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Roundtable Review of The Land Was Ours

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Introduction by Jacob Darwin Hamblin, Oregon State University

Nature's role in facilitating social change, for better or for worse, is not easily denied. As an extreme example, one need only point to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the racial tensions that accompanied the emergency management efforts, and the remaking of New Orleans afterward. After any natural disaster, some will choose not to rebuild, while others will see opportunities in the chaos. Some may leave and never return. Historically, in coastal areas where change by erosion and storms are constant, environmental transformations have been catalysts for demographic adjustments even when they were so gradual as to be imperceptible.

Such reconfigurations amidst environmental change offer opportunities for environmental historians wanting to understand how different groups of people have encountered the natural world. Much of the literature of environmental history may be skewed toward the perspectives of privileged whites, whether on the topic of wilderness preservation, natural resource conservation, or environmental activism of the latter twentieth century. Important exceptions are social justice issues, such as the sites of landfills or toxic waste dumps, and we encapsulate these with the terms environmental justice, environmental racism, and environmental equity. But increasingly scholars are going further, attempting to assess a wider range of experiences among racial minorities, to integrate their histories into the broad narrative of environmental history.

In *The Land Was Ours*, **Andrew W. Kahrl** sees the coastal American South as an ideal way to explore the interconnections between race, space, and environmental change. It was there that, during the Jim Crow era, African Americans had an enormous yet under-studied connection to land and sea, largely because privileged whites tended to avoid such land. And yet over time African Americans lost control to resort developers, for complex reasons that involve whites and blacks seeking political and economic opportunities in a natural environment that itself was changing. For Kahrl, it is a tale that compels us not only to see injustice, but also to related African American experiences to other processes in such as the commodification of beaches, the creation of unsustainable environmental practices, and the interaction between culture and place.

I invited **Sarah S. Elkind** to provide comments because of her long interest in unequal access to water, beaches, and resources in growing urban areas. Elkind is a professor of history at San Diego State University. In her introduction to a *Pacific Historical Review* forum on water and cities on the West Coast, she observed that urban growth in San Francisco, Seattle, and Los Angeles distanced the waters from several ethnic minorities, including Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. Not only did this limit leisure activity, but also it hampered these groups' abilities to engage in important economic activities such as fishing and foraging. Work such as

Elkind's has opened up serious questions about the long-term and unequal consequences of supposed modernization and economic development.¹

Another commentator, **Christopher J. Manganiello**, is the policy director of the Georgia River Network, an organization that works to ensure clean river water in Georgia. His Ph.D. dissertation from the University of Georgia assessed the consequences of dam construction in the South, and it won the Rachel Carson Prize for best dissertation in environmental history in 2010. Manganiello has written about the political context of the water resources in the American South, analyzing how water access evolved amidst competing demands from manufacturers, electrical power plants, and pleasure-seekers.²

Cassandra Johnson-Gaither, a research social scientist at the USDA Forest Service, has written numerous articles exploring how a variety of ethnic groups view and engage with nature. Her essay (with Josh McDaniel) "Turpentine Negro" grapples with the gap between African American and white interaction the natural environment, and points out that the answer may lie in the history of labor. She reveals how working in the turpentine extraction industry gave African Americans an intimate knowledge of forested areas but that the negative connotations of oppressive work practices made them less likely to seek them out for leisure. As a social scientist, Johnson-Gaither also is actively engaged in offering solutions to contemporary environmental equity problems, such as access to nature parks.³

Colin Fisher, an associate professor of history at the University of San Diego, shares many interests with Andrew Kahrl, including the uses of outdoor areas by African Americans. Fisher has shown that disadvantaged Americans did not necessarily lack the desire to pursue leisure in the wilderness. In an essay on the 1919 Chicago race riot, for example, Fisher pointed out that passion for nature and wilderness were not unique to privileged European Americans, and that nature provided an important escape from unhealthy and harsh conditions in the city. The difference

¹ Sarah Elkind, "Environmental Inequality and the Urbanization of West Coast Watersheds," *Pacific Historical Review* 75:1 (2006), 53-61.

² Christopher J. Manganiello, "'Dam Crazy with Wild Consequences: Artificial Lakes and Natural Rivers in the American South, 1845-1990,'" University of Georgia Ph.D. dissertation, 2010; Christopher J. Manganiello, "Hitching the New South to 'White Coal': Water and Power, 1890-1933," *Journal of Southern History* 78:2 (2012), 255-292.

³ Cassandra Y. Johnson and Josh McDaniel, "Turpentine Negro," in Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll, eds., "To Love the Wind and the Rain:" *African Americans and Environmental History* (Pittsburgh, 2004), 50-62; Cassandra Johnson-Gaither, "Latino Park Access: Examining Environmental Equity in a 'New Destination' County in the South," *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* 29:4 (2011), 37-52.

was that when blacks attempted to cross the line between city and country, they had to overcome numerous social obstacles. These became a major source of tension, and even violence.⁴

Before turning to the first set of comments, I would like to pause here and thank all the roundtable participants for taking part. In addition, I would like to remind readers that as an open-access forum, *H-Environment Roundtable Reviews* is available to scholars and non-scholars alike, around the world, free of charge. Please circulate.

⁴ Colin Fisher, "African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Race Riot," in in Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll, eds., "To Love the Wind and the Rain:" *African Americans and Environmental History* (Pittsburgh, 2004), 63-76.

Comments by Sarah S. Elkind, San Diego State University

In *The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South*, Andrew Kahrl has documented the devastating impact of recreational shoreline development on African American communities, and linked this story to larger narratives of environmental racism, commodification of nature, and the social costs of the real estate economy. He argues, in his introduction, that the dispossession of black land owners is linked to the "pursuit of reckless and unsustainable environmental policies."⁽⁴⁾ His carefully researched case studies of beaches and black resorts from the Potomac to the Gulf coast, however, say rather more about commodification and the racial redistribution of coastal lands as a result of commercial exploitation of the shoreline than they do about environmental engineering or the exploitation of natural resources. This is not really a criticism: Kahrl draws the connection between commodification and dispossession with great attention to the complexities of each story, of American real estate development, and of relevant historiographies; this seems like more than enough for one volume.

Kahrl begins *The Land Was Ours* by explaining the concentration of Southern black property ownership in coastal counties in the American South. Before the Army Corps of Engineers' stabilized the coast, unstable and, therefore, undesirable and inexpensive lands offered African Americans rare opportunities to own property. Near urban centers, black and white entrepreneurs blended exploitation, opportunism and community solidarity – with varying degrees of success – into Jim Crow recreation developments. Kahrl then describes the erosion of black access to coastal recreation, including conflicts of interest that marred legal property rights proceedings, arson attacks against black-owned beach clubs, and official indifference to pollution and other hazardous conditions at publicly-owned, segregated beaches.

Although Kahrl's examples highlight the racial character of this narrative, race alone does not explain the rise and fall of black beaches. "The capacity to convert others' vulnerabilities into gain, while instrumental in the production of racial inequality," Kahrl writes in his epilogue, "can operate as effectively and as ruthlessly in the absence of any personal malice or prejudice."⁽²⁵⁷⁾ The black developers who participated in the appropriation of black property for real estate development were, in Kahrl's words, "not so much race traitors as inheritors of a distinctly black capitalist imagination" that is intimately linked to "the corporate consolidation and privatization of America's shores."⁽²⁵⁷⁾ African Americans understood land as a commodity much as whites did. Clearly development for white Americans was the main cause of black dispossession, but Kahrl also shows how black entrepreneurs exploited laws, property rights and other people to develop coastal lands and to profit from them.

