"To Love the Wind and the Rain"

AFRICAN AMERICANS and ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

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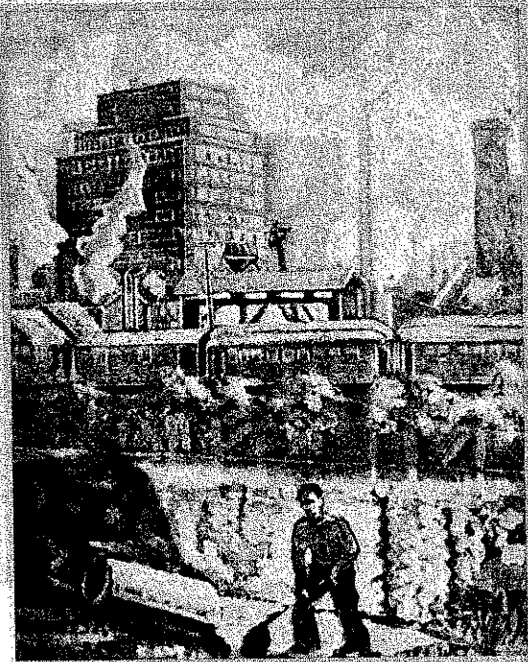

Edited by DIANNE D. GLAVE and MARK STOLL

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I dedicate
to the memory of Cyri
Gladys Gordo
with thanks to Harold a
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To my parents, D
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for their supp
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FOREWORD

CAROLYN MERCHANT

President Theodore Roosevelt was on a ten-day bear hunt in the dense canebrakes of the Mississippi Delta in 1907. "I must see a live bear the first day," he told his guides. Holt Collier, African American hunter par excellence, and his trained dogs set out to track the quarry. In advance of the party, Collier trailed and drove a bear into the lake and, with his best dog, plunged into the water: "I slicked up the rope with the blue mud from the bottom. . . . I kicked the bear and he stuck his head up. While he was shaking the water from his eyes, I dropped the rope over his head, moved back about ten feet or so, and tied it to a tree." When Roosevelt reached the lake, he too ran into the water after the bear. "Don't shoot him while he's tied," Collier admonished the president. Despite the urging of the others to go for the kill, Roosevelt complied. The lives of the bear-hounds, who would have charged the dying, desperate bear, and the honor code of the sports hunter were at stake. Not until the last two days of the hunt did the guides corner a fleeing bear, and Roosevelt finally took his trophy.[1]

Roosevelt, in his own separate account of the hunt, describes Holt Collier as a former slave with "all the dignity of an African chief," who "for half a century . . . had been a bear-hunter, having killed or assisted in killing over three thousand bears." Together the two narratives—one oral, one written—form sources for a multistoried, multicultural environmental history. Collier the tracker and hunter knew intimately the wildlife of the impenetrable canebrakes, the formidable hanging vines and creepers of the bayous, and the habits of bears of all ages in all seasons. Roosevelt the wilderness writer and conservationist created the dramatic setting of the giant cypress swamp, filled with dangerous water moccasins, elusive wildcats, and striking ivory-billed woodpeckers. Together the two hunters paint a composite picture of nature in a local environment, its natural resources, and the relationships between blacks and whites.[2]

"To Love the Wind and the Rain" draws on such sources to craft an environmental history of African Americans and nature. Here blacks are the main actors in American development. Exploring responses to the natural world from slave subsistence to environmental justice and from urbanization to spirituality, the historians in this volume portray the ways that blacks lived and worked within larger forces of social oppression, racism, and activism. From slavery to Jim Crow segregation to the eras of civil rights and environmental justice, the authors guide us through a multitude of periods and places, skillfully blending theory with practice while building an environmental history of African America. They explore complex questions about African American access to and responses to a nature that is variously constructed as pristine and free, owned and segregated, or polluted and dangerous.

Along the way, we meet and share glimpses into the lives of unique and memorable individuals. Slave John Smith hunted rabbits, coons, and possums with his dog in North Carolina. Slave Jane Arrington and her sisters cooked the possums the men of the family brought home. Sally Moore, a Progressive-era women's club president, planted thirty-four different vegetables on her truck farm and exhibited a ten-pound cabbage in a home demonstration gardening contest. Ethylene Seastrunk, wife of a turpentine worker, wanted her family to leave the poverty of the backwoods camps, but was afraid she would miss the old trees and woods too much.

