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THE SUN INTERVIEW

Poetic Justice

Camille T. Dungy On Racism, Writing, And Radical Empathy

BY AIRICA PARKER | JUNE 2018



Camille T. Dungy

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When *Outside* magazine recognized Camille T. Dungy in January as one of twenty-five essential “women writing about the wild,” she told the editors, “I am never not thinking about nature, because I don’t understand a way we can be honest about who we are without understanding that we are nature.” Coming from a black poet and essayist, her words challenge assumptions about nature writing, which has long been dominated by white voices. As part of her efforts to reveal a fuller American experience of the natural world, Dungy put together the anthology *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*. Unless the conversation about nature includes writers of color, she says, “it is not a conversation — it is a monologue.”

Born in Denver, Colorado, in 1972, Dungy grew up in Irvine, California. Her father was a physician who taught at medical schools around the country. Dungy finished high school in Iowa City, Iowa, and got a BA from Stanford University and a master’s in fine arts from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her writing honors include an American Book Award, a Sustainable Arts Foundation grant, two NAACP Image Award nominations, a National Book Critics Circle Award nomination, a 2003 NEA fellowship for poetry and a 2018 NEA fellowship for prose. She is the author of four poetry collections, the most recent being *Trophic Cascade*. Her first collection of personal essays, *Guidebook to Relative Strangers: Journeys into Race, Motherhood, and History*, came out last year. Author Edwidge Danticat called it a “stunningly beautiful love letter from a mother to her daughter to help her daughter embrace the world she lives in, to introduce her to her ancestors, and prepare her for the future.” Her website is camilledungy.com.

Dungy is a professor at Colorado State University, where I work as an instructor. We share a few friends, but this interview was the first time we sat down to talk at length. I met her in the backyard of her home in Fort Collins, Colorado, where she lives with her husband and daughter. It was a hot spring day, starting to feel like summer, and she showed me the patch of wildflowers she was cultivating to replace most of the lawn. She described watching the sun and the rain for cues about where to plant what. She doesn't use chemicals or pesticides in her garden and is committed to working with the land as it is.

As a lawn mower buzzed in the distance, we settled in the shade of her porch and began to talk about race, history, and the current political moment.

Parker: Much of your work highlights your racial identity as a writer. Can you describe what being an African American means to you?

Dungy: Wow. We're jumping straight into the big questions! The *African* in front of the *American* changes the way I move through the world 98 percent of the time. I have to ask: How safe or unsafe, loved or unloved, successful or thwarted am I likely to be in the context in which I find myself? These are questions we all probably ask with some regularity, but, as a black woman in America, I ask them instinctually and continuously. How might people perceive or misperceive me based on their own ideas about what it means to be black?

I'm proud of my heritage. I'm proud of the accomplishments of my family, accomplishments often achieved despite the obstacles of their race, gender, or region. My grandmother, born in 1918, was one of twelve children, and each of the twelve earned at least a college degree. The frequent negative representations of black people in America make my story sound remarkable, but I see it as normal.

There is a stark division between the world white people often imagine for blacks and the world in which we really live. In the early 1990s I loved the TV show *Beverly Hills, 90210*. West Beverly High reminded me of my own Southern California high school, and I felt my life was represented on TV once a week. I loved every episode — except the one in which a black family moves to Beverly Hills. It was maddening. The show depicted this family like they were freaks, like it was shocking for them to be in Beverly Hills at all. The episode was offensive, out of touch, and depressing, a hurtful reminder that, though I felt I was a part of the world I was watching, I was invisible to the show's creators.

There are black people in places like Beverly Hills. Really. The American imagination is too often limited in its ability to picture who black people can be. That TV episode is an example of the discrepancy between my reality and the way white people perceive me. We need to reconsider our assumptions. I made a decision to have a child, and it's not a decision my husband and I would have made if we couldn't have faith that our child — and children like her — could enjoy the freedom to achieve her full potential. Every day I work to make this world worthy of the risk I took.

Parker: What does being an American mean to you?

Dungy: My family name can be traced back to the 1700s in Virginia. When I lived there, people knew how to spell my last name, which offered me a sense of belonging, though the name itself is linked to a history of enslavement and repression. Even some of the stories we celebrate in my family — of ancestors who served in the Virginia House of Delegates toward the end of the nineteenth century, and others who were among the first blacks to attend American colleges — even these have to do with celebrating the ways my ancestors moved beyond the limits this country set up for them. So saying that my family name dates back three centuries in this country doesn't quite feel like the whole picture of what it means for me to be an American. I could say that I've belonged here all this time, but I also have to think about the ways I am constantly reminded that I have been excluded from belonging.

