

Unwoven Empire: A Not-So-Natural History of Environmental Racism and the  
Transatlantic Slave Trade

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Land of the Ais, Apalachee, Calusa, Seminole, Timucua and Tocobago tribes

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# APPROVAL PAGE

This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
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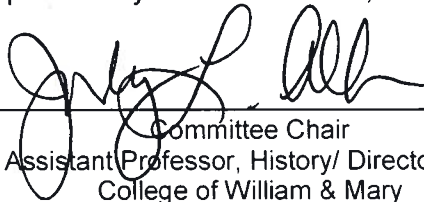
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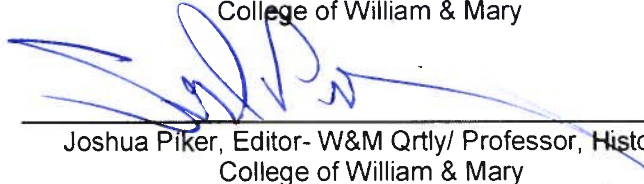
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## ABSTRACT

### Elegies UnKnown

To center the intellectual and spiritual traditions of the Black Atlantic, specifically Black America, is to disrupt our perceptions surrounding Black environmental thought, or the lack thereof, in relation to the Transatlantic Slave Trade. While historians have been re-examining and reimagining the movement of enslaved plants and people for decades, few historians have expanded their environmental lens beyond food crops to examine the deeper ecological implications surrounding their enslavement. The distinct, intimate identities and ecologies of enslaved people, who were also land stewards, herbalists, rootworkers, and gardeners, have not been critically examined by scholars and remain on the margins of many methodologies. My thesis attempts to challenge the existing frameworks that contextualize our, often fragmented, understanding of the continued and emerging environmental thoughts Black folks held about the land they lost, lived, and labored on in relation to their bondage and emancipatory actions during the era of slavery.

### Ecosystem UpRooted

Scholars of environmental history and justice have textured and threaded strong parallels between environmental racism and the (hu)manmade systems of white supremacy over the course of the twentieth-century. However, very few have begun to flesh out the implications American slavery had on the formation not only of our industrialized spaces, but on our understandings of plants, public health, and everyday practices. For us to begin addressing, and redressing, the historic injustices that continue to have active afterlives, we must begin to at the beginning of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. This chapter is a continuation of Elegies that explores the relationship between enslaved peoples and the deep ancestral knowledge they held around enslaved plants, like indigo.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ii
Dedications	iii
List of Tables	
1. This is the first chapter of the Thesis	1
2. This is the second chapter of the Thesis	2
3. This is the third chapter of the Thesis	20

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This author would first like to give the grace and glory to their ancestors whose miracles, memories, and magic ways have guided their lifework and journey. She is humbled to have received an abundance of support from the William & Mary faculty and her fellow scholars. She would like to express her deep gratitude to her thesis committee for the patience, practice, and perspectives they shared throughout this process. Dr. Allen nurtured a garden-space for them to build a language and landscape around environmental history in nuanced ways that helped build her confidence and expand her ideas. Dr. Piker's background as an editor and indigenous scholar proved invaluable in building her understanding about the evolution of a communal environment (and how everything, especially history, is VAST). To her mentors and "comrades in scholarship" both at W&M and beyond, especially Jayson Porter, Darrell Stover, Michelle Lanier, Andre Taylor, Jessica Brabble, Rebekah Toussaint, and Emily Magness, she is thankful for their deep knowledge and near-bottomless inspiration.

To her ever-growing "village" of family, friends, and sibling-activists have always offered a space and place filled with love, support, and deep-bellied joy, and for that, this author is forever be thankful.

This project is dedicated to my family, both born and found.  
May we stay curious in our search for our ancestors' gardens.

## Chapter I - Environment Uncovered

Born in the Midwest and raised as an AfroFloridian, **Sidney Rose McCall** is a historian and community intellectual who combines her academic work with her activism. Though the pandemic saw her complete her Masters in Applied Social Science (Florida A&M University) far from the classroom, she turned her eyes to the community, building a platform through Patreon — a digital subscription platform for creators and educators — where she continues to share decolonized history lessons and book discussions. In the two year interim, she also joined the Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community, Inc. at the Zora Neale Hurston National Museum of Fine Arts. Though she started as an intern and then quickly became a student-docent, she now serves as a program organizer and member of their Academic Committee for the annual ZORA! Festival of the Arts and Humanities.

Sidney is currently pursuing her doctoral degree at the College of William and Mary, the second oldest higher education institution in the United States and one of the many early American colleges that utilized enslaved labor in both the construction and day-to-day service of the campus community. Her current research consists of examining the roots and routes of environmental racism during America's era of slavery, and how the exploitation of land, water, and labor shaped the ideologies and ecosystems of racism, resistance, and rebellion across the country. Her work between the oldest incorporated Black town and the second oldest college in the United States has fostered a soul-deep appreciation for the importance of community storytelling, crafting narratives that reflect not only the present world, but also roots and routes of our futurepasts.

*“We belong to the past just as much as we belong to the future. By crafting stories out of the folklore, memories, and afterlives of communities long submerged in the narratives of our world, we can raise them to the surface.”*

She hopes to work alongside scholars and community bridge builders to weave integrative stories into creative spaces of resilience, resistance, and restorative justice.

## Chapter II - Elegies UnKnown

*You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. 'Floods' is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was." ~ Toni Morrison, The Site of Memory*

*But culture, useful culture, will not be destroyed. Let justice be done, though the world perish. It will certainly not be necessary for people to revert to tillage of the land with sticks or to lighting up with torches. It is not for nothing that mankind, in their slavery, have achieved such great progress in technical matters. If only it is understood that we must not sacrifice the lives of our fellow-men for our pleasure, it will be possible to apply technical improvements without destroying men's lives, and to arrange life so as to profit by all such methods giving us control of nature as have been devised and can be applied without keeping our brother men in slavery.*

*~ Leo Tolstoy, The Slavery of Our Times*

Throughout our remembered histories, from the indigenous starlore that marked the changing seasons and planting times of African pastoralists<sup>1</sup> to the ocean-rivers that bore witness to the movement of plants and people across the Americas, nature has deeply shaped human life, labor, and liberty across the Atlantic World. The environmental landscape has featured prominently in the memories, imaginations, and folklore of the indigenous, immigrant, and diaspora cultures across this expansive region, though the writings of European and, later, American colonists dominated the ecological discourse that would come to define environmental conservation during the United States' early twentieth century. In fact, land is a near permanent fixture in the ever-evolving American mythos made manifest through the various threadlines of political, social, spiritual, and environmental thought:

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<sup>1</sup> Jarita Holbrook, "Celestial Women in Africa," (*History and Philosophy of Physics*, 2020.) Holbrook emphasizes the gendered bodies of the moon and stars, with the Pleiades playing an essential role in tracking dry seasons, planting times, annual harvests, and marking important initiations, especially among girl-children who would grow to become the primary agriculturalists within their pastoral and pre-colonial South and West African communities.

When America was first discovered, the western hemisphere was practically a wilderness of boundless forests. The magnificent and luxurious timber growth of this continent, for practical and utilitarian purposes, was rivaled by none ever found on the globe. In the course of time, the settlers laid waste to the proud monarchs of the forest, using some of the timber to erect their homes, while millions of dollars worth of logs were burned during the process of clearing the land for cultivation. As westward the star of emourh wended its unrelenting way, pioneer, axe in hand, continued the devastation of the primeval forests, always cutting down, and replacing none.<sup>2</sup>

During the twilight years of the nineteenth century as the Black political enfranchisement brought on by Reconstruction all but collapsed under the weight of antiblack resistance and violence — immortalized by the haunting images of broken Black bodies twisted and tied against trees and the starch white cotton garbs of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>3</sup> American industrialization saw the ecological imperialism of the slavery days brought into the world of large corporations and expansionists policies that led to the widespread devastation of America's natural places and the displacement of the Black and indigenous communities connected to those spaces. While we can attest

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<sup>2</sup> See *Forestry and forest preservation in Alabama* (Public Library of America, 1908).

<sup>3</sup> Cotton continues to hold a complicated space within the mapped eco-memory of the United States. Romanced by historical and present day supporters of the "False Cause" as a symbol of the Southern landscape and its agrarian gentility. Amongst the ecospiritualities of the Black Diaspora, cotton occupies a spatial expression of reclaimed ancestral knowledge, though even this is space of recognition is deeply scarred and haunted by the legacies of colonial oppression that displaced, dehumanized, and dispossessed Black bodies bond to the land and lost along the Middle Passage. We must also keep in mind that while the antebellum South, even during the Civil War, never truly achieved a monocultural identity. While southern states shared political and economic priorities that tied them to the Transatlantic Slave Trade and, later, domestic slave trade after the trafficking of Africans was outlawed in 1808 (though enslavers and speculators still smuggled Africans across the Atlantic), the South remained deeply divided across class and color lines, which deepened with the emergence of Jim and Jane Crow politics.

part of this reality to the imperial politics perpetrated by the United States' government, we must also recognize the role colonial and antebellum writers, naturalists, surveyors, and geographers played in shaping the American public's perceptions and practices surrounding the natural world.

