the lights in the fridge were working. The fridge had posters reminding about cleanliness and fridge etiquette and gave a map with directions of other fridge locations around the city. Once a plain white fridge, the Studio Two Three community fridge has animated-like artwork on its doors and sides. The background of the entire fridge is a sky blue color, the sides

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<sup>13</sup>A food desert is an area where residents do not have access to healthy, nutritious foods whether that be due to distance from healthy food options or costs.

have clouds painted on them and the front has little stars. On the front of the fridge there are six animated vegetable characters that tell different things about the fridge; community fridge, free food, take what you need, and leave what you can are all painted on the front of the fridge. Right beside the fridge there are three bins: one was for pantry items like canned goods, the next had essentials like masks and some toiletries, and the other had contraceptives. I dropped off my pack of UTZ Chips in the pantry bins and then sent in updates to the Discord Chat about the current state of the fridge.

Aside from providing food, in "Community Self-Organizing and the Urban Food Commons in Berlin and New York" (2019), Morrow emphasizes how these revenues, which he defines as "urban food commons," also support self-organization in communities. Moore states that urban food commons are unique in that they "rely on a unique combination of technical and social innovations to make under-utilized resources visible and engage community members in their imagination, access, governance, and care" (Moore, 2019, 11). Self-organizing groups can have lasting impacts on their community due to their ability to engage the community and make resources visible. I would argue that they are able to do so more than a governmental program due to the self-organizing community's proximity to the community itself. This idea of self-organization is integral to combating community-wide issues such as hunger, pandemics, and most relevantly our climate crisis. Shannon continues this message "the reality is and this is what I think is so beautiful about Black people in general because we're so resilient. This work is not new to us. Organizing is not new to us." This self-organization, ability to communicate, and mobility has been rooted in our fight within the civil rights movement which has provided us with skills to make the changes that we want to see today.

During one of the RVACF Instagram Live's<sup>14</sup>, Taylor was joined by Quee, who also works closely with the administrative side of the organization, to discuss their plans and goals for the

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<sup>14</sup> This live stream was on their Instagram page on 11 February at 8:30am and also streamed on Facebook Live.

fridge. Quee stated that "the goal is that the community actively does the cleaning, stocking, maintenance, and monitoring" and continued that their personal goal is "empowering the community to know that they can step up and do something." Quee also emphasized that although they "wear the admin hats" that if the community raises something that they want to do, they allow the member to lead that initiative with the support of the RVACF community. It's clear that self-organization is at the core of RVACF and this is one of the many things that make this program so successful and sustainable for the community.

### **Broadrock Community Garden**

Broadrock Community Garden is unique as a once vacant lot now provides neighborhood residents with connection to nature and access to healthy food options. The garden is located right in the front of the neighborhood and onlooks traffic intersecting E Broad Rock Rd and Stockton St. The front of the garden, that is closest to the road, has a path that leads from the sidewalk to the garden. As you enter, to your left are the flowers and bushes that beautify the property and a mural which was painted by a local artist.<sup>15</sup> To your right are the gardening beds. Finally, in the front of the garden there is the fire pit and wooden pavilion made with picnic benches and rain barrels attached to it. Technically, the garden itself is city property that is managed by Briana Stevenson (Bri).

Bri, who grew up in Henrico, told me how her struggle living in food insecurity has shaped her passion for it today: "I was 23 and had no idea what a plant looked like growing out of the ground... I just got passionate about educating myself about what I was putting in my body and being intentional about caring for myself better and that led me trying to learn how to garden." Community gardens can provide low income neighborhoods with healthy, accessible

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<sup>15</sup> The mural is a protective goddess, as Bri describes. Her hands are mudras for growth. Mudras are from many different practices but are hand motions that are believed to change one's mood, perspective, or attitude. We see these a lot in practices like yoga or meditation. Bri says that this is one of the many forms of symbolism found throughout the garden.



food alternatives (Wakefield, 2007). Bri received a more formal education on gardening through attending training from Lewis Ginter, which was under Duron Chavis at the time.<sup>16</sup> Broadrock was given to her cohort as a part of this program and after moving nearby to the garden it "fell into [her] lap as [she] was the only one willing to take responsibility for the space." Even with this informal leadership position, Bri constantly refers to the garden as "ours" emphasizing how it belongs to every person in the community. Although residents can apply for a bed to grow their own things, people often come by and pick up any food they need without a problem. Interestingly, RVACF got their own plot this year to grow food that will supply the community fridges. Glover (2003) reflects on how transformative citizen decision making can be when "the community gardeners, not their city officials, make decisions about the urban spaces in their neighborhood" (193). Citizen decision making helps to improve self-organization efforts that mitigate local issues such as the effects of climate change.

