for everyone

We need to challenge the perception of Britain’s ‘white landscape’, writes Louisa Adjoa Parker

Although in theory the beauty of the British countryside should be available for all to enjoy, such spaces are popularly imagined as ‘white’ environments. Rural areas represent some of the last bastions of Old England, an imagined ‘golden’ age where everything was right, and white. As part of the current discussion around identity, Britishness, and belonging, I wanted to explore some of the issues involved in the disconnection between people of colour and Nature.

“The countryside is popularly perceived as a white landscape predominantly inhabited by white people, hiding both the growing living presence and the increasing recreational participation of people of colour,” wrote Julian Agyeman and Rachel Spooner in the book Contested Countryside: Culture, Otherness, Marginalisation and Rurality. When I read their words as a sociology student in the early 2000s, they struck a chord – here was my lived experience, something known yet not fully understood. The trope that black, Asian and minority ethnic people only inhabit urban spaces is strong, rooted in factors such as economic constraints, stereotypes, racism and exclusion. A small body of literature has explored this issue, but it has been little discussed outside academia.

The idea that black equals urban, for instance, is a relatively new form of blackness as viewed through a white lens. A child of dual heritage growing up in 1970s Britain, I was assumed by white people to have come from Africa. Later, such assumptions began to include urban parts of the UK where black and Asian communities were firmly established. The idea that a black person could come ‘from’ rural Britain was impossible – presumably only white-skinned people could spring forth from such green and pleasant land. And we see this on TV; in adverts, in the arts – black and brown people portrayed as urban beings. While it’s true that the majority of people of colour in the UK live in urban spaces, we don’t do so exclusively. There is more than one way to be black or Asian; like anyone else we have multiple, intersecting identities.

In the post-war immigration era, people migrated to the UK from Africa, the Caribbean and Asia for economic reasons. I spoke to Satish Kumar, editor emeritus of Resurgence & Ecologist, who settled in the UK in the 1970s. These people, he said, “focused on cities, work, factories, living upstairs with a shop downstairs. They didn’t have the opportunity to engage with Nature. They were under economic pressure, working 24/7. It’s not about less love for Nature, but that economic circumstances didn’t allow this engagement.” I can’t help wondering if there was also an element, for immigrants like my Ghanaian father on arrival to the mother country, of wanting to present an urbanised, anglicised, modern version of themselves, and to leave any association with rurality (and poverty) behind. And stories of being forced to work the land were still within living memory.

In spite of the inevitable pull of cities, people with African and Asian heritage have gravitated towards the countryside. Our experience in rural spaces has been difficult. The 1992 report Keep them in Birmingham: Challenging Racism in South-West England found “a disturbing picture of racial prejudice and discrimination towards ethnic minority residents”. Various reports have shown that people of colour in the South West experienced intolerance ranging from subtle racism to verbal abuse and physical violence. In 2004 Trevor Phillips, chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, described a “racial apartheid”, which kept black and Asian people out of the countryside. In 2001, Jay Rayner’s ‘race map’ showed that people in rural areas were more likely to experience racial attack than those in inner-city areas. And since the Brexit referendum in 2016, hate crime in Britain has increased, with rural areas being more affected. It is understandable why many ethnic minority people don’t want to go to the countryside: it doesn’t sound safe.

Not only do people of colour feel excluded from rural areas (or are mistrusted in them), but also we are not represented in the stories being told about land and Nature. The conversation around racism in Nature writing was propelled forward recently by Richard Smyth’s article ‘The Dark Side of Nature Writing’. Smyth points to a long connection between Nature writing and right-wing ideology. For example, children’s book Tarka the Otter was voted this year the nation’s second-favourite Nature book, in spite of the fact that the author was a known Nazi. Key tropes of a post-war, ‘back-to-the-land’ movement persist, argues...