

**From Root to Seed:  
Black, Brown, and  
Indigenous Poets  
Write the Northeast**

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**This Nature....It is Us.**  
**A Foreword by Shanta Lee**

When I met this book, I did not realize that I'd been preparing for it for years: an interview with artist, storyteller and author, Dr. Carolyn Finney; and my work with the first known African American Poet, Lucy Terry Prince.

These verses stand in their power because they join their kin within a growing literary canon. *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, (Ed. Camille Dungy, 2009), was the first of its kind focusing on the nature writing of Black poets. *From Root to Seed*, reminds, instructs, and hands down a wisdom that echoes as strong as Courtney Lindwall's piece (2021, Natural Resources Defense Council), "Black Walden Came First. Thoreau, After."

The wisdom simply requires that one adjust their eyes, ears and whole spirit to take this in: The land so intimate, entangled with, kinned with Brown and Black Bodies that there is no true beginning or end as they have imprinted upon each other through time in ways that can't be counted.

An intimacy that predates the current revisitation; that supersedes any titles or words for the people who are entered into this kind of relationship; that embodied intersectionality because this marriage, this weddedness, this kinship go back to a before time.

And because of the degree of intimacy that Black and Brown bodies hold with the land, we are inviting you to reconfigure your seeing.

What you hold in your hands is many things all at once.

It is an invitation that invites you to see how the coastline, the trees, their roots, and all of the things within the landscape are aptly noticed as within Abdurraqib's verses they are "congregation/Spirit work" that brings you into a realm of the sacred that is just nature doing what it does.

It is a time-endured lullaby that lies within Doyon's verses "Every living thing began inside this same salty,/undulating womb, and every living thing must/ find its way back here, sometimes. Even you."

It is a chant with many things that invite repeating like within Russell's poem, "How long til I remember/this body belongs everywhere/on land/on sea/On Goddx, trust yourself to remember/to belong everywhere your ancestors have been/and everywhere future kin have yet to see"

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It is the reminder that land can be the site of crimes within the enmeshment with Black and Brown Bodies, e.g. Jordan-Zachery's "Break, in case of emergency" with the lines "The sea ain't got no back door!"

And a reminder about the vanished points between nature, humanity and harm within Hardy's lines, "The priest contemplates murder red rain amphibians boils slick/ swords calls these plagues.//But then there are the murders/of everything black. Everybody./ Everyone sees this."

*From Root to Seed* is also a clear road mapped toward an imprinting within your own spirit in three sections, that when put together in one full bodied line, speak as a full verse and summoning.

A Place                      For Our Bodies                      In These Surroundings

The spellwork is the verses that invite you to do a noticing while you allow yourself to become engaged in an undeniable seduction and destruction that is what we want to stamp as the wild as if we are separate from it. However, what these poets remind us is that the concept of separation is impossible just as undeniable as the woven fact of violence, death, beauty and just-is-ness that is nature itself/ourselves.

A welcome is equally important as a good-bye. In *From Root to Seed*, you are properly greeted with the first instruction that is Montgomery's poem about allowing the things around us to be the guide, inviting you, your spirit and your whole mind to engage with a coming home of sorts while Paul's closing poem tells it in the final lines, "Live as you are meant to live./Live./Live."

In an era when living Black and Brown is an audacious act, how could we not listen as these lines instruct? How can we not do the doin'?

Nature does what it does and so shall we in our kinning with it.

Come in, as this does not require you know how to read a field guide.  
Come in, as this does not require that you have to language right in order to take it in. You don't need to know the latin names for things that have had names long before someone decided to up and name them.

Enjoy the verses.

Taste them in your mouth.

Feel them as you feel all that holds you.

This land. This Nature that is us and we are it.

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## Preface: A Place for Our Bodies in These Surroundings

When you think about the land and the ecosystem of the Northeastern region of the United States, what do you imagine? You likely envision the rolling hills and mountains of the places we now call New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine. You might imagine coastlines – both rocky cliffs and sandy beaches. Perhaps you visualize wide open spaces in the north and densely congested spaces in the south and west of the region. And when you think of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people in the region, where do you place us? Are we in those wide-open spaces? Are we in engaging with the natural world or are we set apart and isolated from it?

*Dear reader, I need to tell you: we are everywhere. And we are in relationship with the land and with nature wherever we are.*

The ways that we relate to nature are as diverse as we are – from cookouts in the city park, to through-hiking the Appalachian trail, to mastering horticulture. Personally, I found my way into a conscious relationship with nature in my mid-30s. This relationship grew from a place of necessity – a need for healing and a need to be grounded in something outside of myself. When I moved from the Midwest to the Northeast and into the land stewarded by the Wabanaki people, I found that healing and grounding in the breathtaking ecosystem of the region that begged me to stay. And so I did – I stayed.