I have attended volunteer work days at Broadrock to help beautify the area and ensure that it was safe and clean for people to commune. My first day at the garden (10 October 2021) I walked up to find a group of four men, likely to be in their 40s or 50s, who were talking and enjoying the sunny day at the pavilion adjacent to the garden. The men talked for a bit about their plans for the day then after a few minutes they got on their bikes and rode away. Bri describes the users of the community as "learning Black people." She continued that there has been a mix between residents and non-resident users and she plans to increase resident-specific programming in the future. Moreover, it is obvious that residents use this space for more than food. Bri says "there are people in the community who use it for comfort... I do think the food thing is something that is a matter of them learning how to grow or learning that this space is for them to grow in." Having access to this outdoor space provides a safe haven for community members. Bri emphasized this message to me; she informed me that members of

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<sup>16</sup> Bri informed me that through this program Duron paid for the infrastructure of the garden but most other expenses, in the first year, were taken care of by Bri. Now, they receive more help from the state through grants and similar programming.

the community often come, on their own, to socialize, tend to the garden, pick up food, and one lady in particular comes every morning to help clean up any litter.

One day, I watched as Nate, a volunteer at the garden, carefully used his bare hands to pick and clean the soil from the vegetables. As I was watching, Nate looked up to me and laughed saying "I love playing in dirt." He explained to me what certain vegetables are and why they grow the way they do. Nate told me that he learns everything he knows from "youtube university." At one point there was a hoe and a rake but very early on Bri threw them to the other side of the garden and we used our hands to do all of the work. I used gloves only to pick up trash. The way we interacted with earth was direct. With this project in mind, I couldn't help but think about the many ancestors that I would be connecting with through working directly in the dirt. This reminded me of Charles Grandy who couldn't use any tools during his time enslaved and at age five had to pluck weeds out of his enslavers' yard. At Broadrock, we did not use any tools to carefully pluck vegetables from the garden that help to provide nourishment for our community members. Grandy was exploited, forced to work the yard for the benefit of his enslaver. Today, we are able to create a healthier connection with the earth on our own terms and for our own benefit. Through groups like Broadrock community garden, we are able to reshape the narratives of Black people's experience in nature. Here, this looks like changing who exactly is benefiting from our work in nature.

Duron Chavis states that "we know that climate change is affecting people of color... and communities that have been traditionally marginalized, faster. And of course, those same neighborhoods are lacking in access to healthy food" (Chavis, 2022). Marginalized communities lack access to nutritious food often due to economic barriers but also because of distance from healthy food sources (food deserts) or lack of time or knowledge about nutrition. At a more anthropological level, the gardens foster a place for community: "Community networks and social support were developed through the gardens... was seen to help to bring people out of isolation, and served as a starting point for broader discussions of community issues"

(Wakefield et al., 2007, 100). It is from these broader community discussions that we can then address the changes that we face and connect that to climate change. These discussions can increase participation in environmentalism through illustrations of how environmentalism does not only look white. Seeing Black people in nature in this way may encourage participation in nature and shift negative perspectives of nature by other Black people. Broadrock creates opportunities for Black people to see other Black people in nature. Here, we can create the discourse around "environmentalism" and define for ourselves what this looks like, how this takes place in our communities, and how doing so is for our own benefit. This will allow us to break away from the stigma that Black people don't do certain things and allow us to confront the limitations that stop us from being able to participate in nature. Further, fostering collaborative discussion at the community level can spark a shift in the conversations about environmentalism and provide a space for changes to be made on a larger scale.

