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Dreaming Black Environmental Futures: A Middle Grade Graphic Novel on Black Communities' Relationship to the Environment

COURTNEY NUNLEY

Yale College, New Haven Connecticut

Abstract:

My Education Studies capstone is a two-part creative project. This paper establishes the problem of the Black community's complex relationship with the environment, how this relationship has been largely absent in children's lit on the environment, and what my intervention into the literature is. The second part of this project is a middle grade graphic novel, *The Adventures of Zora Jones*, set in Los Angeles on Black environmentalism. This is important because there hasn't been much writing for youth on Black people's long history of engaging with the environment and on how racism is tied up in how we engage with nature. I hope to show all Black kids that there is more for Black folks interested in the environment than violence and pain, Black folks have in fact had meaningful relationships with the environment for years, and their own relationship can look like a million different things beyond the dominant narrative of who and what is considered "outdoorsy."

Key words: creative project, Black, youth, nature, environment, outdoors, outdoorsy, multigenerational, reclaim, graphic novel, future, dreams

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Introduction

Growing up, I was constantly reminded that being in the outdoors was not for me. I remember being told by older—and often lighter skinned—members of the family to not spend too much time in the sun when I would play outside. Not for any worries of things like skin cancer or dehydration, but because I'd get darker and god forbid I let that happen. I remember my mom being horrified when she found I went swimming without my hair being in braids because she'd have to "fix" what I did. I remember frequently driving by these machines I only knew as large metal giants when going to different community events in a state park. I was always excited to go to that park because it was one of the few green spaces I regularly remember going to with my family. The machines were constantly moving, so I knew they were doing something but I didn't know what. It was years later that I learned the giants made up an oil field—in fact, the biggest urban oil field in the country—contaminating the air and water in the surrounding Black community.¹ How do you enjoy the park and feel safe in it once you know the air and water there can hurt you?

When I started going to private schools, they brought me out to do all kinds of traditional "outdoorsy" activities like hiking, kayaking, and camping that I hadn't experienced before. Yet, even with all this access to the outdoors through school, it didn't feel like any of these trips and activities were things I could do outside of school. If we ever ran into other people while on these trips, I never remember any of them being Black. I wouldn't have known about many of these places or have had a way to get to some of them without these schools. I got jokes from other students about how bad my hair would look if it ever got wet, not having to wear sunscreen, and being scared to swim. I was even put with a group of all guys for activities and for sleeping on one of these trips when most of the groups were made by gender, an experience

¹ Nicole Levin, "Inglewood Oil Field Is Killing Us," Sierra Club Angeles Chapter, July 31, 2019, https://angeles.sierraclub.org/conservation_news/blog/2019/07/inglewood_oil_field_is_killing_us.

that illuminated the masculinization of Black women before I ever had words for it. I certainly had positive experiences with the outdoors that were built up by my family and community. However, they were few and far between all of these stories.

My relationship with the outdoors is no anomaly. For centuries, there have been stories of Black Americans' experiences with the environment that are full of discomfort, neglect, exclusion, fear, surveillance, and violence. Tens of millions of Black people were enslaved and transported across the Atlantic Ocean, tingeing oceans with a dark history of violence, death, and suffering. The woods—sites lingering with memories of lynchings and slave catchers—can feel haunting to Black folks to this day. Many “public” spaces, such as parks and pools, once legally segregated still remain de facto white spaces today through surveillance and policing of Black people who dare to enter these areas. Flint, Michigan is one of many examples of Black communities nationwide disproportionately suffering from pollution and proximity to toxic sites and chemicals. Racist urban planning and housing policies also account for low income Black communities being disproportionately damaged from natural disasters like Hurricanes Harvey and Katrina.² To this day, the hypervisibility, surveillance, and perceived out-of-place-ness of Black folks in the outdoors can be life threatening. The Central Park Five and Christian Cooper are examples of that. The list goes on and on.

Studies support these stories and can illustrate some other ways Black folks' fraught relationship with the environment manifests. In 2018, *The George Wright Forum* published a report that said African Americans are the most underrepresented of United States (US) national park visitors, making up less than 2 percent.³ For reference, Black people made up about 12.7

² Frank Thomas and E&E News, “Flooding Disproportionately Harms Black Neighborhoods,” *Scientific American*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/flooding-disproportionately-harms-black-neighborhoods/>.

