

JUJU LEAVES IN THE CENTER OF A WHIRLWIND:

AFRICAN AMERICAN NATURE/CULTURE MEDIATION

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**Juju Leaves in the Center of a Whirlwind: African**

**American Nature/culture Mediation**

**By**

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**To the ancestors and the youth for their struggles and to those  
who strive to decenter the human and heal all living things**

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## Chapter 1

### “Topographing the Terrain: The Land, Literature and the People”

“Yea, that’s your ancestors—gardenin, farmin, huntin, fishin, pigs, chickens, cows, horses. Could grow your own food.” Albert Johnson

In the fall of 1991, I conducted a phone interview with a veteran hunter in his mid 50’s who began hunting at age 12. I asked him what he liked about hunting. He replied “I like hearing my dogs tree a coon or rabbit. It’s relaxing to be out in the woods. Clears my mind. You can do what you want to do; cause you’re always doing what you gotta do, or have to do. Being out in the woods or fishing is fun, relaxing.” I explained that I was beginning a large project and planned to write about how we as black people had “a lot to do with Nature.” He answered “Yea, that’s your ancestors—gardenin, farmin, huntin, fishin, pigs, chickens, cows, horses. Could grow your own food.”

My academic endeavor had attracted me to a unique “source”, I was interviewing the father who helped raise me. Ancestors. He was not talking about my grandfather or grandmother—though my grandmother picked cotton—he was speaking of a material and spiritual ancestry, an inheritance of environmental interaction, an inheritance that is multi-layered. The African American environmental world view he expressed entails a meditative practice, a world relatively free from human constraints and one which allowed communion with other animals—in this case, dogs. His grandfather was an Indian who healed colds and other sickness. The women of the family practiced and passed on “old home remedies” to heal sickness and restore health. My father and his rural ancestors related to the environment in the physical space of Louisiana’s and Florida’s woods, gardens and fields and they related to the land with an interactive, respectful recognition of its power

and an appreciation of its gifts. Economic independence was integrally tied to skins, meat, gardens, farms and the ability to “grow your own food.”

The relationship was not uncomplicated. My father, like many other black people, refused to pick cotton because of its association with the oppression of slavery and exploitative sharecropping. He and his ten sisters and brothers helped the family by picking peppers and other agricultural products. Yet, outside of spiritual mediators or diviners who advise on interpersonal relationships, his brothers and sisters intentionally distance themselves from this complex rural heritage.

I grew up with my own biases. The South was a place to fear, a racist hell from which most of my family members were able to escape. Rural carry overs in “urban” Saginaw, Michigan, were emotion-laden. I felt same when the neighbors called the animal control people because of my father’s penned up dogs, horror at the skinned rabbits in the sink, sadness as raccoons lay dead on our back porch, pity for blue-gills and crappies struggling for their last breaths in a bucket and resentment at having to work in the garden. I felt childish impatience as my parents “forced” me to walk through the 4-H and produce exhibits at county fairs, or interrupted our country rides to stop and look at cat-tails or tadpoles.

It is impossible to claim that my early life with “country” parents alone brought me to this “place.” The path from Saginaw to this project is a long and complicated one. It courses through college campuses, up trees, through woods, across deserts, up mountains, through bookstores, along garbage runs, through “womens” land,” libraries, archives and movie theaters. Prior to beginning graduate school, I was influenced by Godfrey Reggio’s vision of how destructive connections

between nature, culture and technology created “Life out of Balance” in the film “Koyaanisqatsi.”<sup>1</sup> Spiritual and political activists who linked capitalism, long-standing state-sponsored terrorism and ecological devastation with the land struggles of the indigenous Hopi and Navajo/Dine tribes in Arizona informed me, as did the investigators and practitioners of Old and “New Age” spiritualities. Luisah Teish, in her work Jambalaya, and Carlos Dignes, in his film Quilombo, raised important questions concerning the influence of African retained spirituality and resistance in Diasporic cultures. Each author/auter suggested that individuals’ relationship with “Nature” comprised a significant component of their cultural repertoire in places as diverse as New Orleans, Louisiana and Palmaris, Brazil.

In the midst working with Native American adolescents in a dysfunctional group home in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and baling newspapers and crushing glass for a recycling and garbage company, read Zora Neale Hurston’s ethnographies Mules and Men and Tell My Horse. In both texts Hurston provided much of the cultural and historical context for Teish’s work in her discussion of the role of African retained cultures and nature-based religions. Her descriptions of obeah suggested to me correlations between maroon societies in Jamaica and Brazil and I began reconsidering graduate school. I was faced with the choice of managing a branch of the recycling company or returning to academia to examine African Diasporic resistance to slavery. While my decision appears fairly obvious, the polarities between my choices were not easily resolved.