### **Black Girls Hike**

Black Girls Hike is an LLC founded by school teachers Nicole Boyd and Nashara Tucker (Shara). During my time with them, they expressed that they founded this organization based on their love for hiking and want to connect more people of color with hiking to combat that limiting belief that hiking was for white people. Interestingly, I learned that Nicole is much like myself and that growing up Nicole's dad would often take her hiking too. An important part of Nicole's family cookouts was to go hiking, even without formal trails. During the "If She Can Do It, You Can Too" podcast, Amanda (the host) asks Nicole if she realized that hers was the only Black family out there. Nicole responded that "I didn't notice because who I was with looked like me. It didn't feel like we were just an eyeball." (Amanda, 2022, 15:06). Shara, on the other hand, took a lot of persuading by both Nicole, her partner, and other friends to get more involved. Shara shared with me that her first time hiking was at age 31, with Nicole, for a birthday: "my experience with

the outdoors was never let's go to a state park or let's go camping it was more like you're playing outside playing sports."

Shara and Nicole talked to me about their own intersection with being Black hikers. Shara shares: "being outdoors, for Black people, hasn't always been a good thing so having a positive spin on being in nature for me has been very rewarding." Nicole elaborates on this: "the people around me were Black so [hiking] must be something everybody does... I was an exception to something that was historically such a painful place." Nicole acknowledges the history behind how slavery may shape negative perspectives on nature. However, her work with Black Girl shows that we can reshape history to challenge the beliefs that limit Black people's experiences in nature. They are most passionate about doing so by making Black women particularly feel safer in nature and realizing that it is for everyone. This goal is something that is personal to both Nicole and Shara. Shara states: "we personally feel like it's important because nature and land belong to everybody, we're all on stolen land." (Amanda, 2022, 18:52).

I first joined BGH on a hike to Richmond's Slave Trail on 5 February 2022. There were twelve adults with us, two kids, and two dogs. The historic slave trail is interesting in itself as we were able to walk the actual route that was taken by enslaved Africans from Ancarrow's landing to deeper into the city where they would be sold. I went on this hike with my friend Sherley (who is an Afro-Latina woman) who helped me realize the issues about access to such a historic area. This historic land had no sign of maintenance or hints at attempts to preserve it. The trail itself was covered by leaves and could hardly be considered a trail (See Appendix). Sherley pointed out to me that places like this, and thinking about the historic cemeteries, always have some sort of construction going on which really takes away from their historic meaning and value. We brought this up while talking to Nicole and she said it was in her, and BGH's, mission to help preserve this historic location: "as you've seen, the first mile of the trail is very unkept... I see the love that other parts of the city get" and she mentioned how BGH is working with other organizations to bring that to the Slave Trail.

Moore et al (2007) found that involvement in conservation based groups correlates with increases in the overall quality of life for residents. "Members of conservation groups reportedly gain a wide variety of benefits from their involvement, including the social aspects associated with membership, mental and physical benefits, and the knowledge that their contribution is preserving and improving the local environment" (Moore, 2007). Being a member of groups, such as BGH, has a variety of benefits for mental health and community engagement. This study illustrates the need for connection in both community and with the land. Through the creation of and participation in conservation based groups, members have experienced a variety of benefits. These benefits were both intrinsic and beneficial for the broader community at large. Toney echoes this message stating that "community is the lens so often left out of the environmental discussion, but it's vital for identifying real solutions" (Johnson & Wilkinson, 2021, 76).

Community was something that I directly experienced during my time with BGH. During our hike at Belle Island we depended on one another to complete the hike and conquer fears. While three of the women attempted to mount a boulder, we all cheered them on and took pictures. Two older ladies in particular stood and watched in awe, blaming their older age as stopping them from being able to climb. After some encouragement from the rest of the group, the two ladies' confidence rose and they climbed the rock together. We all cheered for them, took pictures of them, and guided them on the safest way to dismount the rock. In addition to this, there was a footbridge that went over the river that I was terrified of crossing. One older lady grabbed my hand, comforted me, and multiple other ladies cheered for me when I made it to the other side. From the constant support in conquering fears to getting bugs off of one another, BGH fosters an amazing sense of community. Curating memories like this for future generations of Black people will help to dispel the beliefs that nature isn't for us. This can support a shift in the negative attitudes that many Black people have about the outdoors. Nicole

and Shara spoke to me about the role that generational trauma plays in the ability to connect with nature and how they constantly try to combat this in their own families.