Though the writings of European naturalists like Thoreau and Tolstoy were internationally renowned and left deep impressions on their American counterparts and intellectual descendants, who saw themselves as part of a community that would nurture environmental preservation movement half a century later, their writings reveal that they took much inspiration from earlier generations of romantic [white] nature writers, surveyors, ethnographers, folklorists, and myth-makers who all framed their works around environmental racism. Taking their queues from men like Madison Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, alongside their own emerging scholarships of ecology, anthropology, social history, and bio-politics, these romantics use nature a vehicle to push for broader environmental protections, improved conditions for indigenous communities and, at times, form the earliest traditions of environmental justice. the centuries old traditions of Still, within the straightened out, academic and environmentalist landscapes of the United States, the arteries of this intimate ecology have rarely been explored in relation to that most peculiar of institutions: the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Slavery, class, and caste systems — all noticeable fixtures in societies aligned with the patriarchal practices of imperialism — have existed across the European continent in some form throughout pre-modern history, especially in cultures, like the Vikings, where raiding, enslaving, and trafficking local populations was

essential to their economy.<sup>4</sup> The established and aspiring empires of Portugal, Spain, England, Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Russia all utilized systems of forced labor — though it should be noted that their systems of slavery, indenture, and serfdom varied in their levels of subjugation and perpetuity across regions. By comparison, much of the scholarship around the histories and legacies of the Transatlantic Slave Trade have fostered a fragmented history that creates extensive breaks in social continuity and restoration efforts of the many indigenous, immigrant, and diaspora communities infected and affected by the violent institution.

## **Untangling the Methodologies**

As a whole, the field of professional history, while continues to struggle with fully integrating ecocriticism across its historiographical landscape, especially before the mid-nineteenth century. This absence is the result of perceived community proximity; nineteenth-century slavery is not only chronologically closer to the present day, allowing for a deepened level of mapped memory, but American and European writers of this period, potentially influenced by the rising tensions and militancy between abolitionists and enslavers (along with aspiring enslavers), framed their commentaries of the institution largely on the structured slavery models of the early

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (Vintage Books, 2015) 113-115.

republic that influenced their own (hu)manmade<sup>5</sup> landscapes:

The nineteenth-century model includes tobacco or cotton plantations worked by Creole Black slaves owned by Creole Black slaves owned by Creole American Whites. Africa, when mentioned at all, is either a mythical past, a romanticized future, or the victim present-day imperialist European powers. In this nineteenth-century model, slaves are all native-born in America and essentially undifferentiated from one another except by occupation. Slave owners and traders are all White (though in reality, some free Blacks owned Black slaves in the United States), and the whole economic institution of slavery is defended by assertions of the racial inferiority of the enslaved.<sup>6</sup>

The contributions of indigenous, immigrant, and diaspora communities connected to the era of slavery and their shared and segregated environments, both the natural and (hu)manmade ones, are rarely approached from an integrative framework. This also fosters an invasive misconception, reinforced by [white] environmentalists is that Black folks, both historically and today, do not have a sustained interest in preserving

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<sup>5</sup> In my research, I employ the term *(hu)manmade* when referencing the interwoven ecologies that connect the environmental, gender, (eco)spiritual, material, labor and literary histories connected to the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the lasting afterlives and legacies of that peculiar institution. It is no accident that, prior to the rise of professional Black scholars and community intellectuals of prominence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the main threadline of academic history was deeply rooted in Eurocentric colonial realities that re-cemented the notion that men racialized as white and/or European were (and still are) the primary cultivators, landscapers, and makers of their environments, be it natural or *manmade*. This brand of academic objectivism often erases the lived experiences, ancestral knowledge, and historical truths of indigenous, immigrant, and diaspora communities across color lines. History is neither objective nor is it absolute. History is the *futurepast*, a liminal space of discovery, discourse, and dark matter brought to light through careful analysis and understandings of the interchange and influences the past imprints on the present and vice versa. Within the pages of this work, I hope to uncover and rediscover the intimate and oft invisible histories between people and their *(hu)manmade* environments across the American South and beyond.

<sup>6</sup> Vincent Carretta, *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the 18th Century* (The University Press of Kentucky 1996) 1. The word *creole* as defined by Carretta signifies “non- aboriginal Americans born in the Americas . . . during the eighteenth century.”

or protecting their natural environments and, by extension, their (hu)manmade environments. These color-coded arguments reveal not only a grossly oversimplified understanding of the haunted histories between the occupied land and her Black Diaspora, but also express a larger ignorance about the role Black ecologies, ecospiritualities, and environments played in shaping the deeply textured histories of the Atlantic world. There is no environmental history without the the generations of Black environmental knowledge that, far from being dispossessed, were deepened and redefined along the waterways structured by the Transatlantic Slave Trade, industrialization, settler-colonialism, and white supremacy.

These color-coded arguments reveal not only a grossly oversimplified understanding of the haunted histories between the occupied American land and her Black Diaspora, but also express a larger ignorance about the role Black ecologies, ecospiritualities, and environments played in shaping the deeply textured histories of the Atlantic world. In spaces of public history, the larger American public, infected and affected by the (hu)manmade ecosystem of white supremacy, is still situated comfortably to in colonized construction of the environment as soma commodity for their own enjoyment, leisure, and future usage. A number of Western-centric environmental scholars and activists frame their preservation and conservation campaigns around either the total absence of humans from nature<sup>7</sup> or the carefully colonized “outdoor” recreational activities that are tangled in the roots of imperial narratives of Western expansion and exceptionalism. Both the activities and

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<sup>7</sup> Isaac Yuen, “The Ecological Imagination of Hayao Miyazaki: A Retrospective on Four Fantastical Worlds” (*Orion Magazine*, Spring 2021); Eriko Ogihara-Schuck, *Miyazaki’s Animism Abroad: The Reception of Japanese Religious Themes by American and German Audiences* (McFarland & Company, 2014).

absences oft leave Blackness and the cultures, histories, and identities manifested from a shared past out of larger environmental frameworks, treating them more as peripheral subjects than participatory actors and observers. But there is no environmental history without the the generations of Black environmental knowledge that, far from being dispossessed, were deepened and redefined along the waterways structured by the transatlantic slave trade, industrialization, settler-colonialism, and white supremacy.

In the sister-fields of interdisciplinary scholarship — especially within environmental studies, climate science, botany, and public health — the histories and memories passed down through folklore, songs, oral histories, food and fibre traditions, and written accounts among indigenous Americans and enslaved Africans are treated with more weight, flooding frameworks that not only allow for racism to be examined with ecocritical intersections, but also extend to the afterlives and legacies of our transformed (hu)manmade environments.<sup>7</sup> While the larger study will incorporate more ecocritical perspectives to future texture and complicate the relationship between the colonized American landscape and one her most colonized peoples (i.e. enslaved Africans and their diaspora descendants), the archival absences and silences in the scholarship will require a more exhaustive analysis that extends beyond the margins of this study. Firstly, the documentation of Black environmental thought prior to the Harlem Renaissance<sup>8</sup> is extremely limited and the expansive research requires painstakingly reading through volumes of slave narratives, court petitions, geographical surveys, abolition pamphlets, speech transcripts, letters, and memoirs which further

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<sup>8</sup> Carney and Rossomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World*, 7.

complicate an already deeply tangled narrative. Still, this the space I am determined to explore and reimagine. One such route that will be explored in more detail is the system of necrocapitalism<sup>9</sup> and how a reflection of the historic formation of racialized capital in relation to settler-states, imperialism, colonialism, and post-colonialism. For the purposes of this paper, I seek to provide a framework that focuses on how the environmental thoughts of enslaved Africans and white enslavers came to shape the waterways and (hu)manmade environments of America's colonial and early republic landscape. This timeline is marked as the transitional period where America's tangled identity was defined by four major developments:

- 1. Through ecological imperialism, enslavers and their (hu)manmade systems of occupancy and oppression exploited ancestral knowledge and land from indigenous environments and their inhabitants.*
- 2. The American landscape became racialized as European settlers sought to define their precarious status in the "New World" and, simultaneously claim emancipated identities from their mother countries all while attempting to morally — and, later, scientifically — justify their subjugation and dehumanization of enslaved and indigenous peoples.*
- 3. European environmentalists and nature writers of early America held complex, often contradictor views of pastoralism and modernity, a tension that was further exacerbated by the transatlantic and domestic slave trades.*

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<sup>9</sup> The Harlem Renaissance is marked as a moment rich in Black political thought and environmental language; the likes of Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and W.E.B. DuBois immersed their writings in Black environments that, once defined by slavery, were now constructed around Jim and Jane Crow politics. Still within these segregated spaces and places, Black writers still found rich gardens and groves of memories mapped by Black environmental language and thought.