We're talking in my backyard — which I adore — but when I moved in, this yard was a suburban landscape of green grass and clean rock borders. I understand the ways in which our interactions with place teach us about who we are, and so I can see my way of dealing with my yard as an extension of the ways I deal with myself, my daughter, my family, and this world. We could

have a homogeneous landscape, but I choose not to. That's why I tore out the rock and grass and replaced it with soil and wildflowers. I crave another kind of ecosystem — one with a variety of life-forms. Not just flowers but native grasses and sometimes dandelions and bugs and rabbits and birds. This is more representative of who I am than a plain green lawn with pristine borders. My yard is diverse, full of surprise and wonder. That's the America I want to be a part of.

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Parker: Why is diversity such a controversial subject?

Dungy: Diversity is scary. To truly support it means to give up control. You don't quite know what will happen when one plant grows next to another, or when one kind of person talks to another kind of person. So many of our struggles with each other arise out of fear. We're anxious around people if we don't know where they come from, what they eat, what music they listen to, what they care about. It's easier to stick with who and what you know. This is true for my garden, too. I know how to deal with mums, so I plant a lot of them. I don't know much about the sea holly I just put in, so it will take more education and, perhaps,

more effort to tend. With people, of course, the stakes are greater. When we see things differently than the person next to us, we may ask questions or make statements that are unintentionally hurtful. And we are understandably averse to causing pain — and to being in pain. But difference can also generate strength. With risk comes reward. I am willing to invest in that and push for it.

Parker: Is the Civil Rights Movement over?

Dungy: I don't believe anything is over. The Civil Rights Movement was a core moment. The lessons it taught us — about social activism and political engagement and strategy — are still very much in play. Many of the people who were active in that movement are alive today — and not particularly old, either. Ruby Bridges, the kindergarten student who helped desegregate schools in New Orleans, turned sixty-three last year. She's not even old enough to retire!

The Civil Rights Movement became a model for the Women's Movement, the Gay Rights Movement, and much of the anti-war and anti-poverty movements. Who we are as activists today was shaped in many ways by the Civil Rights Movement. And the fundamental questions it raised have not gone away. As a culture, we are still learning how to be civil and how to acknowledge each other's rights.

Parker: How has American culture been shaped by slavery and the Civil War?

Dungy: When I work toward a clearer understanding of our present moment, I often end up circling back to the past. I am dedicated to writing about history because it isn't finished. We are living in history. And it has lessons to teach us. America would not be the wealthy country it is without slave labor. We would not have our power or wealth if we had not, for a very long time, depended on the unpaid labor of *millions* of human beings. I feel like I shouldn't have to spell this out, but maybe I do. America was built by the labor of enslaved men, women, and children. Cotton wasn't king just in the South. Many of the most productive cotton mills were in the North, as were the insurance companies and other industries that profited off those mills. Without a lot of unpaid labor, those profits would have been significantly less. And we are still depending on the unpaid or underpaid labor of *millions* of human beings — from prison workers to immigrants to foreign labor. The question of slavery is still with us. America has a legacy of harming other human beings and justifying that harm by glorifying the wealth it brings to a few. Thankfully America also has a legacy of resisting that impulse.

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Parker: Speaking of glorifying the wealth of the minority, you write that in 1860 only around “5 percent of the Southern population owned even one slave, and a significantly smaller percentage owned more than twenty.”

Dungy: That quote is from *Guidebook to Relative Strangers: Journeys into Race, Motherhood, and History*. Taken out of context, it might seem as if I'm saying that there weren't that many slaveholders in America, so why bother making such a fuss about slavery? In fact, I'm making precisely the opposite point. Millions of human beings were held in bondage. It's mind-boggling to me that such a small number of people controlled so much of the wealth back then — and much of that wealth was accrued through the bodies of other human beings. A black human being was a commodity, an object, not particularly different in value from a piece of jewelry, a few head of livestock, or several bolts of fabric. My point is that most white people didn't have the kind of wealth that the institution of slavery was protecting, just like most people today don't have the kind of wealth protected by tax codes that allow a billionaire to write off a private jet but don't allow schoolteachers to write off \$250 worth of school supplies. It's sometimes difficult to accept the fact that whole portions of our society were built up — are still built up — to support the wealth of just a few. Why don't more people object to that? Perhaps because so many Americans think maybe one day they will be the billionaire with access to the unchecked power to acquire wealth at the expense of other human beings. When the focus is on the glorification of wealth rather than on an honest examination of how that wealth might have been accrued, we routinely ignore brutalities visited upon our fellow human beings.