³ David Scott and Kang Jae Jerry Lee, “People of Color and Their Constraints to National Park Visitation,” *The George Wright Forum* 35, no. 1 (2018): 73.

percent of the US population in 2018.⁴ Dorceta Taylor wrote a report surveying gender and racial diversity in six types of mainstream environmental organizations—general conservation organizations, freshwater organizations, environmental education centers, environmental consulting organizations, environmental policy institutes and think tanks, and professional conservation and trade associations—that is lauded as “the most comprehensive report on diversity in the environmental movement”.⁵ Across hundreds of organizations and their thousands of staff members, 11.7 percent of all mainstream organizations’ staff members are people of color.⁶ Only 7.1 percent of all these organizations’ senior staff members are minorities.⁷ A 2018 study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* focused on stereotypes demographic groups hold of one another in regards to the environment.⁸ Demographic groups included white, Black, Latino, and Asian people as well as a range of socioeconomic statuses, ages, and educational backgrounds.⁹ One key finding is that all respondents overwhelmingly associated the term “environmentalist” with someone who is white, fairly wealthy, and highly educated.¹⁰

Histories of how these fraught relationships came to be and of how Black people must be told. Moreover, our communities’ relationship to the environment is more than the trauma we have endured. Histories of how Black folks have connected with the environment in rich and

⁴ “Race, 2018: ACS 1-Year Estimates Detailed Tables,” United States Census Bureau, accessed December 10, 2020, <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Race%20and%20Ethnicity&tid=ACSDT1Y2018.B02001&hidePreview=false>.

⁵ Dorceta Taylor, Ph.D., “The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations: Mainstream NGOs, Foundations, Government Agencies” (Green 2.0, July 2014).; “The Challenge,” *Green 2.0* (blog), accessed February 28, 2021, <https://diversegreen.org/research/the-challenge/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Adam R. Pearson et al., “Diverse Segments of the US Public Underestimate the Environmental Concerns of Minority and Low-Income Americans,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 49 (December 4, 2018): 12429–34, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804698115>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 12432.

meaningful ways must also be reclaimed. Black youth deserve to be taught a fuller Black environmental history so they can realize a brighter Black environmental future and I want to help teach them.

Overview of Capstone Project

Summary

My capstone is a 2-part creative project: this paper and a graphic novel. This paper details the questions, extensive research, and care that went into creating the graphic novel. The middle grade graphic novel is my attempt to bring a fuller Black environmental history to Black youth through telling the multigenerational stories of a fictional Black family in Los Angeles. It is both written and drawn by me.

Why a Graphic Novel?

The graphic novel format proved most effective for a variety of reasons. First, taking from the concept of “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors,” it’s incredibly important for young readers to read books that reflect themselves and the world around them.¹¹ I believe that a graphic novel format can show Black kids themselves, their families, and communities in nature through a powerful combination of text and images. Furthermore, graphic novels can strengthen many skills within young readers such as inference, reading comprehension, understanding succinct language, motivating reluctant and nervous readers, vocabulary skills, and understanding the relationship between text and images.¹² They’re a way to bring an arts

¹¹ Rudine Sims Bishop, The Ohio State University, “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors” originally appeared in *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, Vo. 6, no. 3, Summer 1990.

¹² “The Benefits of Reading Graphic Novels,” *Bucks County Free Library* (blog), May 22, 2019, <https://buckslib.org/the-benefits-of-reading-graphic-novels/>; “Raising Super Readers: Benefits of Comic Books & Graphic Novels,” accessed December 10, 2020,

education of sorts into the classroom, a program that is often cut or threatened to be cut in many schools nationwide.¹³ They're also said to be good for kids with learning disabilities by helping them identify emotions through images and being less overwhelming to get through than a normal book because they have less words on a page.¹⁴ The multiple modes of representation graphic novels allow for in addition to all the skills it can build up makes it a wonderful format for teaching this material.

Significance

For people who can get outdoors, there are many positive benefits to our mental and physical health from spending time outside. Studies have shown that getting outside can decrease anxiety and improve cognitive function.¹⁵ It can also increase energy, decrease stress, restore focus, and even improve sleep quality.¹⁶ The myriad of ways the Black community has been denied access to the outdoors and has been told that it's not for us is a direct threat to our health. In this pandemic, when outdoor recreation is one of few allowed and safe activities in many places nationwide, this problem weighs even heavier.

Moreover, I hope this project will encourage Black folks hesitant to explore their curiosities about nature and the outdoors to dive deep and reclaim their generational connection to the Earth. I dream of a future where a project like this isn't even necessary because so many Black folks have learned more about our community's past and grown stronger, healthier relationships to the environment. A future where our communities are no longer polluted, Black

<https://www.scholastic.com/parents/books-and-reading/raise-a-reader-blog/raising-super-readers-benefits-comic-books-and-graphic-novels.html>.

¹³ "Raising Super Readers."

¹⁴ "The Benefits of Reading Graphic Novels."

¹⁵ "Why Being Outside Is Good for Your Mental Health," accessed December 9, 2020, https://luminohealth.sunlife.ca/s/article/Why-being-outside-is-good-for-your-mental-health?language=en_US.

