

Article

Roots and Refuge: A Critical Exploration of Nature in Black Visual Narratives

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Abstract: This article examined the underrepresentation of Black characters in children's picture books, particularly in natural settings, and its effect on Black children's relationship with nature. Through an analysis of four contemporary picture books, the study revealed how visual depictions challenge these exclusions and expand narratives about Black engagement with the natural world. Utilizing visual semiotics and the theory of Black Aliveness, this research underscores the transformative power of illustrations by Black artists in enriching children's literature and advancing joy.

Keywords: African American; children's literature; nature; visual analysis

1. Introduction

The history of racism in outdoor spaces has deeply influenced who feels welcome and safe in natural environments. Finney's (2014) work, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*, elucidates how outdoor spaces have been racialized, often being unsafe for Black people due to legacies of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and racial violence. These legacies have led to the development of stereotypes that depict Black people as uninterested in outdoor activities such as camping, hiking, or swimming. This misconception ignores the historical context of exclusion and danger that made natural spaces inaccessible or threatening to Black people (Finney 2014). Despite legislative efforts like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Wilderness Act, which aimed to desegregate public accommodations and protect natural areas, racist planning practices have continued to impact access to green spaces, contributing to ongoing environmental inequalities (Hoffman et al. 2020).

In response to these systemic barriers, Black communities have historically accessed outdoor spaces through resilience and resistance, finding ways to connect with nature despite these challenges. This connection manifests in various forms, such as community gardens, urban parks, and cultural practices that honor the natural environment (Kahrl et al. 2020). Grassroots movements and organizations have also played a crucial role in reclaiming and redefining Black presence in the outdoors, advocating for equitable access and representation (Corrigan et al. 2023). This rich history of engagement with nature demonstrates the enduring relationship between Black people and the natural world.

Similarly, in literary conversations, the representation of Black people in natural settings has often been overlooked. Dungy (2009) argues for greater inclusion of diverse voices in discussions about human interaction with the natural world, describing the complex relationship Black people have with land as one shaped by histories of "toil and soil." She emphasizes the necessity of recognizing the spiritual and physical connections Black people have with nature for survival. This perspective is echoed in contemporary literary analyses, such as Bayoumy's (2024) examination of ecofeminist texts that explore characters' perceptions of environmental injustices, highlighting the need for humans and



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nature to coexist. Although these texts do not specifically depict Black characters, they stress the power of all humans with nature and the importance of ecological awareness.

In children's literature, picture books are powerful tools for shaping young minds and influencing how children perceive the world and their place within it. However, as Christopher Myers (Myers 2014) points out, Black characters have been historically underrepresented in these books, with more stories published about talking animals than about Black people. This underrepresentation is particularly evident in the lack of depictions of Black characters in natural settings, reinforcing stereotypes that alienate Black children from nature. Addressing this gap is crucial in fostering a richer narrative for Black youth interested in the outdoors and challenging the exclusion of Black people from stories about environmental stewardship and exploration.

This article investigates how contemporary picture books featuring Black characters in natural environments challenge these exclusions, presenting a richer, more diverse depiction of Black life. By analyzing four recent picture books, this study explored the visual narratives that counter stereotypes and affirm Black children's presence in all aspects of life, including the outdoors. Employing visual semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021; Painter et al. 2013) and the theory of Black Aliveness (Quashie 2021), this research highlights the transformative power of illustrations by Black artists in reshaping societal perceptions. These depictions offer new perspectives on the relationship between Black communities and the natural world, countering historical narratives that have often excluded them.

2. Context and Related Literature

The representation of Black characters in children's picture books has undergone a significant evolution, marked by notable milestones that have shaped the publishing landscape and influenced the broader cultural narrative. A landmark moment in this evolution was the publication of *The Snowy Day* (1962) by Ezra Jack Keats, which was the first major picture book in the US to feature a Black child as its protagonist. This book tells the story of Peter, a young Black boy who explores the wonders of a snowy day in his urban neighborhood. Keats's illustrations are celebrated for their simplicity and vividness, capturing Peter's joy and curiosity as he interacts with the snow-covered environment. Dressed in a bright red snowsuit, Peter's activities—making footprints, building a snowman, and creating snow angels—are depicted with a playful and imaginative touch, highlighting a Black child's joyful engagement with nature.