Each chapter in *The Land Was Ours* investigates a different place and aspect of the commodification of the Southern coast. Kahrl's choice of cases is robust, and allow

him to explain the importance of black resorts and recreational spaces as respites from Southern racial culture, and to associate the decline of these resorts with integration. In spite of the importance of public ownership in creating and preserving recreational space in the long term, private ownership provided better recreational opportunities for minorities for much of the twentieth century than public lands did. Public Jim Crow beaches were dangerous, polluted and inaccessible. Even national parks were racially segregated during the first half of the twentieth century.⁵ Nonetheless, private resorts faced challenges of their own: undercapitalization; rising property values; coastal engineering; and the management difficulties caused by individual property-owners who insisted upon their property rights even when they violated a resort's carefully constructed land-use rules.⁶ Even when families owned land communally as heirs' property, ambitious developers – be they family members or outside opportunists -- could force the sale and eviction of those still living on and using the land. All of these cases reinforce Kahrl's larger point about broad American participation in commodification of nature and its social consequences.

The Land Was Ours details the redistribution of valuable resources from socially marginal to elite Americans and the transformation of productive resources into recreational or scenic resources. In this, Kahrl's study complements Karl Jacoby's *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves and the Hidden History of American Conservation*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), Coll Thrush's *Native Seattle: Histories from the Crossing-Over Place* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), and Matthew Morse Booker's forthcoming *Down by the Bay: San Francisco's History between the Tides* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). Kahrl's coda on Mississippi's response to Hurricane Katrina recalls the extensive historiography on the destruction of black and Hispanic neighborhoods by urban renewal projects ranging from ballparks to highways, as well as Ari Kelman's *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). This strength of this work lies in its clear explanation of the varied and contradictory ways by which African Americans lost their beaches. And, like all good books, it suggests many topics for further research: Was the Army Corps of Engineers racially motivated, or indifferent to the needs of black property owners in responding to the demands of powerful, white interests? How did the environmental degradation that accompanied recreational development on the coast contribute to the demise of landscapes of production? And, perhaps most

⁵ See Terence Young, "A Contradiction in Democratic Government': W. J. Trent, Jr., and the Struggle to Desegregate National Park Campgrounds," *Environmental History* 14:3 (2009) 651-82.

⁶ A similar lack of capital undermined black developments in the American West after the Civil War. See Kenneth Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1877-1915*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

intriguingly, how did community-members themselves understand and negotiate the contradictory nature of private property as both a communal and private asset?

Comments by Christopher J. Manganiello, Georgia River Network

Engaging Race, Recreation and Environment

John Sayles' movie *Sunshine State* weaves fact and fiction together with overlapping stories and multicultural characters. Set during the boom-years of the early 2000s in the fictional northeast Florida community of Lincoln Beach, longtime African American residents face an onslaught. Real estate speculators – white and black – swarm the barrier island eager to acquire property for new condos and five-star resorts. As one of four white golfers teeing-off amid water hazards explains: the developers learned to tap into white government and union workers' retirement funds by selling a manicured life-style in a coveted and domesticated coastal environment. As the island transforms before the cast's eyes, African American residents attempt to regain control, confronting developers in a county commission meeting and picketing as a Native American bulldozer operator levels palm trees and unearths skeletons buried long ago.⁷ In many ways, *Sunshine State* gets right to the heart of Andrew W. Kahrl's book, *The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sun Belt South*.⁸ But we all know that even the best of Hollywood's endings rarely live-up to even better historic interpretations.

Andrew Kahrl brilliantly describes how African Americans secured, struggled to maintain, and lost access to waterfront property throughout the coastal U.S. South – from the Chesapeake Bay's Western Shore to Mississippi's Gulfside, and from Norfolk to New Orleans – between the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Kahrl's important and provocative narrative, the act of building leisure landscapes in a segregated society reinforced and challenged racial identities. In the process, African Americans also carved out spaces where they were often united by race and divided by class. African Americans built a wide variety of recreation escapes on a geographical margin because they faced two evils: the rise of segregation in the Jim Crow era and the environmental hazards of urban living. Driven by capitalist impulses – the risk of investment, promise of profit, and spoils of property ownership enjoyed by many white Americans – these motivated entrepreneurs and families invested in leisure based land developments that reshaped coastal landscapes during the long civil rights movement. African Americans established profitable and successful spaces for visitors to experience moments of freedom not only along beaches but also along riverbanks and bay shorelines well into the Sunbelt era. Almost none of these spaces exist today as they once did.

No founder, investor or site was exactly the same in *The Land Was Ours*. Many affluent African Americans built what amounted to gated communities to protect their second-

⁷ Thanks go to Bert Way for multiple insights and helping to make this a better essay. John Sayles, *Sunshine State*, Sony Pictures Classics, 2002.

⁸ Andrew W. Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South* (Harvard University Press, 2012).

home investments from black working-class interlopers. Some segregated destinations were accessible by steamboat and others were associated with religious institutions such as the Methodist Episcopal Church. Enterprising men and women also established resorts for the masses that included – or included some combination of – overnight accommodations, restaurants, nightclubs with slot machines, amusement rides, and bandstands that showcased Fats Domino, Nat King Cole, James Brown and others performing on the “Chitlin Circuit.” In essence – African Americans created a privatized leisure space for any African American who could pay-to-play.

A string of cultural and natural factors brought an end to almost every one of the successful black capitalist enterprises Kahrl has painstakingly reconstructed from local land records, newspaper accounts, and oral history. The biggest blow came from desegregation after the 1960s, which presented African Americans with choices to go elsewhere to spend money. By the 1970s many leisure seekers stopped patronizing Jim Crow-era resorts, theme parks, and coastal destinations. Hurricanes and the high-cost of rebuilding also contributed to the demise of these resort communities. In addition, white Americans’ growing interest in coastal properties nationwide – a risk mitigated by federal insurance, beach re-nourishment and other policies – led to a spike in property taxes that placed pressure on African Americans to cash out or unwind complicated land titles.

Andrew Kahrl has written a persuasive book about power and property. Business minded property owners, investors, doctors and lawyers – African Americans and whites – made choices about and engaged over a commodity that carried with it notions of respectability and freedom. That commodity – land – was culturally defined by powerful legal and financial instruments that were as rigid as they were twisted or presumed to be color-blind. Many of these leisure based recreation ventures – such as riverboats – were undercapitalized and operated on a razor sharp margin because African American entrepreneurs often purchased sub-par vessels or property at high prices on credit extended from white investors who demanded aggressive repayment terms. Plus, vessels sank and buildings burned – sometimes by accident and sometimes a result of arson – while insurance policies, if there were any, did not cover replacement costs. In another example, “tenancies in common” (or heirs’ property) became a popular legal arrangement among African American property owners that complicated land title in the long-run: when owners died, all survivors inherited a fraction of the original owner’s share. And all shareholders – including those who might not even physically reside on the property – had an equal legal standing. As such, conniving black and white speculators learned how to approach heirs with no physical connection to the property, accumulate shares, and force the sale of coastal properties. Finally, banks did not underwrite construction or home loans for improvements to heirs’ property because titles were not clean. Unable to improve their land, many African Americans were compelled to sell as property values and tax assessments increased in the Sunbelt era. While this book is primarily about the political economy of African American land ownership and segregated leisure space during the long civil rights movement, environmental historians can use these stories of progress and decline in coastal zones as a launching point.

I say launching point for a few reasons. First, Kahrl presents what amounts to two-dimensional snapshots of “changes in the land” (p. 17) involving rivers, bays, and coastlines. Kahrl provides an impressive wide-angle assessment of *how* African Americans used specific natural environments to achieve economic and social goals. There are very brief descriptions about what they did to the Chesapeake Bay’s coastline; how a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ North Carolina navigation project contributed to significant beach erosion of African American property; and how urban water pollution impinged upon oyster beds and segregated waterfronts. *The Land Was Ours* does not attempt to analyze what these landscapes looked like or how African Americans affected environmental change over time. Future coastal and Low Country environmental histories might take a much longer and systematic view of very specific areas – in the vein of existing environmental histories – that included segregated leisure spaces.⁹

Second, there is an overriding assumption that readers know *why* African Americans liked leisure activity that revolved around water. Kahrl clearly and convincingly explains first and foremost, African Americans – regardless of their class status – found peace and freedom from the indignities of racism and white supremacy in self-segregated leisure environments. Furthermore, urban residents understood the danger urban environmental hazards presented. Summer disease epidemics, foul air, and contaminated water pushed African Americans out of cities. Clean air and water – as well as safe places to swim – pulled them to the coastline. Given the historical degree of interest in private and public water related developments for energy, leisure, municipal, and eventually agricultural purposes in the U.S. Southeast, I have little doubt that “bodies of water *mattered*” (p. 212) to southerners – African Americans and others – from the New South to Sunbelt ears.¹⁰ But I suspect there must be more to why black Americans had an affinity for riverbanks, inland bays, coastlines, and water.

