



At Home in the Great Northern Wilderness: African Americans and Freedom's Ecology in the Adirondacks, 1846-1859

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ABSTRACT In the fall of 1846, the first of 3,000 African American settlers set foot on their 40-acre plots in the Great Northern Wilderness of New York State, a place we now call the “forever wild” wilderness of the Adirondack State Park. These black settlers were the initial wave of a social experiment meant to destroy both slavery and, more generally, racism throughout the entire United States through the redemptive practice of a utopian agrarianism. The settlers understood that nature and culture, wilderness and society, were thickly, dialectically intertwined. And they weren't alone: their efforts were seeded by the white abolitionist, Gerrit Smith; fertilized by the utopian socialist communes that covered the Northeast in the 1840s; and nurtured by abolitionists, both black and white. To United States environmental history, I add two threads less frequently seen: African American history and an intellectual history of radical politics. Following these threads has led me beyond the disciplinary confines of history and into larger debates about the cultural politics of wilderness. In this article I argue that the critical wilderness paradigm currently reigning both in and beyond historical scholarship has obscured nuanced, sometimes radical visions of the natural world. Instead of an ironic, deconstructed notion of a troubling wilderness, I suggest another heuristic, the ecology of freedom, which highlights past contingency and hope, and can furthermore help guide our present efforts, both scholastic and activist, to find an honorable, just way of living on the earth.

Wilderness is white.

At least, that's the impression left by much of the humanistic scholarly literature on the topic. Indeed, in my home field, American environmental history, the whiteness of wilderness has been a central, axiomatic proposition from the early days of Roderick Frazier Nash's celebratory *Wilderness in the American Mind* (1967) to William Cronon's critical “The Trouble with Wilderness” (1995), an essay that I see as exemplary of the wilderness paradigm currently dominating historical discussion.¹

¹ Given its name, I'm obviously connecting what I am going to call the Trouble with Wilderness paradigm to William Cronon's epochal “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” I recognize that this is a controversial attribution since, as J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson point out in their introduction to *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, Cronon's essay was largely a synthesis of others' work—including that of Ramachandra Guha, Arturo Gómez-Pompa and Andrea Kaus, Carl Talbot, Thomas H. Birch, and Callicott himself.

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Of course, a white wilderness has served important scholarly and social needs, and in today's intellectual climate signifies the way that a concept born in the mid-19th century minds of a select handful—usually male, usually white, usually elite, usually western—has been an exclusionary category. What's worse, such a received wilderness idea has deflected much needed attention from burning issues of social inequality and even environmental degradation, and so is no real alternative to that which it critiques. Once the dust of critical deconstruction settles, we're often left with, in Cronon's words, an "insidious" concept, one whose ideological implications we need to rethink if environmentalism is to have any chance of leaving our world more greenly just.²

Partly due to the influence of the Trouble with Wilderness paradigm, environmental historians and ecocritics have begun to discover much needed multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-gendered, and multi-classed branches to the environmental tree. Indeed, the beginning of a black U.S. environmental historiography is sending up shoots, though because of its relative newness it is still a two-branched sapling: agricultural histories of the pre-Civil War South, or framed-by-environmental-racism histories of the 20th century urban North.³ With the exception

Indeed, the term "received wilderness idea"—that thing that "The Trouble with Wilderness" unseats—comes from Callicott and Nelson. Nevertheless, as Callicott and Nelson themselves make clear, 13 August, 1995, the date when "The Trouble with Wilderness" appeared in *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, marks the day when the great wilderness debate exploded out of the Ivory Tower and into the wider world of environmentalism. I think paradigm is a good noun, especially when the contributions of those like Guha and Callicott are also taken into consideration. The sheer heft of a footnote containing even a brief list of environmental scholarship that could be categorized as representing the Trouble with Wilderness paradigm precludes even trying to include a representative sampling in an article footnote. The foundational works are William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991) and William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996); J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson's two collections, *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998) and *The Wilderness Debate Rages On: Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2008), are probably the definitive scholarly works on wilderness and environmentalism. For their use of "the received wilderness idea," as well as an intellectual history leading to the publication of "The Trouble with Wilderness," see *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, 2, 5-12.

² William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 73.

³ See, for instance, Andrew Hurley *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Mart A. Stewart, *What Nature Suffers to Groe": Life, Labor and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996); Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Conevery Bolton Valenčius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Elizabeth D. Blum, "Power, Danger, and Control: Slave Women's Perceptions of Wilderness in the Nineteenth Century," *Women's Studies* 31 (2002): 247-265; Nicolas W. Proctor, *Bathed in Blood: Hunting and Mastery in the Old South* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002); Dianne D. Glave, "A Garden So Brilliant with Colors, So Original in its Design: Rural African American Women, Gardening, Progressive Reform, and the Foundation of an African American Environmental Perspective," *Environmental History* 8, July (2003): 395-411; Dianne D. Glave, and Mark Stoll, eds., *To Love the Wind and Rain": African Americans and Environmental History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006); Dianne D. Glave, *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010); Kimberly K. Smith, *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007); Kimberly K. Smith, "What Is Africa to Me?: Wilderness in Black Thought, 1860-1930," in *The Wilderness Debate Rages On: Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate*, eds. J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2008); Kimberly N. Ruffin, *Black*

of Myra B. Young Armstead's *Freedom's Gardener: James F. Brown, Horticulture, and the Hudson Valley in Antebellum America* (2012) there is currently no environmental historiography on antebellum northern blacks, free or enslaved.⁴ And though the occasional mention of wilderness and African Americans has made its way into print, the impression that it leaves is that black wilderness—often figured as the wooded fringes of a plantation, a place of material sustenance and escape—is physically and intellectually separate from white wilderness—typically seen as an ideology of empty “virgin” spaces for elite recreation. A black wilderness, in other words, is everything a white wilderness is not.⁵

But I worry about this dualistic equation. Could a concept as complicated as wilderness have conformed so neatly in the antebellum period to a late 20th century intellectual model? Surely, the antebellum U.S. was witness to competing, contingent wilderness notions? Perhaps our current wilderness paradigm has obscured alternative landscape visions with great potential for social and environmental justice. Perhaps, instead of taking mutually exclusive black and white spaces as a given, we ought to question the very assumption of difference, and instead look for hybrids of black and white, wild and cultivated.⁶ If we do approach the past

on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2010). Thankfully, the newest entrant into the canonical works of environmental history, Mark Fiege's *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012) has two hefty chapters devoted to African Americans: one is on antebellum southern agriculture, and the other focuses on 20-century urban environmental racism.

⁴ Though Armstead doesn't explicitly pitch *Freedom's Gardener* as a work of environmental history—she's more overtly concerned with black agency, citizenship, and the sometimes blurry line between slavery and freedom in the antebellum U.S.—it is that, as well. See Myra B. Young Armstead, *James F. Brown, Horticulture, and the Hudson Valley in Antebellum America* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

⁵ Kimberly K. Smith, Elizabeth D. Blum, and Dianne D. Glave are the historians who most directly engage with wilderness and African American history. Smith's “What is Africa to Me?” is an intellectual history analyzing what she terms “a distinctive ... black concept.” This black wilderness concept conceptualizes raw nature as “the origin and foundation of culture, and intimately connected to one's cultural (and particularly racial) identity. Preserving wilderness means preserving not merely the physical landscape but the community's cultural forms and considerations—its collective memories of the community's aboriginal environment.” Blum's “Power, Danger, and Control,” a social history of African American women, traces wilderness as an American analog of the African bush, and argues that a great deal of African culture survived the Middle Passage, triply imbuing the (southern) American landscape as a source of black power, a storehouse of food and medicines, and the lurking ground of both evil spirits and whites intent on doing harm to black bodies. Glave bases much of her analysis on Blum's, arguing that wilderness was a place where “blacks were hunted and mauled or lynched ... But ... also a refuge, a place to live long-term, or a place of transition for runaways between the plantation and freedom.” And so wilderness takes on multiple valences for Smith, Blum, and Glave: it is coded positively when it is a physical or spiritual refuge, and negatively when it stands for captivity and compulsion. Phenomenally, wilderness can be anything from a plantation or slave ship, to the ocean, the wooded boundaries between farm fields, the deep forest, or an unhealthy urban ghetto. What each author agrees on is that black and white wildernesses are completely separate: each sets up her argument negatively, by first characterizing a monolithic white Trouble with Wilderness wilderness against which black wilderness appears as an alternative conception. Colin Fisher's “African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot,” is one of the few works that realizes that African Americans, too, have used the environment as a place of recreation and play. Smith, “What is Africa to Me?” 301-3, 310, 320; Blum, “Power, Danger, and Control,” 263; Glave, *Rooted in the Earth*, 59-60; Colin Fisher, “African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot,” in *To Love the Wind and Rain”: African Americans and Environmental History*, eds. Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).

⁶ Richard White has argued that one of the key benefits of the still budding cultural turn in environmental history is its ability to bring hybrid landscapes into focus. See Richard White, “From Wilderness to Hybrid Landscapes: The

looking for hybridity, then the history of New York State's Adirondack Mountains suggests that we could find radical landscape visions whose ideological roots are grounded in an ecology of freedom, a vision where home is an inhabited wilderness, a vision potentially as useful and subversive of inequity today as it was 150 years ago.