Beyond its narrative, *The Snowy Day* is significant for its groundbreaking visual portrayal of Black childhood in literature. Andrea Davis Pinkney (Pinkney 2016), in her work *A Poem for Peter*, refers to Peter as the "Brown Sugar Boy in a blanket of white", acknowledging Keats as "a man who saw you for you". Similarly, Bryan Collier has reflected on the personal impact of seeing Peter in literature, noting how it made him feel visible in a predominantly white world of books (Zipp 2012). For book creators like Pinkney and Collier, Keats's work served both as a mirror and a gateway, inspiring them to pursue careers in children's literature.

Scholars have explored the evolution of Black representation in picture books, examining these works across a historical spectrum (Martin 2004; Bishop 2012; Barton et al. 2022). These studies suggest that depictions of Black children in literature affirm Black identity and humanity while also challenging non-Black audiences to perceive Black childhood in diverse and nuanced ways. Bishop (2012) argues that Black illustrators have sought to dignify the portrayal of African Americans in children's books, challenging stereotypes and showcasing the diversity of Black experiences.

Despite the progress, detailed analyses specifically focusing on visual representations by Black illustrators remain relatively rare. Thompson (2001) conducted a visual analysis of three picture books about Harriet Tubman, highlighting the varied artistic interpretations by Jerry Pinkney, Jacob Lawrence, and Faith Ringgold. Thompson's work underscores the diversity of visual storytelling and the importance of these differing perspectives in portraying historical figures like Tubman.

Other studies have examined the thematic elements in picture books by Black illustrators. Millman (2005) analyzed Faith Ringgold's picture books, identifying a recurring theme of darkness—both literal and metaphorical—that conveys the gravity and discomfort associated with Black experiences. Similarly, Gardner (2017) examined children's reactions to picture books featuring Black characters. Her study, though centered on children's literary responses, also analyzed the illustrations. Importantly, she highlights the need for a deeper examination of how Blackness is depicted, given societal biases that often associate it with negativity. Gardner emphasizes the importance of critical racial literacy, encouraging the reading of multiple texts and teaching children about the visual and stylistic elements in African American children's literature.

More recent research by Cueto and Brooks (2019) focused on how picture books created by Black artists confront anti-Blackness, presenting Black children in new, empowering lights. This critical content analysis of visual images highlights the role of these illustrations in challenging societal norms and countering racist imagery prevalent in mass media.

The importance of inclusive representation in children's literature, particularly in stories involving nature and outdoor exploration, has become increasingly recognized. Substantial research emphasizes the critical role nature plays in promoting cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic development. Conversely, a lack of exposure to natural environments has been linked to psychological distress (American Psychological Association 2020; Hari 2018). Despite this, there is a notable lack of research on the representation of Black youth in natural settings.

The scarcity of children's literature featuring Black children engaging with nature highlights a significant gap in representation. In her article, "Black Kids Camp Too", published in *The Horn Book Magazine*, Martin (2019) discusses the impact of this absence, arguing that it limits the imaginative possibilities for Black children, who are often depicted in urban settings or roles unrelated to nature. Martin emphasizes the importance of including Black children in nature-themed literature to foster a sense of belonging, challenge stereotypes, and broaden perceptions of who participates in outdoor activities.

Martin (2019) also explored the concept of "wildness," a term borrowed from biologist Drew Lanham, to describe a unique understanding and experience of the outdoors. She argues that this "wildness" offers a distinct way of knowing, which is vital for holistic childhood development. Additionally, Martin references Louv's (Louv 2005) idea of "Nature-Deficit Disorder," which describes the consequences of disconnection from nature, such as reduced sensory engagement, attention difficulties, and increased physical and emotional challenges. However, she critiques Louv's portrayal of children as predominantly white, middle-class, and viewed through a nostalgic lens. Martin asserts that similar patterns are reflected in children's picture books, where minoritized children are underrepresented in immersive outdoor settings.