As I fell deeper and deeper in love with the land and its non-human inhabitants, I was confronted with the idea that my Black body did not belong in these wide-open spaces. At times this message would resound loud and clear in the questions about my presence at a bird sanctuary or doubt cast towards my skills and expertise. But, more often, I found the message in the absences. When I would go out exploring, I rarely saw people who looked like me. When I would take courses or go on naturalist-led educational walks, I rarely saw people who looked like me. When I would search the wealth of ecopoetry or nature poetry coming from this region for voices that sounded like mine, I rarely found them.

*From Root to Seed* speaks volumes into that void. The poets featured in this collection situate themselves firmly in the Northeast and put themselves in conversation with the land they know and the natural world they celebrate.

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The poems in the section “A Place” give shape to land and to place, both the at-home feelings connected to place as well as the feelings of disconnection and rejection. Framed by Jason Montgomery and Robert Anthony Gibbons pausing and opening themselves up in awareness to the beacons in nature that call and speak to us. Throughout this section, the poets grapple with the power of stones, the ocean, and the perpetual harms colonizers have inflicted on Black, Brown, and Indigenous people who have called these lands home.

From the macro-view to the micro-view, “For Our Bodies,” turns attention to Black, Brown, and Indigenous bodies inhabiting the natural world and contending with all it has to offer. From Rheros Iliad Kagoni’s brief meditation on their likeness to strawberries to Mihku Paul’s wading in to greet the “congregation of pebbles” and the life below the water, this section reminds us that non-white bodies have always had a place in and intimate understanding of the natural world.

“In These Surroundings” draws our attention back out, outside of ourselves and beyond land. The poems in this section engage on the level of ecosystem, grappling with the waiting and loss wrapped up in phenology and the passing of time. The poems in this section are rife with weighty contemplations, like RescuePoetix’s questioning our interpretation of star language and Ebbie Russell’s woeful call to the woods of Plainfield, “Who will hold me when I return?”

This collection is important because it responds, with resonance: YES, we are here. Through resistance and resilience, we are here. With our deep-rooted knowing and our mutli-faceted understanding of this land, this place, and our connections – we *are* here and we *have been* here.

—*Samaa Abdurraqib, PhD*  
*Brunswick, Maine*  
*April 2023*

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# A Place



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**A Nonet for Charlestown, RI**

Jason Montgomery

There are lights floating on night insects  
Lights drifting like clouds on the sea  
There are lights across the sky  
of lights there are many  
along the shores of  
Charlestown's night  
All of which  
guide me  
home.

# For Our Bodies



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## **Eu Sou Capoeira**

Winston Antoine

I am a Capoeirista

I wonder what it means to be balanced

I hear the vibrations of the berimbau hum through the air

I see the spirits of my ancestors in the joda

I want to learn and teach, I want to learn to teach

I am a Capoeirista

I pretend to be the animals that surround me

I feel the energy of the environment

I touch the ground in homage of those before me, those that support me

I worry about passing it on

I cry at my physical and mental limitations

I am a Capoeirista

I understand that I am the sum of many wholes

I say that true beauty is shown under the sway of the moonlight

I dream about Calypso and me, the flow of the sea

Try to see the Ocean in me

I am a Capoeirista

# In These Surroundings



**While Driving on I-295**

Maya Williams

I saw a beautiful brown hawk  
gliding in mid-air.

I never saw one this close before.

Then, six feet below its flight,

I saw bloodied butchered pieces  
of a deer upon the road.

Dammit. Mia was right.

I *can* see the bright side of roadkill.

I want to push out pessimism.

Prove them wrong.

But I can't.

Beauty was witnessed  
and fed well.

## About the Editor and Foreword Writer



Samaa Abdurraqib,  
Editor

**Samaa Abdurraqib, PhD** lives in Wabanaki territory, close to the ocean and the mountains. She is in love with the natural world and is committed to learning more about the land and life that surrounds her. She served as a volunteer leader for the national organization Outdoor Afro (2018-2022) and is currently deep into a year-long Maine Master Naturalist course. Recently, Samaa's poetry can be found in *Enough! Poems of Resistance and Protest*, *Bigger Than Bravery: Black Resilience and Reclamation in a Time of Pandemic*, *Cider Press Review*, *Writing the Land: Maine*, and in her self-published chapbook *Each Day Is Like an Anchor* (2020).

**Shanta Lee** is an award winning writer across genres, journalist, visual artist and public intellectual actively participating in the cultural discourse with work that has been widely featured. Shanta Lee is the author of poetry collections *GHETTOCLAUSTROPHOBIA: Dreamin of Mama While Trying to Speak Woman in Woke Tongues* (Diode Editions, 2021) and the illustrated poetry collection *Black Metamorphoses* (Etruscan Press, 2023). Her latest work, *Dark Goddess: An Exploration of the Sacred Feminine*, is on view at the University of Vermont's Fleming Museum of Art. [www.Shantalee.com](http://www.Shantalee.com)



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