¹⁶ "Mental Health Benefits of Spending Time in Nature," *Parks Blog* (blog), October 10, 2020, <https://www.ontarioparks.com/parksblog/mental-health-benefits-outdoors/>.

kids bask in the sun and love the way their skin shines in it, and Black folks are out enjoying themselves unbothered all over parks and community gardens. Right now, Black youth are growing up in a time where environmental justice is understood as racial justice by an increasing number of people, climate disaster is a looming threat, and challenges to this nation's impulse to forget and erase histories are getting more attention. This colliding of movements and people power shows how important it is to teach Black environmental histories to youth. Without knowing our histories, our collective dreams and organizing for what the future can hold for us are stunted.

Research Questions & Methodology

There are three questions I seek to answer through this capstone: (1) Given the problem of a socially constructed Black alienation from the environment and outdoors, what histories and imaginaries do we need to recover in order to repair this relationship?, (2) What are the themes that need to be explored in order to re-shape this relationship?, and (3) What literary elements and representational styles would serve me best in my graphic novel in order to bring these histories to youth?

To answer my first question, there are two pots of literature that I needed to read and familiarize myself with: how race, gender, and class have been constructed alongside our understandings of the environment and Black environmental histories. Today, there is a growing prevalence of non-scholarly articles from mainstream news outlets, social media content, and local organizations aimed to better understand this relationship and to center Blackness in their environmental work.¹⁷ These developments have helped make knowledge on Black folks'

¹⁷ Denise Chow, "Why 'I can't breathe' is resonating with environmental justice activists," NBC News, June 10, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/science/environment/why-i-can-t-breathe-resonating-environmental-justice-activists-n12>

relationship to the environment more accessible. However, in this paper, I will focus on books and scholarly articles which often grounded these more recent interventions into environmentalism. To answer my second question, I will do a literature review of children's books about the environment with a focus on middle grade books to understand the landscape of environmental literature for this age of children. In doing so, I can map out what gaps exist that I want to fill through my graphic novel. Finally, I will read a sampling of middle grade graphic novels to get a sense of the voice and style of this literature as inspiration for my own writing and drawing.

Literature Review

Constructions of Race, Gender, and Class Alongside the Environment

The ways in which the environment has been associated over time with whiteness, masculinity, and higher socioeconomic status in the United States is tied up in white supremacy, specifically anti-black racism, and colonialism. In the past couple decades, there has been a wealth of scholarly articles and books written on this. Three foundational books doing this work are *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection* (2016) by Dorceta E. Taylor and *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States* (2017) by Carl A. Zimring. Taylor's book is about how environmentalism, conservationism, and preservationism were all inspired by urban activism and

²⁸⁵⁶¹.; Rachel Jones, "The Environmental Movement Is Very White. These Leaders Want to Change That.," History, July 29, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/environmental-movement-very-white-these-leaders-want-change-that>.; Tiya Miles, "Opinion | Black Bodies, Green Spaces," *The New York Times*, June 15, 2019, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/15/opinion/sunday/black-bodies-green-spaces.html>.; Leah Thomas (@greengirlleah).; Alexis Nikole (@blackforager).; Christopher (@plantkween).; Garden Marcus (@garden_marcus).; #BlackBirdersWeek.; Soul Fire Farm.; Melanin Base Camp.; SÚPRMARKT.; Outdoor Afro.; Black Girls Trekin'.; The DEEP Grocery Coop.; Black Outside, Inc.;

particularly the activism of urban elites.¹⁸ Moreover, she discusses how colonialist conceptions of land ownership, enslavement of Black people, and social constructs of gender that influenced how people interacted with the environment were fundamental to the rise of these environmental ideologies.¹⁹ Zimring's argument is centered on how constructions of race, especially of whiteness, came up alongside our constructions of waste and cleanliness. He shows the evolution of thoughts about racial purity during slavery and in the antebellum period that posited Blackness as the opposite of whiteness and thus impure into the belief that white people were inherently cleaner than non-white people; eventually colliding with residential segregation in the concentration of waste disposal in predominantly poor, people of color, urban neighborhoods.²⁰

There have also been numerous other articles and chapters that contribute to this body of research. Writers like Kristen Egan dive deeper into teasing out the associations between cleanliness, racial purity, and environmental purity as a consciousness that not only white men helped build up but white women as well.²¹ Others like Jody Chan and Joe Curnow focus on the role of masculinity in environmental organizations and activism.²² Furthermore, some literature is more intersectional in its approach to understanding how the wilderness and the environment have been constructed, similar to Taylor's analysis in *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement* (2016).²³ A fascinating example is Michelle Yates' chapter on the idea of nature as Eden in Western environmental thought that manifests in the common desire to "protect and/or

¹⁸ Dorceta E. Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Carl A. Zimring, *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

²¹ Kristen R. Egan, "Conservation and Cleanliness: Racial and Environmental Purity in Ellen Richards and Charlotte Perkins Gilman," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 3–4 (2011): 77–92, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2011.0066>.