Our study addressed these concerns by analyzing four contemporary picture books that feature Black characters in natural environments. By emphasizing the importance of visual representations, this research broadens the scope of children's literature to be more inclusive and reflective of all children's experiences. It underscores the need for Black youth to see themselves in the outdoors through illustrations that immerse them in the natural environment.

3. Book Selection

The books for this visual analysis center Blackness, as articulated by Campt (2021), who discusses how Black artists redefine Black visual experiences through the creation and curation of a Black gaze. By focusing on Black illustrators and their representations of Black characters, we shift from merely observing these visual narratives to engaging with them, understanding the perspectives and experiences of Black youth as depicted through these artworks.

These books—*Where's Rodney?* (Bogan 2017), *Tasha's Voice* (Bogan 2024), *Nell Plants a Tree* (2023), and *Emile and the Field* (2022)—feature illustrators with strong credentials and

distinctive styles that portray the lived experiences of Black children in relation to nature. The books highlight themes of inclusion, resilience, and the human right to a connection with the natural environment. Children ages four to eight constitute the target readers of these books.

Notably, the illustrators' racial and ethnic backgrounds contribute significantly to the authenticity and depth of these representations. While most illustrators are from Black communities, Daniel Miyares, illustrator of *Nell Plants a Tree*, is of Cuban descent. However, the alignment with the author's (Anne Wynter) identity as a Black person ensures that the story maintains its focus on Black experiences and perspectives.

These books not only provide rich, empowering visual experiences for young readers but also align with the research goal of examining Black perspectives through the visual work of Black artists. This approach aligns with our goal to prioritize a "politics of looking with, through, and alongside another" (Campt 2021, p. 8), thereby offering a nuanced, insightful analysis of Black characters in the books described below.

Where's Rodney? by Carmen Bogan, illustrated by Floyd Cooper, tells the story of Rodney, an energetic young Black boy who finds the classroom confining and longs for the freedom of the outdoors. His restlessness and vivid imagination lead him to daydream about wide-open spaces. When his teacher organizes a trip to a nearby park, Rodney is introduced to the boundless joy of nature for the first time. The book portrays his newfound freedom as he immerses himself in the fresh air, open skies, and the sensory delights of the natural world. Rodney's journey is a celebration of discovery and the unrestrained joy that nature brings, especially to children who rarely experience such environments.

Tasha's Voice by Carmen Bogan, illustrated by Daria Peoples, is about a young Black girl, Tasha, who finds her confidence and voice through her unique connection with nature. Initially quiet and reserved, Tasha is overshadowed in a noisy world until she visits a tranquil park near her home. There, she finds solace in the gentle whisper of leaves, the songs of birds, and the caress of a gentle breeze. Nature becomes her sanctuary, a place where she feels seen and heard. The story captures Tasha's transformation as she embraces the serenity and harmony of the natural world, illustrating the joy and peace that nature can instill in those who open their hearts to its beauty.

Nell Plants a Tree, by Anne Wynter and illustrated by Daniel Miyares, is about the enduring impact of a single, loving act. It follows Nell, a young Black girl who plants a small sapling and watches it grow into a majestic tree that becomes a cherished part of her family's life. This story, filled with tender familial moments and lush illustrations, is a celebration of growth, both in nature and within Nell's family. It captures the joy of nurturing life and the powerful legacy that a simple, loving gesture can create, resonating through generations.

Emile and the Field, by Kevin Young and illustrated by Chioma Ebinama, is a lyrical exploration of a small Black boy's deep, joyful connection with a field he treasures. Emile finds endless delight in the changing seasons, each bringing new wonders to his beloved field. He revels in the flutter of butterflies, the rustling leaves, and the scent of wildflowers, finding a sense of freedom and joy in nature's embrace. As Emile grows older, his bond with the field becomes a source of inspiration and reflection, making him mindful of the passage of time and the need to preserve natural spaces. The story invites readers to find wonder and joy in the world around them and emphasizes the importance of cherishing and protecting our natural environment.

4. Methodology and Visual Analysis

Our study employed a detailed visual analysis of selected picture books using the interpersonal metafunction framework outlined by (Painter et al. 2013). We explored how illustrations convey relational dynamics and viewer engagement through various visual systems.