## **Survey and Results**

I created a survey to illustrate that Black people, often unknowingly, engage in environmentalism. From February to March 2022 I ran a survey entitled "Relationships with Nature" (hereafter referred to as the "Nature Survey") with the goal of understanding diverse perspectives of environmentalism. The Nature Survey was not focused on any age range or race although those factors are recorded. The Nature Survey was spread through word of mouth, social media, and various Richmond based group chats (such as those for students at the University of Richmond and a local book club). However, the Nature Survey was not limited to Richmonders. I tried intentionally to not focus on environmental groups as I wanted to understand the reasoning behind those who may not identify as "environmentalist" and do not participate in formal environmental based organizations.

Two questions on the survey were ranking scale questions and five short answer questions. One limitation of my survey was that I wasn't able to follow up on the ranking questions, which leaves room for speculation over why people chose a certain response. Some scale-based, ranking questions could have also been exaggerated or up to respondents' interpretation as they were on a scale of 1 to 5. The ranking starts off at a scale of 1, which could've been a 0 to more accurately see users who had absolutely no connection to the question. As a virtual survey, many used the survey as a time to show off their humor (one denoted their race as "human") or misunderstood the question, something that could not be followed up on as I did not collect email addresses nor contact information. In the Nature Survey I received 98 responses from a group of diverse age ranges, races, and geographic locations (all were from the US). 79 respondents are Black, 12 white, 5 Asian, 5 Hispanic/Latinx, and 1 Native American. 21% of respondents are under 18, 39% between 18-35, 25% between 35-55, and 13% over 55 years old.

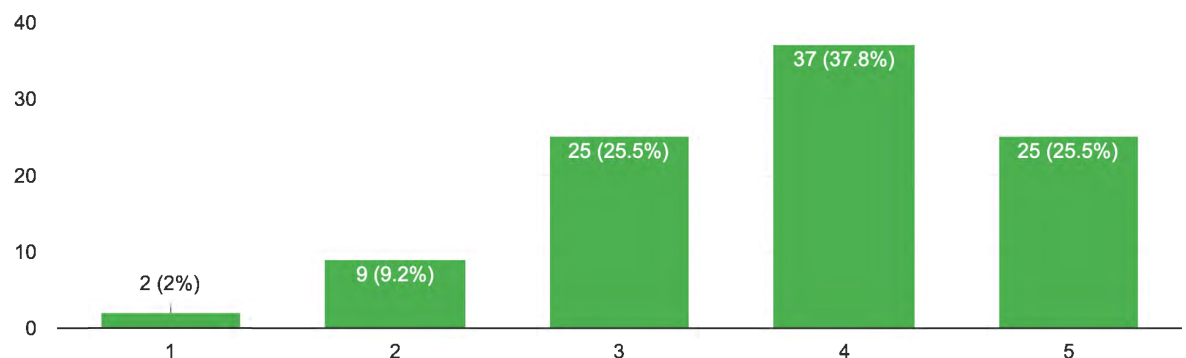
Question one was a short answer question: "How would you define the word 'environmentalist'?" I received many answers that included someone made up of "someone who cares about the environment" which really did not get at what the environment is perceived as. The main categorization of answers included: Scientific, Conservation/Protection, Advocacy, or Intrinsic Connection.

Question two was a rating question ranging from 1 to 5 "I think my surrounding environment (outside home/work) is beautiful and often spend time looking at or being in nature." In this question, a response of 1 was associated with strongly disagreeing and 5 with strongly agree. These responses gave a curve shifted more to the right with the highest response being 4 with thirty-seven picks. Only two people responded with a 1 and twenty-five people responded with a 5.

Question three was the second rating question: "How often do you believe you spend time in nature." A response of 1 indicated never/infrequent and one of 5 indicated at least once a day. Here, I got more closely to a bell curve with 3 being the most frequent answer with twenty-six responses. 1 had five responses and 5 had nineteen responses.