²² Jody Chan and Joe Curnow, "Taking Up Space: Men, Masculinity, and the Student Climate Movement," application/pdf, September 6, 2017, 9 Pages, 227 KB, <https://doi.org/10.5282/RCC/7986>.

²³ Kevin DeLuca and Anne Demo, "Imagining Nature and Erasing Class and Race: Carleton Watkins, John Muir, and the Construction of Wilderness," *Environmental History* 6, no. 4 (October 2001): 541, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3985254>.

recover Edenic [original, pristine] nature” to further settler colonialism.²⁴ For example, Edenic nature can be thought of as untouched and pristine land. In turn, that thought can justify violently removing indigeneous people from the land and seeing nature as empty space ready for colonialist development. Another conception of Edenic nature can be a wilderness or wasteland. This idea is then used to justify settler colonialism through necessitating the conquering of the wild to commodify its resources and restore order. Moreover, whiteness and masculinity are central to this Edenic narrative as the power and dominance associated with these categories allow white men to be the ideal agent for embodying civilization, conquering the wild, and restoring Eden.²⁵ Carolyn Finney also wrote a chapter on how Black people being continually animalized and deemed savage or wild has strongly impacted the community’s relationship to nature.²⁶

Towards A Fuller Black Environmental History

There is a significant body of work for adult level readers on telling Black environmental histories. This literature can be parsed into several, different categories: comprehensive accounts of Black environmental history, Black environmental histories set exclusively during slavery, personal narratives from Black environmentalists, compilations of Black authors’ writings on the environment, environmental racism as its particularly affected Black communities, Black food justice and food sovereignty efforts, and teachings of Black environmental practices and lessons.

There are a handful of books that attempt to create a comprehensive account of Black environmental history.²⁷ Starting in the early 2000s, these works began to emerge and have since

²⁴ Michelle Yates, “Saving Eden: Whiteness, Masculinity, and Environmental Nostalgia in *Soylent Green* and *WALL-E*,” in *Gender and Environment in Science Fiction*, ed. Bridgitte Barclay and Christy Tidwell, *Ecocritical Theory and Practice* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 167.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Carolyn Finney, “Jungle Fever,” in *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 32–50.

²⁷ Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Dianne D. Glave, *Rooted in the Earth:*

been vital to increasingly popular efforts to heal and mend the relationship between Black folks and the environment. Additionally, histories focused during slavery are able to recover stories of enslaved Black people and their relationship to the environment; from their use of migrant ethnobotany for creating medicine to their recreational swimming and diving to enslaved Black women's use and perception of the environment.²⁸ Another common approach for contributing to this body of work was for Black people to write books on their personal relationships to the environment.²⁹

Something I find beautiful and valuable about this literature is how Black readers are connected to their elders and ancestors through them. This is especially true of books on personal relationships to the environment. However, I think this connection is exemplified in the books that compile Black authors' writings on the environment.³⁰ For example, Camille T. Dungy edits a book that collects over 400 years of Black nature poetry from over 90 contributors.³¹ Not only is this book an invaluable archive and testament to Black peoples' long held interest and investment in the environment, but it also creates an intergenerational link among its Black readers and authors.

Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage, 1st ed (Chicago, Ill: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010); Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll, eds., *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006); Lauret E. Savoy, *Trace: Memory, History, Race and the American Landscape* (Berkeley, California: Counterpoint, 2015).

²⁸ Elizabeth D. Blum, "Power, Danger, and Control: Slave Women's Perceptions of Wilderness in the Nineteenth Century," *Women's Studies* 31, no. 2 (January 2002): 247–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870212952>; Herbert C Covey, *African-American Slave Medicine: Herbal and Non-Herbal Treatments* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008); K. Dawson, "Enslaved Swimmers and Divers in the Atlantic World," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 1, 2006): 1327–55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4485894>.

²⁹ Dudley Edmondson, *Black & Brown Faces in America's Wild Places* (Cambridge, Minn.: Adventure Publications, 2006); Audrey Peterman and Frank Peterman, *Legacy on the Land: A Black Couple Discovers Our National Inheritance and Tells Why Every American Should Care*, 1st ed (Atlanta, Ga: Earthwise Productions, 2009); J. Drew Lanham, *The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature*, First edition (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2016).

³⁰ Melvin Dixon, *Ride out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Camille T. Dungy, ed., *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009).