The analyses examined four primary systems within the interpersonal metafunction: social distance, proximity, attitude, and orientation. These systems are critical for un-

derstanding the perceived intimacy between viewers and the characters depicted. Social distance, for instance, is a key focus, as it defines how closely viewers connect with the characters. Illustrations featuring close-ups create intimacy by bringing viewers to connect with the character's personal space, whereas medium shots suggest a more social relationship. Long shots imply detachment (Painter et al. 2013).

In scenarios where close-ups are less prominent, this study shifted its focus to proximity, attitude, and orientation. Proximity relates to the physical closeness between characters within the illustration, influencing perceived relationships. Attitude considers the way characters engage with viewers, for example, through direct eye contact or body positioning, which can convey power dynamics and emotional states. Orientation examines how characters are depicted in relation to one another and to the viewer, providing insights into the nature of their interactions and the intended viewer response.

Beyond these core systems, this study also investigated other aspects of interpersonal metafunction, including focalization, pathos, affect, and ambience. Focalization refers to the perspective from which the viewer perceives the scene, such as a character's point of view versus an external, objective perspective, which can affect the viewer's sense of involvement and empathy. Pathos and affect relate to the emotional resonance of the illustrations; this is particularly evident in depictions that employ high levels of detail and naturalism, creating lifelike representations that foster emotional connections despite their fictional context. Additionally, this study explored how the use of color, medium, and "provenance"—cultural meanings associated with the images—contributes to the overall ambience and viewer interpretation (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021).

To deepen the analysis, the visual elements were considered alongside theoretical discussions on Black Aliveness by Kevin Quashie (2021), allowing for a nuanced understanding of the interpersonal dynamics and cultural implications present in the illustrations. By focusing on Black Aliveness, we move beyond the confines of resistance as an aesthetic or reactionary response to exclusion. Instead, we illustrate how Black characters in these books engage with nature in personal, leisurely, imaginative, and communal ways that are detached from systemic inequalities. This approach aligns with Quashie's broader questioning of what lies beyond resistance in the shape and meaning of Black culture and subjectivity (Quashie 2009, p. 336). In the following section, we rely on key tenets from Quashie's framework, including the following:

1. Expressiveness of Inner Life: Black Aliveness is a lens that captures both textual and visual representations of the depth of Black experiences, going beyond outward displays of resistance. Inner life, according to Quashie, is dynamic and full of "wild motion", reflecting a wide range of emotional and psychological states.
2. Beyond Resistance: Quashie critiques the overemphasis on resistance in Black cultural expression, questioning what more can be said about Black subjectivity outside of a reactionary stance to oppression. His framework urges a shift in focus toward the broader experiences of Black life, not limited to systemic struggles or exclusions.
3. Black Engagement with Nature: Engagement with nature by Black communities is not necessarily a form of resistance. Instead, it is often personal, leisurely, imaginative, and communal. Quashie's concept of Black Aliveness detaches Black engagement with nature from reactionary responses, recognizing it as a full and rich interaction free from systemic inequities.
4. Black Interiority: Building on his earlier work on Black Interiority (2012), Quashie emphasizes the importance of understanding the "full range" of Black life (Quashie 2012, p. 6). This includes the complexity of feelings, desires, ambitions, and emotions, reflecting the nuanced and expansive inner life of Black individuals.
5. Expansive Black World Orientation: Quashie advocates for a worldview that recognizes the richness of Black life in all its facets beyond the lens of struggle or resistance. Hence, Black Aliveness involves a deep engagement with the self, community, and nature, embracing a full range of human emotions and experiences

4.1. Book 1—*Where's Rodney?*

In Carmen Bogan's *Where's Rodney?* (2021), illustrated by Floyd Cooper, a young Black boy, Rodney, discovers the beauty and freedom of nature. The illustrations by Floyd Cooper resonate deeply with Kevin Quashie's concepts of Black Aliveness and speak to the ongoing reclamation of outdoor spaces by Black people, specifically males. In a socio-cultural context where Black boys are often subjected to harmful stereotypes and systemic violence, these illustrations offer a powerful counter-narrative. They present Black boys as joyful, curious, and intimately connected with nature, challenging prevailing narratives that restrict Black youth to urban or confined spaces and deny them the freedom to explore and thrive in the natural world.