Parker: How are race and class related?

Dungy: Some people would suggest they are the same, but I think that's a dangerous falsehood. It suggests, for instance, that all of the obstacles faced by the "black urban poor" can be blamed solely on the "poor" part of that categorization, with no regard to the "black" component — or, for that matter, to the history of urban America over the past 150 years, a history that includes laws and de facto policies that prevented black people from amassing wealth through property ownership, job advancement, and even bank accounts. Did you know that in some places it was impossible for black people to have bank accounts? How do you save if you can't even put money in a bank, much less get a loan to buy a home? And, should you still manage to find the means to buy a home, you were prevented from buying in most neighborhoods because of the color of your skin.

Just to state the obvious, not all blacks are poor. Oprah, one of the wealthiest women in the world, has been turned away from exclusive stores more than once because the shopkeepers didn't believe she had the money to buy their incredibly expensive goods. That's not about her class. That's about her race.

So racism and classism are not the same, but they are intertwined. Racism is a tool of classism. Wealthy elites use it to keep workers of different races from banding together to fight for better treatment. The owners tell the white workers they are better than the black workers and give them just enough power to feel they are a class above. The white workers will then fight to maintain their sense of superiority whenever it is threatened. They will do all they can to keep the black workers out of their unions and their neighborhoods. Those at the top use race and class to maintain separations that prevent the larger body of Americans from coming together and questioning divisive and exploitative policies.

Parker: As the granddaughter of an American Baptist minister, what is your religious identity?

Dungy: I am a Christian who is sad that it is often difficult for me to say that I am a Christian. I believe in what I understand to be the fundamental teachings of Jesus Christ: Love one another, and do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Justice and care and dangerous, radical kindness — I believe in all that. But I don't believe that there is just one "right" Church. And I don't believe in waiting to go to heaven to get my due. Uh-uh. I'm going to fight for my due here and now, and for my daughter's due. This is the only version of heaven that my God has given me, so this is where I am going to do my work.

In this political climate, what *Christian* means to many is not what I mean by it. As a result, I've had difficulty finding religious communities that feel right for me, which breaks my mother's heart. When I moved to Lynchburg, Virginia — the home of televangelist Jerry Falwell and the university he founded — I tried to go to a few churches, but my reaction was always: *Ugh*. One time, while the minister was giving a sermon about how we do not have free will, I had an uncontrollable coughing fit. I didn't know if it was free will or not, but I had to leave the church. [*Laughs.*]

Finally I went to another church with a friend and realized I was surrounded by all the social activists I'd been working with in Lynchburg, and I thought, I guess I've found my people!

I've managed to find a similar church everywhere I've lived. It brings me comfort to know that I'm not some lone wing nut. There is a community of people who believe that social justice and social activism and radical love and kindness have a place in a faith community — are, in fact, the things upon which our faith might rest. I get strength from that, but it can still be lonely sometimes.

Parker: The name Lynchburg doesn't sound too welcoming.

Dungy: The people of the town insist that it has nothing to do with lynching but rather is named for John Lynch, who built a ferry landing at that point on the river. Which may be true. It also may be true that a relative of John Lynch took part in one of the first recorded instances of summary justice in the colony. My recollection is that he strung a Tory up by his thumbs. It's also true that there are an awful lot of Lynchburgs along the eastern seaboard, and Lynch was a common name in the British Isles. And still there is violence in the name that I can't help but hear: a history of violence leveled against people who look like me; violence enacted for the purpose of making me feel always on edge and afraid to step out of line. The presence of towns named Lynchburg — like the presence of monuments to the Confederacy — is part of the background noise of a system of terror.

Since I brought up the monuments to the Confederacy, I'll say this about them: They were mostly erected long after the end of the Civil War, in times and places where there were organized movements resisting the systematic subjugation of black citizens. They were erected as statements about who should hold authority. Spoiler alert: the answer was meant to be white people. It's not like this information has been hidden. For some of us it has been made very obvious, and we fail to pay attention at our own peril. I mentioned earlier that I'm always wondering how safe or unsafe, cared for or dismissed, thwarted or rewarded I might be in a particular place. When I make that assessment, this sort of background noise is as relevant to me as the more overt policies and practices of violent white supremacy.

Parker: How do churches influence American politics?