³¹ Dungy, *Black Nature*.

As discussed earlier in this paper, environmental racism has had a profound impact on Black communities in the United States for decades through residential proximity to toxic waste and pollution and vulnerability in the event of climate disasters. Thus, it is understandable that literature on histories of Black people and environmental racism are extensive.³² These works, dating back to the early 1990s and birthed from “father of environmental justice” Robert D. Bullard and “mother of environmental justice” Hazel M. Johnson, are sometimes overviews of environmental racism in the United States and are other times deep dives into particular events or areas such as Hurricane Katrina. Furthermore, food justice and food sovereignty are movements that are gaining traction in Black communities that also have a long history of Black collectives, organizing, and cooperative work attached to them. There is also a body of literature related to this about farming, food, gentrification, and activism growing concurrently with these movements.³³ These books help contextualize why Black communities need to be centered in solutions to food insecurity through describing the systems and practices that have made Black people particularly vulnerable to having a lack of food, especially healthy and fresh food, in their communities. Furthermore, this body of literature describes how Black communities have combated food insecurity through various food justice and sovereignty work. Finally, one of my personal favorite facets of this literature are the guides to Black environmental practices and

³² Bunyan I. Bryant and Paul Mohai, eds., *Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards: A Time for Discourse* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992); Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*, 3rd ed (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 2000); Robert D. Bullard and Beverly Wright, *The Wrong Complexion for Protection: How the Government Response to Disaster Endangers African American Communities* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Dorceta E. Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).; Harriet A Washington, *A Terrible Thing to Waste: Environmental Racism and Its Assault on the American Mind*, 2019, <https://www.overdrive.com/search?q=B428ABE5-6550-4944-A1B5-31EBC9BFADEC>.

³³ Hanna Garth and Ashanté M. Reese, eds., *Black Food Matters: Racial Justice in the Wake of Food Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020); Anthony Ryan Hatch, *Blood Sugar: Racial Pharmacology and Food Justice in Black America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Monica M White and LaDonna Redmond, *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469643694.001.0001>.

lessons. The most popular example of this is most likely Leah Penniman's *Farming While Black* (2018).³⁴ However, I'd also like to include books like Alexis Pauline Gumbs' *Undrowned* (2020) and Lee and Allen-Taylor's *Working the Roots* (2014) in here as well.³⁵ From farming to lessons for movement building to healing practices, all of these works recover Black ancestors' knowledge and theorizing and bring them into contemporary lessons for building movements and engaging with the environment.

Youth Literature on the Environment

In terms of how race is portrayed, there are three buckets this literature falls into: (1) characters aren't racialized (thus, are de facto white) and race is seemingly irrelevant to their experiences, (2) has diverse characters and illustrations but race is still irrelevant to their experiences, and (3) race is relevant and central to experience. I argue that most middle grade environmental books fall into this first bucket where race isn't mentioned explicitly and/or characters are race-neutral, often read as white by default.³⁶ Many of these books feature survival stories, adventures through "the wild," mysteries, animal conservation efforts, inspiration for kids hoping to save the environment, and biographies on famous—largely

³⁴ Leah Penniman, *Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2018).

³⁵ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, Emergent Strategy Series (Chico: AK Press, 2020); Michele E Lee and J. Douglas Allen-Taylor, *Working the Roots: Over 400 Years of Traditional African American Healing*, 2014.

³⁶ Kate Allen, *The Line Tender* (New York: Puffin Books, 2020); Roberta Edwards and John O'Brien, *Who Is Jane Goodall?, Who Was ... ?* (New York, N.Y: Grosset & Dunlap, 2012); Sarah Fabiny and Dede Putra, *Who Was Rachel Carson?, Who Was... ?* (New York, New York, USA: Grosset & Dunlap, an imprint of Penguin Group (USA) LLC, 2014); Gail Gauthier, *Saving the Planet & Stuff* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2003); Lisa Greenwald, *My Life in Pink & Green* (New York: Amulet Books, 2010); Gail Herman and John Hinderliter, *What Is Climate Change?, What Is ...?* (New York, New York: Penguin Workshop, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2018); Carl Hiassen, *Hoot* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).; Rachel Ignatofsky, *The Wondrous Workings of Planet Earth: Understanding Our World and Its Ecosystems*, First edition (New York: Ten Speed Press, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, 2018); Gary Paulsen, *Hatchet*, Rev. cover ed (New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1999); Louis Sachar, *Fuzzy Mud* (New York: Yearling, 2017); Piers Torday, *The Last Wild* (New York: Viking, 2013).

white—environmentalists. Some also manage to tackle some deeper topics like grief, experimentation, parents’ infidelity and toxic environments as well.