4. *Despite the death politics and destruction that labeled Black bodies as “matter out out of place”<sup>10</sup> their existence, enslaved Africans and their diaspora descendants still managed to retain, recover, and reimagine their ancestral practices both in relation to their dispossession and their everyday resistance.*

By organizing methodologies under the intersectional lenses of bio-politics, ecocriticism, and environmentalism allows for a richer field of study that allows for this collection of microhistories, geographies, environmental consciousnesses, and human ecologies to flourish, for it is only through careful analysis and memory mapping that we can begin to to rediscover the ecologies and histories that woven across the American landscape.

## **Blood, Water, and Soil: Destiny Manifested White**

Before there were any romantic notions of the American frontier or bold proclamations about a mythologized city on a shining hill,<sup>11</sup> there was a swamp. The precolonial landscape that the first European sailors and settlers encountered was a land of vast woodlands, flooded marshes, grasslands, lakes, bayous, and indigenous fields. Alfred Crosby notes that the “New World” food and fibre crops Europeans encountered such as potatoes, sweet potatoes, squash, beans, maize, tobacco, tomatoes, corn, and chocolate would become staples, not only in European

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<sup>10</sup> Carl A. Zimring, *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States* (New York University Press, 2017)

<sup>11</sup> The titular phrase from John Winthrop’s 1630 sermon; later reappropriated by President Ronald Reagan in the 1970s as he cultivated a *biomythology* (an interwoven narrative that repurposes myth, folklore, and history to form an identity across intersectional lines and landscapes) around American exceptionalism, proclaiming “that there was some divine plan that placed this great continent between two oceans to be sought out by those who were possessed of an abiding love of freedom and a special kind of courage.” Excerpt from President Reagan’s “Thanksgiving Day Proclamation,” November 21, 1982.

metropolises, but across the eastern hemisphere.<sup>12</sup> While this essay will not be an analysis of the emergence of settler-colonialism during the early American period, it is important for us to acknowledge the role indigeneity plays in understanding Pre-Revolutionary America — for it is within this environment that the spatial expressions and social constructs which would later define the early republic were first forged. While much of the emerging scholarship of these early periods of European settlement and colonization focuses on settler violence and warfare, punctuated by agricultural difficulties and indigenous resistance, the emphasis on environment is rarely coupled with the construction of racial identities that, like waterways that carried European immigrants across the Atlantic and flooded the sands, soils, and settlements of the Americas, came to define existence in the early republic.<sup>13</sup>

The letters and literature of European observers from the late fifteenth century through the eighteenth century capture both the aspirations of the newly arrived Europeans and overflow with nature narratives shaped by their interactions with the indigenous plants and people. Even as they wrote about the abundance of fish and fowl, these writers also described a hostile environment that, in their eyes, was a “desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and men.” In his 1650 manuscript *Of Plimoth*

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<sup>12</sup> John Douglass Belshaw, *Canadian History: Pre-Confederation* (B.C. Open Textbook Project, 2015). Belshaw notes that “these plants revolutionized life in the Old World: potatoes replaced grains in many parts of Europe; manioc (or cassava), while not having a huge impact on European diets, underwrote a population explosion in Africa

<sup>13</sup> Early American scholarship is arguably one of the most ecocritical fields of history in the Atlantic World due, in part, to the role the natural environment played in the contemporaneous accounts of European observers and settlers from the period. Adding the indigenous histories and ecospiritualities of Native Americans and Black Africans into these existing frameworks will allow readers to further challenge and integrate their understanding of the plant and people who lived and labored within and beyond these colonized landscapes of Euro-American occupancy. It should also be noted that European subjects are still widely viewed as separate, self-isolated entities devoid of any indigenous memory or identity outside of the racialized biomythologies that later manifested as part of the Enlightenment of America’s early republic. I seek to explore these absences in future studies.

*Plantation*, William Bradford, distinguished as a Puritan expatriate who fled political persecution by boarding the *Mayflower* in 1620 and was one of the original signers of the Mayflower Compact,<sup>14</sup> depicted America as an untamed wilderness that was “full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue.”<sup>15</sup> While the word *hue* can be examined through multiple interpretations, ranging from the shade and/or color of one’s skin to an older usage linking one’s *hue* to their [perceived] inherent character and virtue, early American writings were deeply immersed and informed by literary traditions that paralleled the characterizations of the untamed wilderness with the untamed indigenous peoples. Therefore, we can determine that Bradford, similar to his contemporaries, sought to navigate this new setting by engendering and coloring the landscape in proverbial, philosophical language that could be used interchangeably between bodies of nature and the bodies of indigenous Native Americans and Africans. The terms *savage*, used previously to describe the wilderness, was also used to describe Native Americans, who settlers encountered

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<sup>14</sup> Signed on November 11, 1620, the “Mayflower Compact” was a temporary treatise written and co-signed by several prominent [male] separatists onboard the *Mayflower* who, fearing possible shipwrecks, collectively decided to resettle outside the bounds predetermined by the Virginia Company patent. An excerpt from the “Mayflower Compact” transcribed into modern English: “Having undertaken, for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith, and honor of our King and Country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia, do by these presents solemnly and mutually, in the presence of God, and one of another, covenant and combine our selves together into a civil body politic.” (State Library of Massachusetts)

<sup>15</sup> See *William Bradford's History Of Plimoth Plantation* (State Library of Massachusetts)

and engaged with through trade, shared meals, intimate interactions, and violence.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The war tactics of indigenous tribes is often sensationalized in early American literature and anti-indigenous rhetoric as a justification for the brutality and indiscriminate killings of indigenous peoples. However, the Columbian Exchange and subsequent arrival of Europeans and their livestock profoundly changed the American landscape. Unlike indigenous communities who coexisted with their natural environments, Europeans sought to shape their newly claimed space to fit their established European sensibilities — and, arguably, reinvent their American identities. Along with diseases that decimated indigenous populations who had previously been unexposed to Old World sicknesses, European livestock decimated the indigenous plans, fields, and plants, forcing the migration of game animals indigenous people relied upon to supplement their diets. Food scarcity and expansionist colonies led to confrontations that often turned violent. Rather than looking to redress the grazing habits of their animals (that indigenous fighters targeted in their raids) or establish cooperative economics between their communities, the settlers retaliated with extreme violence. “Scalp hunting became a lucrative commercial practice. The authorities had hit upon a way to encourage settlers to take off on their own or with a few others to gather scalps, at random, for the reward money.” See Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (Beacon Press, 2015).

During both the colonial and post-revolutionary periods, the cultivation of food and fibre plants remained a prevalent concern of European colonizers, who recognized that their limited knowledge of America's topography and climate left them especially vulnerable to famine, starvation, poverty, and disease. In the New England territories, settlers came to rely upon the crops and knowledge of indigenous people who viewed the newly arrived Europeans "as a source of goods and as possible allies or adversaries." Very quickly, these communities "threw themselves into the business of acquiring exotic trade goods" in exchange for woven baskets of food.<sup>17</sup> The ecology of the American South proved to be equally challenging, as the "tropical climates do not support the temperate-zone crops that defined European foodways — wheat, barely, red, and oats."<sup>18</sup> Here too, European settlers relied upon the generosity and trade of indigenous people, although, like in New England, this system of cooperation was soon replaced by a system of enslavement. As the colonial period moved towards the American Revolution, the Transatlantic Slave Trade began to take shape and indigenous native peoples were replaced when ships arrived from Africa carrying enslaved Africans. European enslavers came to recognize that different communities of Africans held a depth of ancestral knowledge around plants that could be exploited. "Slave ships became the unwitting vessels of Africa's botanical heritage by carrying seeds, tubers, and the people who valued them to the Americas."<sup>19</sup> The American South would become defined as the archetypical slave society predicated on a system

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18 Belshaw, *Canadian History: Pre-Confederation*.