The Adirondacks are many things: a forever wild wilderness protected by the New York State constitution; a year-round home to almost 150,000 people and the site of a few-hundred-thousand more summer houses; a world-renowned training ground for winter sports thanks to the snow and the infrastructure built for the 1980 winter Olympics; a landscape of lakes and swamps and mountains; a place to hunt and fish, ski and climb, canoe and hike, or ride the roller coasters of the Great Escape and the water slides of Enchanted Forest Water Safari; a place to recreate and a place to work. The mountains are one of the holy sites of American preservationism as well as one of the birthplaces of conservation and U.S. forestry. Perhaps you, like me, hear the word "Adirondack" and find yourself awash in a Proustian moment of balsam-scented mountain breezes and think of the miles you've tramped over mountain trails.⁷ Indeed, the many connotations of wilderness—mysterious, aboriginal, authentic, therapeutic, filled with hardship or the potential for riches in the form of natural resources—have long clung to the mountains' sides. Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, the Adirondacks were a vast area little known to western settlers, other than as contested, and perhaps truly empty parts of the Iroquoian empire.⁸ By the 18th century, as colonial settlers were trying to erase American

Cultural Turn in Environmental History," *The Historian* 66, September (2004): 557-564. Though there's not space to fully articulate them here, my thoughts on hybridity owe a great deal to Greg Dening, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas 1774-1880* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1980); Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture. With a New preface by the Author* (New York: Routledge Classics, 1994); James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), especially Part 4, "The Missing Link," 307-357; and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference. With a new preface by the author* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁷ There's a huge trove of literature—public histories, coffee-table books, memoirs, and novels in addition to academic scholarship—devoted to the Adirondacks. I've relied extensively upon Alfred L. Donaldson, *A History of the Adirondacks*, 2 vols. (1921. Reprint, Fleischmanns: Purple Mountain Press, 1996); Frank Graham, Jr., *The Adirondack Park: A Political History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1978); Philip G. Terrie—probably the most prolific scholar of the Adirondacks—*Forever Wild: A Cultural History of Wilderness in the Adirondacks* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994) and *Contested Terrain: A New History of Nature and People in the Adirondacks* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997); Caroline Mastin Welsh, ed., *Adirondack Prints and Printmakers: The Call of the Wild* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998); Paul Schneider *The Adirondacks: A History of America's First Wilderness* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997); Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and David Stradling, *The Nature of New York: An Environmental History of the Empire State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

⁸ To this day, the official scholarly word on American Indians and the Adirondacks maintains that the area was historically a true, unpopulated wilderness—though to be fair, many scholars acknowledge that the Indigenous history of the Adirondacks has been understudied. Thankfully Melissa Otis, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Toronto, is contesting the "empty" narrative. She's currently finishing her dissertation, entitled "'Location of Exchange': A History of Algonquian and Iroquoian Peoples in the Adirondacks, 1776 – 1920" in which she argues that the Adirondacks have always been an Indigenous homeland for Algonquian and Iroquoian-speaking peoples.

Indian claims to the land, the place started to show up on maps with toponyms such as “parts but little known.”⁹ One hundred years later, these blank parts of the map grew into “wild unsettled lands,” and eventually, “the Great Northern Wilderness,” and the Adirondacks became one of the nation’s pre-eminent destinations for a wilderness experience—a distinction it still maintains.¹⁰

Though some of today’s visitors to the state-protected wilderness will pause for a moment at the John Brown farm site, contemplating the titanic boulder serving as Brown’s headstone—the revolutionary northern abolitionist was executed for his raid on the Virginian armory, Harper’s Ferry, a preliminary step to an attempted slave insurrection in 1859—most of us never think of the mountains as a landscape of radical social reform or realize that pulsing underneath our boots are the living roots of an experiment premised on mutual aid, wilderness, and utopian thinking.

Yet, in the fall of 1846, the first African American settlers of Essex and Franklin Counties—in the wilderness heart of what we now call the Adirondack High Peaks region—stepped onto land recently made theirs.¹¹ These black pioneers had left cities and towns throughout New York to make a home in the Great Northern Wilderness, and when they arrived, they settled communally, emphasizing spatially what they sought to do politically by congregating in a few main nodes—perhaps the biggest was around North Elba, in a

Before contact with Europeans, the Adirondacks were a place of resources and labor; after contact, they became a refuge from 18th century geopolitical destabilization, as well as a source of capital, in the form of beaver skins. While the Adirondacks may never have been “settled,” they weren’t empty, but a sort of contested commons, and Otis argues that we need to rethink what counts as claimed land. Melissa Otis, e-mail message to author, 11 January, 2012; 27 March, 2013.

⁹ Richard William Seal, “New and Accurate Map of the Present War in North America” (London: J. Hinton, 1757).

¹⁰ H. C. Carey, “Geographical, Statistical, and Historical Map of New York,” in *A Complete Historical, Chronological, and Geographical American Atlas* (Philadelphia: H. C. Carey & I. Lea, 1823). For a good cartographic history of the Adirondacks, see Jerold Pepper, “When Men and Mountains Meet: Mapping the Adirondacks,” in *Adirondack Prints and Printmakers: The Call of the Wild*, ed. Caroline Mastin Welsh (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 1-24.

¹¹ Not much has been written about these communities of black Adirondack farmers, and the vast majority of what has been written unsurprisingly comes from historians of slavery and abolition. No environmental historian, with the exception of Paul Schneider, has touched on the subject. Even those social historians who do write about the black Adirondack farmers tend to see the Adirondack experiment as a very minor offshoot of abolitionism in general, or the history of John Brown in particular. Amy Godine is the acknowledged expert on Timbuctoo and she curated an excellent exhibition called “Dreaming of Timbuctoo,” conceived and produced by Martha Swan, in 2000. Godine is currently at work on a manuscript that promises to be the first thoroughly researched exploration of Timbuctoo. Finally, in 2009, a professor of archaeology from SUNY Potsdam named Hadley Kruczek-Aaron began excavating the plot of Lyman Epps, one of the pioneers who stayed in the Adirondacks for the rest of his life. She has not yet published anything, though her findings hold great promise. See Donaldson, *A History of the Adirondacks*, 2 vols; David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 125-132; Milton C. Sernett, *North Star Country: Upstate New York and the Crusade for African American Freedom* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002) especially chapter 8, “John Brown’s Body,” 195-221; John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), especially chapter 5, “Bible Politics and the Creation of the Alliance,” 134-181; Katherine Butler Jones, “They Called it Timbuctoo,” *Orion* 17, no. 1 Winter (1998): 27-33; Amy Godine, “Forty Acres and a Vote,” *Adirondack Life* 33, no. 6 September/October (2001): 46-53; “Dreaming of Timbuctoo,” <http://adkhistorycenter.org/edu/dot.html>.

community that may have been known as Timbuctoo.¹² Farther north was Blacksville, and somewhere to the west was Freeman's Home. Though gathering socially earned them the enmity of some locals who feared that their territory was being overrun, not every white face evinced hostility.¹³ Indeed, in North Elba, the Thompson and Osgood families—two of the oldest white families in the area—greatly helped the settlers and were probably integrated into the pioneers' social, economic, and cultural lives, which was part of the point of this black migration north: Timbuctoo along with Blacksville and Freeman's Home and all the other holdings whose names we've lost, represented a heady mix of white and black, African and American, a realization of the subjunctive possibilities of racial harmony, a utopian abolitionist geography rooted in the Great Northern Wilderness of the Adirondacks.¹⁴ These pioneers were the vanguard of a peaceful revolution meant to take root in the stony, acidic soils of the Adirondacks, to thrive, and to rescue the U.S. from white supremacy.¹⁵

The year 1846 was a year of hope and activism for New York's abolitionists, as well as, paradoxically, a year of utter disappointment. The voters of New York emancipated their adult slaves in 1827, but in 1846 rejected efforts to fully enfranchise black men who owned less than \$250 of property. Among the activists galled by New Yorkers' intransigence was Gerrit Smith, a wealthy white abolitionist and social reformer from central New York State whose father, an immensely rich baron of the international fur trade, bequeathed to his son an estate including nearly a million acres of New York land.¹⁶ It was on a portion of this inheritance, 120,000 Adirondack acres, which the black pioneers settled.

¹² It's common for the scanty literature to refer to the whole experiment as Timbuctoo. Yet the difficulty in trying to say for sure whether the community—or even the whole area represented in Smith's grants—was known as Timbuctoo is that, as far as I've been able to determine, there are only four primary source references to Timbuctoo, three from John Brown (it may have been his own pet name for the community) and one from the pioneer, James H. Henderson. However, there was a strong and well-documented tradition of African-Americans invoking Africa in their cultural production. And so even though Timbuctoo may be more fantasy than real, referring to the area as Timbuctoo is consistent with historical practice. See the series of letters Brown wrote to Willis A. Hodges, founder of Blacksville, published under "John Brown in Essex County," *Evening Post*, 20 December, 1859; "Mr. Waite J. Lewis and the Smith's Lands," *The North Star*, 16 February, 1849.

¹³ *The North Star* ran an article in 1849, which indicated that many local whites saw black consociation as a source of unfortunate strength, that if the black pioneers would only rely on themselves as individuals they could be starved out "and the land would be settled by whites." "From the Northern Star and Colored Farmer," *The North Star*, 2 February, 1849.

¹⁴ The term "abolitionist geography," comes from Stephanie LeMenager's, *Manifest and Other Destinies: Territorial Fictions of the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004) 182, and elaborated upon further in "Marginal Landscapes: Revolutionary Abolitionists and Environmental Imagination," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 7, no. 1 Fall (2005): 49-56.

¹⁵ James McCune Smith calls a number of the settlers pioneers, and he does it in full knowledge of its cultural overtones. I do the same. See James McCune Smith to Gerrit Smith, July 7, 1848, Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University, Box 34, Smith, James McCune Incoming Corres. Folder; Rev. Theodore S. Wright, Rev. Charles B. Ray, Dr. J. McCune Smith, *An Address to the Three Thousand Colored Citizens of New-York, Who are the Owners of One Hundred and Twenty Thousand Acres of Land in the State of New York, Given to Them by Gerrit Smith, Esq., of Peterboro* (New York: n.p., 1846), 5.

¹⁶ It's hard to find good biographical information on Gerrit Smith—there are only a few published biographies, two of them dated from the first years of the 19th century—largely because his handwriting was nearly unreadable. I've relied on: Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Gerrit Smith: A Biography* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1909); Ralph

Gerrit Smith was a come-outer committed to the full range of 19th century reform movements, and it's fair to call him a religious fundamentalist—though his fundamentalism was fundamentally different from what we in the early 21st century might think when we hear that word. The key tenet of Smith's religious thinking, which he shared in common with the radical abolitionists, was that any human hierarchy—black over white, male over female, rich over poor—was a basic sin. Humans must not be reduced to mere things, and God's government meant a society of free women and men, each equal in terms of their social relations, who could devote themselves perfectly and harmoniously to following the higher law.¹⁷

By the mid-1840s, Smith was hovering on the verge of committing himself to grassroots social action—he only needed a small push, and it came from two seemingly disconnected places. The first is almost laughably mundane: he was drowning in the debt he also inherited from his father. By the mid-1840s Smith owed nearly \$500,000 on various landholdings whose legal history was so dim that no one knew which plot of land the tax bills described, and he began to sincerely wish himself free of his financial obligations.