Books that fall into the second bucket are the next most common, especially among picture books for younger children.³⁷ Literature for readers younger than middle grade is important to consider here because these are the books these books begin to influence children’s perceptions of Blackness and the environment early on. Thus, it is significant to show a link between books that fall in this bucket for younger readers and for middle grade readers. This category of books is all about equal representation. Although well intentioned, these books don’t engage with race thoughtfully and often even sideline the people of color as side characters or character development props for the white main characters. In highlighting diverse people without discussion of how their differences impact their engagement with the environment, their inclusion of people of color falls flat and lacks substance.

Finally, books in this third bucket are the least common and this is where I see my graphic novel falling. Some books in this category focus on non-Black people of color, their cultures, environmental racism, and conservation.³⁸ Additionally, there are middle grade books that focus specifically on Black people’s relationship to the environment. A considerable number are centered on Black people in Africa.³⁹ Others inform kids about environmental crises that

³⁷ Such as Chelsea Clinton and Siobhán Gallagher, *Start Now!: You Can Make a Difference* (New York: Philomel Books, 2018); DyAnne DiSalvo, *City Green* (New York: Morrow Junior Books, 1994); Maya Christina Gonzalez and Dana Goldberg, *Call Me Tree*, First edition (New York: Children’s Book Press, an imprint of Lee & Low Books Inc, 2014); Julian Lennon and Bart Davis, *Touch the Earth* (Perseus Distribution Services, 2017); Patricia MacLachlan and Francesca Sanna, *My Friend Earth* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2020); Edward Miller, *Recycling Day*, 2015; Linda Trice and Hazel Mitchell, *Kenya’s Art* (Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge, 2016).; Zoë Tucker and Zoe Persico, *Greta and the Giants: Inspired by Greta Thunberg’s Stand to Save the World*, 2019, <https://www.overdrive.com/search?q=5EFD193A-0416-4114-91B8-AD53C84D9A04>.

³⁸ Such as Austin Aslan, *The Islands at the End of the World*, First Edition (New York: Wendy Lamb Books, 2014); Bev Doolittle and Elise Maclay, *The Earth Is My Mother* (Shelton, Conn: Greenwich Workshop Press, 1999); Margarita Engle, *Forest World*, First edition (New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2017).

³⁹ Such as J. A. Myhre and Acacia Masso, *A Chameleon, a Boy, and a Quest*, The Rwendigo Tales, Book 1 (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015); Miranda Paul and Elizabeth Zunon, *One Plastic Bag: Isatou Ceesay and the Recycling Women of the Gambia* (Minneapolis: Millbrook Press, 2015); Jeanette Winter, *Wangari’s Trees of Peace: A True Story from Africa*, 1st ed (Orlando [Fla.]: Harcourt, 2008).

impacted Black communities in the United States either through non-fiction reporting written for youth.⁴⁰ There are books published as recently as January 2021 that draw on a variety of genres from historical fiction to fantasy that tell stories set in the past specifically about Black folks in the rural South and their relationships to the environment.⁴¹ There is one graphic novel I found that falls into this category titled *As the Crow Flies* that explores a queer, Black child, her week on a church youth backpacking trip, and questions on gender norms, religion, and whiteness in the outdoors.⁴² Finally, although much of her work might be too mature for middle grade readers, I must acknowledge the trailblazing Octavia Butler has done to carve out a category of youth environmental literature that centers race, specifically Blackness. Butler's critically acclaimed *Lilith's Brood* and *Parable* series are foundational fiction texts on race and the environment that have certainly influenced how I approach my own intervention.⁴³ By looking ahead briefly to Butler's work, I can more clearly see the gaps between youth environmental literature for elementary and middle school kids versus high school and young adult readers.

My Intervention

Plot

In *The Adventures of Zora Jones*, it's summer in South Central LA and Zora Jones is sick of having nothing to do. Every day is filled with the same routine. It was fine at first, but she got tired of it after seeing seeing some of her friends go on fun adventures with their families:

⁴⁰ Such as Candy J. Cooper and Marc Aronson, *Poisoned Water* (New York: Bloomsbury Children's Books, 2020).

⁴¹ Such as Jewell Parker Rhodes, *Sugar* (New York: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2013); Jewell Parker Rhodes, *Bayou Magic* (New York: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2015); Jewell Parker Rhodes, *Ninth Ward* (New York, NY: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2012); Eden Royce, *Root Magic*, First edition (New York: Walden Pond Press, 2021).

⁴² Melanie Gillman, *As the Crow Flies* (Chicago, Illinois: Iron Circus Comics, 2017).