As Colin Fisher has illustrated, there was an environmental history linked to Jim Crow’s political economy and segregated recreation. In Chicago, for example, African Americans wanted to get out of the city for all the reasons Kahrl identified in a chapter titled “Surviving the Summer.” Fisher demonstrated that black Americans also left Chicago to go fishing, hunting, hiking, boating, and camping. They wanted to engage with nature. As he argues, environmental historians can help to uncover “how, during their leisure time, African, Asian, Latino, and Native Americans as well as European ethnics used the natural world to play, pray, think, make meaning, and forge identity.”¹¹

⁹ Mart Stewart, *What Nature Suffers to Groe’: Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920* (University of Georgia Press, 1996); Drew Swanson, *Remaking Wormsloe Plantation: The Environmental History of a Lowcountry Landscape* (University of Georgia Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Christopher J. Manganiello, “Hitching the New South to “White Coal”: Water and Power, 1890-1933,” *The Journal of Southern History* 78, 2 (May 2012): 255-292.

¹¹ Colin Fisher, “African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot,” in Diane D. Glave and Mark Stoll, eds., *“To Love the Wind and the Rain:” African Americans and Environmental History* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006); Colin Fisher, “Race and US

When I finished *The Land Was Ours* I wanted to know how African Americans expressed that they cared about more than commodification of the shore. Were they fascinated with nature: the movement of dunes, wave and wind action, wetland ecology, and migratory birds? We know African Americans engaged politically to secure access to National Parks during the Jim Crow era; how did they engage to protect and speak for coastal environments?¹² How did urban African Americans' coastal experiences inform their advocacy for environmental and social justice back in the city or elsewhere? For example, Kahrl offers a brief tantalizing connection between the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's training and the Gulf of Mexico's beaches, almost to the point that the Gulfside Waveland Assembly site begins to sound like a beach version of another civil rights boot-camp (the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee). *The Land Was Ours* is an important step forward, but if these questions remain unanswered, environmental historians risk reproducing narratives that reduce minority engagement with the natural world to oppressive labor conditions, proximity to industrial sites, and landfill fights. Those are critical issues, but alternative interpretations are adding complexity to the existing narrative of environmental inequalities as well as what constitutes a conservationist and an environmentalist.¹³ And that brings me back to *Sunshine State* – where the fictional Lincoln Beach functioned as John Sayles' interpretation of the real American Beach.

American Beach – located on Amelia Island near Jacksonville, Florida – shares a history with examples from Kahrl's chapters describing "Corporate Ventures" and "Black Privatopias" but it was not included in the book. Abraham Lincoln Lewis (1865-1947) and other members of the Afro-American Life Insurance Company (founded in 1901) established American Beach on a former plantation's property in the 1930s. The site functioned as a recreation destination and fringe benefit for executives and staff before

Environmental History," in *A Companion to American Environmental History*, Douglas Cazaux Sackman, ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 108-9.

¹² Terence Young, "A Contradiction in Democratic Government: W. J. Trent, Jr., and the Struggle to Desegregate National Park Campgrounds," *Environmental History* 14, 4 (October 2009): 651-682.

¹³ There are a number of excellent interpretations of the complicated dynamics that contribute to environmental inequalities, in particular see: Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (University of Chapel Hill Press, 1995); Eileen Maura McGurty, "From NIMBY to Civil Rights: The Origins of the Environmental Justice Movement." *Environmental History* 2, 3 (1997): 301-323; Ellen Stroud, "Troubled Waters in Ecotopia: Environmental Racism in Portland, Oregon." *Radical History Review* 74 (Spring 1999): 65-95. See also: Diane D. Glave and Mark Stoll, eds., *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006); Mark Hersey, *My Work is that of Conservation: An Environmental Biography of George Washington Carver* (University of Georgia Press, 2011); and Kathryn Newfont, *Blue Ridge Commons: Environmental Activism and Forest History in Western North Carolina* (University of Georgia Press, 2012).

evolving into a national second-home community for middle-class and affluent African Americans. Like other segregated resort communities, American Beach entered a period of decline in the 1970s before the Amelia Island Plantation and Ritz Carlton developments began catering to white Midwestern and Northeastern snow birds, retirees, and half-backs.¹⁴

Environmental historians should scour the archives for other public and private American Beaches – or more specifically for women like Marvyne Elisabeth Betsch (1935-2005). Known as MaVynee and “the Beach Lady,” the eccentric Betsch was Abraham Lincoln Lewis’ great-granddaughter. After singing opera in Europe for nearly a decade, the one-of-a-kind Betsch returned to American Beach in 1965 and evolved into a globally recognized community, historic preservation, and environmental activist. In short, Betsch was a champion for environmental justice who challenged unscrupulous developers at county commission meetings, led white visitors on Black Heritage Tours, and donated all of her inheritance to environmental causes. She poured energy into saving American Beach’s massive sand dune called Nana, which is now protected by the National Park Service.¹⁵

There is another reason to examine public segregated leisure spaces while looking for more people like Beach Lady. Kahrl’s argument that racial identity was manufactured and reinforced through private segregated recreation spaces is convincing. State park histories – as demonstrated by New Deal and Sunbelt era activity throughout the South – reveal a parallel process where white and African American stakeholders not only defined where segregated recreation would take place on but also what activities would constitute white and black recreation. To be fair, Kahrl speaks to this process of white and black negotiation over private segregated recreation in rural North Carolina in an even more recent publication.¹⁶ Segregating public space by race was one achievement for Jim Crow and Sunbelt boosters, but proscribing the type of recreational activity, the location, and which cultural resources were available also determined how Americans – identified as rich or poor, and white or black – ultimately engaged with nature.

¹⁴ Marsha Dean Phelts, *An American Beach for African Americans* (University of Florida Press, 1997); Russ Rymer, *American Beach: How ‘Progress’ Robbed a Black Town – and Nation – Of History, Wealth, and Power* (Harper Perennial, 2000). A “half-back,” for example, would be a New Yorker who retired to Florida for the winters and then began spending summers in North Carolina, which was half-way back to their original home.

¹⁵ Oral History Interview with MaVynee Betsch, November 22, 2002, Interview R-0301, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Published by Documenting the American South.

¹⁶ Andrew W. Kahrl, “The ‘Negro Park’ Question: Land, Labor, and Leisure in Pitt County, North Carolina, 1920-1930,” *The Journal of Southern History* 79, 1 (February 2013): 113-142.

Given Andrew Kahrl's long history of African American water-based recreation and leisure, where else might we discover an equally textured narrative of politically engaged African American and minority nature enthusiasts, conservationists, and environmentalists in other locales? Finding none would signal another win for Jim Crow. If segregation made it impossible for African Americans to fully engage with – and perhaps act on the behalf of – nature, than we have an example of how the legacy of white supremacy made the world more socially, politically, and environmentally complex for everyone. Finding more examples, however, would challenge simplistic interpretations of what constitutes an “environmentalist” and perhaps the adage that conservation is a luxury.

