

Biophilia on Purpose: A Declaration to Become an Ecosocial Citizen

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Despite the interventions designed to restrict, subvert, and deny black life, on the American landscape African Americans utilize agency, identity, and civic engagement as a means to expand this narrative of disenfranchisement. Adaptiveness, resilience, fearlessness, and courage wasn't the anomaly, but was the reality.

—Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African-Americans to the Great Outdoors*

Our inborn affinity for the natural world is, in effect, a birthright that must be cultivated and earned. For a creature of learning and free will, this is not a hard-wired outcome, but one that requires conscious and sustained engagement. To become adaptive and beneficial, our biophilic tendencies must be learned through experience and be supported by others.

—Steven Kellert, *Birthright: People and Nature in the Modern World*

Inspired by the conceptual capital of my ancestors and intrigued by the social influence of global elites' monetary capital, I am in search of a new, broader concept of citizenship. I am in agreement with Stephen Kellert who suggests, in the epigraph above, that we need greater biophilic fitness to adapt to the demands of our times. As Kellert points out, our "birthright" is something that must be cultivated and supported. My study of African-American ecological traditions has given me firm examples of how a dehumanized population is able to cultivate and support its biophilia. Carolyn Finney rightly identifies that "adaptiveness" has been a long part of African-American tradition; it has been a hallmark of our ecological outlook. This tradition and reflection on the "alternative citizenship" of global elites has sparked in me the desire to begin adapting to what I consider to be the age of the ecosocial citizen.

"Ecosocial citizenship" requires civic participation informed by the interconnectedness of ecological and social worlds. It is not because the relevance of the nation-state or nation-state citizenship has expired (although globalization is challenging the nation-state as the dominant form of social organization). Instead, we are in an era in which our ability to meet our fundamental needs is not only driven by the health of nation-states but also the endangered health of interconnected global ecosystems which support the world's web of social systems.

It might seem odd that super-rich global elites in the 21st century inquiring about citizenship-by-investment and the 20th century's last generation of racialized, unpaid, enslaved labor in the U.S. were the catalyst for my newfound identity as an ecosocial citizen. Yet, Franklin University Switzerland's "Environmental Justice, Collapse, and the Question of Evidence" conference brought discussion of these groups together and sparked this development in my thinking. My presentation's focus on the lives of people enslaved in early U.S. history ("Averting Collapse? Challenges to African-American Ecological Citizenship") and Phillippe Forêt's presentation, "In Anticipation of Collapse: Citizenship, Mobility, and Evidence" encouraged me to think about more than the stark differences between these groups. In fact, it was the groups' similarities that led me to see a familiar topic with new eyes.

Both yesterday's enslaved African-Americans and today's global elites have different kinds of capital that affirms their humanity and propels them to try to secure their future. Either implicitly or

explicitly inspired by biophilia, “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes” (Wilson, 1984, p. 1), they direct this capital to gain greater association with nurturing human and non-human affiliations.

In my book *Black on Earth: African-American Ecoliterary Traditions*, I found that conceptual capital enabled Blacks to self-certify as biophilic actors in the face of persistent dehumanization. Particularly during enslavement, circumscribed social participation meant they were challenged in using human systems to secure their own bodies and their connections to non-human nature. The simultaneous misperceptions that they were less than human and less intellectually capable supported their exclusion from human systems. Enslavement and subsequent institutional and individual racism were firmly supported by the message that people of African descent were sub-human, ape-like beings incapable of “human” behavior. This pernicious history and present could have meant the full collapse of African-American attempts to support their biophilia. However, African-Americans have a triumphant record of self-certified biophilia that enriched their connections to non-human nature and emboldened them to change human systems built to exclude them.

By “self-certified biophilia” I mean the ability to affirm their humanity and engage with the rest of the natural world outside of social systems that denied their humanness. “Seeds of Memory: Botanical Legacies of the African Diaspora” is just one of several studies Judith Carney has provided which document African-American botanical knowledge and application. In this study Carney notes that a focus on slavery’s commodity crops yields no insight into the richness of African American ecological agency. She elucidates the way in which subsistence crops allowed them “to ward off hunger, diversify their diet, reinstate customary food preferences, and to treat illness” (Carney, 2013, p. 30). In doing so, they asserted their biophilic connection to specific plants and maintained “traditional dietary preferences across space and the dislocations of geography” despite the “property rights [of] plantation owners [who asserted] the power to claim that knowledge as their own and transmute it over time as proof of their presumed ingenuity” (Carney, 2013, p. 30). This tradition of botanical knowledge empowered African-Americans to embrace their humanity by forging non-human ecological connections while they also fought for rights within human systems. In fact, a tradition of self-certified biophilia engenders value and care which can alleviate the disappointments of social alienation. As E.O. Wilson (1984) notes, “to the degree that we come to understand other organisms, we place a greater value on them, and on ourselves” (p. 2).