⁴³ Including Octavia E. Butler, *Lilith's Brood* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 2007); Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, First Grand Central Publishing edition: January 2000, reissued: January 2007 (New York Boston: Grand Central Publishing, 2007).

camping, traveling to new places, canoeing, bonfires, the works! Frustrated one day, she vents to her family about how her friends are off exploring the outdoors and she just stays in her neighborhood. They try to tell her about all she could be doing around town and with them, but she doesn't bite. Yet, Zora falls asleep that night wondering if they were right. Maybe there is some exploring to do at home.

Through her dreams of South LA and her family, she realizes all the amazing "outdoorsy" adventures and lessons she was missing out on while wishing she was somewhere else. I hope this book can be a lesson in the importance of intergenerational knowledge, Black environmentalism, justice, joy, and community.

Engagement with Literature Review

As aforementioned, I see *The Adventures of Zora Jones* as falling into what I defined as the third bucket of youth literature on the environment where race is relevant and central to experience. However, the book will be a unique addition to this category as it's set in an urban area in the West, particularly Los Angeles. When thinking of the environment, histories of Black folks within the United States, and specifically the relationship between Black people and the environment, it's important to be place-specific. For example, the history of housing and segregation in specific areas can illuminate how Black people and other communities are disproportionately vulnerable to climate disasters, polluted water, and polluted air, as demonstrated in my African American Studies (AFAM) thesis. Therefore, an urban coastal setting and particularly Los Angeles will help tease out different facets of the relationship between Black people and the environment that can differ from how that relationship manifests in the rural South. Moreover, my book is set in the present day as opposed to the tendency of

books in this category to be set in the past or an imagined post-apocalyptic future. I think in contending with dynamics of this relationship that we're currently living through, this book could help kids understand the histories and implications of present day connections between Blackness and nature.

I'm also excited for this book to help grow the graphic novels within this bucket. Gilman's *As the Crow Flies* is a fascinating book that I enjoyed reading.⁴⁴ However, there were times throughout the novel that I could tell that Gilman was white through their handling of race. While the literary world should strive to produce works that reflect the diversity of today, it's incredibly difficult to write main characters with central aspects of their identity and characters if the author does not share that. Both Gilman and the main character Charlie are queer, but Charlie's Blackness is posed as a foundational element of her identity and her discomfort with the camping trip.⁴⁵ Yet, I could still sense a disconnect in an understanding of what it's genuinely like to be Black reflected in Charlie's character and especially in how she reacted to racism versus how she reacted to homophobia.⁴⁶ I don't expect Gilman as a white person to be able to authentically capture the Black experience and, as I said before, I think her book does really interesting work still. Nevertheless, to have a graphic novel within this category of youth environmental literature written by a Black person only enriches this body of literature to connect more deeply to Black people's experiences.

Additionally, I attempt to touch on many aspects of Black folks relationship to nature in my environment. Through using the interests of Zora's various family members, I touch on a variety of topics such as pollution, segregation, environmental justice work, Blackness and water, Black ancestral practices, alternative food systems, and Black folks existing in what's

⁴⁴ Gillman, *As the Crow Flies*.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

considered more traditional outdoors spaces. I'm able to take on this relationship with such breadth due to conducting such an expansive literature review that gave me a general understanding of these subjects and due to writing my AFAM thesis on the relationship between Black people and the environment specifically in Los Angeles. Through both methods, I can talk about a number of topics generally that I think Black folks all around the country can relate to while also making some place-specific commentary as well. In taking this multifaceted approach, I envision this book being a starting point for youth, especially Black youth, to dive deeper into elements of this relationship that interest them.

Themes Explored

Intergenerational Storytelling and Black Ancestral Knowledge. This is the most central theme to my graphic novel. Throughout *The Adventures of Zora Jones*, I draw on the knowledge of her moms, her grandparents, and their ancestors to teach her lessons about Black people's engagement with the environment. This book is really grounded in the older family members—Noelle, August, Maggie, and Marcus—and their stories, memories, and traditions. Ancestral knowledge and practices are particularly important in relation to August, Maggie, and Marcus.

Pollution and Environmental Justice. I use Cam's character as the main vehicle through which this theme is explored. As youth today are becoming more and more engaged with climate and environmental activism, I thought conveying this theme through an older but still teenaged character would be apt. In the book, I discuss the pervasiveness of toxins and pollutants in Black communities, oil drilling specifically in South Central, and the multifaceted approach community

organizers take in response. Additionally, this theme is brought up briefly with the map at the beginning of the book and through Theo and Maggie's characters.

Housing Segregation. Although I don't explicitly use the term "housing segregation," the process and its effects are referenced in the novel. Through Cam, Noelle, and Marcus' characters, segregation and the specific issues of Black neighborhoods are discussed in relation to pollution, lack of access to green space, and food apartheid.