Then, in 1844, sharp questions from fellow reformers started pressing Smith on his commitment to social change. George Henry Evans, radical labor leader, Free Soiler (he coined the term), abolitionist, and editor of both the *Working Man's Advocate* and *People's Rights*, portrayed Smith as of the class whose wealth was contingent on monopoly and slavery.¹⁸ In a rhetorical stab, Evans wrote:

I am informed that you are one of the largest landholders of this State, and, at the same time, one of the warmest advocates of the abolition of Negro Slavery ... You will, therefore, be much surprised to be told ... that you are one of the biggest Slaveholders in the United States.

Smith was hurt, and replied to the contrary, "it is also my belief ... that the individual owners of large tracts of farming land should divide them into lots of say, forty or fifty acres, and then give away the lots to such of their poor brethren as wish to reside on them."¹⁹

Two problems—the crushing taxes of vast holdings, and the suggestion that he was a Chippendale arm-chair radical—that proved to be each other's solutions.

Volney Harlow, *Gerrit Smith: Philanthropist and Reformer* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1939); Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

¹⁷ There were, of course, other, more moderate abolitionists, and to make it more confusing, there was a political party—founded in 1855 by, among others, Gerrit Smith—called the Radical Abolitionist Party, a party that explicitly embraced violence to end slavery. I'm not concerned with the conservative abolitionists here, whom Lewis Perry defines as those who saw slavery as a purely southern institution. From now on, when I refer to abolitionism, I mean the radical, immediatist, peaceful variety, which sought to perfect society by ridding it of *all* slavery. Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), xi, 9, 11, 16-17, 39-46; Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men*, 4, 8.

¹⁸ Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men*, 136. For more on Evans, one of the key radical northern Democrats marrying abolitionism to land reform, see Jonathan H. Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery & the Politics for Free Soil, 1824-1854* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 13, and especially chapters 1, "Dissident Democrats in the 1830s," and 2, "Set Down Your Feet, Democrats," 17-77.

¹⁹ The whole exchange (George H. Evans, "To Gerrit Smith"; Gerrit Smith, "Gerrit Smith's Reply"; and Evans, "Rejoinder to Gerrit Smith") can be found in *People's Rights*, 24 July, 1844.

On 1 August 1846, the anniversary of emancipation in the British West Indies, Smith announced the plan that would help him to clear up his financial mess, strike a blow for freedom, and act on his sentiments, all at the same time. Smith would transfer 120,000 acres in 40-acre parcels, the majority of it in the Adirondacks, to 3,000 black families for the token price of one dollar each.²⁰ The climate was harsh, he knew: “I wish the land was in a less rigorous clime,” he wrote to Frederick Douglass in 1848, who was surprised to discover with Smith’s letter a deed for 40 Adirondack acres, “but it is smooth and arable, and not wanting in fertility.”²¹ Land that was neither smooth nor arable could profitably be logged, and when he ran out of decent land to give away, he vowed to purchase the freedom of southern slaves.²² It was a stunning plan, an ambitious plan—Smith eventually filled 102 pages of a ledger book with names and deeds—and garnered huge support, not only among black New Yorkers, but from Evans himself.²³

So far, however, Smith’s scheme sounds unconventional only for its generosity. But his plan was intellectually undergirded by a mix of social and one might say environmental theorizing that was anything but ordinary. Smith and his major agents—Henry Highland Garnet (the fiery pastor of the Liberty Street Baptist Church, in Troy, New York), Dr. James McCune Smith (a writer, critic and esteemed physician), Theodore Wright (a Reverend and the first black graduate of Princeton), Charles B. Ray (editor of the black abolitionist newspaper, *The Colored American*) and Jermain Wesley Loguen (a runaway slave who would become a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church)— explicitly considered themselves sympathetic to the soil’s husbands: “I am an Agrarian,” Smith wrote, capitalizing the peculiarity of his position. “I would that every man who desires a farm, might have one; and I would, that no man were so regardless of the needs and desires of his brother men, as to covet the possession of more farms than one.”²⁴ This sounds a good deal like Jeffersonian, democratic agrarianism—an ideology holding that landownership was a political and, indeed, moral good,

²⁰ Clearly part of Smith’s goal was to combat poverty in its very widest sense. Leslie Harris misses this when she argues that, “white radical abolitionists never consistently funded programs or institutions to address the poverty of free blacks in New York City, or in the North generally.” I think that reading environmental and African American history through each other’s lenses highlights histories that have traditionally lain hidden. Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 135; Rev. Theodore S. Wright, *An Address to the Three Thousand*, 7, back page; Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men*, 138; “Distribution of Lands to Colored Men; Begun in 1846,” Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University, vol. 88.

²¹ “Correspondence,” *The North Star*, 7 January, 1848.

²² Smith also set out to form another black utopian community in Western New York, near the town of Florence. By 1849 and 1850, he also resolved to give land away to over 1000 needy white residents of New York, as well. Most of the land was not in the Adirondacks, however, and was of lesser quality. “A New Settlement,” *The North Star*, 22 December, 1848; “Florence Settlement,” *The North Star*, 23 February, 1849; “New Bedford, 22 March, 1848” *The North Star*, 30 March, 1849; Wright, *et al.*, *An Address to the Three Thousand*, 7, 8 9; Gerrit Smith to John Cochrane, Isaac T. Hopper, Daniel C. Eaton, George H. Evans, and William Kemeys, Jan., 1850 in Gerrit Smith, “Collected Political Papers by Gerrit Smith in the American Antiquarian Society.”

²³ Indeed, Evans would become one of the lesser agents who helped draw up names of potential grantees. See, for instance, John Cochrane, Isaac J. Hopper, Daniel C. Eaton, George H. Evans, List of Beneficiaries, Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Box 145, Gifts of Land and Money to Negroes Folder; “Distribution of Lands to Colored Men; Begun in 1846.”

²⁴ Wright, *et al.*, 3.

because the struggle of an independent farmer winning a living from the raw materials of the environment would refine out the human impurities of greed, corruption, and laziness, ensuring an ethically sound citizenry. "We have an immensity of land courting the industry of the husbandman," wrote Thomas Jefferson:

Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phænomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example ... It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigour. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution [sic].²⁵

But in the 65 years since Jefferson had penned his thoughts on the state of Virginia, much had changed, and a competing, aristocratic, largely southern agrarianism theorizing that leisure, the leisure to think and write and cultivate the finer aspects of Western culture, leisure, not labor, ensured democracy. And this non-democratic brand of agrarianism was making its mark.²⁶ If physical toil were only left to the drudges, a "natural," stable hierarchy would ensue, and in Jefferson's South, aristocracy depended utterly upon slavery. "Every plantation," argued John Calhoun in 1838, "is a little community ... These small communities aggregated make the State in all, whose action, labor, and capital is equally represented and perfectly harmonized."²⁷ George Fitzhugh, Virginia planter, lawyer, early sociologist, outspoken defender of slavery, and, ironically, cousin to Smith's wife, agreed: human bondage was the only way to achieve Jefferson's dream of a stable, prosperous, democratic people. "In Boston," he wrote, "nine-tenths of the men in business fail. In the slaveholding South, except in new settlements, failures are extremely rare; small properties descend from generation to generation in the same family;

²⁵ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 290-291.

²⁶ There is a large literature touching on agrarianism in the U.S. I've relied upon Smith, *African American Environmental Thought*; Stewart, "What Nature Suffers to Groe"; the cliometric approach of Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, *To Their Own Soil: Agriculture in the Antebellum North* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1987); Allan Kulikoff, *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), especially chapters 2, "The Rise and Demise of the American Yeoman Classes," 34-59 and 3, "The Languages of Class in Rural America," 60-95; Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), especially chapter 10, "The 'Agrarian Myth' in the Early Republic," 253-276; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Sarah T. Phillips, "Antebellum Agricultural Reform, Republican Ideology, and Sectional Tension," *Agricultural History* 71, no. 4, Autumn (2000): 799-822; Steven Stoll *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), and Kimberly K. Smith, *Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), especially chapter 1, "Agrarian Visions," 11-36, a very close parsing of the different strains making up the tradition of American agrarianism.

²⁷ John C. Calhoun, "Speech on the Importance of Domestic Slavery," in *American Political Thought: A Norton Anthology*, eds. Isaac Kramnick and Theodore J. Lowi (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 604-605.

there is as much stability and permanency of property as is compatible with energy and activity in society."²⁸

While pro-slavery agrarians cultivated a poisoned ideal that depended on weeding liberty from southern soil, many Northern agrarians—including Gerrit Smith and his agents—were beginning to link Dixie's aristocratic slaveholders to environmental and moral degradation.²⁹ Unhealthy land, unhealthy bodies, and unhealthy societies were all inextricably linked.³⁰ In 1844, the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberty Tree* ran an article by Kentucky senator Cassius Clay—addressed to northern abolitionists—arguing that human bondage “impoverishes the Soil and defaces the loveliest features of Nature ... The wild brier and the red fox are now there the field growth and the inhabitants!” In an age, he continued, distinguished by steam power, he and his fellow southerners were “living in centuries that are gone ... In the South where cotton and tobacco once rewarded the husbandmen, can now be seen sterile pine groves, clay banks and naked rocks.”³¹

Put simply, many in the North started to intuit a link between environmental health and labor systems, and to wield this distinction ideologically: they were tracing the outlines of what we might call an ecology of hierarchy, one in which elite white domination depended on efficient human and environmental exploitation.³² The profits of slavery relied on stealing the

²⁸ George Fitzhugh, “Sociology for the South; or, the Failure of Free Society,” in *American Political Thought: A Norton Anthology*, eds. Isaac Kramnick and Theodore J. Lowi (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 629; Smith, *Wendell Berry*, 18.

²⁹ Indeed, a rift opened between northern and southern agrarians precisely over the question of whether or not slavery and agrarianism could be compatible. Many northern agrarians believed that scientific agriculture could only work when land and labor was free. Foner, *Free Soil*, especially chapter 2, “The Republican Critique of the South,” 40-72; and especially Phillips, “Antebellum Agricultural Reform,” 808-809, 822.

³⁰ Conevery Bolton Valenčius argues that in the 19th century, the human body and landscape were understood to be directly, intimately linked. Valenčius shows that “the geography of health” points to a “surprising holism in the worldview of the bustling, rapidly industrializing nineteenth century,” that 19th-century Americans were much more environmentally conscious than many current scholars give them credit for. Bolton tends to focus on material health, but I think her work can be extended to see how healthy landscape could help engender a sort of ethical and social health. Additionally, her final chapter is devoted to exploring the simultaneous confidence in and anxiety about environmentally determined racism among white Americans in the antebellum Southeast. “Change of place,” she writes, “created change of person in the inchoate borderlands. In health, in skin, color, in countenance, in modes of life and habits of being, even in political allegiance, the process of acclimating to a place was irrevocably and unstopably transformative.” Though she’s almost exclusively concerned with how place could make a white person non-white, there’s no reason that the process couldn’t work in reverse. Valenčius, *The Health of the Country*, 3, 229-258, 230, and chapter 8, “Racial Anxiety.”