19 Judith A. Carney and Richard Nicholas Rossomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (University of California Press, 2009) 65-66.

of perpetual subjugation and segregation, but we should keep in mind that this region was also distinguished by its extensive waterways which remained fluid fixtures in the imaginations of European and American writers alike. “Not only are bodies of water regarded as spatialize sites of memory . . . but the drowned bodies [of the enslaved] are objective correlatives of submerged histories which continue to haunt the natural world.”<sup>20</sup> While the accounts and observations vary, “the perception of the tropics in West Africa was mapped onto the American South, merging land, water, and diseases through the dangers of ‘blackness . . . this body of water became conflated with the body of fugitives.’”<sup>21</sup> Similar to the wilderness analogies attributed to indigenous peoples, Africans were defined from the beginning by their complexion that marked them, in the minds of enslavers, as humans unmade and un-Christian. through a series of complex, often contradictory, through the lens of nature. the way human beings seek to understand and experience nature. Similar to the enslaved peoples of “At the same time, they suppressed anthropogenic fires and dammed, channelized, and redirected the nearby waterways to better fit their own habits of living on the land.”<sup>22</sup>

## **By Faith and Labor | American Pastoralism vs. Modernity**

*“Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which*

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<sup>20</sup> Wardi, *Water and African American Memory*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>22</sup> James D. Rice, “Early American Environmental Histories,” (*The William and Mary Quarterly*, 2018)

*otherwise might escape from the face of the earth.”*

~Thomas Jefferson

Religion featured prominently in the writings of the early republic, both in relation to nature and to slavery. While many historians and environmental scholar argue that race did not play a factor in the enslavement of indigenous and African peoples, instead noting that it was their non-Christian status that bond them to the land, the oral histories and nature writings of Black individuals of the time reveals that this emerging slave society was not only very color conscious but also nature conscious:

Slave narratives, representing some of the earliest published American works of literature, are deeply situated in place, for geography was a definitive factor in determining free and slave status . . . navigation of the non-human world—woods, swamps, and rivers—constituted a major narrative, as did locating the North Star.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, slavery was not a wholly agrarian institution. Across the United States, especially in populated urban centers, enslaved people labored as bricklayers, shipbuilders, sailors, slave drivers, crafters, dressmakers, and bondservants.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the scarcity of extensive intellectual writings and histories from the perspective

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<sup>23</sup> Wardi, *Water and African American Memory*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> While the term bondservants is often used in place of “slave” or “enslaved people,” I utilize the term to distinguish the intimate roles enslaved people served in the homes, schools, and businesses of their enslavers. These roles include cooks, housemaids, midwives, nursemaids, and companions. Within the accounts of slave narratives, we see that those who labored in the intimate, interior spaces of the institution were often exposed to elevated levels of emotional and sexual labor. See Alexandra Finley’s *An Intimate Economy: Enslaved Women, Work, and America’s Domestic Slave Trade* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020) 5-15.

of enslaved and emancipated Africans during the colonial and early republic periods, “there is evidence that many [...] first-generation slaves remained psychologically in exile and never looked on America as their home.”<sup>25</sup> They resisted their bondage by fleeing into the woods, fields, and waterways, at times even forming their own fugitive communities. Resistance came in a variety of forms, and many who remained in bondage found ways to retain their African customs. For example, “many black spirituals are fueled by images of rivers, boats, and passengers, revealing the myriad analogies drawn between the North and the Promised Land.”<sup>26</sup>

Controlling nature was critical not only to the plantation owner’s economic success but to his social and political standing. In colonial America and the early republic—especially in the agrarian South—economic, social, and political status depended heavily on ownership of and effective control of productive . . . in Anglo-American thought linked land ownership with economic and political independence.<sup>27</sup>

Perfect control over the bodies of nature and the enslaved became fixture in slave communities across the United States. Still, despite their collective dispossession, enslaved Africans and their descendants managed to retain a sense of their African

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<sup>25</sup> Smith, *African American Environmental Thought*, 23. See also John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (Oxford University Press, 1972) 30-32. It is important to note that, within United States history, very little scholarship to date has examined the generational distinctions between the first generations of enslaved Africans and their descendants who, depending on the status of their mother, were born into perpetual bondage or a tentative freedom. Compared to the scholarships of Caribbean and South American slavery which boasted larger concentrations of trafficked peoples. While a number of slave narratives detail ancestral knowledge and traditions passed by elders within the slave community, most documentation comes from the notes of [white] European naturalists and travelers who often imbued their writings with their own racial and cultural prejudice of African communities.

<sup>26</sup> Wardi, *African American Memory and Water*, 65.

<sup>27</sup> Smith, *African American Environmental Thought*, 18.

identities and ancestries well into the nineteenth century. For “in the Americas, enslaved Africans continued their innovating processes. They nurtured Africa’s principal dietary staples in their food fields and adopted [Amerindian] crops beneficial to their survival.”<sup>28</sup>

## **Shaped by Land and Legacy**

The legacy of environmental racism in the United States, at times, can read like an American horror story. We are haunted by this history not just because it is past, but because that history is still very much present. Within our shared and segregated landscapes, one can find the roots and routes of the many ecological erasures and atrocities mingled and mixed into the soil and sand. Beneath our decorated military bases and our neglected sites of decay lie the buried remains of the emancipated and enslaved.<sup>33</sup> Permeating our communities of color, are toxic waste sites and landfills that poison our waterways. Along with the disturbing resurgence in white nationalism and segregationist politics (though we must acknowledge neither ever truly went away) in public discourse, settler-colonialism still reigns as a dominant empire-building force, now articulated as communal decay, mass evictions, land seizures, food apartheid, gentrification, mass incarceration, and the de facto segregation of our education, childcare, housing, and reproductive systems. Through the construction of (hu)manmade environments, antiblackness has become a public health crisis. Unfortunately, this crisis is not unique to the United States. Across the Global North and South, environmental colonization and colorism continue to shape and reinforce ecosystems of white supremacy:

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<sup>28</sup> Judith A. Carney and Richard Nicholas Rossomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa’s Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (University of California Press, 2009) 7.

Taking control of rivers in Africa and chagrining farmers to access the water, the World Bank, with its headquarters in Washington, D.C., is pushing for the privatization of the water industry. Around this world, powerful multinational corporations buy and control water resource rights, mining water from water-stressed areas and diverting it, resulting in extreme shortages in developing countries.<sup>29</sup>

The environmental movement remains predominately white, not because of Black apathy or indifference, but because of whiteness. Given that the framing of environmentalism is predominately understood only through the lens of whiteness, white identities and biomythologies, people of color, especially people of the Black Diaspora, are exposed to “environmental othering.”<sup>30</sup> Similar to their indigenous and enslaved ancestors, Black people are treated as subjects and victims, and not as participants and co-conspirators in the fight against environmental injustice. The

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<sup>29</sup> Wardi, *Water and African American Memory*, 17.

<sup>30</sup> Environmental othering, coined by Kimberly Ruffin, refers to the dispossession of Black people in relation to the bio-politics of their environments. Building on her paradoxical framework that focuses on natural spaces, I incorporate the term not only through the viewpoints of land sovereignty or homeownership or but the right to exist within and beyond the whitewashed ecosystem of American existence. See Kimberly Ruffins' *Black on Earth African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (University Georgia Press, 2010) 12.

question must be asked: **What then, is Earth to American people of color?**<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Alison Hawthorne Deming and Lauret Savoy, *The Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity and the Natural World* (Milkweed Editions, 2002) 7.

Furthermore, if Black people and other people of color continue to be viewed as “out of place” subjects whose movement, migration, dislocation, disability, and dispossession only serves as an area of study rather than an area of acknowledgement and action, and their communities continue to be exploited and erased, how can we live?

This answer is a complicated one and the body of interdisciplinary is expansive and tangled. But through examining the environmental, gendered, spiritual, scientific, and political dimensions of the United States, we can learn how the enslaved and emancipated bodies connected to this land navigated their environmental subjugation and exploitation, but also used nature as tool remain connected to their ancestral identities and cultivate patterns and practices of self-liberation that can radically reimagine environmental history, liberation, and activism today.

### **Chapter III - Ecosystem UpRooted**

*From dark abodes to fair ethereal light  
Th' enraptur'd innocent has wing'd her flight;  
On the kind bosom of eternal love  
She finds unknown beatitude above.  
This known, ye parents, nor her loss deplore,  
She feels the iron hand of pain no more;  
The dispensations of unerring grace,  
Should turn your sorrows into grateful praise;  
Let then no tears for her henceforward flow,*

*No more distress'd in our dark vale below*

**Phyllis Wheatley,**  
“*On the Death of a young Lady of Five Years of Age*”

Summertime in Virginia between the years 1810 and 1836 were marked by a haunting image. A *coffle*, or line, of nearly 300 enslaved children, women, non-men,<sup>32</sup> and men marched down 1315 Duke Street in Alexandria on foot, chained and bound for a 1,100 mile journey that would take them across the Chesapeake, through Tennessee, and down the Mississippi River to slave markets across the Deep South.