Comments by Cassandra Johnson-Gaither, USDA Forest Service

Andrew W. Kahrl's *The Land Was Ours* explores the little known intersection of black coastal landownership and disenfranchisement, coastal development or "coastal capitalism," and environmental degradation of waterfront properties on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, commencing in the first decades of the twentieth century and continuing late into the twentieth century. In the aftermath of the civil war, beachfront properties were all but abandoned by white southerners who saw little value in the mosquito infested lowlands of North and South Carolina and the southern, Gulf states; but for African Americans, some of these beaches and adjoining townships materialized as black oases amidst the asphyxiation of American-style apartheid in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Within certain southern coastal communities mostly devoid of white impositions, black people were "freer" to express themselves in ways less encumbered, certainly by middle (white) American decorum, and by the very mean oppression that characterized Jim Crow America. Before wholesale, white appropriation of these lowlands, there reigned something akin to Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontierism," which held that in the sparsely-populated frontiers of America, a truer form of democracy manifested because the hypocritical ethics of civilized society held less sway (Turner, 1953).

Black possession of these properties began to dissipate when white, wealthy landowners realized the many physical, psychological, and emotional benefits of proximity to oceans, rivers, and lakefronts. These spaces offered escape from the disease and summer heat of crowded cities such as New Orleans and Mobile, Alabama; or became winter retreats from frigid northern climes. As well, improved infrastructure in the form of railroad lines and roads, swamp drainage, dams, and an inexhaustible determination to bend coastal ecologies to human will provided more accessible routes to waterfront properties for whites with abundant leisure time and also for those growing strata of the white middle classes and white laborers who attempted to emulate the recreation of the wealthy. Blacks also realized the positives associated with leisure on or nearby the water and attempted to join in this new culture of recreation but were constrained by both a Jim Crowism that severely restricted black participation to inferior waterfronts and recreation services. Still, attempts by black entrepreneurs in the late 1800s and early 1900s to own river-going vessels, acquire river and oceanfront properties, and provide water access for African Americans in places such as Washington, D.C., coastal Virginia, and Maryland were met with limited successes, at best, and many more failures resulting from race-based, structural inequalities, outright sabotage, and terrorism, which effectively shut down these black enterprises, leaving only the segregated and exploitative services offered by established white tour boat owners or white owners of "colored" beaches. Kahrl's very detailed and well-researched book also reveals to some readers what might be an unexpected classism and "colorism" perpetuated by middle/upper class and or lighter-skinned blacks designed to prevent lower-class/darker-skinned blacks from leisure time associations with the former. These prejudices were explicit within many black communities until the mid to late 1960s, the effects of which circumscribed not only outdoor recreation participation for that preponderant mass of poorly educated, wage-earning African Americans, but also dictated broader social relations, marriage, access to

the limited number of white collar jobs offered by black-owned businesses, and even church membership (Kerr, 2006).

Though the main focus of *This Land Was Ours* is African American ownership of coastal properties and blacks' long struggle to retain ownership of the same, this scholarship can also be situated within the literature on black demand or interest in outdoor recreation, particularly nature-based outdoor recreation that occurs in mostly undeveloped settings. Decades of research has shown that African Americans are less likely than whites to engage in most forms of undeveloped setting recreation activities such as camping, hiking, or beach swimming (Ferris, 1962; Washburne, 1978; Cordell, 2012, Appendix). According to the most recent national level data collected on ethnic/racial group preferences for outdoor recreation activities (2000 to 2009), 18.6 percent of African Americans 16 or older reported swimming in lakes/streams; this compares to 41.5 percent of the general population; 46.7 percent of whites; 40.9 percent of American Indians; and 35.3 percent of Asian or Pacific Islanders (Cordell, 2012, Appendix). Cronon (1996) and Johnson and Bowker (2004) suggest that contemporary black Americans have developed an aversion for wild land recreation settings because of their history of forced associations with land via plantation agriculture, grueling work in extractive industries (timber, turpentine), and terrorism perpetuated against blacks in wild, open lands. Johnson and Bowker (2004) write: "African Americans have not belonged to the elite group that appropriated wild spaces as cultural ideal because the subjugated black position with respect to cultivated lands [slavery/sharecropping] would not allow this association."

The Land Was Ours, however, might suggest greater overall black demand for wild land or beach activities, even though the case studies described were of people living proximal to water. The empirical analyses cited above might also show different results for beach demand by blacks if the sample were restricted to people living in the mid-Atlantic and Gulf states; but I think the more important lesson learned from Kahrl's scholarship is that the strong demand for beach access reflected a desire to be near the water, certainly, but also African Americans' longing to be with the larger black collective in terms that they established for themselves. So, when leisure researchers ask the question of why more blacks do not camp or backpack, or visit wild beaches, this query fails to consider the importance of the social dimensions of leisure, particularly for African Americans. Johnson (1998) argues that black leisure, more so than white leisure, prioritizes opportunities to engage in collective recreation activities and demonstrates a greater demand for developed recreation settings.

Indeed, Kahrl makes clear that the aim of those early black entrepreneurs for beachfront properties was part of the larger goal of helping blacks to integrate, domesticate, and emulate the genteelness of middle America, by offering places for rest and relaxation, spiritual development, and certainly refinement. This was not a retreat to the wilds in the sense that most comforts of home were lacking. Rather, Kahrl describes Bishop Robert Jones' efforts to transform Gulfside's retreat in Waveland, Mississippi "from fragile wetlands and dense forests to real estate for residential and recreational use," p. 69; further, [d]omesticating the land and taming an unruly shoreline became synonymous

with uplifting the race and...demonstrating to their [blacks'] white neighbors that they [blacks] were equally dedicated to ensuring that the coast be well groomed and aesthetically pleasing." As such, these were places where black family, community, and culture were fortified via the familiarity and unapologetic knowingness of race.

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Comments by Colin Fisher, University of San Diego

The Intertidal Zone Between African-American and Environmental History

During the last twenty years, the field of environmental history has turned on the middle-class nature tourist with a kind of special vengeance. Some, such as William Cronon and Richard White, note that the tourist who sees “wilderness” as the only nature that counts denies fundamental connections with nature at home and work. Others demonstrate that the production of tourist landscapes often resulted in significant unintended ecological effects and considerable human collateral damage. In particular, scholars show that the seeming innocence of Yellowstone, Yosemite, or Glacier National Parks, the Adirondack Forest Preserve, Superior National Forest, or even Manhattan’s Central Park hides a dark history of forced removal of marginalized populations.¹⁷

In this fascinating, well-researched, and disturbing book, Andrew Kahrl adds to this literature by demystifying the white middle-class beach vacation. He shows that in much of the South, the magical moment of contact with nature at the shore obscures some all-too-human history. On the one hand, he tells the story of shortsighted and ecologically destructive coastal engineering and development on the southern coast. On the other, he documents the history of African-American displacement. Many of us know bits and pieces of this history, but one of Kahrl’s many achievements is to illustrate the degree to which coastal development and black removal were intertwined processes.

If the author had stopped here, he still would have produced an important book. But Kahrl is not just an environmental historian; he also works in African-American

¹⁷ On denial, see William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995), 69-90; Richard White, “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1995), 171-185. On unintended environmental effects, see for instance Richard West Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). On dispossession, see for instance Louis S. Warren, *The Hunter’s Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Laura Pulido, *Environmentalism and Economic Justice: Two Chicano Struggles in the Southwest* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996); Benjamin Heber Johnson, “Conservation, Subsistence, and Class at the Birth of Superior National Forest,” *Environmental History* 4 (January 1999): 80-99; Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Colin Fisher, “Nature in the City: Urban Environmental History and Central Park,” *OAH Magazine of History*, 25 (Oct. 2011): 27-31.

history, a field that makes its central focus the complicated ways that black people made history. As such, Kahrl does not let the story of white environmental injustice overshadow black agency. Nor does he view the black community as monolithic. Like fellow practitioners in African American history, he insists on exploring the complicated power dynamics *within* African-American communities. Nor is he content to only focus on the actions of a small group of proto environmental justice activists. In *The Land Was Ours*, we are introduced to a broad spectrum of unequally empowered black agents: ex-slaves living on the margins of the New South; black Methodists; steamship owners; jazz musicians; light-skinned blacks who attempt to pass; hustlers; intellectuals; working-class children trapped in the urban environment; land owners; black coastal entrepreneurs, among many others

By moving outside the constraints of the environmental equity framework, Kahrl gives us a much richer and more three-dimensional account of African-American life. He is also able to show environmental history's relevance to topics of keen interest to those in the field of African-American history (religion, popular music, black entrepreneurial culture, the Civil Rights movement, the unintended side effects of desegregation, black consumer culture, the meaning given to land, among others). By avoiding the temptation of making an important late twentieth- and early twenty-first century environmental movement the lens through which we should view the first half of the twentieth century, Kahrl avoids anachronism and writes not only more nuanced and interesting African-American history, but also, I would argue, richer environmental history.