Dungy: Our Founding Fathers tried to separate religion from politics. They tried to keep church and state apart because they understood that there is something in us humans that doesn't want to separate them. And sometimes that tendency turns us toward fundamentalism. All around the world there is a common core to fundamentalist thinking — regardless of how different faiths might deny those similarities. Across cultures, fundamentalism has similar things to say about the role of women, the role of the arts, the role of self-expression, the role of God.

The American experiment is always moving back and forth between extremes. We've always been both liberal and conservative. Collectively we are always asking: Are we this, or are we that? Are we a God-fearing country, or do we stand for religious liberty? Are we a welcoming nation, or do we disdain immigrants? Are we a progressive country or a conservative one? We are both familiar to ourselves and strangers to ourselves at once. This shifting line between religion and politics is just another iteration of that.

Parker: Was the election of President Trump evidence of the back and forth you describe? What are your feelings about it?

Dungy: I'm devastated but not surprised by his election. I believe that Donald Trump is simply the current face of an ideology that already existed and isn't going anywhere.

I do question the assumption that only rural people supported this president, or only poor white people. That can't be true, because poor white people don't actually have much political capital. Placing the blame on them alone creates more frustration and alienation between Americans without addressing the core issues at stake.

Parker: In part the shift to the right seems a response to Barack Obama's presidency. What do you think will be the long-term effect of our having had a biracial president?

Dungy: Well, one effect that is immediately obvious is that America has a new story. James Baldwin made a documentary in the sixties with director Richard O. Moore. In it, Baldwin went to black neighborhoods in the San Francisco Bay Area to interview people about their lives and perspectives. When he asked if it was possible for America ever to have a black president, the young people he interviewed found the question absurd. Obama changed that. A black American president will never again be an impossibility. In this country our questions, traumas, and joys so often seem static — even regressive. It's nice to be reminded sometimes that there are ways in which we have managed to progress.

Parker: What kind of role would you like to see the Obamas play now?

Dungy: Let them go on vacation! We seriously need to think about how much we ask of our moral leaders. Why can't you read what they have written and apply the lessons? Why can't you become a political leader or a social activist on your own? You can do it. Let them be. I always want to tell people to stop pulling Martin Luther King Jr. out of his historical context, particularly when the focus is on his nonviolent, passive-resistance strategies. King was dangerously, courageously compassionate — and confrontational — in direct and active response to injustices in his time. When you pull people out of context, you diminish their message. And you aren't taking personal responsibility for changing the world in which you find yourself today.



The American experiment is always moving back and forth between extremes. We've always been both liberal and conservative. Collectively we are always asking: Are we this, or are we that? Are we a God-fearing country, or do we stand for religious liberty? Are we a welcoming nation, or do we disdain immigrants? . . . We are both familiar to ourselves and strangers to ourselves at once.

Parker: In which areas of society do you see racism as most prevalent?

Dungy: I hesitate to point to certain areas. Racism — and resistance to racism — is part of the fabric of this country. When our twenty-dollar bill celebrates a man who is connected to the genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of black people, I can't see how I can say, "Let's just focus on this one area." We are part of an ecosystem. We can't just worry about the whales, so to speak. We need to address what's happening to our oceans.

But, as individuals, I know we sometimes have to choose the battles that matter most to us. We cannot fight the whole war.

Parker: One pressing concern is racial profiling.

Dungy: Surviving racism takes its toll. Racism is toxic in its overt forms, and it is toxic in its more subtle forms. It is toxic to all people who participate in it. But I don't think that's what you're asking about. I think you're asking about how racial profiling hurts someone who is black like me. When I move into a new place, I've got to wonder if my neighbors will subject me to the trauma of profiling. Even after I am comfortably assimilated into my community, if a black friend comes to visit, I have to wonder if a neighbor will call the police or alert the neighborhood listserve about a "suspicious character." It happens again and again. Sometimes it amounts to nothing, but sometimes it adds up to a death. If you spend your life wondering, whenever you go out with your black husband, *Is this the time I watch him get killed? Is this the time? Is this the time?* it takes a toll on your mind and body. Stress can create physical trauma. Isn't it interesting that black *American* men have a higher rate of hypertension and stress-related heart disease? It's not all black men; it's black American men. So there might be something about being a black man in America that is creating a higher level of stress.

Parker: What can an individual American do to oppose racial profiling?