We are only beginning to understand the full dimensions of the conceptual capital engendered by African-American self-certified biophilia. “Environmental justice,” a most necessary cause, continues to be the default framework in which African-American ecological participation gets credit. However, as Carolyn Finney (2014) notes, “One of the biggest challenges for individuals whose work is considered ‘environmental’ is how quickly anything related to African-Americans gets designated as an ‘environmental justice’ concern” (p. 108). In my research, I came across other dimensions of this conceptual capital that suggest biophilia’s power. One of the most memorable records I found was the record of Clara Davis, a formerly enslaved woman in Alabama, whose interview was recorded as part of the Federal Writers Project. She relays:

White folks, you can have your automobiles and paved streets an’ electric lights. You can have de busses an’ street cars an’ hot pavements an high buildin’ caze I ain’t got no use for ’em no way. But I’ll tell you what I does want. I wants my ole cotton bed an’ de moonlight nights a shinin’ through de willow trees an’ de cool grass under my

feets as I runned roun' ketchin' lightin' bugs. I wants to hear de sound of de hounds in de woods atter de 'possum, an' de smell of fresh mowed hay. I wants to feel de sway of de ol' wagon a-goin' down de red, dusty road . . . I wants to see de dawn break over de black ridge an' de twilight settle . . . spreadin' a sort of orange hue over de place. I wants to walk de paths th'ew de woods an' see de rabbits an' watch de birds an' listen to frogs at night. (Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938)

While Davis' disinterest in modern urban development might be cast through the lens of environmental justice, her remarks also convey her deep connection to non-human nature and desire for its beauty. She does not allude to validation within human systems as her concern; instead, she stresses the importance of non-human connection. In doing so, she suggests that these connections are more than amenities of rural life, they are central to her well-being. Because she notes how desirable human-non-human relationships are, she's left behind traces of conceptual capital that enrich our understanding of biophilia in the lives of those for whom social influence is limited.

Philippe Forêt's presentation on global elites turned my attention to how monetary capital can support the biophilia of those with incredible influence in the social sphere. This kind of capital enables global elites to travel the world relatively unencumbered by a single nation-state citizenship. For instance, Henley & Partners, a residence and citizenship planning firm, provide rationale for "why you need alternative citizenship" on their website. Providing explanation of their services, they maintain that they assist global citizens with "quality of life, education, mobility, security, and tax" [which are] "tools [they] want... in an international and global world" (Our Expertise). Unlike the economically disenfranchised, these global elites can use monetary influence to ensure their place in social systems that support their humanity. Using the financial capital they have on hand, they make clear investments to obtain privilege in human systems. Despite the objections of people who do not agree with the practice, they "shop" for attractive human systems that ensure them a measure of social security. Forêt's work suggested, however, that not even super-rich global elites with multiple forms of national citizenship can buy their way out of ecological collapse.

Talking about the formerly enslaved alongside global investment citizens made me more aware of the interconnectedness of ecological and social systems and human need for both human and non-human affiliation. Both groups support their biophilia by exerting agency and influence over and outside of the systems that might otherwise limit or exclude them; both articulate their desire to live in a world that is hospitable, beautiful, and socially secure.

Going forward, human beings need both social and ecological vitality (what I will call the presence of "ecosocial security") if the planet Earth is going to continue to be the stage for their biophilia. Contemporary African-Americans cannot fully enjoy self-certified biophilia if their status in the social sphere remains compromised. And while their geographic and social mobility is enviable, investment citizens cannot shield themselves from ecological collapse through their purchased entry into human systems that confer "alternative" citizenship. Simply put, our future in our current life support system is predicated on our ability to strengthen interconnected ecosocial security.

The "Environmental Justice, 'Collapse' and the Question of Evidence" conference organizers and participants helped me sharpen my vision of what is necessary for a vital existence on Earth. The examples of the conceptual capital of African-Americans and the monetary capital of global elites demonstrate powerful examples of influence that can lead to ecological and social affiliation

respectively. These examples inspire me to employ my biophilia for the purpose of long-term ecosocial security because neither ecological nor social affiliation can be enjoyed exclusive of the other. Human beings are an intimate part of nature whose notions of rights, responsibilities, obligations, and freedoms have both a social and ecological context. Espousing this fact may assist us in defining and working toward “ecosocial security.” And in gratitude for the work of my ancestors, elders, and peers, I declare myself an ecosocial citizen in-progress, knowing that my biophilia will be cultivated with the specific purpose of becoming an effective ecosocial citizen.

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