Preface

Three little birds
Pitch by my doorstep
Singin' sweet songs
Of melodies pure and true
— BOB MARLEY, “THREE LITTLE BIRDS”

My personal journey to environmental awareness began in the borough of Queens and later led to a bend of the Mississippi River in New Orleans and on to metro Atlanta. I grew up near John F. Kennedy Airport in Rosedale, New York, my beloved neighborhood of concrete, asphalt, ranch homes, and rumbling planes, with my immediate family: my parents, Daphne and Percy Glave, and my brother, Richard Glave.

During those early years and continuing into my adulthood, I often sprawled out on my parents’ bed or sat at their kitchen table, listening to them reminisce about Jamaica, their first home, their “old country,” defined for some by Bob Marley and his music. They spoke of my grandparents, born in the 1890s, who lived indirectly and directly off Jamaica’s reddish-brown claylike soil, much like the farmers who cultivated the land in the American South.
Boss Yates, Percy’s stepfather, made his living as an agent for a purchasing association, acting as an intermediary between local banana farmers and international buyers. He married Gladys Gibson, my grandmother.

My mother’s parents, Cyril and Christine DePass, owned a small farm in Halifax, Manchester, Jamaica, at a distance from their home, where they grew coffee and bananas while fattening pigs, chickens, and cows for slaughter. I traveled to the farm as a child during the 1960s. I remember arriving by plane to visceral smells, vistas, and tastes so different from those of New York. On humid afternoons, perspiration covered my neck as I rode a donkey, witnessed a hog bloodily slain and butchered, and peered at yams, potatoes, bananas, and coffee growing in the yard. Water was piped into the house from a nearby well that was filtered by small golden fish. Delicate green lizards flitted about the yard.

My parents launched my informal nature study during the 1970s when they drove Richard and me to Baker’s Camp in upstate New York for our annual weeklong summer vacations. I swam, fished, and rowed on the lake. Early in the day, I would crawl past the slippery lichen-covered walls of Dead Man’s Cave and wander below the shadowed understory of the woods. In the afternoons, I chased deer and chipmunks under and over downed trees, and by evening, I would be sitting on the pier by the lake, kicking my feet, baiting my hooks with worms, and catching and tossing back sunnies—small rainbow-colored fish.

I was similarly awed by New Orleans, where I revised parts of this book. This mystifying emerald of a spot on the Mississippi River teemed with snowy egret at the water’s edge and with black swallow-tail butterflies, lime green lizards, and weighted banana trees in the city. In the French Quarter, palmetto bugs—giant winged roaches—crawled along the damp walls. In New Orleans I lived at the mercy of rain, humidity, and wind. I watched the sky for darkened clouds.
Introduction

PEOPLE AND CURRENTS

He inquired if I did not want to take farming. I told him promptly that I had worked enough on a farm and did not care to learn anything more about it. He then asked me if I would like to take agriculture. I said that I thought I would like that very well. So he assigned me to the livestock division. Imagine my surprise when I learned that agriculture was farming.

—THOMAS MONROE CAMPBELL, ON SELECTING CLASSES AT TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE, THE MOBILE SCHOOL GOES TO THE NEGRO FARMER, 1936

Stereotypes persist that African Americans are physically and spiritually detached from the environment. This wrongheaded notion is so ingrained in our culture that many of us have begun to believe it ourselves. But nothing could be less true. From ancient Africa to the modern-day United States, people of African descent have continued the legacy of their relationship with the land.
This book explores the history of environmental activities and attitudes in the African American community and asks: Did Africans and the enslaved espouse and practice some form of environmentalism, and can some preliminary parallels be drawn between these practices and those of free African Americans? What did nature mean to African Americans? Did religion and spirituality inform their interpretations of nature? How did African Americans practice agricultural methods and soil conservation techniques? How did African American women embrace the aesthetics and conservation of gardening? In what ways did African Americans practice preservation? What were children's experiences in rural environmentalism? What are the contemporary parallels in Africa and the United States?

Many African Americans, including historic figures like Thomas Monroe Campbell, the first black federal agricultural agent, have long expressed their ambivalence about the land. Campbell's feelings about farming, expressed in the epigraph to this chapter, were formed and hardened during his time as a sharecropper and day laborer. Those feelings were negative, and for good reason, since he performed labor that he considered demeaning and that originated in the arduous work of enslaved people in Southern society. At the Tuskegee Institute, Campbell agreed to take an agriculture class, believing that agriculture translated into upward mobility toward middle-class African American ranks. Farming, on the other hand, seemed to him to be a step down into life among the black masses.