For me, some of the most interesting actors in Kahrl's story are black tourists themselves. Environmental historians (as well as historians of tourism) have typically viewed tourism as a white middle- and upper-class phenomenon. Native-, Asian-, African-, and Hawaiian-Americans and working-class people are the toured upon. They suffer displacement and then reappear as service workers. They cook, drive, clean hotels, and sometimes put on displays of "authentic culture" for the pleasure of white tourists. In this book, Kahrl certainly shows how blacks were often the victims of the burgeoning coastal vacation economy, but he also demonstrates how they forged their own world of subaltern tourism. At black beaches, Kahrl explains, blacks could escape work and the larger white world and give "spatial dimension to a black public sphere."¹⁸

Kahrl's discussion of how vacationing African Americans used the shore to make space for black public culture will strike some environmental historians as a departure from themes central to their field and a long detour into largely irrelevant social or cultural history. But what blacks did on their vacations at the shore, I would argue, is actually quite relevant to our field. Environmental historians have spilled a lot of ink on Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Theodore Roosevelt and

¹⁸ Andrew W. Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 13.

their flights out of the city and “back to nature.” We know a lot about Anglo American auto campers in the national parks or the white baby boomers who visited Sea World or the Nature Store or consumed countless nature documentaries. But we know almost nothing about black cultures of nature. Like their white counterparts, did blacks draw an ecologically-problematic line between city and country and attempt to cross it during their leisure? Did African Americans view urban environments as “artificial” and seek refuge and regeneration in nature? Was there a black “wilderness cult”? How did African-American trips back to nature differ from similar white forays? Did black pleasure trips to the shore ever spark interest in nature study or ecology or a broader understanding of human relationships with nature?¹⁹

Kahrl brings us to the shore of these questions, but I wish that he had gone further and explored whether his subjects viewed the beach not just as a public, recreational, or social space, but also as a natural place. A not unrelated problem is the lack of attention to what the excursion to the beach tells us about the history of African-American gender norms, sexuality, and family life. Kahrl brilliantly uses the beach to illuminate power relations within the African American community along lines of color and class, but these other axes of power are left almost completely unexplored. Historians (such as Warren Belasco, Cindy Sondik Aron, Marguerite Shaffer, Susan Rugh, among others) have shown us that the vacation destination has been a site where Victorian masculinity and femininity were sometimes transgressed and new, more modern ideas of proper gender roles and family structure were naturalized. We know that Teddy Roosevelt and other tourists of his class used nature to perform masculinity (as well as race). Did black men do the same thing? What does the annual vacation at a segregated black shore tell us about

¹⁹ On the Anglo- or European-American culture of nature, see for instance, Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973); Peter J. Schmitt, *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America*, The Urban Life in America Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); Donna Haraway, “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York,” in *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 26-58; Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 167-206; and Susan G. Davis, *Spectacular Nature: Corporate Culture and the Sea World Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Gregg Mitman, *Reel Nature: America’s Romance with Wildlife on Films* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Cronon, “The Trouble With Wilderness.” For an important examination of one subaltern culture of nature, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Disorientation and Reorientation: The American Landscape Discovered from the West,” in Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2000), 186-190.

changing African-American ideas about family life? How especially did black women negotiate the shifting sands?²⁰

One of the most chilling aspects of this excellent book is how Kahrl subtly challenges our understanding of change over time in the twentieth and twenty-first century South. Throughout the book we jump from place to place: the Gulfside Resort in Waveland, Mississippi; black beaches on the Potomac near Washington, D.C.; Highland Beach on the Chesapeake shore; Ocean Breeze Beach near Norfolk, Virginia; the black beach on New Orleans's Lake Pontchartrain; among other black vacation destinations. This shuttling from site to site (each with its own distinctive human and natural histories) is sometimes disorienting, and some environmental historians will be disappointed that this book is not structured around a single place. But Kahrl makes the right move by setting his story within the grand arc of southern history. The payoff is a book with broad reach that illuminates how African-American history and environmental history can powerfully inform each other. But even more importantly, Kahrl challenges us to question the received wisdom regarding racial progress, from Jim Crow through the Civil Rights Movement. Certainly he is attentive to moments of profound and positive change (the end of beach segregation, for instance), but what is striking here is how when it comes to the maw of coastal development and black dispossession things often stay stubbornly and breathtakingly the same. The bookend is not the Age of Obama and the arrival of a supposedly post-racial America, but rather Hurricane Katrina, which not only razed the already threatened resort at Gulfside, but served as pretense to "remake the coast through rolling out a red carpet for commercial developers while constructing innumerable obstacles for poor homeowners to return."²¹ By stressing continuity rather than radical change and showing us that sharks are still very much swimming in the water, Kahrl makes the past uncomfortably relevant to the contemporary moment.

The upshot then is that this is an important book that not only fills in some large gaps in our knowledge, but also tells the story differently. As such, it is a significant contribution to the small but growing subfield of African-American environmental history (joining important works in the field such as *What Nature Suffers to Groe* by Mart Stewart; the anthology *To Love the Wind and Rain* edited by Diane Glave and Mark Stoll; *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations*, by Kimberly

²⁰ Warren James Belasco, *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Cindy Sondik Aron, *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Marguerite S. Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001); Susan Sessions Rugh, *Are We There Yet? The Golden Age of American Family Vacations* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

²¹ Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours*, 248.

Smith; among others).²² Even more *The Land Was Ours* demonstrates that we should not fear the “intertidal zones” that exist between environmental history and other fields. Yes, these liminal spaces are sometimes disorienting and even treacherous, but they can also be extraordinarily productive.

²² Mart A. Stewart, *What Nature Suffers to Groe: Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003); *To Love the Wind and Rain: African Americans and Environmental History*, ed. Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006); Kimberly K. Smith, *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

Response by Andrew W. Kahrl, Marquette University

As I was writing *The Land Was Ours*, I often found myself at pains to dispel many of my friends and colleagues' assumptions about its subject matter. The mere mention of beaches immediately conjures up images of picnics, beach blankets, and bikinis, a sand castle symbolizing the innocence of youth, or a mass of scantily clad college students on spring break signifying, perhaps for some, sexual freedom, and for others, debauchery and misogyny of the highest order. Bringing race into this picture brought forth another set of assumptions about what my study of beaches would be about. Surely, the main focus would be whites' primordial fears of contact with black bodies (no more acute than when it came to sharing a body of water), those racist stereotypes of black sexuality that served to justify the lynching of thousands of black men and the sexual violation of equal numbers of black women in the age of Jim Crow, and the heroic efforts of black freedom fighters to integrate public beaches and swimming pools. On the subject of African Americans' own separate beaches, many assumed that my story would fit neatly within a growing body of works on how blacks and other segregated people "made lemonade out of lemons," how they carved out spaces of their own under America's system of apartheid, places that offered sanctuary from white supremacy. Jim Crow was evil and oppressive, to be sure, but these places, while a product of segregation, stood outside, apart from, and in subtle defiance of that world, and thus offer us one of the more uplifting and heartening tales of black life during that period in American history Rayford Logan famously labeled "the nadir."

I suspect many readers have been surprised to instead find what **Colin Fisher** did: a "disturbing book" that "makes the past uncomfortably relevant to the contemporary moment." That was not my intention when I began working on this project, but it certainly became the end result. I entered graduate school intending to study cultural history at one of the nation's finest Ph.D. programs in that field: Indiana University. My decision to research the obscure, undeveloped subject of black beaches in the segregated South grew out of my desire to write about the growth and development of black popular culture in post-World War II America, in particular, the incorporation of black music into mainstream American culture during these years and its transformative effects on American life, perceptions of race, and struggles for freedom. Even at the time, this was a well-developed field, with a number of notable and celebrated works, so I knew I needed to find a new way to approach if I had any hope of writing a dissertation that would be both original and of lasting significance.