Not until my second year in my second graduate program did I get a glimpse of the ways in which I could reconcile my seemingly divergent interests. Two authors were particularly influential

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<sup>1</sup> The Dine translation for Koyaanisqatsi is “life out of balance.”

in this process. Henry Nash Smith's Virgin Land explored ways in which myths and aspirations of the "wild west" and "the garden" helped shape Americans' ideology and practice of land settlement. William Cronon's Changes in the Land detailed the ways in which Indigenous and European cultural beliefs and practices influenced the New England environment. Both presented fascinating perspectives on the ways in which the environment should be figured into any comprehensive study of American culture. While Smith asserted the need to understand the intellectual constructs which informed the shaping of American Culture, Cronon examined the intersection of belief and practice, particularly among Indigenous hunters and capitalist colonists. I began to wonder how their theories applied to African Americans with distinctly different experiences. While Smith pointed to the tension between the yeoman farmer and plantation ideals, he did not even approach the question of how Africans and African Americans viewed their relationship with the southern environment.<sup>2</sup>

Environmental relationships were primary in African American's early experience in the United States, I am concerned with how capitalism and governmental policy affected African American's relationships to the land and how African retained spirituality and resistance emerged as themes in African American cultures. An investigation of these questions reveals how African American cultures in Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama between 1830 and 1939 negotiated externally imposed restrictions and demands in relationship to the land. The shifting ideologies and practices of individuals and collectives simultaneously asserted multiple ways of maintain self-defined and counter hegemonic cultural beliefs and practices. While exploitative environmental relationships were a site of injury in the forms of slavery and sharecropping, many African Americans maintained associations with the land as a way to maintain and achieve economic,

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Myth and Symbol (New York: Vintage 1957), and William Cronon, Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

physical and spiritual health. Through immaterial and material traditions, some retained from West African cultures, others adopted and transformed from European and European American cultures, many African Americans significantly influenced American cultural geography. The ways in which African Americans negotiated these multiple environmental experiences is the focus of this dissertation.

While critics such as Hazel Carby problematize an emphasis on rural culture and argue that an examination of the rural south constitutes an omission of the lives and cultures of black working class people in urban environments, it is imperative that, as scholars, we do not abandon analysis of rural African Americans simply because so many of their family members migrated to northern cities.<sup>3</sup> Discerning the complexity of African American southern cultures is critical because they so significantly informed Northern blacks. Additionally, the south functioned as a place from which many northern African Americans saw themselves escaping from racism, segregation, limited opportunity, labor exploitation and physical threat. Thus, “the South” figured as a referential point against which African Americans understood, among other things, race, class, gender, the natural world and spatial relations in American culture generally, and the North specifically.

Yet, the rural south is a critical site of inquiry, not only because of its role as cultural informant for northern blacks, but because it is a site of significant cultural contention in its own right. A focus on the 1930’s reveals shifting terrains of cultural experience which were pivotal to African Americans physical, spiritual, economic and environmental cultures. During this period,

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<sup>3</sup> Carby writes that authors of the Harlem renaissance, namely Zora Neale Hurston, represented “the people...as a metaphorical “folk,” which in its rural connotations avoided and ignored the implication of the black city workers.” See Hazel V. Carby, “The Quicksands of Representation” Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

geographic locations, systems of labor, education and medical approaches, all transformed in subtle and dramatic ways as economic, political and environmental relationships shifted. In particular, I argue that an analysis of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama during this time, illuminates how critical environmental issues converged regarding entitlement to and maintenance of land, the possibilities of self-sufficiency, questions of health care, diet and spiritual beliefs, participation in the agricultural economy, and women's' relation to production and space.<sup>4</sup> Many rural African Americans in Alabama, for example, faced exploitative sharecropping arrangements which the depression exacerbated. At the same time that land tenants were, quite literally, losing ground and rapidly losing long-standing hopes of acquiring land, African Americans challenged the sharecropping and land tenancy systems. They proposed means as diverse as advocating capitalist land ownership and market participation and challenging the capitalist structure through communist measures of economic and political resistance.<sup>5</sup>

Many African Americans continued a long struggle for self-definition in relation to the land which began during slavery. Yet on the most basic level, African American cultures during the 30's reflect a tension between association with and disassociation from the environment. In her 1934 novel, Jonah's Gourd Vine, Zora Neale Hurston vividly portrays a segment of the black community who advocates a stringent resistance to farm labor. Hurston details the magnified northern migration during the First World War, and chronicles the promises of northern factory labor which provided serious competition to the exploitative conditions associated with agricultural work.