We also gain insights into the ways the environment affected the lives of blacks and shaped their actions toward it. Fourteen-year-old Eugene Williams, escaping the summer heat on a beach used by Chicago blacks, drowned in Lake Michigan when he was hit in the head by a white boy's rock, setting off the 1919 Chicago race riot and demands for black access to beaches and parks. Later in the century, civil rights leader Eugene Burnett was able to move out of Harlem to a Long Island suburb surrounded by woods and with a reputation for sending its children to good colleges. And in the 1990s, geologist Patrick Barnes, owner of an African American environmental consulting firm, provided expertise on the detoxification of the Warren County, North Carolina, landfill. Such individuals and their stories exemplify a spectrum of actions and reactions toward nature.

African American history exhibits a dialectical relationship between oppression and racism on one hand and resistance and activism on the other. The essays fall into three main periods: slavery, post–Civil War segregation, and the post–World War II civil rights and environmental justice movements.

The first Africans arrived at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. By 1640, the first black was sentenced to lifetime servitude. During the ensuing three centuries of development of the North American continent, slaves encountered brutal

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treatment at the hands of overseers and plantation masters. Yet within the slave system, in both the South and the North, blacks made substantial contributions to American history, not only by introducing foods and cuisine and transporting planting and production methods to the New World, but through their music, poetry, and science. The authors in this volume argue that the experiences and memories of blacks with slavery honed their abilities to defy authority while helping to establish a measure of control over their own livelihoods. Instead of receiving liberal, democratic values from emancipation and later from the civil rights movement, African Americans used their experiences and memories of slavery to create new values and identities for themselves.

After the Civil War (1861–1865), Jim Crow laws divided neighborhoods, schools, and businesses, and the Supreme Court's 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision established the "separate but equal" doctrine that reinforced segregation. During the ensuing decades of racial oppression, blacks aided other blacks in developing agriculture, documenting violence, and organizing exoduses to the North and West. In the urban North, many found jobs in industries and formed supportive communities, while also experiencing the effects of living in poor, segregated, redlined neighborhoods. The authors demonstrate that during the so-called "Progressive era"—in which Jim Crow segregation prevailed—African American women established their own identities and used their activism to improve the conditions of their lives and to garner respect for their race and gender. African American men who worked in nature, on the other hand, found it difficult to perceive of the woods as a place to spend leisure time, instead seeing it as both a home and a place from which they hoped to escape and leave their demeaning work. By contrast, middle-class blacks who sought out nature in parks or moved to suburbs had to overcome racism and sometimes violence, but the process of resistance strengthened racial identities that may ultimately have offered greater access to and appreciation of nature.

World War II and the postwar industrial buildup provided jobs for African Americans and opportunities to escape from slums and poor neighborhoods, but those very opportunities came with a toxic toll. Black communities often suffered the health effects of chemical discharges into waterways and the siting of landfills and dumps in minority communities. The civil rights movement of the 1960s challenged segregation and promoted school and workplace integration, while the environmental justice movement of the 1980s and 1990s carried those emancipatory struggles into communities and homes threatened by toxic pollution. Here the authors reveal complex connections between the civil rights and environmental justice movements. Not only did

the experiences of the civil rights movement aid black and white activists to form coalitions to protest toxic landfills and demand environmental cleanups, they also led to stronger identity politics that sometimes worked to undermine those very coalitions. Both activists and decision makers had to deal with racial politics and hence with the long shadow of slavery and the legacy of segregation. Throughout these events, the shared religious experiences and the roles of churches in the struggles for freedom and justice contributed a deep moral sense to the movements for freedom and to the new history.

The stories of the African Americans in this volume must be read in the context of the enormity of this oppressive history and the struggles of individuals and communities to overcome its consequences. Set against this historical backdrop, the stories herein become more remarkable as the authors illuminate the vitality of their subjects' lives, the significance of their achievements, and the successes and failures of their work together. In so doing, the writers not only show us how to write a new kind of African American environmental history, but illustrate the ways that writing history can itself become a moral act.

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