I think my surrounding environment (outside home/work) is beautiful and often spend time looking at or being out in nature

98 responses

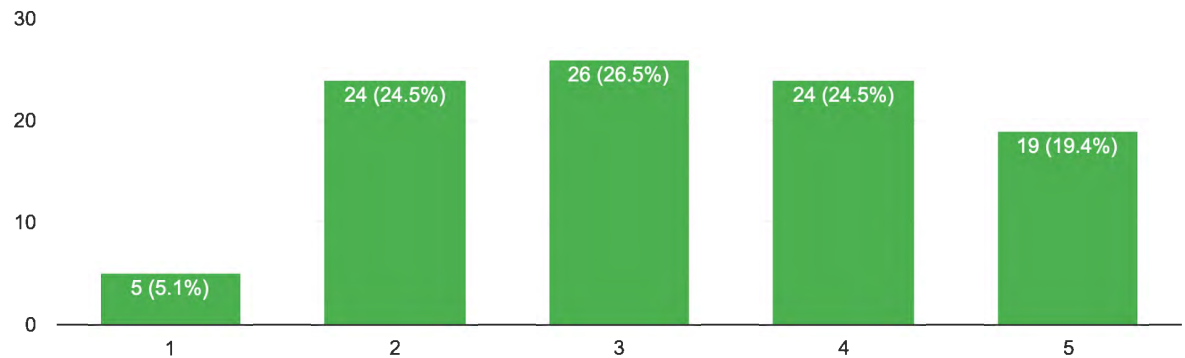


Question Two



### How often do you believe you spend time in nature

98 responses



### Question Three

Question four was "List 3 activities where you spend time in nature." Using broader categories, there were 91 responses of walking or running and within that 29 people indicated hiking specifically. 68 people indicated that they enjoyed some type of outdoor event. In this category I included concerts, watching and participating in sports, exercising, and swimming. The sports ranged from skiing, swimming, fishing, and hunting. 30 people responded that they enjoyed sitting in a park or sightseeing. 2 of these people included bird watching as an activity. 18 people indicated gardening or some type of yard work including washing their cars or raking leaves. 32 people talked about the leisure activities they participate in such as reading, doing homework, eating, listening to music, stargazing, and hammocking. 15 people indicated that in some way they enjoy communing with others like having cookouts, family reunions, or taking children outdoors. Of the 98 people that responded, only 2 of the responses stated that they do not go outside at all.

Question five was "What issues have you experienced firsthand stopping you from spending more time in nature." Respondents were given a checklist and an "other" box to write in their own responses. The choices they were able to choose from were: scheduling, not a

priority, physical distance from natural spaces, not knowing what to do, or they could indicate that they've never had any issues with being outdoors. 16 respondents were positively satisfied with the amount of time that they spent outdoors, indicating that they've never had any issues with trying to get out in nature. 14 respondents were negatively satisfied with the amount of time they spent outdoors indicating that it is not a priority and that they did not want to spend any time in nature. 18 respondents said their physical distance from natural spaces hindered their ability to spend time outdoors. 54 respondents had issues with finding the time to spend time in nature. 14 respondents indicated that they did not know what to do outdoors. Other answers included: allergies, covid, baby, weather, transportation, bugs, and unleashed dogs.

Question six was "Think about the last time that you spent more than 15 minutes in nature/outdoors. Please describe what you did and how you felt in a few sentences." I categorized this broadly into positive or negative experiences and had a third category if it was mixed or indistinguishable. Of the respondents there were 13 incomplete responses, 5 negative reactions, and the other 80 were positive. One negative response stated that the respondent "I felt sticky & like bugs were surrounding me", another noted how hot and uncomfortable they were, the third explained how hard it was walking through the snow, and the other two simply stated that they were not interested. The incomplete responses told me what they were doing outdoors (skating, planting, walking) but failed to elaborate on how it made them feel. There were a variety of emotions connected with respondents' last time in nature: beautiful, free, therapeutic, peaceful, quiet, scenery, appreciation, relaxing or stress relief. Many respondents mentioned their mental health benefits. Respondents also stated that they weren't only happy because of nature, spending time with loved ones outdoors is another common theme in respondents' enjoyment of time outdoors. There were a few mixed responses where a respondent enjoyed themselves despite a negative stimulus such as the heat, the smell of weed, or allergies.

My final question asked respondents to indicate whether they were a part of any environmental organizations. 94 respondents said they were not a part of any environmental organizations. The other 4 respondents were a part of organizations that did environmental work such as Top Teens America which participates in routine clean ups and a Swimming Group in a local Recreation Center.