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<sup>4</sup> As well, African Americans' relationship with the environment in 1939 is situated at a mid-point in the history of American agricultural mechanization prior to extensive technological practices.

<sup>5</sup> See Robin D.G. Kelley, Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), and Jack Temple Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920-1960 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).



Undifferentiated voices praise urban factory jogs and “brick houses” which outshine the prospect of tilling and cultivating land. Hurston represents newly returned World War I veterans from France who will no longer serve as land cultivators.

“Nar, Ah ain’t goin’ back tuh no farm no mo’. Ah don’t mean tuh say Git up to nary ‘nother mule lessen he’s setting down in my lap. God made de world but he never made no hog outa me tuh go rootin’ it up. Done too much bookoo plowing already.”<sup>6</sup>

In the novel, distance from mules, plowing and pigs stands as a measurement of social progress. To continue to partake in farm labor is to actively participate in a historic arena of degradation. These men, in resisting agricultural interaction with the environment, figure as members of a black community who are unable to negotiate the environment apart from the cultural constructs of exploitation. Thus, in portraying their resistance to farm labor, Hurston illuminates at least two significant components of African Americans’ relationship with “Nature”: a historic dynamic of oppression and a resulting disassociation from cultivation.

The clear rejection of agricultural labor that Hurston’s narrators’ voice reveals how African Americans mediated and negotiated their relationship with the environment and the cultural constructs which define these interactions.<sup>7</sup> While her fictitious narrators express their dissatisfaction after World War I, this dialogue continued during the 30’s as each real person decided, on some level, how they would interact with the land. Some chose to disassociate or remove themselves from agricultural interaction, while others related to the land through farming,

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<sup>6</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934, New York: Perennial, 1990), p. 149.

<sup>7</sup> I suggest that the human is situated between a centralized environment and the various cultural constructs which code and order both the human and the environment. By mediating, I mean that each individual sees, feels, touches, hears, tastes, hears—in short, takes an—information from two or more reals and forms her or his own perceptions and actions as a result of negotiating these multiple and simultaneous experiences. This is more fully discussed later in this prospectus.

education, healing and gardening. Association and disassociation were not polar opposites or discrete choices, but rather, points along a spectrum which African Americans negotiated. A black farmer in the 1930's interacted directly with the environment at the same time he or she mediated socio-historical experiences of black exploitation in the agricultural labor system. Farmers related to the environment with full recognition of the past and present context of labor exploitation and oppression and the stigmas attached to agricultural labor. If, for example, an individual chose to farm during this time, she or he may have been derided as "country" or "backward," or labeled as a pawn in a larger system which was meant to keep black people in a powerless place. At the same time, the farmer may have experienced some degree of economic independence, while retaining and/or formulating a spiritual/healing philosophy regarding his or her relationship with the land through the use of roots and herbs.

While these complex and multifaceted reasons for association with and disassociation from the land resonate throughout the south, I am centrally concerned with African Americans' experiences in Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama, known variously as the "Deep South" or the "Black Belt." These regions are particularly important because they are in many ways the "west" that Henry Nash Smith discussed in Virgin Land. Thus, if we are to understand more about the cultural influences that Nash Smith omits, it is imperative to pause in Mississippi to fill out his story. Alabama is significant for similar reasons, but to these is added the presence of an institution that had at its core, a concern with African Americans' relationship with the land: Tuskegee Institute. Finally, I include Louisiana because of the prominent Hoodoo circles in the New Orleans area. By crossing disciplines and drawing from traditional historic record, literature, interviews and secondary sources, I attempt to present an integrated whole which reveals the depth and breadth of an African American environmental culture. I offer an analysis of slavery and reconstruction in Mississippi in

Chapter 2 and argue that these “processes” formed a critical foundation for African Americans as they negotiated between externally imposed boundaries and their struggles for establishing self-determined, though contested, spaces. In Chapter 3, I extend the discussion of the ways in which African American root medicine practitioners and clients in Mississippi attributed the space of the woods with healing properties and asserted distinctions between various physical and metaphysical approaches to healing. “Wild,” “uncultivated” environments, I argue figure centrally in traditional healing between 1865 and 1938. In Chapter 4, I assume a literary perspective by examining the work of Zora Neale Hurston to discuss themes of Hoodoo, social healing and nature in New Orleans. As well, I investigate how Hurston represents Moses in the imagined terrain of Egypt. I examine the employment records and annual narrative reports of agricultural and home demonstration extension agents in Alabama in Chapter 5 as a way of discerning how individuals and institutions transmit ideas about association with the land through education, science, agriculture, land ownership and capitalist participation.