Most of these individuals' names went unrecorded in the slaveholding logbooks of Franklin & Armfield, but their occupations reveal small fragments of their lives in bondage: houseboy, nurse, valet, field hand, fancy girl, dressmaker, hostler, carpenter, laundress, boatman, and gardener. This annual procession of mass displacement was carried out predominately over land and, although the firm used a retinue of sailing ships to traffic people to slave ports in New Orleans, the human caravans were well-equipped to make the long march with wagons trailing behind and between lines of

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<sup>32</sup> In the University of California's 2019 article, "Exploring the history of gender expression," scholars note that gender non-conforming community members have existed as far back as "3,000 years to the Iron Age, and even further back to the Copper Age," supporting emerging evidences that non-binary people were among the enslaved Africans transported along the Middle Passage during the Atlantic World's era of slavery (*University of California*, 2019). **Note:** One important revelation manifesting in my research of such ledgers and auction books is that both childbearing women and skilled laborers, most often male-bodied, were distinguished by their gendered "function" or "occupation" (i.e. childbirth, welding, carpentry, etc.). This leads to several inquiries regarding enslaved youths who gender was often not specified beyond their adolescent status (perhaps, distinguishing children who had yet to go through puberty or, more likely, to define the reproductive potential of girl-children) and enslaved adults whose occupation and/or gendered status was left unspecified. I utilize the term *non-men* to acknowledge both the ambiguity and ancestral erasure that exist within the archives regarding enslaved gendered identifies; not only did enslavers reinforce their own Eurocentric gender distinctions onto bond bodies, but scholars of slavery have struggled to remedy the relationship between the queer and non-heteronormative identities retained by enslaved community members and their *sexual economy* and, to borrow a term from Alexandra J. Finely, *emotional labor* as human chattel. Gender formation also plays an essential in the classification and categorization of natural environments posited by both eighteenth and nineteenth century European botanists and their American counterparts, suggesting a more textured correlation between gender, queerness, and natural history. See Lauren Heinz's 2017 piece, "The Crisis of Kinship: Queer Affiliations in the Sexual Economy of Slavery" for further analysis.

bond enslaved people packed with ammunition for the white patrols on horseback, foodstuff, young and disabled bondspeople, and “those who had collapsed and could not be roused with a whip.”<sup>33</sup>

Such spectacles were not uncommon sights across the emerging American landscape. Fifty years earlier in the season of July, another such march took place, this time in British-held East Florida. A group of fifteen enslaved Black men, comprised of a slave driver and fourteen laborers, travelled along the freshwater arteries of the Guana River with instructions to clear trees and uproot the brush from the over 1,450 acres of highly desirable land situated along the juncture between the rivers and the surrounding water-thickened marshes. One prospective planter described the stretch of land, twenty miles north of St. Augustine, as “a large body of very fine fresh marsh with a clay bottom adjoining the high land”<sup>34</sup> that was prime not only for the cultivation of rice but also indigo.

While few accounts written and recorded by African-born bondspeople remain in the archives, the handful that have been preserved — along with the speeches, poems, letters, memoirs, narratives, and nature writings of their diaspora descendants — not only detail their harrowing journeys across the waterways<sup>35</sup> and earthen landscapes of the Atlantic World, but also reveal an intimate knowledge and memory of their ancestral

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<sup>33</sup> Edward Ball. “Retracing Slavery’s Trail of Tears” (*Smithsonian Magazine*, November 2015).

<sup>34</sup> Daniel L. Schafer. *Governor James Grant’s Villa: A British East Florida Indigo Plantation* (*The St. Augustine Historical Society*, 2000).

<sup>35</sup> Anissa Janine Wardi notes in her book *Water and African American Memories: An Ecocritical Perspective* (University Press of Florida, 2011) that in the traditions of Black “diasporic history, the sea is repeatedly cast as a matrix, a womblike space where Africans were transformed, and reborn into a hybrid identity . . . which is marked by scenes of arrival and departure, ancestral presence and absence, death and new life” (43).

homelands and traditions; coupled with the strained threadlines and tensions brought on by their perpetual bondage, the writings of enslaved and emancipated Black people introduce us to some of the most compelling firsthand literatures and ecocriticisms on involving environmental thought in early America:

She does not seem to have preserved any remembrance of the place of her nativity, or of her parents, excepting the simple circumstance that her mother poured out water before the sun at his rising—in reference, no doubt, to an ancient African custom . . . the solitary exception which held its place so tenaciously in her mind, was probably renewed from day to day through this long season of affliction; for, every morning, when the bereaved child saw the sun emerging from the wide waters, she must have thought of her mother, prostrating herself before the first golden beam that glanced across her native plains.<sup>36</sup>

Slave narratives provide an especially helpful lens of analysis, one that challenges us to place enslaved Africans and their diaspora descendants into landscapes where their experiences and expressions were often omitted, erased, or arranged in relation to their labor. Still, what we come to find is that the memories collected and shared by enslaved people “are deeply distorted in place, for geography was a definitive factor in determining free and slave status . . . navigation of the nonhuman world—woods, swamps, and rivers—constituted a major narrative, as did locating the North Star.”<sup>37</sup>

Despite slave narratives intrinsic importance in challenging scholars to reimagine the

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<sup>36</sup> See Phyllis Wheatley’s “Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave” (Light and Horton, 1834) 10-11.

<sup>37</sup> Anissa Janine Wardi. *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective* (University Press of Florida, 2011), 11.

ecologies<sup>38</sup> between humans and their environments with prominent voices like Phyllis Wheatley, James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, and Olaudah Equiano invoking strong nature and ecospiritual themes across their written and oral pieces, rarely are these diasporic histories allocated the same space in our interwoven environmental and historical canons as the diaries, letters, and collected notes of European observers. Whether they viewed themselves as settlers, scientists, surveyors, sailors, soldiers, preachers, pioneers, pilgrims, landowners, or laborers,<sup>39</sup> these Europeans and their American-born descendants participated in the ecological imperialism of their colonial and, later, antebellum environments. While the majority of white European immigrants were not enslavers, their farming and botany practices, textile traditions, body politic, and, in fact, their social positions and aspirations were all deeply textured by slavery as “the ethos of a slave society” infected and affected nearly all aspects of every life and

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<sup>38</sup> I invoke Kimberly N. Ruffin’s working definition of ecology she incorporates into her work *Black on Earth* that argues ecology is “the study of. Often overlapping experience of relationships among humans and among humans and nonhuman nature” (18). In this study, I seek to examine these overlapping relationships and tensions between enslavers, the enslaved, and their shared environments.

<sup>39</sup> It should be noted that the voices of European indentured and incarnated workers — who fell into the precarious, oft liminal, social rank above enslaved Africans and [most] free people of color but firmly below the Euro-American landed gentry and politician-planters — are absent from much of this paper’s scope. This is not to suggest that their voices, actions, and imaginations do not factor into this discourse of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Long(er) Civil Rights Movement. Future research will seek to strengthen the distinctions and similarities between the ruling and intellectual classes of Euro-Americans who posited environmental thought as a scholarly pursuit and tool of colonization with the lived experiences of the white indentured and working class who regularly engaged with both the people and plants within enslaved communities. While there is archival evidence that laboring Europeans, particularly those who were self-educated or held occupations that brought them into proximity with reading and writing, engaged in public discourse, most accounts involving indentured and convict workers exists in the court papers and news clips detailing white servants marrying enslaved and free people of color or workers running away. These events were so commonplace in the British-held territories that colonial governments implemented policing laws: see Virginia’s “Runaway servants act” (1643) and “English running away with negroes” (1661). Still, despite the introduction of laws criminalizing runaway servants, and their limited political power and status as *involuntary laborers of noticeable European descent*, this European ancestry granted them levels of mobility, self-determination, and legal representation that was denied to both their enslaved and indigenous counterparts.

society from the laws and literature (especially laws around the literacy of enslaved peoples) to their foodstuff, fiber crops and even their sense of freedom and identity.<sup>40</sup>

The flight from the Old World to the New is generally seen to be a flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility. Although, in fact, the escape was sometimes an escape from license—from a society perceived to be unacceptably permissive, ungodly, and undisciplined—for those fleeing for reasons other than religious ones, constraint and limitation impelled the journey. All the Old World offered these immigrants was poverty, prison, social ostracism, and, not infrequently, death . . . Whatever the reasons, the attraction was of the “clean slate” variety, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity not only to be born again but to be born again in new clothes, as it were. The new setting would provide new raiments of self. This second chance could even benefit from the mistakes of the first. In the New World there was the vision of a limitless future, made more gleaming by the constraint, dissatisfaction, and turmoil left behind. It was a promise genuinely promising. With luck and endurance one could discover freedom; find a way to make God’s law manifest.<sup>41</sup>

By comparison, unlike many of their European counterparts, who undertook the transatlantic journey to the Americas, enslaved Africans did not arrive under the archway of religious freedom, indentured labor, political asylum (or exile), or mercantile pursuit. Rather, their oceanborn journeys were intimately woven into the larger tapestry

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<sup>40</sup> Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 8-9.

<sup>41</sup> Toni Morrison, “Romancing the Shadow” from *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Vintage Books, 2007), 33-35.

of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the subsequent textile trade that saw the transcontinental cultivation, trafficking, and material consumption of fiber crops like cotton, silk, linen, and indigo across and beyond the spatial boundaries of the Atlantic World.