Cooper's use of the oil erasure technique throughout the book emphasizes themes of accessibility and inclusion. From the first image on the cover, Rodney is depicted with agency and vitality. The vertical angle looking up at him not only empowers Rodney but also suggests readiness and adventure, qualities often denied Black boys in a society that frequently views them through a lens of suspicion or threat. By placing Rodney against a lush green background and having him look directly at the viewer with wide-open eyes, Cooper creates an immediate connection that humanizes Rodney, showcasing his presence and importance in natural spaces.

Throughout the book, nature is a liberating force for Rodney, a place where he can express his curiosity and engage in self-discovery. The illustrations of Rodney in his classroom, juxtaposed with those of him exploring the outdoors, highlight this contrast. In the classroom scene, Rodney's prominent placement in the foreground, combined with the grainy texture of the room and the clear view of the bird outside, symbolizes his longing for freedom and movement—an echo of the broader historical and cultural yearning of Black communities for access to open, natural spaces. This imagery aligns with the reclaiming of outdoor spaces by Black Americans, where engaging with nature is a form of resistance and a means of reclaiming health and well-being.

One of the most impactful images in the book is Rodney climbing a hill at the park. Here, Cooper's detailed textures and use of space create a visual narrative of struggle, achievement, and personal growth. This illustration counters stereotypes that limit Black boys to specific, often negative roles. Instead, it shows Rodney in a moment of triumph, embodying resilience and determination. This depiction of Rodney's ascent mirrors the ongoing efforts of Black Americans to reclaim and redefine their relationship with nature, as outdoor activities and spaces are historically fraught with exclusion and racialized violence. By portraying Rodney in such a positive light, Cooper's work underscores the potential of nature to be a space of healing and empowerment for Black youth.

Moreover, the detailed illustrations that show Rodney observing ants or reaching for a tree speak to his engagement and curiosity, qualities that are often overlooked or underestimated in narratives about Black boys. These images offer a vision of Rodney as a thoughtful, introspective child, fully alive and immersed in his environment. Such representations are vital in challenging reductive stereotypes and affirming the richness of Black Aliveness—Rodney's presence in these spaces suggests not just survival but thriving and growing in an environment that is often denied to him.

4.2. Book 2—*Tasha's Voice*

In a nation that often denies Black women and girls the right to joy and healing, this book features a Black female main character with solace and a space to breathe freely. Carmen Bogan's *Tasha's Voice*, illustrated by Daria Peoples, is a visual celebration of Black Aliveness that resonates with the themes of Black women and girls' connection to nature. The book captures the transformative journey of a young Black girl, Tasha, as she finds her voice amid the rich landscapes of U.S. National Parks. This visual narrative underscores the importance of nature as a space of healing, exploration, and self-expression for Black girls, which is not commonly seen in everyday life. Nature provides a sanctuary where

Black girls can find peace, reflect, and connect with themselves, free from societal pressures and stereotypes.

The book's cover juxtaposes Tasha with her lively classmate Rodney from the previous book. While Rodney stares directly at the viewer with confidence and boldness, Tasha glances to the side with arms outstretched, suggesting both movement and hesitation. Her braids and posture, set mid-stride, symbolize the beginning of her journey, echoing a dynamic balance between contemplation and movement. This portrayal aligns with Quashie's concept of Black Aliveness, where stillness and motion coexist, reflecting the multifaceted experiences of Black children. The butterfly further symbolizes transformation and freedom, enhancing the scene's vitality. The eye-level perspective ensures relatability and empathy, particularly for Black children, making Tasha's story easily accessible and deeply personal.

Peoples' use of collage and watercolor techniques, combining gouache, charcoal, and ink, creates a vivid, textured environment where Tasha's journey unfolds. This layered artistic approach mirrors the complex layers of Black identity and experience. Organic shapes like trees, flowers, and animals blend seamlessly with Tasha's figure, emphasizing her integral connection to nature. The vibrant color palette and rich textures capture the vibrancy of natural landscapes, reflecting the dynamic presence of Black Aliveness in these spaces. This speaks to the essential role of nature in offering Black girls a space to explore their identities freely and connect with the environment on their own terms.