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Environment. Nature. Land. My inclination is to use these terms interchangeably; yet each term is laden with cultural codes and definitions with their own popular and intellectual history. While this is not the place to engage this lengthy discourse, the question of terminology is particularly critical when discussing African American cultures because I am concerned with how we as African Americans view our relationship with “the environment” and what we call “it.” Though I received helpful and inspirational information from my first interview when using the term “Nature,” I soon realized the limitations of this terminology. I conducted my second interview with an 85-year-old hunter and his son. Thomas Glen, or Mr. Tommy, as we always called him, and his son Joe, discussed the rudiments of hunting in the north and the south.

The issue which informed my discourse of language happened when I posited the query: “So, Mr. Tommy, tell me about Nature.” My question/statement was met with an uncomfortable chuckle. I tried to rephrase it. “What do you think about...people use that word Nature. What do you think about nature? Like, is it something...just...is Nature something spiritual, is it something that just is, is it something that gives you what you need?” Again there was a discomfort in the room until Joe articulated a long answer based on the Bible and the original sin of Eve. It seemed nature for him was attached to issues of God’s creation of man and woman. God’s relationship with Nature was not even “his” creations during the standard six days before human creation, but rather the gender dynamic between men, women and God. Nature was not Eden, but the essential nature of women and men. I gave this a great deal of thought for a while and, admittedly, I still am not clear on Joe’s exact meaning.

I returned to the question of what African Americans called the “environment” in two instances; first, the question arose when I began to define an African American environmental culture and second when I began to pan a research strategy. I saw specific African American cultural practices that could be viewed as constituting an environmental culture from an academic perspective. Hunting, gardening and root medicine were just a few of the practices which came to mind. Yet the question remained, how did we as African Americans view our relationship with “the environment?” What was the place of “Nature” if that term did not even strike particular chords for Mr. Tommy and Joe? What was I going to call this mass of chemicals when I interviewed people throughout the south? Nature sounded hokey and environment too “proper.” I realized that when I discussed my dissertation on African American Environmental Culture, most people looked at me funny or asked “What exactly is that?” People understood most easily when I explained that I was interested in African Americans’ relationship with the land. This statement was usually met with an

understanding interest. “The Land.” Where “Nature” was nebulous, “the land” was concrete. The term had its romantic connotations for some, but for others it simply meant the earth and the things that come from it. Agricultural fields, woods, gardens, are all “the land” for many African Americans. I never had to rephrase my question when I asked people “What is important about the land?” Specific cultural practices such as root medicine, gardening and agricultural work can be viewed from an academic perspective, as constituting an environmental culture. Yet, while the term “Nature” does not always strike particular chords among us and “the environment” is often times a distant concept, “the Land”, most simply, means the earth and the things that come from it.<sup>8</sup>

While the definitions of “space” are as equally expansive as discussions of nature, the term appears throughout this dissertation as an arena or, as Doreen Massey explains in space, place and gender, a “dimension” which informs and is defined by social relations and yet often times contains self-possessed and autonomous elements of the environment.<sup>9</sup> From their earliest experiences of the “New World,” Africans acutely encountered the spatial configurations of culture. During the Middle passage, for instance, Africans were cramped in ships that were characterized as “tight

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<sup>8</sup> “Environment,” “nature,” and “the land” will appear in this dissertation as descriptors of the planet and its components. I use them all because each holds a piece in my intellectual discourse and because they move toward identifying the complexity of an African American environmental culture. Environment refers to that which exists independently of humans. The concept denotes the chemical/elemental or material worlds of forests, rivers, lakes, oceans, air etc. that have their own cycle of life and death and exist within a larger ecosystem. Though we as humans can pollute water, for instance, we cannot effect its fluid, erosive and abysmal qualities. We cannot alter waters essence. I use “nature” when individuals specifically use this term to express their perception of “the environment” or when their relationship is one that explicitly or implicitly draws on or represents a spiritual or intangible environmental perspective. This dissertation identifies “the land” as the environmental arena in which African Americans saw themselves acting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early twentieth centuries. Because “the land” is used within African American cultures as an operative descriptor, I use it to describe African American’s physical, non-human environment in this time period.