During those first years in graduate school, as I sifted aimlessly through various sources on black popular music, I kept coming across mentions of so-and-so's beach, or seaside pavilion, or summertime resort as the venues for many of that era's most famous and celebrated performers. In one instance, I came across a Duke Ellington tour itinerary from some summer in the 1940s that someone has posted on a fan

website. It had the Duke traveling up and down the eastern seaboard, performing shows at several named beaches along the way. I had not heard of any of these places, and after some cursory searches through online library catalogs, discovered that no other scholars had, either. So, I headed to the beach to see if there was a story buried in the sand, and better yet, one that might force cultural historians to look at this moment in history anew. Indeed, there was. The influence of these separate black beaches on the growth and dissemination of black popular music and popular culture in the postwar years cannot be overstated, and could have easily constituted a book of its own. (I hope someone will take up this challenge, and that *The Land Was Ours* will become for cultural historians what **Christopher J. Manganiello** believes it should be for environmental historians: a “launching point” rather than the last word.)

But even as I uncovered rich and arresting stories of black performers, promoters, and audiences making music and creating a distinctive seasonal black culture by the sea, I kept finding myself coming back to the land. The land, the land, the land. No matter how hard I, as a self-described cultural historian, tried to remain in my comfort zone and keep my eyes squarely focused on subject pertinent to my chosen field, I could not shake this nagging sense that the land—its acquisition, development, and eventual loss—and the sea—its jealous command over the fate of these fragile ribbons of sand whites and blacks flocked to each summer, and its mocking of human attempts to contain and control the shore—were the real stories here.

The first sign that I had a topic on my hands whose scope and significance far exceeded my modest intentions and professional training came just months after my committee approved my admittedly cautious and at times inchoate dissertation proposal. Combing through books and online archives in search of actual places to study, I came across the Gulfside Methodist Assembly in Waveland, Mississippi, a black religious resort founded in 1923 and, as I soon learned after a few web searches and phone calls, one of the precious few black seaside resorts still in operation, four decades after the end of segregation. In fact, as the director at the time proudly told me over the phone, Gulfside had not merely survived but was on the cusp of a miraculous rebirth. Later that summer they would cut the ribbon on a brand new retirement village that would complement existing structures and recreational facilities spread over the 200-plus acre seaside campus. This was July 2005. One month later, Hurricane Katrina laid waste to that new building along with everything else on the grounds. Complete and total devastation. Those records housed in Gulfside’s library that documented its history: washed out to sea. And those federal and state recovery dollars and private capital that allowed the casinos to sprout back up seemingly overnight even as locals still cleared debris by day and slept in mobile homes and tents by night: for Gulfside and other small non-profits, not to mention average homeowners, they were nowhere to be found. In the years that followed, as this project evolved, I kept in the back of my mind that phone call, along with an imagined image of proud, smiling faces at the dedication ceremonies to mark that venerable resort’s long-awaited renewal. And I watched

closely as the two different Katrina legacies unfolded: for Gulfside, a potentially fatal blow that threatened to do to it what had been done to so many of its counterparts along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts; while for the corporately owned casinos, a unique opportunity to capitalize on disaster and wrest control over the shore and its economy.

Although I only dimly perceived it at the time, Katrina demonstrated in the most tragic terms that all of the changes and developments in black life and culture I had intended to explore were fundamentally linked to, and could not be explained apart from, the inherent fragility and volatility of the shore, on the one hand, and humans' frustrated, irrational, and yet unending quest to enfold these lands into an existing property regime and make them conform to the demands of powerful real estate and tourism industries, on the other. Moreover, it showed that the transformation of these shorelines—from wild, unruly places where, as **Cassandra Johnson-Gaither** notes, a form of "frontierism" took hold, to what they are today, an endless string of manicured beaches, managed shores, and towering hotels and exclusive resorts—constituted my book's narrative arc. My cultural history had become, in some form or another, an environmental history. Later, I learned that this would also be very much a legal history.

In their thoughtful and generous critiques of my book, all four of the reviewers addressed the strengths and weaknesses of this hybridized form of environmental history, and offer very important suggestions for how future scholars can learn from and build on my attempt to write a different kind of environmental history (one which, admittedly, was not conceived of as an environmental history at all and only tenuously crossed over late in the process and still kept its feet firmly planted in other fields). Before I go any further, I must thank all four of the reviewers for their detailed and extraordinarily insightful critiques, which not only challenged my thinking and forced me to revisit and critically reassess some of the assumptions and strategies I carried with me into this project, but also led me to see my own work in an entirely new light. It's a distinct honor to have my book read and discussed by such a distinguished group of environmental historians. I've always felt somewhat uncomfortable and anxious in these crowds, fearful that, despite years of educating myself on coastal ecologies, dynamics, and processes, I still lack the pedigree and expertise to contribute in a meaningful fashion to the study of environmental change over time. These reviewers' kind words about my book assuage some of those anxieties, while their comments point to ways that, in future work, I might be able to offer a more three-dimensional portrait of human-environmental interactions along the shore and elsewhere. For these and many other reasons I will mention below, I am deeply grateful for the time they took reading and evaluating my work. For readers of this roundtable, their reviews offer a fair, well rounded, and informative description and assessment of the book and its main points. For, me, these reviews offer crucial advice for how to do environmental history better in the future. In arranging and coordinating these roundtables, Jacob Hamblin is doing a great service to his colleagues and to the profession that should be commended and emulated.

In their reviews, both **Sarah Elkind** and Manganiello highlight some of the ways *The Land Was Ours* can help to lead the study of race, environmental (in)justice, and African American environmentalism in productive new directions. More awareness of the environmental dimensions of the Sunbelt phenomenon, one of the guiding principles of this book, offers a good place to start.

As a number of important recent works in urban and political history have shown, “The post-1940 period [in American history] brought ... the emergence of the Sunbelt ethos ... as the nation’s political and economic engine.”²³ This ethos was manifested in the dismantling of Jim Crow’s legal culture, the collapse of the New Deal order, the triumph of corporate capitalism, and the forging of a neoliberal state in which public policy and private interests became inseparable and at times indistinguishable. While these themes have shaped and informed an entire generation of scholarship in the “new” political history, and become central themes in the burgeoning field of the history of capitalism, environmental historians have been slow to add their voice to these conversations, while historians interested in questions of political economy have expressed far less interest in extending their analysis to include political ecology. And yet, the signs of the Sunbelt revolution (and the emergence of what I describe in my book as a distinctive form of “coastal capitalism”) are nakedly apparent along the beaches of the American South and beyond. Here, we find a shining example of how federal policies and programs fueled economic growth, facilitated and later subsidized private enterprise, and bred a political culture of privatism, meritocratic individualism, and a contradictory hostility to and utter dependence on environmental regulation and federal power. In the desegregation of public beaches and commercial resorts (a development that I devote far less attention to in my book than it deserves), we find a telling example of another key theme in political and civil rights histories: the role of Cold War politics, increased dependence on defense contracts as the lifeblood of regional economies (and the sudden accountability to federal officials these new arrangements entailed), and the emergence of new industries (such as vacationing and tourism) that sought to attract northern dollars and investment and, as such, came to see the South’s apartheid as more liability than asset. These developments, as I attempt to show in my book, did not merely erase the color line on the beach, but led directly to the bulldozing of dunes; the creation and continual (not to mention, costly) management of white sandy beaches for legions of vacationers; and the mass conversion of fragile wetlands and shifting, mercurial shorelines into real estate.²⁴ And, not unrelated, it turned black coastal landowners (for a variety of

²³ Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, “Introduction,” *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, ed. Lassiter and Crespino (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 10.