As Tasha's class arrives at the park, the artwork captures the lively energy of exploration. Dynamic lines in the straw field and bold character outlines distinguish the children against the detailed background, celebrating their active engagement with nature. The composition, anchored by a Black park ranger, not only grounds the scene but also highlights the importance of representation in these natural spaces. Tasha's positioning within this scene, counterbalancing the textures around her, symbolizes her growing connection to her surroundings, embodying belonging and discovery that resonates with Black Aliveness. This connection to nature is vital for Black girls, providing them with a space where they can feel seen and valued.

In a serene scene where Tasha discovers a turtle, the illustration shifts to a softer, more introspective tone. Clean lines and a minimalistic approach focus on Tasha's interaction with the turtle, capturing a quiet moment of connection and introspection. This portrayal reflects the contemplative aspect of Black Aliveness, emphasizing the depth and richness of Black interiority. The cohesive color palette, featuring Tasha's deep brown skin, her yellow shirt, and the turtle's hues against a soft blue background, creates a serene atmosphere that invites reflection and connection.

As the day ends, Tasha's climactic moment of finding her voice focuses on movement and transformation. The dynamic composition, with Tasha's profile on the left and butterflies on the right, symbolizes a harmonious balance between stability and change. The scale of Tasha's face, juxtaposed with the delicate butterflies, emphasizes her newfound voice and presence. This imagery of breath, lightness, and flight captures the essence of Black Aliveness, celebrating Tasha's journey as a powerful narrative of growth, resilience, and hope.

In *Tasha's Voice*, Daria Peoples' artwork not only complements Carmen Bogan's storytelling but also transforms the narrative into a celebration of resilience and the beauty of the Black presence in nature. Through Tasha's journey, the book offers a visual testament to the richness of Black experiences and the transformative power of nature, resonating deeply with themes of Black Aliveness and joy discussed in contemporary dialogues about Black girls and nature.

4.3. Book 3—*Nell Plants a Tree*

In *Nell Plants a Tree*, by Anne Wynter and illustrated by Daniel Miyares (Wynter 2023), the fusion of visual and textual elements celebrates Black land ownership, labor, and the richness of Black life in nature. Inspired by the pecan trees of Wynter's childhood, the book

moves between past and present, illustrating the enduring legacy of planting a tree. This narrative, while simple, holds deeper significance and is a testament to the resilience and vitality of Black communities, as well as the healing power of connection to the land.

The narrative's structure alternates between time periods, showing young Nell planting a pecan seed that grows into a tree enjoyed by future generations. The tree functions as a symbol of joy, a playground, a reading nook, and a family gathering place, reflecting the cyclical nature of life and the lasting impact of Nell's actions. By centering the story around a tree, Wynter subverts the historical context in which trees were often associated with racial terror, particularly lynching, as described in historical accounts of racial violence. Instead, Wynter reclaims the tree as a symbol of life, growth, and community—transforming it into a site of nourishment, joy, and Black continuity.

Miyares's illustrations using gouache, watercolor, color ink, and acrylics further enhance this theme of Black Aliveness, which Kevin Quashie defines as the fullness of Black life beyond mere survival. The illustrations depict children climbing the large tree, showcasing not only joy and energy but also a profound engagement with nature. The organic shapes and natural colors reinforce a realistic and intimate atmosphere, while overlapping elements and layered space add depth, reflecting the multifaceted nature of Black experiences. This attention to visual complexity emphasizes the richness of ordinary Black life amid nature, suggesting a subtle form of resistance against historical narratives of Black suffering and violence.

Nell Plants a Tree emphasizes the importance of Black people reclaiming narratives of land and nature as spaces of safety, joy, and belonging by situating Black life in a direct relationship with the earth, portraying the tree as a site of familial connection and generational memory. In one flashback, young Nell, around seven or eight years old, contemplates the seed she holds. The slightly high angle of view suggests introspection, positioning her within a quiet, thoughtful connection with nature. The composition, with Nell in the foreground and surrounding foliage in balance, emphasizes her solitude and contemplative relationship with the land. This scene evokes ancestral ties to the soil and the ways in which Black people's connection to the land is a form of self-determination and identity.