Engaging in the Outdoors. Noelle's section is about different ways to engage in outdoor spaces that are equally valid, from reading nature literature to going on hikes. Moreover, the section touches on the simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility of Black folks in the outdoors. Hypervisibility is referenced through Noelle's thoughts of how racist white people may see her and Zora out on the trails and think they're dangerous and threatening. Invisibility is referenced through her thoughts on how the city was structured so that there were fewer green spaces in Black neighborhoods.

Reading nature as navigation. Through Maggie, I discuss how Black people have historically been able to use their understanding of nature in order to orient themselves and get to their destinations. I focus on the importance of knowing constellations and reading stars to find North, but I also mention knowing birds' migratory patterns and the side of trees that moss grows on. I don't specifically tie this to slavery as some of these practices existed in Africa long before slavery, but I do mention that this is a multigenerational practice of Black folks.

Water. Throughout history, Black folks have held different relationships to different terrain and elements. For example, as I mentioned back in the “Introduction,” slave catchers and lynchings are just a couple reasons why the woods could be a frightening space for Black folks to this day. While South Central LA and Los Angeles generally are pretty isolated from wooded areas, water is another site with a complicated relationship that Los Angeles is well situated for. Thus, I explored this through Theo. In trying to center joy and life throughout this graphic novel, I didn’t focus extensively on more traumatic histories. Instead, I start my discussion of water with how Theo, as a swimmer, feels connected to it and at peace when he’s in it. However, as I aim for this book to share Black environmental histories and be educational, I do mention more traumatic elements of the relationship to water as well.

Plant medicine. I use August’s character to discuss the migrant ethnobotany and plant medicine practices of Black folks that are rooted in African traditions preserved during slavery. While her section more largely talks about Black people’s knowledge of plants and the many ways they can be used, plant medicine is explicitly discussed as part of that conversation. It is important to me to touch on this theme favorably as non-Western medicine is generally stigmatized.

Alternative food systems. Food justice and sovereignty has been and continues to be a long-term struggle for the Black community. It has, therefore, generated a lot of literature on inequitable access to healthy foods. People use a variety of terms such as food desert and food apartheid to refer to this and it’s been widely studied and organized around in Los Angeles. Thus, I find it important to discuss in this graphic novel and did so through Marcus’ character. I envision Marcus’ character, and Maggie’s for that matter, coming from a farm in the South to Los Angeles

during the Second Great Migration like many other Black people did as I discussed in my AFAM thesis. So, he became a great way to discuss differences between access to fresh food in cities and on the farm where he grew up. Furthermore, I use Marcus to talk about urban gardening as a response to food apartheid in cities.

Normalizing different genders and family structures. There are a few choices I made in this graphic novel in crafting my characters and the family as a whole that I wanted to include but not spend much time trying to explain or contextualize in an attempt to normalize them. Specifically, the grandparents live with their children and grandchildren, there are two moms, and one of the characters Cam is nonbinary. Although in my experience it's more common for people of color to live in multigenerational homes than white people, all of these choices could be novel or unfamiliar for some young readers. With more time and in a longer graphic novel, I could've expanded Parts 1 and 3 to give more background on the family and fleshed out the characters more. I absolutely prioritized Part 2 and I believe that's for the best. However, it's also good for a kid to read this graphic novel, see these elements of the characters, and just accept them as part of the story like we're all conditioned to do when a mom and dad or brother and sister are introduced in other stories.

Combating the adultification of Black youth. It is incredibly important to me to maintain the youthfulness and joy of childhood for the kids in my graphic novel, especially Zora as a Black girl and the youngest character in the book. This story tells and connects to a lot of history, so I can't entirely exclude racist and traumatic events from being mentioned. However, I am very intentional to craft a story that goes beyond pain and centers change, joy, learning, and

possibility. In Alice Walker's introduction to Zora Neale Hurston's book *Barracoon*, she wrote about Hurston's writing, "Those who love us never leave us alone with our grief. At the moment they show us our wound, they reveal they have the medicine".⁴⁷ This so perfectly encapsulates what I'm trying to do in this graphic novel out of my love of Black people and especially Black children: not just dump trauma and grief but to show there is life and a future beyond that. It is only right that someone who centers love and humanity in their writing about Black communities be the eponym for my main character.

Conclusion

This project has been a labor of love for me. It has been a wonderful opportunity to bring together my love of Black people, my history, and my community's histories into an academic space. I hope that this graphic novel can be one of many books that teach youth about Black environmentalism in meaningful ways that springboard them into dreaming up new possibilities for Black environmental futures.

⁴⁷ Zora Neale Hurston, Deborah G. Plant, and Alice Walker, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo,"* First edition (New York, NY: Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2018), xi.

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