²⁴ On coastal ecologies and the environmental effects of coastal development, see the voluminous body of work by Orrin Pilkey and his Program for the Study of Developed

historical, cultural, and legal reasons that I detail in the book) into the proverbial path of least resistance for pro-growth public officials and the chief targets of speculators and developers.

I hope that, if anything, my book helps to move the coastal South from the margins to the center of scholarship on Jim Crow and the Sunbelt revolution, and leads to more works that interrogate the relationship of race, space, and environmental change in the political economy of modern America.²⁵ Ultimately, *The Land Was Ours* seeks to demonstrate how the simultaneous disappearance of the one main asset blacks possessed under Jim Crow (land), the spectacular growth of real estate development and leisure-based economies (a hugely significant but heretofore understudied component of the Sunbelt economy), and the implementation of environmentally destructive and unsustainable coastal management policies and programs, are inextricably linked and mutually constitutive. I hope that the book's thesis and supporting evidence will lead political and policy historians to treat the making of the Sunbelt (and unmaking of Jim Crow) as not just a process of social, economic, and political transformation, but an environmental one as well.²⁶

Just as many of the better works on the modern South have done, *The Land Was Ours* seeks to tell a story of regional convergence and the incorporation of the South into the nation and a global economy, and pushes against decades of scholarship that has tended to treat the region as separate, apart, and exceptional. When

Shorelines. For a small sampling of Pilkey's writing on and arguments against coastal development, see Pilkey and Rob Young, *The Rising Sea* (Washington: Island Press, 2009); Pilkey and Katherine L. Dixon, *The Corps and the Shore* (Washington: Island Press, 1996); Pilkey and Wallace Kaufman, *The Beaches are Moving: The Drowning of America's Shoreline* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1979). For more on the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines and an inventory of its research projects, see <http://www.psds-wcu.org>

²⁵ For an introduction to scholarship on the Sunbelt, see Bruce Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); James C. Cobb, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Carl Abbott, *The New Urban America: Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); Michelle Nickerson and Darren Dochuk, eds., *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Place, Space, and Region* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk, Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: Norton, 2011); and Joseph Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).

²⁶ For one of my other attempts to write a more environmental history of Sunbelt land policies and politics, see Andrew Kahrl, "Sunbelt by the Sea: Governing Race and Nature in a Twentieth-Century Coastal Metropolis," *Journal of Urban History*, 38 (May 2012), 488-508.

looking at modern American history from the shore, we instead find rich new veins of comparative research linking the histories of the Gulf and South Atlantic coasts, for example, to New Jersey, the Biloxi waterfront in Mississippi, and Monterey Bay, California.²⁷

More attention by political historians into the environmental dimensions of the Sunbelt revolution will also help to bring some critically important federal agencies and programs out of the shadows. In one of the earlier works on the origins and development of postwar Sunbelt conservatism, Lisa McGirr examined the paradoxical political culture of Orange County, California, the spiritual birthplace of the John Birch Society and Goldwater Republicanism, where anti-Communism and distrust of the federal government was only matched by the region's indebtedness to the military-industrial complex for its growth and prosperity.²⁸ Similarly, along many of America's coastlines today, we find robust real estate and vacation industries generating fabulous wealth (and providing pleasure) for the few, inflicting colossal damage to coastal ecosystems and ratcheting up the costs of recovery following massive storms, all subsidized and sustained by the work and continued support of the state. As I discuss (all too briefly) in *The Land Was Ours*, branches of the military and federal programs (specifically, the Army Corps of Engineers and the National Flood Insurance Program) made the rise of coastal capitalism (and the reckless environmental actions that have come to characterize coastal real estate and vacation industries today) possible, and continue to keep it afloat in the face of deadly storms and rising tides. During the same years that the federal government embraced a strategy of growth liberalism, the Army Corps of Engineers, became an agent of coastal development, and Congress created the National Flood Insurance Program, which removed any remaining barriers to housing construction in dangerous, low-lying areas and has been cited as a key factor in the explosion of coastal real estate development from the 1970s to the present.²⁹ And yet, we still know little about these agencies and programs whose

²⁷ If we needed any reminder, Superstorm Sandy and Hurricane Katrina demonstrate not only the need for historians to devote more attention to the phenomenon of coastal development, but moreover, suggest how the histories of coastal areas offer rich possibilities for comparative study. The reference to Monterey Bay is meant to highlight an important work of coastal environmental history: Connie Y. Chiang, *Shaping the Shoreline: Fisheries and Tourism on the Monterey Coast* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

²⁸ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

²⁹ See David J. Brower, William Dreyfoos, and Don Meserve, "Access to the Nation's Beaches: Legal and Planning Perspectives" (Raleigh: UNC Sea Grant, 1978); Klaus J. Meyer-Arendt, "Historical Coastal Environmental Changes: Human Response to Shoreline Erosion," in *The American Environment: Interpretations of Past Geographies* (Savage, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992), 217-33; H. Miller Crane, "Barrier Islands: Gamble with Nature," *Environment*, 23 (Nov. 1981), 6-11, 36-42; Peter Overby, "Beachfront Bailout," *Common Cause*, 19 (Summer 1993), 12; Rutherford H. Platt, "Congress and the Coast," *Environment*,

histories seem to rest squarely within that “intertidal zone” between environmental and public policy history.

Both Johnson-Gaither and Fisher mention how my book should lead historians to look more closely at African Americans’ engagement with and demand for outdoor recreation. This is, as Johnson notes, a woefully underdeveloped field. One gets the sense that many environmental historians interested in leisure and recreation took Eldridge Cleaver’s statement that slavery taught black people to “hate the land” as gospel, assumed there was no history there, and moved on. Thankfully, that has begun to change. Fisher, in particular, has produced groundbreaking, imaginative work that has pioneered new ways of thinking about the environmental dimensions of African American urban cultures. Brian McCammack’s environmental history of the Great Migration, likewise, offers a model for future scholarship on this subject. In his masterful dissertation, McCammack uncovers a rich and complex history of African American engagement with the natural world throughout the process of northern migration and urban resettlement. From the urban parks of black Chicago to rural retreats in northern Michigan, to YMCA camps outside the city, black migrants to the northern metropolis fashioned a distinctive environmental ethos that reflected their cultural roots in the rural South and their experiences in the urban North. In seeking out “nature” (whether it be in a condensed urban park or spacious, remote rural wilderness), black Chicagoans, McCammack shows, created communities, carved out a measure of cultural autonomy, and sought to achieve a measure of economic self-determination. More provocatively, McCammack argues, it was through the process of claiming and remaking outdoor environments that blacks became urban and performed modernity.³⁰ In a forthcoming essay, I pick up on some of these themes through a history of black numbers kings and underworld bosses who invested in rural real estate, built swanky country clubs for the high rollers of the Black Metropolis, and strove to retire from the streets and become country gentlemen farmers.³¹

27 (July-Aug. 1985), 12-17, 34-40; Jamie W. Moore and Dorothy P. Moore, “The Corps of Engineers and Beach Erosion Control, 1930-1982,” *Shore and Beach*, 51 (Jan. 1983), 13-17; R. Jason Richards, “The National Flood Insurance Program: A ‘Flood’ of Controversy,” *Florida Bar Journal*, 82 (April 2008), 8-18; Erwann O. Michel-Kerjan, “Catastrophe Economics: The National Flood Insurance Program,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 24 (Fall 2010), 165-86.

³⁰ Brian James McCammack, “Recovering Green in Bronzeville: An Environmental and Cultural History of the African American Great Migration to Chicago, 1915—1940 (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2012).

³¹ See Andrew W. Kahrl, “The Black Metropolis at Work and Play Outside the Metropolis,” in *Escape from New York! The “Harlem Renaissance” Reconsidered*, ed. Davarian Baldwin and Minkah Makalani (University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming 2013)

It was no coincidence that the people who were lounging on the beach or renting a cabin for the weekend at the places in my book were, by and large, city dwellers, who were oftentimes one or two generations removed from the plantations of the rural South, who were more likely to associate the “great outdoors” with bourgeois respectability than sweat and toil, and indeed, who understood their return to nature to leisure rather than labor, as tourists rather than (as Fisher aptly puts it) the “toured upon,” as a sign of progress.