<sup>9</sup> Doreen Massey, space, place and gender (Oxford, UK: Polity Press, 1994), p. 251.

Packers” or “loose packers.” Thus, the forced migration from the African continent functioned as a foreshadowing of African Americans’ spatial relations in the United States.

As African American history unfolds, black women and men have continually been denied space on the basis of race, class and gender. Spatial theory provides an intriguing and compelling lens by which to understand African Americans; relationship with the environment. In Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity, Rob Shields writes that “problematics such as race, class, or gender are uninteresting and contribute little when isolated from the complex web of structures and arrangements in which people cope, cooperate, and compete in everyday life.”<sup>10</sup>

What is most suggestive in Shields’ claim is the notion that the dynamics of constructs of race, class and gender function within tangible “structures and arrangements.” For Shields, the configurations in which these popular arenas of inquiry are “spatialized” are really the most engaging lines of critical thought.

Shields states the importance of considering the ways in which “places” are infused with a range of emotions and ideologies. Cultural and political world-views influence how people organize themselves in spatial relation to one another. Shields argues that simply recognizing the symbolic value that individuals attach to an environment is not sufficient for theorizing about the origins and perpetuations of those values. Thus Shields points to the difficulty in writing about space absent a complicated analysis of how that space is constructed. In order to understand images of particular

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<sup>10</sup> Rob Shields, Places on the margin” Alternative Geographies of Modernity (New York, London: Routledge, 1991), p. 10. This quote consistently gets a rise from students as they respond to the brief utterance that race, class and gender are “uninteresting.” These are the very foundations on which they have come to understand themselves and the world around them and any intimation, however cursory, that they are insignificant strikes at their academic fiber.

places and their meaning, he argues, scholars must engage the multiple factors that make up human experience such as feelings, ideas and ideologies.

Shields insistence on figuring in the ways in which individuals and collective members of cultures attach emotive and intellectual understandings to images of places and spaces is a salient factor when considering African Americans' relationship to the land. As I noted in my discussion of Hurston's Jonah's Gourd Vine, black women and men presented an image of oppression related to agricultural labor and mules. Accordingly, cogent images emerge. Still, I extend an analysis of African American environmental culture that reveals the ways in which these are not simply images but memories of lived experience.

Recognizing the depth of spatial theory, Houston Baker draws from geographical or architectural scholars, in his Working the Spirit and asserts the importance of what he calls an imagistic field in the works of Zora Neale Hurston. Baker argues that the conjure woman, as represented by Hurston, resides in a space that affords the possibility of movement. Arguing that a "relationship of identity exists between the successful architectural project and a classic work of verbal expressiveness because both are spatially constituted," he writes,

Their material inscriptions are less important than the cultural dynamics they encompass and facilitate. Rather than simple reifications of ideas of their individualistic creators, they are transmitters of cultural dynamics....A classic in any culture, one might say, is a space in which the spirit works. The very sign "classic" denotes an absence of temporal and material boundaries and suggest the accomplishment of effects through means outstripping the tangible and immediate.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Houston Baker, Workings of the Spirit: The poetics of African American Women's Writing (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991).

Hence, the conjure practitioner functions within a space in which boundaries between “traditional material and immaterial phenomena” are dissolved. In the same way that architecture integrates the immaterial qualities of light, air and space to construct a building which relates to the surrounding landscape, Baker argues that the conjure woman relates to the immaterial medium of classical space which maintains an image within the cultural geography. Like Shields, Baker centralizes the image and investigates the way it functions in African American cultures. Cultural and political ideology and emotive responses to particular places in the forms of hopes, fears and situational transcendence then, influence constructions and perpetuation of the spatial image.

Neither Shields nor Baker explicitly assert that space is merely a static image devoid of physical results. In fact for Baker, movement between the spiritual and material world is embedded in the classic space of the conjure woman. Yet in drawing from architectural theory which emphasizes the potentiality of space, Baker weaves in theories which are contingent on human perception and human-centered definitions of space. One of the primary dangers of drawing from architectural and spatial theory is that it emphasizes “landscape,” a one dimensional environment or “scenery seen from a single viewpoint.” When we add elements of the environment and investigate how African Americans understood and interacted with space, place, image and environment we have much more than just a “picture” but rather a story about a multi-dimensional energy.