This survey has illustrated that there is a widespread appreciation and love for nature in diverse groups of the Black community although they may not consider themselves environmentalist or join any formal groups. During my interviews with BGH, Nicole told me how she and Shara would take "hikes" to Midlothian Moms which was in reality a five minute, trailless walk. The definition of "hike" is enough to push people away. Similar to how I've seen in this survey: calling it "environmentalist" immediately results in a disassociation, although most of the activity that respondents engaged in should be recognized as environmental. This is the unfortunate result of the disregard of Black environmentalism.

## **Conclusion**

With the increase in environmental justice laws and programs, such as President Biden's Environmental Justice Executive Order,<sup>17</sup> it is necessary to consider the limiting beliefs that are inherent in conceptions of environmentalism and those of justice. Black people are excluded from green spaces while our forms of recreation in nature are not acknowledged which fosters the misconception that black people don't go outside. This in turn disincentivizes and discounts acts of Black environmentalism which is harmful when considering how important groups like the ones I have explored in this paper are in mitigating the effects of our climate crisis for the Black community, by the Black community. In this paper I have attempted to justify the need to increase and appreciate Black environmentalism both on its own and in the larger environmental movement. I have done this through examining the past and present of Black environmentalism which illustrates the longevity and reflectivity inherent to it.

Gentrification is an issue that I have often considered coming in tandem with the expansion of the acceptance of forms of Black environmentalism. When whites start to appreciate our forms of environmentalism, will they try to take it for themselves? However, the three groups that I have examined have illustrated the importance of community and self-organization to combat this. Self-organization can combat gentrification through its community based nature. Moreover, Black communities have our own ways of showing a connection with nature. Although it differs from white environmentalism, it works for what we have. RVACF uses nature to provide healthy food options. Broadrock Community Garden provides connection with and maintenance of nature in a way that benefits our communities directly. Black Girls Hike reshapes history by shifting the narratives around Black

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<sup>17</sup> Set on January 27, 2021 the executive order illustrates dedication to combating EJ issues and mitigating climate change. Read more about the Executive Order at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/01/26/fact-sheet-a-year-advancing-environmental-justice/>.

environmentalism. Barnes (2011) sums this up: "In collaboration, in building communities in the present, and in presenting the ongoing history-making that collaboration involves that we can shift the basis of meaning from sites themselves to what there is new to say about them given what's changed in the world around us and what has not" (Barnes, 2011, 43). Community based organizations and initiatives light the path that is true environmental justice. This form of environmental justice is done for the benefit of the community while simultaneously engaging community members in every step.

My call to action for you, my reader, whether you consider yourself African American or otherwise, is to be open to forms of environmentalism that are not "granola." I want for you to be ready to accept Black forms of environmentalism for what they are and encourage participation in these forms of connecting with nature. It is my hope that this will spark a connection between what we accept as environmentalism with the broader movement and that environmental organizations will meet us where we are. Instead of planting trees on our tracks, we could work to create interpretive signage or nature scavenger hunts at recreation centers. Through movements like this we can further environmental education, communication, and understanding by the means of the connection that is already established between the Black community and our natural environment. Shannon said that "There are so many dynamics at play here with race and gender and education, income, accessibility that doesn't always come to the surface because we're in this space that is so white." When we acknowledge and appreciate Black environmentalism, we are then able to mitigate the differences within the Black community to increase involvement in the movement by our own means for our own communities.

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#### **Survey by Author**

[Nature Survey], survey conducted on-line, [February-March 2022]



**Appendix**



RVACF: Studio Two Three Location. Pictured is the fridge itself, the two pantry bins, and the one toiletry bin.



The Slave Trail's actual trail was not very noticeable and is clearly not being preserved to its greatest extent. The leaves on the ground don't help it to stand out either. Many groups, including Black Girls Hike do have work days where they clean and rake up invasive species from the trail.



This picture shows how misleading the trail continues to be as it is gated off with a sign that denies access to the trail. The sign says "Authorized Vehicles Only" with a closed, yellow gate which is a little less visible through this picture.



You can see in this picture how the landmarks weren't even marked well (if at all). The landmarks do not show that the trail continues beyond that point or in which direction it takes. Interestingly enough, there's a cone which is a physical symbol to not access the trail although it is open to the public.