Dungy: The three black women who founded Black Lives Matter — Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi — were recently awarded the Sydney Peace Prize for doing just this. Garza says — and I want to quote her directly here, because I think their narrative has been co-opted and corrupted too many times — "Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression." These women are demanding a shift in the way we define humanity in this country. They present alarming statistics about the rates of racially driven police violence, which is part of white-supremacist culture. If you are black and live in America, the need for a movement like Black Lives Matter is not surprising. The fact that it is surprising to so many white people reveals the rift in communication and experience in this country. Black Americans are always in peril. Black Lives Matter has brought this perpetual peril to light and demanded transparency from the police and an accounting of our systems. Black Lives Matter was founded because of failures of justice. Its members are meeting with politicians, becoming politicians, helping change school policies, talking to police, and trying to address these failures of justice. The kinds of conversations the movement promotes help provide answers to your question of how an individual American can oppose systemic racial oppression. When I'm feeling despair, their work helps me circle back to hope. I always have to circle back to hope, or I crumble.

You may note that I didn't assume that the "individual American" referred to in your question was necessarily a white person. The question might well have been asking what white readers of this interview can do to oppose racial profiling, but for me to assume that an "American" is necessarily white would be to participate in the very form of erasure and bias from which racial profiling stems. To assume that the only people who belong under the label "American" are white people is to support the idea that the presence of a person of color is suspect, invasive, even criminal. Our ideas about who belongs where and when are informed by history and bias, and these shape our behavior toward others. But nothing says we can't be more attentive, that we

can't be part of effecting positive change. We can inform ourselves about our history, we can challenge our biases, and, in these ways, we can take responsibility for our behavior.

Parker: Our culture often projects its own idea of "blackness" onto you, expecting you to conform to certain stereotypes. How do you deal with that?

Dungy: Oh, heavens. This is a daily question. I start by remembering that I am me, and I love myself. This is important. The ideas people project onto me are just that: their projections. And to a certain extent I can choose whether or not to accept them. But these projections also put me in peril, which is why I need to cultivate love.

What's more interesting to me is how I overcome the limiting biases that are projected onto me. If I didn't discover positive paths, my experiences — and books — would be unbearably devastating. I am always more concerned with the path toward hope and change.

Parker: How can we acknowledge our differences without letting them define us?

Dungy: We shouldn't make assumptions or believe stereotypes about people who are different, but we *should* see difference. If you say to me, "I don't see race when I see you," that means you've just erased a large piece of my experience and identity. That's a type of violence. That statement also suggests that the only way you can connect with me is by erasing a part of my person. When we recognize difference without bias, we begin to see the potential of the person in front of us. When I meet a new person, I see a mystery. It's beautiful but also scary. That's why many people project a preconceived notion onto the mystery — to make it less frightening, to maintain control.

Parker: Will you say more about the dangers of erasure?

Dungy: Sometimes people have trouble understanding the concept. If it's not an experience you have had, if you live your life in the dominant culture, erasure may seem like an esoteric or academic concern. But for me it is neither. Erasure is the subtraction, reduction, and diminishment of part of an identity, or of the entire person linked to that identity. I have to counter that diminishment in order to survive — and hopefully thrive — on a day-to-day basis.

It's not just race that can be erased. My writing is deeply steeped in motherhood, for example, which is risky because I've been taught that literature needs to have a masculine, political point of view to be important. I write about motherhood despite what I've been taught because I refuse to erase my motherhood, and I believe in the equal importance of domestic matters. But I run the risk of having my writing dismissed because some people think that black writing can only be about capital-P Politics, not the conversations that take place between mothers in the kitchen. For me to be a whole person and an effective writer, I need to be the complicated and multifaceted individual I am. I can't dismiss one part of my being for the sake of someone else's idea of what is interesting about me.

Writing is fundamentally an act of empathy for me. Part of why I'm so focused on the environment in my writing — despite the fact that I've been told that if I'm writing about black people, it's a waste of time to spend ink on the environment — is because I am concerned about other living beings. I understand other life-forms to be sentient, emotional beings worthy of our compassion. If you have ever loved a dog and had a dog love you, you know what I mean. I have a friend who had a pet chicken who would walk to the end of the road and wait for her to come home from school every day. I know people who treat their pet rats with the grace and kindness they would a human child. All life-forms are capable of something deeper than just self-interested survival. To live in an ecologically conscious manner, and to live in a manner that supports social justice, we must have empathy. Radical empathy is my practice. It's difficult but necessary. Each day I try to live this way, and often I fail, but I hope I have more successes than failures.