³¹ “The Voice of the Slaveholder,” Cassius M. Clay, *The Liberty Tree* (Chicago) 1 January, 1844.

³² Stewart argues convincingly that plantation agriculture was utterly dependent on a radical simplification and attempted total control of land and black bodies. Smith would agree, and add that African Americans knew this: she argues that a cornerstone of black environmentalism is the contention that “a denial of freedom to black Americans has distorted their relationship to the natural environment,” and that the American landscape was “a corrupted land in need of redemption. Humans, in turn, are to be active, creative, co-equal partners in giving meaning to redeeming the natural world.” Proctor takes the analysis one step further, when he extends the notion of mastery, prowess, and self-control to the hunting culture of the antebellum South: “Representing control over other people, animals, nature, and even death, this multifaceted concept [mastery] helped white southern men define themselves as patriarchs, and even, in some cases, as paternalists.” The mutual dependency of environmental and social exploitation is perhaps the founding premise of Bookchin’s social ecology. As Steve Chase has put it: “it is inconceivable to social ecologists that ecology activists can effectively defend the Earth, in

earth's fertility quickly and thoroughly while throttling up the demand on black bodies to produce ever more, before death—of the land, of black human bodies—consumed the bottom line. In an era when land was cheap and its limitless availability nearly an orthodox faith, but labor expensive, rapid exploitation made viciously logical capitalistic sense, and wealthy plantation owners moved often, leaving behind blighted landscapes and shallow graves.³³

Perhaps nowhere was the linked critique of environmental degradation and human exploitation made more forcefully or frequently than in the powerful countercurrent of socialist communitarianism that ran just outside of mainstream politics. The mid-19th century U.S. witnessed an efflorescence of radical social politics, and by the time black pioneers started arriving in the Adirondacks, communes were everywhere, beginning in the early 1820s with the arrival in the U.S. of Robert Owen, the British avatar of socialism.³⁴ Massachusetts became the hotbed of socialist fervor, giving rise to Brook Farm, a transcendentalist and Fourierist community; Fruitlands, an anarchist association; the Northampton Association of Education and Industry; and the peace-loving Hopedale Community. All of these were founded in the early 1840s, and all were either explicitly biracial abolitionist societies, or organizations that strongly supported full racial equality.³⁵

any long-term fashion, if they leave the tapeworm of human oppression firmly embedded within the very guts of our society." In other words, Bookchin is making the same general point as Stewart, Smith, and Proctor, only more broadly, indicting *all* systems of hierarchy—not just slavery or racism. And this is why I think we need to pay more attention to the 19-century utopians, who anticipated Bookchin in seeking to do away with slavery and racism, as well as all of the other forms of domination and hierarchy. Stewart, "What Nature Suffers to Groe," 88, 147-148, passim; Smith, *African American Environmental Thought*, 8, 18, 154, 157; Proctor, *Bathed in Blood*, 61, 72; Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Oakland: AK Press, 2005); Steve Chase, "Introduction: Whither the Radical Ecology Movement," in Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman, *Defending the Earth: A Dialogue Between Murray Bookchin & Dave Foreman*, ed. Steve Chase (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 22.

³³ Smith notes that even a Fire Eater and southern soil conservationist like Edmund Ruffin conceded that free laborers were the most careful, productive, and diligent kinds of laborers—a position which reinforced the need to brutalize recalcitrant black bodies. Smith, *African American Environmental Thought*, 50; For a detailed account of what was seen by many northerners as a mutually exclusive relationship between slavery, soil conservation, and social stability see Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth*, especially chapter two, 69-169.

³⁴ Christopher Clark notes that between 1800 and 1914 at least 260 communes were formed in the U.S., and a great majority of these began in the 1840s because "the early 1840s was the moment when there was room for them to make a difference." Christopher Clark, *The Communitarian Moment: The Radical Challenge of the Northampton Association* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 10.

³⁵ The founder of Brook Farm, George Ripley, was a radical abolitionist and a member of Garrison's New England Non-Resistance Society, as was Bronson Alcott of Fruitlands. Sojourner Truth joined the Northampton Association, along with her fellow black abolitionist Samuel Ruggles. Frederick Douglass was a vocal supporter of the experiment, and he also stopped by Hopedale in 1842, where he "moved and melted" the hearts of Hopedale's members. In 1845, Rosetta Hall, "a protégé of Frederick Douglass," and an escaped slave made Hopedale her home for a while. Ellen and William Craft, who had taken permanent leave of their Georgia owner, spent time at Hopedale, as did the infamous slave rescuer, Jonathan Walker, known as The Man with the Branded Hand. Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth's America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009) especially chapter 10, "A Holy City: Sojourner Truth and the Northampton Community," 156-174; Carl J. Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 2-4, 44-59; Anne C. Rose, *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 117-161; Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 150-168; Richard Francis, *Fruitlands: The Alcott Family and Their Search for Utopia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 1, 281; Clark, *The Communitarian Moment*, 12-14, 31, 56-57, 71, 73-74, 99; Adin Ballou, *History of the Hopedale*

Currents have a way of diffusing: they are fluid and it is of their nature to mix, to continually form anew, and it's a demon of a scientific fantasy which tries to keep currents separate, pure, discrete. Of course utopian socialism and abolition mixed, though historical scholarly literature is all but silent on the matter.³⁶ And of course green thinking formed a third channel in this braided intellectual and cultural stream, which all together gave rise to a flood tide that we might call utopian agrarianism.

Though the various communes and social experiments, the abolitionists and anarchists and radical reformers, were never part of one single coherent philosophy, there was a remarkable degree of intellectual overlap centered on the mutually sustaining relationship between human society and nature. Every association—from the rural Brook Farm and Fruitlands to the more urban New Harmony and Northampton—understood that cultivating a just society required rethinking the mode of relating more generally, beginning with the soil. It meant that one could not accept domination on one hand and advocate for equality on the other. Space was not a blank canvas, or, even worse, a bank of “natural resources” to be drawn down, but a living thing that formed and reformed even as it was being made and remade.³⁷

And so these utopians—agrarians, communitarians, abolitionists, African Americans, and sympathetic whites—together theorized something that we might call the ecology of freedom, to borrow a phrase from social ecologist Murray Bookchin, an ecology characterized by a desire to associate; to grow a beautiful society through fulfilling farm work that would also enhance the fecundity of the earth; to create goods, not commodities, but *goods*, which made one's life richer through form and functionality and the pride of a job well done; to join hands, black and white, male and female, calloused and soft, and stand on an equal footing; to form a landscape bearing witness to the truth that fruitful lives and fruitful societies and a fruitful earth are all necessary for each other's safe-keeping.³⁸ Rather than the heroic individualism of

Community: From its Inception to its Virtual Submergence in the Hopedale Parish (Lowell: Thompson & Hill.—The Vox Populi Press, 1897), 10-11, 77-143; Perry, *Radical Abolitionism*, 144.

³⁶ The great exception is John L. Thomas, whose characteristically incisive, well-written, critical article, “Antislavery and Utopia,” is just about the only secondary source that I have found linking abolition to utopian socialism. It's just such a focus on radical and alternative political, social, and economic systems that can complement Kimberly Smith's truly foundational *African American Environmental Thought*, on the (mainstream) roots of black environmental activism. See John L. Thomas, “Antislavery and Utopia,” in *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists*, ed. Martin Duberman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

³⁷ Henri Lefebvre's monumental *The Production of Space*, is partly founded upon a set of principles that have influenced this entire article: space is always partly a social product (excepting the “absolute spaces” that existed before the rise of humans); every society produces its own peculiar space; every space helps produce a particular society. That is to say, nature and culture can never be separate—they're always dialectically intertwined. And if nature (or space, or environment) is always partly a social product, then we can shift our attention from “*things in space*” to the actual *production of space*”; doing so will help us to see not just what is in our world, but how our world got to be the way it is, and how it can be changed. Spaces have histories, and bear upon them the traces of social relations. But spaces also have power and help to shape societies. If there is an abolitionist geography, as LeMenager argues, then there is also a landscape of slavery—and of freedom. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1991).

³⁸ It's here that Murray Bookchin's social ecology can help us see what the utopian socialists were up to. Bookchin was an anarchist who founded and propounded, perhaps most clearly in his *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*, a school of thought known as social ecology. “By ‘social ecology,’” Bookchin writes, “I ... mean ecology as the dialectical *unfolding* of life-forms from the simple to the complex, or

Jefferson's white yeoman farmer, or the narrow community of white southern aristocracy, the utopian agrarians were guided by a subversive ecology not of competition and struggle for survival, but of mutual aid. It's a vision that made its way north to the Adirondacks.³⁹

For the self-declared agrarians Gerrit Smith, James McCune Smith, Charles Ray, Henry Highland Garnet, Theodore Wright, Jermain Wesley Loguen, and their supporters, the route to freedom's ecology seemed clear. Borrowing from the socialist experiments of their communitarian neighbors and the best aspects of the northern agrarian tradition, as well as an African American ethic celebrating work as a means of knowing the land, they practised a kind of utopian agrarianism in which the difference between cultivator and cultivar was never quite clear.⁴⁰ People and the land were dialectically, mutually fused through labor, and it was impossible for one to be free while the other was chained. A degraded landscape meant that those living on it *must* suffer; likewise a people driven to work with the lash watched the landscape bleed in sympathy. Redemption could only come through cultivation.

more precisely, from the simple to the diverse ... What seems very clear is that without complexity, there cannot be diversity. Thus a tendency toward diversity is indispensable to the emergence of our rich cosmos of life-forms—a cosmos that makes up the multitude of 'selections' in the geological, biotic, and even subjective universe in which we live." *Everything* that lives, and everything that supports life, is involved in an ecological relationship, Bookchin argues. There's great diversity in ecology, but there's no hierarchy: amoebas are not higher or lower than dogs, just unique. The point of social ecology, of the ecology of freedom, is to transform "both nonhuman and human-made natures into a more complete nature that is conscious, thinking, and purposeful. This *thinking* nature is ethical and rational, not simply physiological and biochemical, and humanity is the most recent attribute among the many that evolution added over at least two billion years of organic development ... Social ecology ... is a concept of an ever-developing universe, indeed a vast process of achieving *wholeness* ... by means of unity in diversity, with creative potentialities that thematically intertwine two *legacies* of traditions: a legacy of freedom and a legacy of domination." His ultimate point is that environmental questions are always social questions, and that one cannot have an honorable, just relationship to the natural without honorable and just relationships in the human world. We could take issue with this all of this, but what he's articulating is a vision as old as ecology itself—Darwin's "from so simple a beginning, endless forms most beautiful"—a unity in diversity extended to society. And so simplification—of the natural world, of human culture and society—is anti-natural, contributes to the poverty of our surroundings and ourselves, equally. The utopian socialists articulated it differently, but had Alcott and Ripley and Ballou, Gerrit Smith and James McCune Smith been able to meet Bookchin, they would have found comrades in each other. Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 10-11, 72, 98, 109, 213; Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, in *From So Simple a Beginning: The Four Great Books of Charles Darwin*, ed. E. O. Wilson (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 760.