Such feelings of distaste are long-standing for African Americans whose forefathers and -mothers experienced nature entwined with fear and violence. Stories of the horrors and hardships of the Middle Passage, passed from generation to generation through oral tradition, created anxiety long after our ancestors had completed their arduous journeys. The sick and infirm were thrown overboard, and seasickness was common in the stifling, unsanitary holds belowdecks. This was true for Olaudah Equiano, an African from Benin who was enslaved and forced to leave Africa for the Americas. For others, like Joseph Cinque, a West African who was transported to the Americas on the slave ship the Amistad, the Atlantic Ocean was a stage for violence. Cinque, along with his fellow Africans, revolted against Spanish enslavers on the ship. Runaway slaves experienced dread of being tracked and captured by whites in woods and swamps in the Americas. Perhaps even worse were memories of whites taking land away from free African Americans through taxation and the withholding of government loans.

In the years after enslavement, African Americans began to move to Northern cities in a series of mass migrations that continued into the 1970s. This relocation to the increasingly urbanized North distanced them from the rural experiences of their parents and grandparents, who lived and worked in fields, gardens, and woods. Scorn, distaste, and fear of nature became the emotional legacy of a people who had been kidnapped from their homelands and forced to make the long journey across the Atlantic Ocean to pick cotton and prime tobacco for often violent and abusive masters; they were finally subjected to losing legally owned land to the whites who continued to victimize them long after slavery was banned.

Were these terror-filled experiences passed to future generations, though only the essence of the original stories remained? Did they leave behind a shapeless, lingering fear, manifested today among urban African Americans? The answer to these questions is undoubtedly yes, as the legacy of these historical experiences has hardened into yet another stereotype: the ambivalent or apathetic environmentalist, or even the anti-environmentalist. This stereotype is embraced even by African Americans themselves. So one more image has been added to the sambo, sapphire, coon, and mammy, all originating in enslavement and perpetuated today.

Though there is some truth in the anti-environmentalist stereotype, the reality is more complex. African Americans have long envi-
sioned the environment in luminous and evocative ways, while at the same time remaining pragmatic and realistic about the wilderness. Only recently have African Americans been considered in the study of environmental history—a history traditionally defined as by and for white men. But things are slowly changing, and now we can look to African Americans like Campbell, who yearned for upward mobility and found it in federal government agricultural reform, as a rich and integral part of that history.

Contemporary novelist, poet, essayist, and farmer Wendell Berry broadly defines two strands of environmentalism. The first is preservation in what some would consider wild places, like the ocean, the woods, and swamps. The second is conservation of natural resources, including the land, water, forests, and minerals. Early twentieth-century white environmentalists generally faced off along these distinct lines of preservation versus conservation. Today preservation takes the form of caring for natural areas, such as state parks like Yosemite. An example of conservation is using windmills—rather than dwindling petrofuels—to provide energy.

At the same time and alternately, some rural African Americans and whites who were not formally part of this national environmentalist movement learned and applied both preservationist and conservationist ideologies and practices—a preservation-conservation, for lack of a better term.

For example, a farmer's son could spend his summer at a conference, learning about moths and butterflies—education as a means of connecting to nature through preservation—and then return home to spread fertilizer in a field in preparation for planting, practicing a form of conservation that protected and enhanced the soil.1

George Washington Carver, Ned Cobb, and Thomas Monroe Campbell are all distinctive voices in an expansive environmental history, reflections of preservation-conservation defined and practiced by African Americans. Their words embody the rhetoric of early twentieth-century environmentalism. Carver and Cobb drew on preservation-conservation to imbue nature with human characteristics while also exploiting the environment for economic gain.

Carver, a director of the Tuskegee Experiment Station, did not divide preservation and conservation but instead entwined the two. He advocated for protection of, or "justice" for, the soil in nature in the tradition of preservation. He also experimented with crops using the soil. He mused,

Unkindness to anything means an injustice done to that thing. If I am unkind to you I do you an injustice, or wrong you in some way. On the other hand, if I try to assist you in every way that I can to make a better citizen and in every way to do my very best for you I am kind. The above principles apply with equal force to the soil.

The farmer Ned Cobb, whose oral history All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw describes his life as an Alabama farmer, also gave the land human qualities, using metaphors of preservation and conservation. "It injures your land to plow it wet, it injures your crop," said Cobb. "Pile up wet earth around the stalks, it dries and scalds 'em out."2 Cobb gave the business of farming some humanity.

Southerners painting a romanticized picture of nature to entice African Americans to remain in the South rather than migrate north were, according to Thomas Monroe Campbell, "wont to picture to [migrants] the beauties of nature, the golden sunset, the babbling brooks, and the singing birds. But all of these have little of beauty and grandeur to the Negro farmer, who is constantly in debt, hungry, sick and cold, and without civil protection."3 Interestingly, Campbell's own memoir reveals that he valued nature when it served the personal, economic, and political needs of African Americans, like himself, who tilled or taught others to cultivate Southern soil.
What makes the environmental experience of African Americans distinctive? Enslaved people did not stumble upon or discover wilderness. Instead, African Americans actively sought healing, kinship, resources, escape, refuge, and salvation in the land. The environment held social meaning for enslaved people. Contrary to the dominant purist sort of preservation that emphasized places and not people—the practice and ideology of whites—African Americans acknowledged and emphasized the communities populating those wild places.