While scholarship surrounding the nomenclature, terminology, and classification of these enslaved plants during the early modern era have examined the economic significance of plants in relation to European imperialism and settler-colonialism, only recently, has the field begun to expand their ecological perspectives beyond the imaginations and writings of agents of empire to incorporate the voices and viewscapes of enslaved and emancipated people who sought to find their own place and space within this new, emerging ecosystem defined by wilderness on one side, and whiteness on the other. Despite the fractured, often tangled nature of environmental history involving the Transatlantic Slave Trade, adding environment as both an aspect of the emerging Euro-American social order and as conduit for the enslaved communities and their diasporic afterlives allows for a cohesive history that weaves botanical knowledge, herblore, textile traditions, nature writing, and the American landscapes of water and earth into a fuller, more integrated alignment with the histories and afterlives of the Atlantic World.

### **Untangling the Methods & Modes**

As we embark on this journey of mapping the environmental roots and routes of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, we must bring our subject into sharper focus by establishing both the cultural and environmental landscape occupied by European immigrants, enslaved Africans, and their American-born descendants. Through the

efforts of colonial botanists and their planter contemporaries, the American landscape was radically transformed to support the systems that reinforced the exploitation of plants and peoples. This dual narrative of exploited land and labor was a common one during the era of slavery and all too often reveals the gaping absences and fragments that come with cultivating community histories and afterlives connected to the textile slave trade. Still, rediscovered accounts of formerly enslaved and emancipated people reveal that these bond communities retained deep knowledge about natural and (hu)manmade landscapes that textured the more peculiar institution: chattel slavery. Rather than treating the textile and botanical traditions of the emerging Black Diaspora as historical additions and inquiries via the *dark vale*, this work seeks to integrate those rediscovered narratives into a larger tapestry of the Long Civil Rights Movement.<sup>42</sup>

To establish some limits to the tangled tapestry that is environmental racism, I will focus primarily on the ecological encounters between British, French, Dutch, and German settlers, specifically planters and naturalists, and the enslaved peoples their Atlantic World territories. Rather than focusing on the environmental implications and consequences brought on by agrarian and industrialized slave labor,<sup>43</sup> this work attempts to place the living histories, experiences, and environments of enslaved

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<sup>42</sup> First coined by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall in her 2005 essay, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past" where she argues that the classical southern-oriented canon of the period confines the movement "to bowdlerized heroes, a halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives . . . It ensures the classical phase as a triumphal moment in a larger American progress undermines its *gravitas*. It prevents one of the most remarkable mass movements in American history from speaking effectively to the challenges of our time" (1234). She moves the canon timeline back to the 1930s and the Progressive Era's radical struggles and liberal civil rights initiatives. However, I put forward that the Long Civil Rights Movement should include the antislavery rebellions and abolitionist efforts of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as foundational pillars for the radical reforms and activism that later manifested during the twentieth century. The Long Civil Rights Movement is especially important for configuring the connective tissue between fiber crop cultivation and consumption, the degradation of natural environments, and the exploited labor and knowledge of the Black Diaspora.

<sup>43</sup> See David Silkenat's *Scars on the Land* (Oxford University Press, 2022). "Planters choices and enslaved laborers' actions had consequences not only for the soil but also for the rivers that eroded topsoil washed into and for the native species of plants and animals that depended upon the soil" (7).

Africans and their diaspora descendants at the heart of the story. I regret not incorporating more indigenous knowledge and ecospiritualities into the study, but I simply do not have the breadth or the background. The emerging literature and scholarship on the cross-pollination of afroindigenous identities and indigenous knowledge complicates the natural historical practices imported via waterways from Europe and the diasporic histories born from Black environmental thought and ecocriticisms — chiefly that the textile knowledge and water traditions in slave communities were solely rooted in African and European understandings. While water operates as a material carrier of memory across the American South and larger Atlantic World, the indigenous plants and peoples who inhabited these water-soaked landscapes — the diaspora communities who were later exploited by slave systems — embody those memories, creating an earth-steeped tapestry that reveal the natural and (hu)manmade compositions of our environmental and ecological landscapes. In many ways, narratives exist as extensions and elegies for the Black Diaspora, displaced by water and dispossessed by a strange land. Bringing the fragmented threadlines of material fiber histories alongside the materiality of memory, allows us to unearth the political geography, cultural landscapes, and speculative histories of the enslaved communities shaped and shaded by the colonized plants around them during America's colonial and antebellum period. Although we saw an increase in Black environmental writings during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, early American scholarship, while not always appreciative of the ecospiritualities and political geographies that complicated the connections between enslaved people and the land they worked, is arguably one of the most ecocritical fields of history in the Atlantic World. This is due, in

part, to the role nature played in the contemporaneous accounts of European observers from the period, especially those who worked closely with the land in imperial capacities.

While future studies will incorporate more indigenous knowledge and perspectives to future texture and complicate the relationship between the colonized American landscape and one her most colonized peoples (i.e. enslaved Africans and their descendants), the fragmented scholarship requires a more exhaustive analysis that extends beyond the margins of this study. By cultivating an intersectional framework that allows for retextured narratives and diaspora-centric analysis that incorporates poetry, oral histories, dance, literature, textile traditions, and fiber practices, this work aims to recover the roots and untangle the routes of human interaction and identity formation within a nexus textured by structural, cultural, political, and economic forces connected landscapes of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Long Civil Rights Movement.

### **Black Earth & Green Gold: Remapping the Atlantic**

*The rastaman thinks, draw me a map of what you see  
then I will draw a map of what you never see  
and guess me whose map will be bigger than whose?  
Guess me whose map will tell the larger truth?*

**Kei Miller**

*The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*

The roots of the textile slave trade did not originate in the American colonies; however it is this localized landscape that will serve as the backdrop for our story's beginnings. Even before there were any romantic notions of the American frontier or bold proclamations about a mythologized city on a shining hill, there was a vast, land, seemingly infinite horizon of woodlands, flooded marshes, grasslands, lakes, bayous,

and earth-soaked valleys and fields. The near feverish drive and insatiable appetites of colonial planters and settlers to acquire fertile lands and access to water was matched only by their endless stream of writings and wonderings about the strange new frontier they sought to occupy and exploit. Some of the most regarded European commentators on the natural environments that encompassed early America were, in profession and passion, naturalists themselves.<sup>44</sup> During the eighteenth century, many of these natural scientists recounted their colonizing exploits in the New World as perilous adventures and dramatic quests that “featured ‘adventurer-scientists’ who encountered life-threatening nature, wild natives, and hostile colonials all in the service of science.”<sup>45</sup> Part-alchemist, part-apothecary and part-adventurer, these naturalists fashioned their travel accounts to not only capture the lush imagery of the rugged American wilderness, treacherous waters, hurricane-battered islands, and the “exotic” indigenous communities they encountered, but also to cement an idealized version of their own heroic masculinity. While their contemporaries who remained behind in Europe had long-since cemented their roles as gentlemen scholars,<sup>46</sup> their voyaging — predominantly male-bodied — colleagues took to the seas, booking passage across the Atlantic in trading-company vessels, merchant ships, commissioned naval carriers, and even aboard slave ships. Just as surveyors and mapmakers were put to work by their European governments and patrons in facilitating the consolidation (and control) of

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<sup>44</sup> Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*, 24. “European naturalists were a varied lot: some were men of God, most were physicians; some paid their own passage, most were sent by trading companies, kings, or scientific academies. Some were mature and settled, most were young and unmarried. The vast majority were male.”

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 68.

<sup>46</sup> Schiebinger reminds us about the sharp class distinctions between natural historians of the eighteenth century, noting that naturalists who were categorized as “heroic voyaging botanists,” were largely upper-class men who “were supported by numerous lower-class assistants whose work secured their success” (46).

natural resources, territorial expansions, and, subsequently, empire-building efforts that displaced and dispossessed indigenous, immigrant, and diaspora communities by superimposing cultural, political, gender, and economic features onto their environments,<sup>47</sup> naturalists, both in Europe and abroad in the American colonies, wielded their scientific knowledge to catalogue and categorize specimens across imperial domains. Historian Londa Schiebinger notes further that botanists especially wielded great influence operating on behalf of Europe's imperial powers:

First, botanists identified and catalogued precious plants in new territories, allowing their governments to secure a cheap supply of drugs, foods, and luxury items for domestic markets. Second, naturalists found domestic or colonial substitutes for luxury imports—for example, rhubarb, tea, coffee, or Peruvian bark—that had drained treasuries of precious metals. Thirdly, botanists employed their technical expertise to transport and acclimatize valuable plants to the soils of European territories around the world.<sup>48</sup>

In essence, their role as agents of empire saw them actively aid and abet the expansion of European colonization and commerce “amassing national wealth, and hence power” for their country's governments and sovereigns.<sup>49</sup> Botany was a lucrative business, in part, due to the major developments in nomenclature and taxonomy that arose as a direct result of the European colonization and imperialism. Plants served as the foundation for nearly all medicinal, agricultural, and botanical commerce coming out of the European-occupied colonies during both the colonial and antebellum periods. John

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<sup>47</sup> Wardi, 45.