³⁹ There were also a number of highly visible black utopias. For their histories, see William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America* (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1963).

⁴⁰ Kimberly N. Ruffin has recently argued that, historically, African Americans "forged identities as ecological participants based on their work rather than a privileged position in the social fabric." That is to say, African Americans have historically used work, rather than leisure, to signify their membership as ecological citizens. Looking at black environmental thought, then, is a one way to answer Richard White's persuasive challenge to environmental humanists to start recognizing work as one of our most important daily interactions with the natural world. Smith's identification of a tradition that she calls black agrarianism is particularly useful here, especially her argument that black agrarians "fused the abolitionists' north-south moral geography with the sacred landscape of the slave spirituals ... [creating] a moral landscape with both political and spiritual meaning," as well as the emphasis Smith finds among black agrarians on landownership as well as free labor. See Ruffin, *Black on Earth*, 28, 29, 40, 42, 54; Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?': Work and Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 171-172, 173; Smith, *African American Environmental Thought*, 56, 58.

It would have been remarkable had Smith been the sole evangel boosting utopian agrarianism as a way to cultivate an ecology of freedom, but even more than the white abolitionist, it was his black comrades who articulated the mountains' hope:

In a climate, in which labour is a means for the full and free development of the energies of mankind—in the heart of an almost free state—protected by nearly equal laws—with an equal right to common school education—amidst the friction of advancing civilization—and at a time when the light of science falling upon it has made almost any soil productive—the earth, a free gift, beckons us to come and till it.⁴¹

It sounds familiar, this declaration of Wright, Ray, and McCune Smith's, its rhythms similar to the martial beat of Manifest Destiny, but it's a conditional piece with all of its almos and nearlys and downward-dragging friction. If, in many minds, Manifest Destiny was explicitly linked to the extension of slavery and the triumph of exploitation—of land, of people—in Timbuctoo and Blacksville and Freeman's Home the phrases of expansion were set to a different tune where climate, labor, the colorblind energies of mankind, and the earth all combine in a mutually sustaining commonwealth. "The occupation of those lands," wrote one contributor to *The North Star*, in a similar vein, "will form an era in the history of the free colored men in this State. We should like to be among the first to occupy the wilderness, and strike the first blow toward making it blossom like the rose."⁴²

These utopian agrarians gave the nation's compass a space scrambling spin, replacing the familiar celestial signs of setting suns guiding white Easterners out to colonize the red West with Polaris and the Southern Cross, of black pioneers colonizing, civilizing a white North as a preliminary step towards conquering a continent's racism. "There is no prejudice under which we suffer," wrote Smith's agents, "which may not be removed, no oppression under which we labour, which may not be meliorated, by a prompt and energetic movement in the direction of this glorious opportunity," that is, the northern, wilderness direction afforded by Smith's largesse. There is something of the booster's faith in Wright, Ray, and McCune Smith, but they continue: "Once in possession of, once upon our own land we will be our own masters, free to think, free to act ... Thus placed in an independent condition, we will not only be independent, in ourselves, but will overcome that *prejudice against condition*, which has so long been a mill around our necks."⁴³ With the mill-stone gone, the pioneers could stand upright, "tall, stalwart,

⁴¹ Sernett argues that though "movement abolitionism," those attuned to Garrisonian critiques, has traditionally been told as a tale of white activism, African Americans played a large role, and that, especially in upstate New York, their voices contributed to a richly potent brand of antislavery resistance. Sernett, *North Star Country*, xix-xx. 301-304; Wright, *et al.*, *An Address to the Three Thousand Colored Citizens*, 9.

⁴² Indeed, one of the striking features of America's communal utopias is how thoroughly they seek to reclaim and transform the diseased rootstock of Manifest Destiny into a philosophy of social fulfillment. See LeMenager, *Manifest and Other Destinies*, 46; Anne Baker, *Heartless Immensity: Literature, Culture, and Geography in Antebellum America* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 3; "Gerrit Smith's Land," *The North Star*, 25 February, 1848; Craig Steven Wilder, *In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 11, 13, 53, 55, 58, 62.

⁴³ Wright, *et al.*, *An Address to the Three Thousand Colored Citizens*, 10.

hard-fisted, they embody a Hope of the Race," James McCune Smith wrote back to Gerrit Smith, sure that cultivating the land was another way to cultivate the self.⁴⁴

Seeking to build an alternative social, cultural, and economic landscape, the pioneers reconfigured the typical trope of individualized Manifest Destiny into one that worked towards a common good. Farming in the Adirondack Mountains would throw people of all hues together, for "There is no life like that of the farmer, for overcoming the mere prejudice against color. The owners of adjacent farms are *neighbors* ... There must be mutual assistance, mutual and equal dependence, mutual sympathy—and labour, the 'common destiny of the American people,' under such circumstances, yields equally to all, and makes all equal."⁴⁵ Here the image of the leisurely southern aristocratic agrarian, sun-struck and debauched with ill-gotten privilege, shatters against the closed ranks of mutual, communal effort. A page later, bewitched by their own language emphasizing a common humanity in labor, Wright, Ray, and McCune Smith write, "Hence a number, starting out together for the same neighborhood, may by mutual aid, effect a great deal in meeting with and overcoming the first and severest difficulties."⁴⁶

Underlying all of this blooming-wilderness-and-mutual-aid rhetoric is an incipient argument about nature and labor, an outgrowth of communitarian thinking, and though it never got clearly, rigorously articulated, what starts to emerge is a sort of inchoate environmental philosophy mixing work and wilderness with both political and metaphysical freedom.⁴⁷ And if all of this theorizing, this belief in the power of landscape and sweat to radically remold the nation seems grandiose, it did not to the black communities of New York. Though the unknown Great Northern Wilderness caused a certain amount of consternation among the grantees—something less than 200 actually settled their lands—it did nothing to dampen the ardor of their spirits, and in 1847 thanks started to pour in: conventions of grantees in Ithaca and Rochester both honored Smith and planned for their move north.⁴⁸ Willis Hodges of the *Ram's Horn* trumpeted the Adirondacks in his paper, while *The Albany Patriot* and the *Impartial Citizen* from Syracuse published first-hand accounts and editorials further voicing the black community's support. In 1848 one resolution after another came from Troy, home ground of Garnett's church, to occupy the lands as soon as possible, to "if necessary, even

⁴⁴ The rhetoric can also be read as falling within a prevailing notion of republican citizenship. The slave, as Leslie Harris points out, was the antithesis of the independent individual citizen who was under no obligation to anyone and whose vote, therefore, could not be coerced. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 49; James McCune Smith to Gerrit Smith, 17 December, 1846. Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University, Box 34, Smith, James McCune Incoming Corres. Folder.

⁴⁵ Wright, *et al.*, *An Address to the Three Thousand Colored Citizens*, 10.

⁴⁶ Wright, *et al.*, *An Address to the Three Thousand Colored Citizens*, 11.

⁴⁷ Stauffer argues that Gerrit Smith and James McCune Smith—as well as John Brown and Frederick Douglass—were remarkable in their time for being among the very few Americans who could blur the color line. I think that one of the ways they do so is to emphasize something common to all humans: labor, and in this case, the most idealized form of labor, husbandry. Valenčius points out that to cultivate, the act of the husbandman, was often explicitly an activity of healing, of bringing something to its fullest potential. And so there's a clear link between the work of cultivating and the work of healing a nation eroded by racial discord. Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men*, 2, 14, 19, 38, *passim*; Valenčius *The Health of the Country*, 192.

⁴⁸ Godine, "Forty Acres and a Vote," 52; "Convention of Gerrit Smith's Grantees," *National Era*, 11 February, 1847; "To Hon. Gerrit Smith," *National Era*, 15 April, 1847.

deprive themselves of the necessary comforts of life in order that they may reach their lands."⁴⁹ Even Frederick Douglass threw his full weight behind the plan: between 1848 and 1850, at least 19 articles on the Adirondacks appeared in his paper, *The North Star*, and he exhorted his readers in language that mixed military metaphors with religion, the pioneer's rosy western hope for the future with the slave's nightmarish present:

Advantage should be at once taken of this generous and magnificent donation ... The sharp axe of the sable-armed pioneer should be at once uplifted over the soil of Franklin and Essex counties, and the noise of falling trees proclaim the glorious dawn of civilization throughout their borders ... What a man soweth that he shall reap ... Come, brethren, let it not be said, that a people who, under the lash, could level the forests of Virginia, Maryland, and the whole Southern States, that their oppressors might reap the reward, lack the energy and manly ambition to clear lands for themselves.⁵⁰

By 1848, that year of socialist revolution in Europe, Smith could write that "some twenty or thirty are comfortably settled" on their new land and that "the remainder are preparing to follow them in the Spring. Would that the three thousand grantees were all in their homes and tillers of their own acres!"⁵¹ Indeed, the spring of 1848 saw Willis Hodges selling his interests in the *Ram's Horn* in order to hitch a team to his wagon and head north to Franklin County. He moved not without trepidation—having grown up on a farm in Virginia, the son of a free black farmer, he knew the challenge of farming on the Adirondacks' thin soil; nevertheless, in May he led a group of four families and five single men to Blacksville, on Loon Lake.⁵²

To help fan pioneer flames, reports streamed south extolling the health of the country: Charles B. Ray himself took a tour of the lands in 1847, and, in a second hand-report written by James McCune Smith, reported that, "it is scarcely necessary to say that he [Ray] found the land all fairer than you [Gerrit Smith] represented it to be; considering it to be 'about the best

⁴⁹ "Movements of the Grantees of the City of Troy," *The North Star*, 10 November, 1848.