The wilderness was a place to roam and hide for a moment’s peace from slaveholders, or it could be a means of permanent escape. It was also a source of both sustenance and healing as slaves hunted animals and gathered medicinal plants. The woods and swamps were also dangerous, not only because of predatory animals but also because of predatory whites who used dogs to track runaways from the plantations and farms. Wilderness could be a haven or a nightmare for blacks. These positive and negative forces made the wild theirs, for better or worse, even though, in contrast to many whites, most African Americans did not legally own the soil or a single tree or twig.

African Americans characterized the soil or land in their own way. Though they cultivated Southern land, they did not express a sense of entitlement or ownership over it, nor did they generally subscribe to the white notion of land “belonging” to people. As the ruling class in a racially defined society, whites defined land ownership as traced from their European origins, which continued when they claimed Plymouth Rock and the rest of a land that was already populated by Native Americans. This sense of entitlement was reinforced with ownership of farms and plantations.

By contrast, African Americans rarely were able to lay consistent claim to any property. Those who did not meet white criteria for legal ownership of land did lay claim to cultivated places, but this claim had to be defined differently from that of whites. When African Americans worked someone else’s land, they took some pride in their crops if not the land. In addition, if their ancestors were buried on property that was owned by whites, that land remained a link to their ancestors, making the soil sacred to a mother, a father, a sister, a brother, a wife, or a husband. Such forms of identification and connectedness with the environment have been largely ignored by whites because they do not fit the white paradigm of land ownership or even their conceptualization of wilderness.

African Americans' understanding of wilderness and the land began to transform with their increasing assimilation into American culture and the apparent possibility of their owning more land after emancipation. The oppression of racism concerning land was double-edged. Segregation stripped African Americans of their human, social, and political rights but ironically reinforced traditions by keeping African Americans knitted together on segregated wild or cultivated Southern landscapes. Racism and segregation resulted in inequitable access to quality land, including agriculture and environmental amenities like parks for leisure and play. Such segregation still exists today, with the wealthiest people—more often than not, whites—enjoying access to private beaches and land.

Such acts of environmental racism—inequality in which people of color not only have less access to environmental amenities like parks and pools compared with whites but also are exposed to higher rates of environmental toxins—began with monoculture, a single crop such as cotton or tobacco grown on a large scale for profit. Racism fueled Southern monoculture and agriculture, giving legitimacy to slaveholders' exploitation of the skills and labor of the enslaved, who rapidly and extensively redefined the Southern landscape. The turpentine industry, for example, was powered by black peonage on the cusp of the twentieth century. African Americans were forced to live in tents and shanties in the woods, stripping trees and tapping
turpentine and rosin, thereby enriching whites who kept African Americans in neobondage after the period of enslavement.

Long before the birth of the modern environmental movement, African Americans practiced environmentalism through the lenses of religion, agriculture, gardening, and nature study. These practices have been documented in Africa as well as during enslavement, through the twentieth century, and even today. Ultimately, African Americans constructed a scaffold from existing knowledge of the environment in the community, at times borrowing and refining preservation, conservation, and agricultural methods from many groups, including the government and African American schools and camps.

In an attempt to show the human side of preservation-conservation, I have fictional vignettes open each chapter. These stories reflect my own journey through much research and writing and feel, to some extent, like my own story.

The study of environmental history traditionally encompasses ecology, geography, and history. But throughout this book I challenge readers as I draw, too, on Africa and African art, literature, history, theology, and many other fields in the tradition of sociologist W. E. B. DuBois and historian Carter G. Woodson. In doing so, I hope to widen our perspective of what the environment means, or can mean, to the people who inhabit it.

This said, unearthing the letters and autobiographies cited in this book required the skills of a treasure hunter. This is because some whites generally deemed the papers too insignificant to save and collect through the mid-twentieth century. Further, documents were not written in great quantities because of illiteracy, particularly among the enslaved, domestics, and sharecroppers. As a result, giving voice to the African American experience has been a challenge that I have attempted to meet.

The resulting book is a quilt work designed from this detective's loving labor to reveal the thoughts of farmers, artists, and novelists dotted throughout the South. This book is about individual stories in the African diaspora. I am thankful I was able to give voice to a creative and evocative people. This book is a true labor of love, an homage to every and any person in the African diaspora who was a farmer or a dirt-eater, a woman who cradled a bouquet of flowers, or a child who wondered at the flight of a moth.