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

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

— Adapted from the author's abstract.

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