<sup>48</sup> Schiebinger, 11.

<sup>49</sup> Schiebinger. 5.

Douglass Belshaw adds that the crops Europeans encountered in the Americas such as potatoes, sweet potatoes, squash, beans, maize, tobacco, tomatoes, corn, and chocolate would become staples, not only in European metropolises, but across the Atlantic and along their arteries of trade and commerce.<sup>50</sup>

the earth and water were near permanent fixtures in early writings on America, alongside another topic of interest: color and race.<sup>51</sup> Many European writers used both the occupied and “untamed” landscapes in early American environments as narrative tools to situate their regional that were melded and modified to compliment their transplanted “Christianity, folk beliefs, western literary traditions, and scientific theories.”<sup>52</sup> Their letters and literature from the late fifteenth century through the eighteenth century capture both the aspirations of the newly arrived Europeans and their colonial tendency of *environmental othering* that situated foreign plants, animals, and people in nature-oriented language meant to classify and codify the spaces and

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<sup>50</sup> John Douglass Belshaw, *Canadian History: Pre-Confederation* (B.C. Open Textbook Project, 2015). Belshaw notes that “these plants revolutionized life in the Old World: potatoes replaced grains in many parts of Europe; manioc (or cassava), while not having a huge impact on European diets, underwrote a population explosion in Africa and thus contributed to the rise and longevity of the slave trade.”

<sup>51</sup> I present color and race as a singular, intertwined topic because the larger body of scholarship examined in this piece possesses a more liminal timescape with primary sources ranging across Vast Early America through the Early Republic period. By the time of the American Revolution, botanist and scientific racist Carl von Linneaus’ infamous racial classification charts were less than thirty years old, and “race” as a universal signifier of intelligence, morality, intellect, and ability had yet to form into a fully functioning ecosystem. However, not only did British immigrants and their European counterparts perpetuate color prejudice in their everyday writings and public discourses, but there is strong evidence that environmental racism was a major contributing factor to what would become the scientific racism curated and dispersed by scholars and scientists alike. I think the narratives uncovered here could potentially tie back into a larger global history about the exploitation of plants and people that intersects with reproduction/public health, labor, and environment.

<sup>52</sup> Kimberly K. Smith, *African American Environmental Thought* (University Press of Kansas, 2007), 14.

resources these *nonhumans* could occupy and access — if any.<sup>53</sup> Even as they wrote

about the abundance of fish and fowl, these writers also described a hostile

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<sup>53</sup> Environmental othering, coined by Ruffin, refers to the dispossession of Black people in relation to the bio-politics of their environments. Building on her paradoxical framework that focuses on natural spaces, I incorporate the term not only through the viewpoints of land sovereignty or homeownership, but the right to exist within and beyond the ecosystem of whiteness permeating American histories and landscapes. See Kimberly Ruffins' *Black on Earth African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (12).

environment that, in their eyes, was a “desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and men.” This impenetrable whiteness is reflected in early American writings from European observers. In his 1650 manuscript *Of Plimoth Plantation*, William Bradford, distinguished as a Puritan expatriate who fled political persecution by boarding the Mayflower in 1620 and was one of the original signers of the Mayflower Compact, depicted America as an untamed wilderness that was “full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue.” While the word *hue* can be examined through multiple layers, ranging from the shade and/or color of one’s skin to an older usage linking one’s hue to their [perceived] inherent character and virtue, early American writings were deeply immersed and informed by literary traditions that created colonized parallels between the “savage” wilderness and the “savage” indigenous Americans and Africans. Therefore, we can determine that Bradford, similar to his contemporaries, sought to navigate this new setting by engendering and coloring the landscape in proverbial, philosophical language that could be used interchangeably between bodies of nature and the bodies of indigenous Native Americans and Africans. Still, these early Eurocentric observations were often layered with textured multiplicities that were complex and even, at times, contradictory. During both the colonial and post-revolutionary periods, the cultivation of food and fiber plants remained a prevalent concern of European colonizers, who recognized that their limited knowledge of America’s topography and climate left them especially vulnerable to famine, starvation, poverty, and disease. In the New England territories, settlers came to rely upon the crops and knowledge of indigenous people who viewed the newly arrived Europeans “as a source of goods and as possible allies

or adversaries. Very quickly, these communities “threw themselves into the business of acquiring exotic trade goods” in exchange for woven baskets of food.<sup>54</sup>

The emerging ecologies of the American South were equally challenged, given that the “tropical climates do not support the temperate-zone crops that defined European foodways—wheat, barely, red, and oats.”<sup>55</sup> Here too, European settlers relied upon the generosity and trade of indigenous people, although, like in New England, this system of cooperation was soon replaced by a system of enslavement. As the colonial period continued and the Transatlantic Slave Trade began to take shape, indigenous knowledge was soon replaced when ships arrived from Africa carrying enslaved Africans. Frederick Knight comments in his seminal work, *Working the Diaspora: The Impact of African Labor on the Anglo-American World, 1650-1850*, the “colonial project” posited and propagated by Anglo-American communities “mobilized Africans not only for their brawn but also for their knowledge.”<sup>56</sup> Botanists, many who were trained as medical physicians, organized their ecological classifications and imperial models beyond the scope of plants. Influenced by the racial classification systems of prominent naturalists, like pioneering Swedish scholar and physician, Carl von Linnaeus and British botanists Hans Sloane and Joseph Banks, the placement of re-named species<sup>57</sup> became a tool for interpreting and organizing the body of politic and wealth of these

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<sup>54</sup> Belshaw, *Canadian History: Pre-Confederation*.

<sup>55</sup> Judith A. Carney and Richard Nicholas Rossomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (University of California Press, 2009) 105.

<sup>56</sup> Frederick C. Knight. *Working the Diaspora: The Impact of African Labor on the Anglo-American World, 1650-1850* (New York University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>57</sup> See Schiebinger: “Naming practices celebrated a particular brand of historiography—namely, a history celebrating the deeds of great European men” (20).

European empires. Their environmental biases (and blindspots) would eventually culminate into the metamorphosis of scientific racism. Their racist rhetorical constructs would be used by pro-slavery advocates and politicians across the Atlantic World and, even following the abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, their (hu)manmade constructs would be used to both explain (and justify) the continued exploitation and colonization of territories. Colonial natural science and these systems of taxonomy became very important for the construction of categories of race and sexuality. Production of different categories of the vegetal world necessitated different categories of forms of life, including humans; they underpinned the science of botany, as well as the practice of bioprospecting.

## **Blacker than Blue: Indigo**

*“The forests gave way before them, and extensive verdant fields, richly clothed with produce, rose up as by magic before these hardy sons [and daughters] of toil. . . . Being farmers, mechanics, laborers and traders in their own country, they required little or no instruction in these various pursuits.”*

**Martin Delany, 1852**

*“In passing through a lane, I [...] saw a field, which appeared to me to contain about fifty acres, in which people were at work with hoes, amongst a sort of plants that I had never seen before. I asked my master what this was, and he told me it was indigo.”*

**Charles Ball, 1837**

*“For various colors of cloth the thread was dyed. he dye was made by digging up red shank and wild indigo roots which were boiled: The substance obtained being some of the best dye to be found.”*

**Josephine Anderson, 1936-1938**

Born to a free colored woman and enslaved father in 1812 Virginia, Martin Delaney’s earliest years were colored by slavery. Both sets of grandparents hailed from Africa — his mother’s people were Manidka of the Niger Valley and his father’s family

were Gola chieftains from present-day Liberia — and were brought to America along the blue waterways of the Middle Passage. Possessing ancestral knowledge from the oral histories of his grandparents, Martin was keenly aware not only of his afroindigenous roots, but also of the role African-based knowledge played in maintaining the United States' slavery-saturated economy.

It is notorious, that in the planting States, the blacks themselves are the only skillful cultivators—the proprietor knowing little or nothing about the art, save that which he learns from the African husbandman, while his ignorant white overseer, who is merely there to see that the work is attended to, knows a great deal less. Tobacco, cotton, rice, hemp, indigo, the improvement in Indian corn, and many other important products, are all the result of African skill and labor in this country.<sup>58</sup>

While these African societies and their fiber makers held deep ancestral knowledge about the blue plant, indigo cultivation extends back to our most ancient textile traditions. Widely accepted as one of the world's oldest fiber plants utilized by humans, the plant was widespread across the tropical biomes of India, China, and West Africa flourished across the sea in the Caribbean and Americas. Indigo-producing communities of West Africa possessed a history dyeing practices and oral knowledge retained and preserved within community. While it is unknown when indigo was originally cultivated in Africa, one of the oldest dye pits that remains operational, is located in Kano, Morocco, the same community where famed traveler Ibn Battutah visited in the 1300s and he recorded “his wonder at the colour alchemy of their practices.”<sup>59</sup> Textiles soaked and

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<sup>58</sup> See Delaney, “The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States” [1852].