⁵⁰ Clark, *The Communitarian Moment*, 58; "Correspondence," *The North Star* 7 January, 1848; "The Smith Lands," *The North Star*, 18 February, 1848.

⁵¹ It's more than a coincidence that 1848 was both the year Marx and Engels's *The Communist Manifesto* was published and interest in Timbuctoo reached a critical mass. There was something afoot in the mid-19-century West: radicals everywhere were questioning capitalism, hierarchy, and domination, and many of them, including Marx, rooted their critiques at least partly in environmental grounds. Indeed, as John Bellamy Foster has shown, by the 1860s Marx was convinced that capitalist industrial agriculture was what we would now call unsustainable, and he had the wasting of the industrialized world's soil fertility as proof. Marx came to focus his critique in what he called the "metabolic rift"—the gap between how quickly capitalist societies expropriated soil fertility and how slowly natural process built it back up. And because he was, after all, Karl Marx, he further argued that capitalist agriculture brought with it a set of social relationship that could only ever result in both social and ecological crisis. Marx, then, like Bookchin, like Lefebvre, can help provide a window into the historical intersection of environmental and social radical politics. Gerrit Smith, "From the *Model Worker*," 1848 in "Collected Printed Papers by Gerrit Smith in the American Antiquarian Society," 1835-1874, vol.1; John Bellamy Foster, "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 2 September (1999): 366-405 (many thanks to Referee B for calling the Marx connection to my attention).

⁵² "Gerrit Smith's Lands," *The North Star*, 24 March, 1848; Willis Hodges, *Free Man of Color: The Autobiography of Willis Augustus Hodges*, ed. William B. Gatewood (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1982), xlv, 77-80.

land out doors.”⁵³ The next year, a Mr. Jefferson travelled back to Troy and gave “a very interesting history of [the Adirondacks], and recommends all those that have land there, not to part with it under any consideration.”⁵⁴ Surely one of the most buoying descriptions was Jermain Wesley Loguen’s, who spent seven weeks in August and September, 1848, travelling throughout the region.

I visited in person many of these lands ... In Essex County ... I feel confident in saying, that the farms given by Mr. Smith, with very few exceptions, are as good land as any man can need. In Franklin County ... I found some there that I considered first-rate; many that would not be good for tillage, but are very valuable for the timber upon them; and not one that is worthless.”⁵⁵

Finally, James Henderson, a living witness to the Adirondacks’ fecundity, reported in 1849 that his own patch of wilderness was in full flower.⁵⁶ “There is no better land for grain,” he wrote: “We get from 25 to 50 bushels of oats to the acre ... And for potatoes and turnips ... we get from 200 to 400 to the acre.—The farmers here get 46 cents per bushel, cash in hand, for their oats.”⁵⁷

Even before reaching their new homes, the grantees voiced an understanding of the alchemical relationship between labor, land, and freedom.⁵⁸ In letter after letter, contributors to the *North Star* wrote that settling the Adirondacks would be a sort of homecoming. As one commentator put it, “The country is a wilderness ... [and though] colored people are not accustomed to hardships ... Our forefathers have made this country, once a wilderness, a delightful home for their oppressors, the Anglo-Saxon race.”⁵⁹ Autonomous racial uplift, grounded in rural husbandry, was certainly a part of the appeal: “Colored Americans will have developed one means of their elevation,” proclaimed the grantees from Rochester, “when they leave the subordinate offices now assigned them in the cities, and aspire for the soil.”⁶⁰ And in January of 1849, the National Convention of Colored People published their conclusion that “the freedom, independence and steadiness of a farmer’s life will throw among the colored people elements of character essential to happiness and progress.” There was one specific path to happiness and progress: “forsake the cities and towns and to settle upon this land and cultivate it, and thereby build a tower of strength for themselves ... Forsake the cities and their employments of dependency and emigrate to those parts of the country where land is cheap,

⁵³ Charles B. Ray and James McCune Smith to Gerrit Smith, 27 July, 1847. Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University, Box 31, Ray, Charles Bennett Incoming Corres 1847-1873 Folder.

⁵⁴ “Movements of the Grantees of the City of Troy,” *The North Star*, 10 November, 1848.

⁵⁵ “Gerrit Smith’s Lands,” *The North Star*, 24 March, 1848.

⁵⁶ James McCune Smith to Gerrit Smith, 6 February, 1850, Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University, Box 34, Smith, James McCune Incoming Corres. Folder.

⁵⁷ “Mr. Waite J. Lewis and the Smith’s Lands,” *The North Star*, 16 February, 1849.

⁵⁸ Jones writes that, “for a people who have known the agony of a system in which family members could be routinely sold away from one another—wives from husbands, children from mothers—land stood as one of the only tangible possessions that could not be easily confiscated. For African Americans, the attainment of land was a priceless step toward self-sufficiency and security.” Jones, “They Called it Timbuctoo,” 32.

⁵⁹ “New Bedford, March 22, 1848,” *The North Star*, 30 March, 1849.

⁶⁰ “Meeting of the Rochester Grantees,” *The North Star*, 15 December, 1848.

and become cultivators of the soil.”⁶¹ William Jones, a former slave who had emancipated himself by running away from his master, listened to an address at Henry Highland Garnet’s Liberty Street Church, then rose to speak to the gathering: “God bless Mr. Gerrit Smith, and all the Smiths” began his speech, “come off the steamboats—leave your barber shops—leave the kitchen, where you have to live underground all day and climb up ten pair of stairs at night. To-morrow morning I intend to leave for Essex County to see for myself.”⁶² Whereas towns and cities are theorized as places of vertical dependency—where one lives underground—in the Adirondacks, all is horizontal. The wilderness was yet a living home: “The land is open to them. The land has just as much respect for a black man as it has for a white one.—Let our colored brethren betake themselves to it.”⁶³

James McCune Smith found his salvation when he finally betook himself to Adirondack soil in 1846. The year 1846 was a bad one for McCune Smith: the denial of black suffrage left him depressed and feeling like a lifetime of desperate hard work was all worth exactly nothing. The first professionally trained black physician in the U.S., he was considered by Douglass to be one of the most important intellectuals of his time—indeed, he wrote the introduction to Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855)—and he was an essayist and literary critic, publishing a review of *Moby Dick* in 1856.⁶⁴ But in most white eyes, all of this meant nothing given his black skin. And so when Gerrit Smith asked him to help co-write a broadside encouraging settlement in the Adirondacks, McCune Smith replied:

I have no heart to write it. Each succeeding day, that terrible [racist] majority falls sadder, heavier, more crushingly on my soul. At times I am so weaned from life, that I could lay me down and die, with the prayer, that the memory of this existence should be blotted from my soul.

The good doctor was sick, and wanted nothing to do with a festering America; he was dangerously close to convincing himself that racism sprang from permanently poisoned soil, that it was something inbred, something that remained unyielding to every attempt at reason, moral suasion, nonviolence. Suicide seemed like the only way out.

In desperation, he lashed out at Smith, accusing the white abolitionist of kowtowing to an economic system designed to foster inequality. McCune Smith didn’t want to be the dependent of his possessions: he wanted to be enfranchised because he was a human, not because he was a landowner. Wasn’t Smith simply playing the game, the doctor challenged, legitimizing racism, hierarchy, and domination with his get-out-the-vote scheme?

My personal influence, manhood, presence at the ballot box is utterly destroyed when the earth-owning oath is thrust at me ... The point of the moral is dipped into poison. It is established by our oath, that the vile earth has rights superior to Mankind! That ‘the dust of

⁶¹ “New York, May 18, 1848,” *The North Star*, 12 January, 1849.

⁶² Quoted in Don Papsen, “The John Thomas Story: From Slavery in Maryland to American Citizenship in the Adirondacks,” in the *Lake Champlain Weekly*, 18 October, 2006. I owe a debt of thanks to Don Papsen for sending me his articles.

⁶³ “Convention of Colored People,” *The North Star*, 20 October, 1848.

⁶⁴ Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men*, 5-6, 15, 66.

the earth' is the greater, without 'the breath of life.' What horrible mockery! Is it right to be a party to such Blasphemy?⁶⁵

In the end, however, McCune Smith choked back the acrid bile, and helped write the letter; he did so, I think, because he realized that voting was a secondary consideration, that 'the dust of the earth,' and 'the breath of life,' by themselves were nothing, but combined gave birth to something living, thinking, active, that in the union of the two was the birth of history.

I also think he started meeting the pioneers themselves. When McCune Smith wrote to Smith, he assumed that the Adirondacks were meant to instill an individualist ethic of success that had proved vacuous in his own life. Individualism alone would not kill racism, but as it turns out, the pioneers already knew this. In November of 1846, one month before McCune Smith mailed his letter of despair, a committee of pioneers from Albany wrote Smith with their own plans: they wanted Smith to sell them 75,000 Adirondack acres which they would then divide into 100 to 200 acre lots, open to parties of African Americans.⁶⁶ The plan never came to much, but it shows the pioneers actively engaged in the logic of settlement and leaning toward some sort of more communal model. This, I think, grabbed McCune Smith hard and shook him from his stupor: individualism may have been bankrupt, but a community could work.

By the spring of 1848, the sap was rising in McCune Smith's veins, and he noted that "there is a good spirit amongst the grantees who have received their deeds," and that "I look with joy to mixing with the strong hardy men, when they shall have completed their plans."⁶⁷ In July of 1848, a company of pioneers returned to New York City to tell of their triumphs, and to seek support for a plan of community development. McCune Smith liked what he heard so much that he felt "very desirous to go on the good land," and even began fundraising.⁶⁸

Then, in the fall of 1850—that terrible fall that saw the passage of the Compromise of 1850 and with it a strengthened Fugitive Slave Act—McCune Smith's first child, his daughter Amy, died, and he was devastated. He wrote of it to Smith, and his words are throat-constricting; but McCune Smith somehow continued, wending his way from the unspeakable to the possible. He had spent a few weeks in the mountains soon before he lost Amy, and his letter is less a report than a religious testimony: "I felt myself a 'lad indeed' beneath the lofty spruce and maple and birches, and by the baubling brook, which your deed made mine." McCune Smith didn't and wouldn't move to his Adirondack land—his ties to New York City were too strong—but nevertheless standing on his own patch, with the maple and birches and evergreen spruce as witnesses, he was reborn. In spite of the fact that the stroke of Henry Clay's

⁶⁵ James McCune Smith to Gerrit Smith, 28 December, 1846, Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University, Box 34, Smith, James McCune Incoming Corres. Folder.