The very act of Nell's planting a pecan seed is a metaphor for nurturing future generations, demonstrating how small, everyday actions can have long-lasting effects. This is further emphasized in an illustration where Nell opens a curtain to let sunlight in on her newly planted sprout. Miyares explains that this image symbolizes how Nell "lets in the sun" for her family, embodying a deep connection to the land and a legacy of care, growth, and nurture that transcends generations. This life-affirming relationship with the earth exemplifies Quashie's concept of Black Aliveness, portraying Black life not in the shadow of trauma but within a continuum of joy, labor, and renewal.

The final scenes depict Nell as an older woman surrounded by her grandchildren on a porch, with the family gathering under the tree as lanterns hanging from its branches. These moments, rich with warmth and togetherness, emphasize themes of community and shared experiences. The detailed brushstrokes and vibrant colors create a festive, celebratory atmosphere, inviting viewers to recognize the beauty of ordinary life. This celebration of Black land ownership and stewardship stands as a powerful counter-narrative to the historical accounts of violence—such as trees and lynching—and displacement often linked to Black people's relationship with the land.

4.4. Book 4—*Emile in the Field*

In *Emile in the Field*, Kevin Young's narrative and Chioma Ebinama's illustrations focus on a young Black boy, Emile, experiencing profound belonging and joy in nature. This portrayal, similar to how Wynter and Miyeras reframe the symbolism of trees often associated with racial terror in *Nell Plants a Tree*, contrasts the history of Black labor in the American South, particularly the brutal realities of the cotton economy and slavery. Historically, the connection between Black people and the land, especially the fields, was

defined by exploitation and suffering. In *Emile in the Field*, however, this painful legacy is subverted. Instead of toiling in the field, Emile explores, owns, and delights in his surroundings (Young 2022).

The historical context reminds us that during the height of the cotton economy, Black people were forced to labor on vast plantations, representing economic bondage and oppression. In this context, the field was a site of forced labor, pain, and a deprivation of freedom. Slavery was the backbone of the US cotton industry, with enslaved Africans enduring brutal conditions to fuel the economy. Though they tilled the land, they never owned it, creating a violent disconnect between their labor and the wealth it generated, which was exclusively enjoyed by white landowners.

Contrasting this with Ebinama's illustrations, where Emile—a young Black boy—romps through fields and forests, free and joyous, creates a visual counter-narrative. In the spring scene, Emile is bathed in the calming blue hues Ebinama uses to evoke peace, wonder, and universal belonging. The bright flowers, open sky, and lively playfulness starkly contrast the historical memory of backbreaking labor in cotton fields. Here, Emile is not separated from the land through oppression; he is part of it, owning his experience with curiosity and wonder. His freedom in the field reclaims and redefines a space historically associated with Black suffering.

The summer scene in the book is another important juxtaposition. While enslaved people worked relentlessly through hot summers, their labor unseen and undervalued, Emile's active, playful engagement with his surroundings showcases his connection to nature in a way that emphasizes pure joy. The colors yellow, pink, and blue evoke nostalgia, creating an intimate and personal connection to the land. Unlike enslaved people who had no agency over their labor or environment, Emile's direct engagement with the landscape suggests a shift from laboring under duress to freely exploring and owning his experience.

Even in the more subdued and reflective autumn and winter scenes, Emile is part of a nurturing environment surrounded by family and enveloped in a warm and protective space. The color palettes used by Ebinama—blue, red, and green against the snowy background—reinforce calm, security, and growth, emotions seldom associated with the historical experiences of Black children during slavery. In *Emile in the Field*, nature is a place of learning, familial bonds, and personal growth rather than a site of exploitation.

By reclaiming nature as a place and source of joy, freedom, and exploration for Emile, this book offers a visual and thematic contrast to the past, where fields represented sites of racialized violence and oppression. Ebinama's use of blue further underscores the theme of shared humanity and the right of all people, especially Black children, to enjoy and be in communion with the natural world (Whitaker 2021).

5. Cross Book Themes

In examining the four books' illustrations through the lens of Kevin Quashie's concept of Black Aliveness, several consistent themes emerge that highlight the multifaceted nature of Black experiences and the profound connections to land and nature. Quashie (2021) imagines a Black world where Black being is considered in its fullness, not merely as a response to anti-Black violence but as a heterogeneous existence shaped by relationality and interiority. This perspective is pivotal in understanding the themes we draw across these works.