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shaded blue by indigo were traded and transported along the Silk Road, popularizing the dyed fabric across the transcontinental network. However, the professional trade guilds of Europe actively resisted the introduction of *Indian indigo* into their market spaces. For centuries, Europeans grew woad plants like *Isatis tinctoria* to produce blue dyes. As indigo began encroaching into Mediterranean communities — with Portugal and Spain importing the blue plant from their Central and South American colonies — woad farmers and merchants attempted to halt the importation of indigo:

Prior to the late sixteenth century, indigo was not used extensively in Britain or Europe because of the abundance of the blue-producing woad plant. Indeed, in Britain, woad was protected from imported indigo through much of the Middle Ages because woad's growth and manufacture supported many British growers and dyers.<sup>60</sup>

A century later, with European empires expanding their domains to overseas territories, their agents of empire shifted their focus to Africa and their indigo communities. It wasn't long before these African communities, along with the fiber plants they wove and dyed, were uprooted and transported across the Atlantic.

Indigo proved to be one of the most lucrative and exploited plants of the Atlantic World's textile slave trade, becoming the leading fiber crop in both South Carolina and East Florida, where the plant grew wild and deep along the coastlines. Men like Thomas Ashby, John Barker, and Florida governor James Grant operated as agents of empire across British-occupied Florida, devoting thousands of acres collectively to the production and careful cultivation of indigo. Prior to the American Revolution, Great

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<sup>60</sup> Andrea Feeser. *Red, White, and Black Make Blue: Indigo in the Fabric of Colonial South Carolina Life*, (University of Georgia Press, 2013).

Britain's government furthered the expansion of indigo plantations by paying a subsidy to the plants' producers. In fact, by the year 1750, South Carolina boasted an annual yield of eighty-seven thousand pounds of indigo, early the colony a reputation of producing extensive amounts of the blue dye "next in quality to the highest grade produced in Guatemala and the French Caribbean."<sup>61</sup>

The best indigo seed was found in abundance in the Mississippi River region. About four bushels of seed was required for one acre of planting. The ideal time for sowing the seed was in early March, and continued until early in May, the wet season in Florida. If the seeds had been sown in early March, and if the season was favorable, five cuttings of the indigo plants could be expected between March and November. No cutting was done during hot, dry weather, for the hot sun destroyed the cut plants. The ideal time for cutting was the rainy season. As soon as the indigo bloomed it was cut; the blossoms usually appeared about ten weeks after the seeds were planted. After the plants were cut they were gathered and tied into bundles, and carried to the indigo vats for processing.<sup>62</sup>

Because the demanding process required a high volume of fresh water, indigo plantations were often situated near inland drainage basins or along canals reshaped to better assist in the crops drainage. Enslaved individuals like Charles Ball recounted the extensive labor involved framing the environmental racism and exploitation through the lens of the non-men, women, and men whose fingers grew, nurtured, cut, bundled, held, soaked, and processed the blue fiber plant:

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<sup>61</sup> Knight, 87.

<sup>62</sup> Kenneth H. Beeson, Jr. "Indigo Production in the Eighteenth Century," (Hispanic American Historical Review, 1964).

We had, this year, as a part of our crop, ten acres of indigo. This plant is worked nearly after the manner of rice, except, that it is planted on high and dry ground, whilst the rice is always cultivated in low swamps, where the ground may be inundated with water; but notwithstanding its location on dry ground, the culture of indigo is not less unpleasant than that of rice. When the rice is ripe, and ready for the sickle, it is no longer disagreeable; but when the indigo is ripe and ready to cut, the troubles attendant upon it, have only commenced.<sup>63</sup>

Still, the story indigo is not just one of pained remembrance but a narrative of rediscovered resilience. Enslaved peoples, like Lidia Jones, recounted years after emancipation deep sensory memories of their time in bondage, often bringing up the fabrics and fibers that textured their everyday lives.

I helped weave cloth. Dyed it? I wish you'd hush! My missis went to the woods and got it. All I know is, she said it was indigo. She had a great big kittle and she put her thread in that. No Lord, she never bought her indigo—she raised it . . . She had a loom half as big as this house. Lord a mercy, a many a time I went dancin' from that old spinnin'-wheel.<sup>64</sup>

The ancestral cloth-making traditions around indigo have continued to shape community and culture across Africa and her global diasporas. Denim, a cloth deeply shaded by the textile slave trade, became an iconic symbol of the 1960s when Black American activists reclaimed the fabric, donning jeans and overalls that blended working-class

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<sup>63</sup> Charles Ball “Slavery in the United States. A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia, as a Slave Under Various Masters, and was One Year in the Navy with Commodore Barney, During the Late War.”

<sup>64</sup> See Federal Writers Project: Slave Narratives from Alabama collection.

sensibilities with the aspirations of freedom, mobility, and self-determination. Across Africa, indigo continues to feature as a form of communities alchemy and ancestral reclamation. For example, *àdìrẹ* — a contemporary word for an ancient fabric that translates to “tie and dye” — is a Yoruba cloth “decorated using a resist-dyeing technique to create striking patterns in blue and white.”<sup>65</sup> The Manjak people of Southern Senegal and Guinea-Bissau refer to their indigo cloth-making as *pagne tissé* and in along the Ivory Coast, textile artists and traditional makers alike use Morinda tree bark in their dye-making process to enrich the fermentation, resulting in a deep, rich shade of blue.<sup>66</sup>

### **Planting a Place of Memory**

*“You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. ‘Floods’ is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.”*

**Toni Morrison**  
*“The Site of Memory”*

Throughout the history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the American landscape has been manipulated to fit an ecological mold that seeks to commodify and control access to natural resources, all while dispossessing communities of color, particularly those connected to the Black Diaspora. While Black environmental thought came of age during the Atlantic World’s era of slavery, it was not until the 1970s and 1980s — over a century following Emancipation — that the term environmental racism took root in the environmental justice movement. Still, looking

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<sup>65</sup> “*Àdìrẹ* – ‘tied and dyed’ indigo textiles” | Article produced as part of the Victoria & Albert Museum’s *Africa Fashion* exhibition, 2023.

<sup>66</sup> See Rosie Lesso's along entry “Indigo in Africa: An Indigenous Craft.” (*The Thread*, 10 September 2020)

across our shared and segregated landscapes, one can find the roots and routes of ecological imperialism and the frayed edges of the racist, gendered classifications mingled and mixed into the soil and sand. Beneath our decorated military bases and our neglected sites of decay lie the buried remains of the emancipated and enslaved.<sup>67</sup> Permeating our communities of color are toxic waste sites and landfills that poison waterways. The same insatiable appetite for fertile land that drove Southern planters, has degraded soil, displaced communities, and, in some cases, nearly erased the histories of the plants and people connected to those sites of memory. The broad expanse of environmental histories, both established and emerging frameworks across the Global North, continue to overwhelmingly relegate Black environmental memories, thoughts, and writings to the edge of the ecological terrain:

“This movement began as part of a multifaceted reaction to problematic features of modernity in late nineteenth-century America, including the decline of religious authors and resulting void of spiritual meaning the effects of industrial exploitation of nature on agricultural fertility and human health; the increasing social diversity that dew into question national identity; and the spread of powerful technologies that tended to control and not just facilitate human action. . . . Black experienced modernity differently . . . Debates about national identity and between evolutionary biology and religion were for them filtered through the rhetoric of scientific racism. Industrial exploitation of nature, for many Black Americans, involved exploitation of their labor.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Research conducted by VCU scholar Ryan Smith, has revealed that there are approximately 22,000 free and enslaved Black people interred at Richmond’s second oldest African burial site, Shockoe Hill African Burying Ground.

<sup>68</sup> Smith, *African American Environmental Thought*, 4.

To recognize these community histories in full color is to actively detangle the dispossessed memories and unweave the entire imperial tapestry of environmental knowledge that colonized and categorized our natural environments and the histories they grew. Our ecological conditioning requires us to rediscover the role the nonhuman world plays in shaping the cultures, languages, identities, and memories threaded and connected to the Atlantic World. By threading the lines between African ecospiritualities, Black environmental thought, European botany, and the ancestral textiles and textures caught in-between, we come to acknowledge not only the lingering roots and routes of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, but we uncover the multiple tapestries of the afterlives and futurepasts, filled with memory and magic, that can inspire us to reimagine the landscapes, waterways, and histories that we weave.