⁶⁶ Names Illegible [C. S. Morton, Benjamin Latimore, P.W. Grommell, J. P. Anthony, Richard Thompson] to Gerrit Smith, 4 November, 1846, Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University, Box 145, Gifts of Land and Money to Negroes Folder.

⁶⁷ James McCune Smith to Gerrit Smith, 27 March, 1848. Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University, Box 34, Smith, James McCune Incoming Corres. Folder; James McCune Smith to Gerrit Smith, May 12, 1848. Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University, Box 34, Smith, James McCune Incoming Corres. Folder.

⁶⁸ James McCune Smith to Gerrit Smith, 7 July, 1848. Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University, Box 34, Smith, James McCune Incoming Corres. Folder.

compromising pen rendered his activities illegal—for escaped slaves were seeking asylum and living among the pioneers—even though he was grieving for his daughter, he found “colored settlers making their woods ring with the music of their axe strokes”; he found repose.⁶⁹

John Thomas was one of these axe-wielding settlers. In 1839 Thomas ran away from the Maryland plantation of his master, Ezekiel Merrick, and over a period of nine years made his way north, through Philadelphia, Troy, and, finally, to Essex County. Illiterate and grateful, in 1872 he hired someone to write a letter for him to Gerrit Smith, a beautiful bit of correspondence, written in an unhurried, steady hand that adorned the letters with graceful arabesques. Thomas began by praising Smith’s “benevolence towards myself, as well as my Colored Brothers generally,” before moving on to detail his life in the Adirondacks. Originally given a 40 acre tract, he sold it “owing to inconveniences of Church and school principles.” But rather than leave the mountains, Thomas bought a different plot, closer to his community’s center, “which by labor and economy has been enlarged into a handsome farm of two hundred acres; with all necessary stock and farming implements. I generally have a surplus of two or three hundred dollars worth of farm produce to sell, every year.” Thomas had made it, and in closing, testified that owning land, farming it, allowing it to flower had actively changed him: “I have breasted the storm of prejudice and opposition, until I begin to be regarded as an ‘American Citizen.’”⁷⁰

It was healthy country, settled by healthy pioneers, who were cultivating a healthy society.

That last sentence should be the end of my story: indeed, I desperately wish that crafting a triumphal conclusion about utopian agrarianism and the ecology of freedom and black settlers in the Adirondacks who killed racism was the writing task before me now. But it’s not, and today, thousands work and play on the dust of a forgotten history, while environmental and social impoverishment both continue apace. The Adirondacks did not become the beachhead of equality, and Timbuctoo has become a distant, fantastical place. It’s true that even the pioneers’ expert cultivators weren’t prepared for the ecological realities of the Great Northern Wilderness and found their agricultural know-how sorely tested. Then as now, Adirondack farming is an exercise in hope and faith: without diversifying one’s sources of income it’s hard to make ends meet. It was even harder for those who had been trained as barbers, mechanics, or laborers in New York City, and for many of them, Adirondack life was just too tenuous.⁷¹

⁶⁹ James McCune Smith to Gerrit Smith, 6 February, 1850, Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University, Box 34, Smith, James McCune Incoming Corres. Folder. For a lyrical exploration of the history and cultural politics of repose, see Aaron Sachs, *Arcadian America: The Death and Life of an Environmental Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

⁷⁰ John Thomas to Gerrit Smith, Bloomingdale, Essex County, NY, 26 August, 1872. Gerrit Smith Papers, Cornell University Library (Glen Rock, NJ: Microfilming Corp. of America, 1975), microfilm, reel 18.

⁷¹ Franklin Sanborn’s conclusion—that “there was no opening in the woods of Essex for waiters, barbers, coachmen, washer-women, or the other occupations for which negroes had been trained”—a conclusion that was advanced in order to bolster Sanborn’s hagiographic take on Brown, has become the dominant one. See F. B. Sanborn, ed., *The Life and Letters of John Brown, Liberator of Kansas, and Martyr of Virginia* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 97.

Yet, some pioneers did adapt: Lyman Epps lived out his life on Adirondack soil (indeed, he moonlighted as an Adirondack guide and cut the first trail to Indian Pass, a trail beloved of today's hikers), as did his son; and various other families stayed rooted well into the 19th and even 20th centuries.⁷² What proved far more difficult to overcome than climate and soil was the desiccation of utopian agrarianism, the unraveling of freedom's ecological web.

In 1849, John Brown arrived in the Adirondacks on his red horse, penniless and on the run from creditors.⁷³ He hadn't yet assumed a prominent place in the ranks of abolitionists—his career-making Pottawatomie Massacre, when he and his followers hacked five pro-slavery Kansans to death using broadswords, was still seven years off—and he used the Adirondacks as a refuge for his family and as a staging ground for his increasingly violent plans. Though he never took Timbuctoo's audacious mission seriously—Brown thought only apocalypse triggered by himself, God's avenging archangel, would end slavery—his promise of an immediate, bloody end to bondage did prove irresistible to Gerrit Smith, who became one of the Secret Six with foreknowledge of Harper's Ferry. Douglass, too, knew what Brown was up to in the 1850s, and found himself bending in Brown's direction. Even James McCune Smith began to feel that savagery could be purifying.⁷⁴ Violence was out-competing the tender crops of utopia, and by the late 1850s, many of the pioneers found themselves all but ignored by their former comrades, stranded in the Great Northern Wilderness until, one by one, most slowly trickled back to their downstate homes.⁷⁵

Even so, I'm not sure that we can chalk Timbuctoo up as just one more well-meaning-but-ultimately-untenable radical scheme. Call it a splendid failure, W. E. B. DuBois's bittersweet memorialization of Reconstruction: for, if you listen closely, you can hear the vital pulse of utopian agrarianism, the breath of an ecology of freedom in the environmental thinking of late 19th and early 20th century black intellectuals. In 1873, Frederick Douglass addressed the Tennessee Colored Agricultural and Mechanical Association. He wasn't a farmer—never had been—and he groped for words. As he was doing so, I wonder: did his mind wander north? "Neither you or I can afford to be ignorant of the facts of history," he told the crowd. "The grand old earth has no prejudices against race color, or previous condition of servitude, but flings open her ample breast to all who will come to her for succor and relief ...

⁷² The longest lived was Lyman Epps, Jr., who was born in the Adirondacks and whose father Lyman Epps was one of the original grantees and who helped build the Brown house (he wrote his name on a board that can still be seen in the attic of the Brown farm). Epps, Jr., died in 1942. And there are still descendants of the pioneers who live in the Adirondack region. See Don Papson's series of articles, "The John Thomas Story: From Slavery in Maryland to American Citizenship in the Adirondacks," *Lake Champlain Weekly*, 18 October, 2006; 25 October, 2006; 1 November, 2006; and especially 8 November, 2006; Schneider, *The Adirondacks*, 186 n1.

⁷³ It's devilishly hard to exactly pinpoint when Brown was in the Adirondacks. I've cobbled together my chronology from sources (themselves none-too-clear) including Sanborn, *The Life and Letters of John Brown*, 97-115; Donaldson, *A History of the Adirondacks*, 2: 3-12; Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men*, 168-174; and Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 89, 94, 125-137, 233.

⁷⁴ Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men*, 172, 184.

⁷⁵ In 1859, Robert M. De Witt wrote of North Elba, "scarcely a vestige now remains of this colony, although at one time so numerous that it seemed probably the anomalous political aspect would be exhibited of a town in New York controlled by negro suffrages, and represented in the county board by Colored Supervisors." Robert M. De Witt, *The Life, Trial and Execution of Captain John Brown* (New York: Robert M. De Witt, 1859), 9.

The very soil of your State was cursed with a burning sense of injustice ... Your fields could not be lovingly planted nor faithfully cultivated in its presence."⁷⁶

Forty years later, W. E. B. DuBois—born in western Massachusetts, the former first state of utopia—took a break from nonfiction to pen a novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), set in his contemporary Alabama, and which almost certainly alludes to Gerrit Smith.⁷⁷ It's a conventional love story, an early example of environmental writing with a radical political twist.⁷⁸ A girl named Zora, a "child of the swamp ... a heathen hoyden of twelve" who represents untamed nature and lives in the wilderness bordering the share-cropped fields of Colonel Cresswell, this Zora falls in love with Bles, a hardworking black farm boy, who obviously is meant to represent husbandry.⁷⁹ Their budding love sunders when Bles discovers that Zora has been serially raped by the Cresswells, and both Zora and Bles wind up leaving the South, exploring politics in Washington D.C., and then, disgusted with political life, return, as adults, to their homes, where they become reacquainted and decide that real change can only happen on the ground. And so they tap into their utopian agrarian roots and begin a collective biracial agricultural community, complete with hospital and school, all of it sited in the wilderness of the swamp. The novel ends on a note of tentative hope, a note of cooperation: "The swamp was living, vibrant, tremulous. There where the first long note of night shot with burning crimson, burst in sudden radiance the wide beauty of the moon. There pulsed a long glory in the air."⁸⁰

"If by definition," William Cronon writes "wilderness leaves no place for human beings, save perhaps as contemplative sojourners enjoying their leisurely reverie in God's natural cathedral—then also by definition it can offer no solution to the environmental and other problems that confront us."⁸¹ But what of wilderness conceptions that buck the Trouble with

⁷⁶ Frederick Douglass, "Address Before the Tennessee Colored Agricultural and Mechanical Association," in *African-American Social and Political Thought, 1850-1920*, ed. Howard Brotz (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1992), 288, 290, 291.

⁷⁷ Indeed, there is a minor character in the novel, a politician from New Jersey named Peter Smith who supports the education of Alabama's black sharecroppers, a politician who is notorious for "certain socialistic votes." Recall that Gerrit Smith's father was named Peter, and that Gerrit, like the fictional character, served in Congress for a brief spell. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, (1911, reprint. New York: Harlem Moon, 2004), 45.