5.1. Reclamation of Nature and Land

The existential connection to nature and land is a recurring theme, reflecting a historical and cultural reclamation of these spaces. In *Nell Plants a Tree*, Anne Wynter and Daniel Miyares remind us of Black land ownership and labor through the symbol of a pecan tree. The tree's growth and its central role in the lives of Nell's descendants underscore a deep, ancestral connection to the land, embodying a legacy of care and regard. Similarly, Carmen Bogan's *Where's Rodney?* illustrated by Floyd Cooper and *Emile in the Field* by Kevin Young and Chioma Ebinama, depict young Black children experiencing nature's beauty

and freedom. These stories challenge historical exclusions and highlight the importance of accessibility and inclusivity in natural spaces (Quashie 2021). Ebinama's vibrant use of color and organic forms in *Emile in the Field* captures the awe-inspiring beauty of nature, while Cooper's detailed textures in *Where's Rodney?* emphasize the tactile and immersive experiences of Black Aliveness in outdoor settings. Finally, *Tasha's Voice*, illustrated by Daria Peoples, continues this theme by showcasing a Black girl's journey of self-expression and self-knowledge within the US National Parks. All four narratives reclaim spaces and redefine them as places of transformation for Black people.

5.2. Legacy and Generational Impact

The idea of continuity is central to these visual narratives. *Nell Plants a Tree* illustrates how a single act of planting a tree can resonate through generations, providing joy, comfort, and a sense of rootedness. This theme is echoed in *Tasha's Voice*, where Tasha's discovery and expression of her voice signify a personal legacy of resilience and self-discovery.

In *Where's Rodney?* and *Emile in the Field*, the characters' experiences in nature are transformative, suggesting that these moments of exploration will have lasting impacts on their lives. That Emile experiences the land with his father signifies a multigenerational connection that does not begin or end with enslavement or sharecropping (Quashie 2021). These visual narratives emphasize the importance of creating and preserving spaces where Black children freely explore and connect with nature across time and generations.

5.3. Representation and Belonging

The representation of Black children in natural settings challenges historical narratives and asserts their rightful place in these environments. Each book emphasizes the diversity and richness of Black experiences in nature, celebrating moments of contemplation, curiosity, and exploration. This is particularly evident in Cooper's illustrations in *Where's Rodney?* and Ebinama's work in *Emile in the Field*, where the vibrant double-spread depictions of Black children in nature promote a more inclusive vision of who belongs in these spaces. Furthermore, in *Where's Rodney?*, the characters' curiosity about an outdoor space allows us to think again about where Rodney truly feels belonging. In *Nell Plants a Tree*, belonging manifests through family gatherings under the tree. *Tasha's Voice* presents a nuanced exploration of self-expression and transformation, capturing the fulfillment of finding one's voice in a space traditionally not seen as inclusive. The visual narratives provide an interior expressiveness of "belonging" (Quashie 2009) that is enlivened by a wide range of human forces brought forth by the natural world. These expressivities signify an expanded Black cultural aesthetic.

6. Conclusions

Historically, narratives around Black people and nature have often been underrepresented or portrayed through a limited lens, frequently focusing on urban settings or historical hardships. Through the lens of Black Aliveness, these four books collectively present powerful narratives that represent Black life in its fullness. In doing so, the representations enable the concept of Black Aliveness (Quashie 2021) to be further understood through portrayals of a wide range of inner life and uninhibited behaviors. In this way, the books and their characters "challenge or counter social discourse" and are "articulate and meaningful" in their impact on nature.

The themes of (1) reclamation, (2) legacy and generational impact, and (3) representation and belonging highlight the complexity and richness of Black experiences. These narratives and visual elements not only challenge historical exclusions but also offer more complete visions of Black lives, emphasizing the importance of relationality and the transformative power of nature. These four books illustrate Black Aliveness and the intimate relationship between Black people and the natural world, offering stories filled with warmth, inclusivity, adventure, and beauty. They are powerful reminders of the importance of representation and the transformative power of nature.

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