This project began with the premise that African Americans fashioned a rich and varied leisure landscape of their own under Jim Crow. It grew, in part, out of my own sense of frustration reading numerous books on vacationing and tourism that claimed to depict America as a whole but which cast blacks as either dutiful servants of a white leisure class or as objects of white tourists’ scorn or curiosity. Before *The Land Was Ours*, I wrote an article on African Americans’ efforts to claim Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia, as a black heritage site and tourism destination in the decades following the end of Reconstruction, and how black writers, intellectuals, and day trippers, through annual pilgrimages and commemorative rituals, projected an alternative history of the nation’s rebirth in blood onto the town’s physical landscape.³² So completely had I internalized the notion that African Americans embraced outdoor recreation and, where possible, flocked to beaches and seaside resorts for many of the same reasons white Americans did at this time, that by the time I finished writing *The Land Was Ours*, I neglected, as Christopher Manganiello notes, to explain *why* African Americans liked water-oriented recreation, and whether there were any particular reasons, rooted in history and in the broader African American experience, for African Americans’ apparent affinity for these types of leisure and recreational landscapes. It’s a fair point, and one that I had not considered until Manganiello mentioned it. I guess, in one sense, my relative silence on that question speaks volumes. I don’t think there’s any reason to believe that African Americans (any more so than any other demographic) developed some sort of affinity toward beaches and waterfronts that is derived from their experience being black in white America. In the course of working on this book and related projects, I came to the conclusion that there was nothing remarkable about the fact that African Americans were engaging with nature and seeking respite in outdoor spaces, and that the forms of leisure they partook in and types of leisure landscapes they created revealed more about the performance of class than the social construction of race. That said, once they got out into “nature,” as Fisher and others have written, their racial identities (and personal and collective experiences) conditioned in ways both subtle and overt how they experienced nature and

³² Andrew W. Kahrl, “The Political Work of Leisure: Class, Recreation, and African American Commemoration at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, 1881–1931,” *Journal of Social History*, 42 (Oct. 2008), 57-77.

manufactured their own leisure landscapes. These experiences, and the responses they generated, resist any attempts to treat the black seaside experience as strictly a racial experience, or to ascribe a set of racial environmental sensibilities to the diverse range of black persons who populate my book and continue, to this day, to participate in a variety of capacities in coastal capitalist economies, and who occupy all points on the political spectrum in debates over coastal environmental policy.

Which brings me to John Sayles's film, *Sunshine State*, which Manganiello references in his opening comments and returns to later in his essay. It should come as no surprise to Manganiello and anyone else who has seen the film and read my book that I am greatly indebted to Sayles—for clueing me in to some of the core issues and key struggles that unfolded along rapidly developing coastlines, and for helping me to see, in stark terms, the relationship between economic exploitation, racial injustice, and environmental destruction. It was after watching this film that I began to perceive what my mounting body of evidence was trying to tell me: that the disappearance of black beaches and African Americans' shocking (and uncompensated) loss of land in the decades following the end of segregation was not some bittersweet, but somewhat inevitable (and, some have even suggested, welcome), coda to Jim Crow's "strange career," but the first signs of a new, more insidious racial regime taking hold. The changing of the guard, if you will, has been marked by the passing of an older form of racial capitalism predicated on the exploitation of black labor and the rise of a new set of practices geared toward the expropriation of African Americans' earnings and assets, on the one hand, and the spatial containment of the poor and people of color (whether behind bars or on the outside looking in at gated communities), on the other.

One of the central themes of Sayles's film is that these playgrounds for the rich, with its rows of beachfront mansions, golf courses built on and around the cemeteries where displaced native peoples' ancestors are buried, and forms of private policing and governance, are not merely anti-social but environmentally destructive. To Manganiello's point that the rapid appreciation of coastal real estate values, combined with the specific economic and legal vulnerabilities that tended to characterize black landownership in the areas (which I detail in the book), exposed black coastal landowners to the nefarious schemes of "conniving white and black speculators," I would add that we cannot lose sight of what these coastal capitalists hoped to do with these lands once they got a hold of them. They wanted to replace modest, weathered cottages appropriately designed for the volatile conditions of coastal environments, with massive, multi-story mansions and resorts, clustered together and forming an imposing wall to the sea (and barrier to the public's ability to access the beach)—which, when destroyed by erosion caused by their own actions, or by a massive storm, they will quickly replace it, often with something bigger, taller, and more exclusive and exclusionary than before. Like Sayles's fictional Lincoln Beach, we must also remember and, as historians, continue to excavate the people and places washed out to sea in the process. Their experience of community creation and struggle for preservation powerfully refutes the notion "that conservation is a luxury." For Sayles's elderly African American characters,

and for many of the people in my book, true conservation and practicable methods of living with the sea are not to be found among the privileged, but among the poor and disadvantaged.

That being said, it would be both inaccurate and a disservice to the rich complexity of the black experience to characterize African Americans' response to Sunbelt-style coastal capitalism as simply one of tragic victimization and heroic resistance. In his comments, Manganiello seems to suggest the book suffers from a lack of attention to black environmental activists such as MaVynee Betsch, the enigmatic and tireless defender of Florida's American Beach (the inspiration for Sayles's fictional black beach community) until her death in 2005. I agree wholeheartedly that the stories of black environmentalists and those who fought to protect vulnerable communities and ecosystems from rapacious developers, need to be told. This just wasn't my story, though. In its concluding chapters that bring us to the present, *The Land Was Ours* becomes a story about people like A. D. Brown, the silver-tongued African American developer who, in the early 2000s, returned to his ancestral home on the South Carolina Sea Islands promising to bring fabulous riches and a permanent place in the region's booming economy to his desperate and impoverished relatives who were struggling to hold onto their lands. He came armed with detailed plans and elaborate models of condominiums to be built on his family's remaining acreage. All they needed to do was sign some papers and Brown would take care of the rest. As it turned out, Brown was another slick hustler who used his skin color and family connections to lull elderly persons into signing away their rights to valuable acreage on Hilton Head Island and unknowingly to agree to their own eventual removal. It's important to note that a fictional version of A. D. Brown also appears in Sayles's film. His name is Flash, a former star football player-turned-real estate promoter who returns home to hugs and kisses from the village's elders, all the while quietly assisting a land development company in its plans to speed the removal of the last remaining residents of the historic black beach community. If our goal as historians is to gain a more complete and accurate understanding of the many ways race and environmentalism converged on America's shores during these years, we must devote as much attention to people like Brown (who professed a form of liberation and empowerment predicated on blacks becoming co-partners in coastal capitalism) as we do people like the "Beach Lady," and tell the stories of those who pounded the pavement in search of investors in get-rich-quick real estate ventures (never mind the devastating ecological effects) alongside those who bravely stood in front of bulldozers and shouted down lying public officials at city council and planning board meetings.

In the end, *The Land Was Ours* is a book about black capitalists and a distinct variant of land-based capitalism that proved to have profound, and mostly negative, effects on African Americans and their struggle for justice and equality. It's a story about people whose love of nature and environmental sensibilities were understood in terms of a larger struggle for cultural freedom and economic empowerment, and who, as a result of buying up large swaths of land along once once-forsaken shores that suddenly became accessible and highly coveted, found themselves, at the same

time, well-positioned to capitalize on their good fortune and susceptible to the most extreme (but, as I stress throughout the book, often nominally legal) forms of predation. As a result of these circumstances, I argue, black coastal landowners were less likely to see their claiming and defense of space along increasingly populated and developed shores as an environmental cause and more likely to see it as their new neighbors did: a capitalist venture. This, I believe, was a story that needed told—and its larger lessons about race and power understood. Now, I will leave it to others to tell the history of African American “enthusiasts, conservationists, and environmentalists” with the hope that it will be a more nuanced, appropriately ambiguous, and less celebratory story than those that came before it.

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