⁷⁸ Environmental writing is a brand-new category, and Bill McKibben is one of its inventors. His edited collection, *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau* (2002), is the first major canonical collection showcasing the new genre—and it, unfortunately, suggests the monochromatic way many scholars still view the outdoors: of 101 sanctified authors, only three—Marvin Gaye (in partnership with Joni Mitchell), Robert D. Bullard, and Carl Anthony—are African American. McKibben implies through omission that there was no environmental writing penned by a black author before the first Earth Day marked the emergence of modern environmentalism. If environmental writing is to be anything more than a way to sell books, then it must seek to broaden its scope, and both Douglass's "Address Before the Tennessee Colored Agricultural and Mechanical Association," and DuBois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* are easy starts. For an explanation, and representative offering, of what environmental writing is, how it is different than nature writing, and why we need a new genre, see Bill McKibben, ed., *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau* (New York: The Library of America, 2008).

⁷⁹ DuBois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, 33.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 378.

⁸¹ Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 73, 80-81, 83.

Wilderness paradigm's dualistic definitions? Might *they* offer potential solutions? Political philosopher Kimberly K. Smith writes of a black wilderness tradition that, in contrast to the white version, "is centrally concerned with the relationship between identity and landscape, and particularly the historical relationship between a community and the land as that land is mediated by memory. Those concerns give shape to a distinctive concept of wilderness ... I call 'the black concept.'"⁸² This would seem to subvert the dominant paradigm by elevating its antithesis, yet there's nothing essentially black about any of it: in fact, it sounds like a good brief of Thoreau's philosophy of the wild. "*Who* are we? *where* are we?" he asked in September of 1846(!) from the summit of Maine's Mt. Katahdin.⁸³ Indeed, the whole of *Walden* could be taken as an exploration of identity, landscape, and memory-mediated relationships. Of course, an African American history, culture, and intellectual tradition has a particularity unto itself, and some of the work that Smith and others have done to excavate the cultural continuity of African cultural and agricultural traditions are perfect examples of such distinction. But scholars have sometimes been too quick to assume that black thought and white thought remained pure, unmixed lines, the one uncomplicatedly violent and exploitative, the other virtuous. Again, one runs into the problem of dueling binaries.

It is particularly here that an historical lens colored by the critical insights of social ecology can offer the two things which the Trouble with Wilderness paradigm has so conspicuously lacked: historical examples of more ethical wilderness conceptions, and the hope for a better future rooted in the past.⁸⁴

Hope—from the past, for the future—lies precisely in the degree to which a social-ecology-tinged view can avoid falling into the trap of dualism. Indeed, one of the first axioms of Murray Bookchin's elaboration of social ecology, *The Ecology of Freedom* (1991, 2005) is that environmental issues are always also social issues, with the implication that to focus solely on the environment (or on society) is only ever to address half of the problem.⁸⁵ In a 1989 debate with Dave Foreman, one of the leading U.S. proponents of deep ecology and a humanless wilderness, Bookchin argued, "The ultimate moral appeal of [deep ecology and a radical wilderness preservationism] is that it urges us to safeguard the natural world from ... ourselves." "But," he continued:

Who is this "us" from which the living world has to be protected ...? Is it "humanity ...?" Or is it our particular society, our particular civilization, with its hierarchical social relations which pit men against women, privileged whites against people of color, elites against masses, employers against workers, the First World against the Third World, and, ultimately, a cancer-like "grow or die" industrial capitalist economic system against the natural world and other life forms?⁸⁶

⁸² Smith, "What is Africa to Me?" 301.

⁸³ Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), 95.

⁸⁴ I think Bruno Latour is arguing for something similar in his "Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" in which he continues his earlier attempts to lay the foundation of an ecological vision relying neither on critique nor on the unquestioned authority of Science, but on composing, improvising, compromising, composting—that is, building something new with the best parts of what has come before, rather than rejecting the past as error, only. It's an effort to move beyond, not to tear down. See Bruno Latour, "Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" *New Literary History* 41, no. 3 Summer (2010): 471-490.

⁸⁵ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 32.

⁸⁶ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 30-31.

There's something perverse, Bookchin points out, in that "us," in implying that the world's poor are as implicated in the destruction of the earth as are the bosses of Big Oil. Social issues matter, and social ecology asks us, on the one hand, to critically focus on the existence of hierarchy; and on the other, to actively rebuild based on the values of biotic interdependence, care, cooperation, security, love, and autonomy.⁸⁷ As an analytical tool, social ecology avoids the distancing trope of irony, which seems to provide the Trouble with Wilderness paradigm's keen cutting edge, and instead substitutes a kind of critical sympathy in its vision of a better, more just, greener world. One doesn't have to be an evangel of social ecology to use its critical and activist insights, which can actually help reveal histories—like Timbuctoo's—lying in the Trouble with Wilderness's blind spot.

Of course, one could point out, not without justification, the more anthropocentric side of the Adirondack experiment—and indeed of social ecology. Certainly, the pioneers constantly spoke of using their axes, and when they cut and sold timber, cleared land for their cabins and farm fields, and brought domesticated animals to their homesteads, they were changing the ecological character of the Great Northern Wilderness from thick forest to thick-forest-punctuated-by-farm-field. Indeed, one could go further and follow Kimberly K. Smith in arguing that up until the mid-20th century work of Wendell Berry, agrarians weren't even all that green.⁸⁸ One could also ask, what about other humans? Were the pioneers also fighting sexism?⁸⁹ What place would the area's American Indians occupy at Timbuctoo? I admittedly cannot answer these questions: perhaps, had it survived into the present, Timbuctoo would be indistinguishable from any other town in the U.S. Perhaps not. In any case, the pioneers were neither environmental saints nor rigorous Bookchinite social ecologists; in the same vein, social ecology is not the one true green text—probably the last thing we need are more beatific green heroes, more bibles of environmentalism. And so we could use the Trouble with Wilderness paradigm to historicize with a hammer, leveling every hypocrisy, contradiction, and unfulfilled promise. Yet, I've always felt alone and unmoored and naked, standing amidst

⁸⁷ He argues for an autonomy based not on triumph over, but reliance upon: "it is in this ecological interplay of social freedom and natural freedom that a true ecology of freedom will be fashioned." Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 414, 415, 421.

⁸⁸ This is a powerful critique whose force relies on pinpointing two distinct intellectual traditions: agrarianism and environmentalism. I agree with Smith that the black pioneers weren't part of an American environmental tradition, if we take that tradition to be strictly defined by John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and David Brower. However, it should be clear by now that I'm more interested in blurring boundaries, *especially* in the antebellum U.S. when there was no coherent thing called environmentalism, and so I am arguing for a less-narrowly conceived tradition of green thinking. See Smith, *Wendell Berry*, especially chapters 1, "Agrarian Visions," and 2, "The Greening of Agrarianism," 11-62.

⁸⁹ The sources are unclear on this point, but it seems, at least initially, that Smith was open to deeding black women land, as well. He later reconsidered, however, and instead gave eligible black women \$50. See John Cochrane, Daniel C. Eaton, George H. Evans. N.D. [ca. 1850] List of Beneficiaries. Box 145, Gifts of Land and Money to Negroes Folder. Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University; Asa B. Smith to Gerrit Smith. N.D. [ca. 1850]. Box 145, Gifts of Land and Money to Negroes Folder. Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University; John Cochrane, Isaac Hopper, D.C. Easton, William Kinney to Gerrit Smith. January 2, 1850. Box 145, Gifts of Land and Money to Negroes Folder. Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University.

the rubble of the past when the work of deconstruction has been done.⁹⁰ Besides, the point remains that the black pioneers were rethinking and putting into practice a clear alternative to environmental and social exploitation. We all live in an impoverished world if we lose their historical example.

And though social ecology is certainly not infallible, it is good to think with in that it can help guide us away from the temptation of dualism and towards a more radical, comprehensive green vision, one that mixes histories of exploitation and liberation with nature and culture.⁹¹ In this, it is not alone, and indeed some of the most impressive work in the environmental humanities focuses on the dialectical blurring of binaries.⁹² It is in this vein that literary scholar Kimberly N. Ruffin has eloquently argued that we need “a conceptual reconstruction that rebuilds what it means to be human with ecological sustainability in mind ... This human nature must be built free of racist ideology and biotic and regional chauvinism if we are to better meet human and nonhuman needs.”⁹³ She could have been describing the black Adirondack pioneers’ nascent ecology of freedom.

Perhaps we environmental historians have spent a bit too much time pointing out the problems with the monolithic wilderness dreamt up by a very small handful of white, western elites, and not enough crafting a complicated, nuanced intellectual history, where black farmers and political radicals receive the same rigorous scholarly attention as John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, Theodore Roosevelt, and David Brower. Perhaps, in our efforts to root out a wilderness of exclusion, we’ve paradoxically turned a single, albeit influential, conception into a hegemonic paradigm and read it back into the past, silencing alternatives and historical contingency. What other hybrid wilderness voices—economically less-privileged, or non-western, or female, or indigenous—might we have inadvertently drowned out?

⁹⁰ Latour writes, “*what performs a critique cannot also compose*. It is really a mundane question of having the right tools for the right job. With a hammer (or a sledge hammer) in hand you can do a lot of things: break down walls, destroy idols, ridicule prejudices, but you cannot repair, take care, assemble, reassemble, stitch together. It is no more possible to compose with the paraphernalia of critique than it is to cook with a seesaw. Its limitations are greater still, for the hammer of critique can only prevail if, behind the slowly dismantled wall of appearances, is finally revealed the netherworld of reality. But when there is nothing real to be seen behind this destroyed wall, critique suddenly looks like another call to nihilism.” Latour, “Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto,’” 475.

⁹¹ Indeed, I have found it quite provocative to read Bookchin’s *The Ecology of Freedom*, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “Four Theses” on world history, climate, and economy, and Lefebvre’s contention that “the finiteness of nature and of the Earth thus has the power to challenge blind (ideological) belief in the infinite power of abstraction, of human thinking and technology, and of political power and the space which that power generates and decrees” alongside each other. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2, Winter (2009): 197-222; Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 330.

⁹² Aside from the other work explicitly mentioned in earlier footnotes, I have been particularly influenced by Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988); Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Foundation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); David Harvey, *Justice, Nature & the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1996); Aaron Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (New York: Viking, 2006); and most anything by the cultural landscape studies scholar, J. B. Jackson.

⁹³ Ruffin, *Black on Earth*, 167.

This is what we miss when we survey antebellum free soil with a wilderness paradigm unsuited to the historical particularity of the Adirondacks: a landscape of social activism; a heady mix of labor, race, and wilderness; a struggle to realize the ecology of freedom through the hard mutual sweat of utopian agrarianism. Neither black nor white, the Great Northern Wilderness was once a radical wilderness, a *eutopia*—a real, good place—a home and now a dream too-long deferred, forgotten but not dead, lying at the ready underneath our very boots.

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