Recognizing diversity is an antidote to erasure. Fostering true diversity — acknowledging the complex and rich experiences of others — is an antidote to the divisive and violent behaviors we simplify under umbrella terms like "racism" and racial "supremacy."

Parker: We've been talking about race and identity, but you just brought in the environment, as you so often do in your books. How does the environment play into the African American experience?

Dungy: We're often told we have no relationship to the land. Ownership of land has remained nearly impossible for many blacks. Pushed into urban environments, we were often separated from an environmental consciousness — even though a city is actually a built environment with living inhabitants. This forced migration into the city was a separation from the land, which affects how black people write about the environment. We're often not writing out of a sense of ownership and comfort regarding the land. It's all more complicated than this, of course, but this has been the dominant narrative regarding black people and nature.

I'm starting to see different kinds of stories in environmental writing, though. The conversation is broadening. People are publishing works that take into account how landscapes are connected to political realities — for example, the reality that Europeans were not the first people on this continent. Some environmental writing promotes the concept of North America's pristine, uninhabited wilderness, but, in fact, native peoples lived in nearly all the American spaces we now consider "wildernesses." And there were thriving ecosystems in these places as well. If I see the Arctic as a place that has been inhabited by indigenous people for thousands of years, it is harder for me to exploit it than if I see it as a vast, uncharted wilderness. The contemporary environmental writing that excites me takes this more populated and interdependent view of the planet. There is more space in it for writing about African Americans' complex environmental history — much of which doesn't fit the stereotype that black people have no connection to the land — because there is more space to consider all of our complex environmental histories.

“ Environmental pollution disproportionately affects poor people, people of color, women, and children. So when you work for environmental justice, you work for social justice, and vice versa.

Parker: Are black voices underrepresented in writing about the environment?

Dungy: Black voices are underrepresented in writing, period. Those in positions of power in the publishing world have — consciously or unconsciously — created limited channels for certain voices to move in. There are expectations about how we are supposed to talk about the environment. If we tell a slightly different story, the relevance of the story gets negated. It is labeled a historical narrative, or an economic treatise, or an urban meditation — anything but good old-fashioned nature writing. I think that is changing, though. Black authors are writing about subjects people don't expect us to write about, and in ways they don't expect. I think limited views of what nature writing should be are expanding. And with that expansion comes greater inclusion. As a professor and a public lecturer, I often used to hear, "I never thought about black people writing about nature before." *Black Nature*, the anthology I edited nearly a decade ago, was the first of its kind, collecting four centuries of African American nature poetry. When I reached out to poets I wanted to publish in the anthology, they were often pleased that someone was finally seeing their work this way. Happily, people were far less surprised when, in 2017, I published two books that interweave environmental concerns with very human historical or cultural concerns.

Parker: What does it mean to write responsibly about nature?

Dungy: As I said, for me writing is an act of radical empathy. How do we care for the ecosystem we receive? With balance, integrity, and compassion. I try to write with the same consciousness with which I try to live.

Parker: Which environmental issues concern you most?

Dungy: One issue I'm personally concerned with is water. When we are dealing with systemic crises, focusing on water might seem trivial, but water is actually a huge issue, and one that frequently overlaps with the social and political concerns of people of color. The protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock were about water. Fracking disputes are often largely about water. Droughts in California could mean life or death to industries, communities, species, entire ways of life. Water

shortages in other countries are shaping our geopolitical landscape. Water is important to both our daily and our future existence.

When my daughter was about four, I found her standing at the bathroom sink, running the water for no particular reason. I think she just enjoyed watching it flow down the drain. This wastefulness horrified me, and I told my daughter that when the water wars happened, she would be sorry she had wasted all that water.

She looked in the mirror and made a tremendous scowl.

“What’s with that face?” I asked.

She told me, “It’s my water-wars face.”

I laughed pretty hard. But I also made her turn off the water. We need to understand the systemic problem — the belief we can use the earth however we want without impact.

Parker: What does environmental stewardship look like in this era?

Dungy: One form of stewardship would be fighting against lead and other pollutants in our water. I could talk about the infamous and ongoing contamination in Flint, Michigan, but I could just as easily talk about the high levels of lead that were recently discovered in the pipes of the elementary school my daughter would have attended had we stayed in California — a school in an upwardly mobile section of the Bay Area. The pipes have been removed, at great cost to the community, and those children are safe now. Lead in the water is more likely to occur, and to go without correction, in communities with fewer financial resources, which often happen to be communities of color. Lead’s not so great for adults, but it’s really bad for children and women of childbearing age. This is how environmental pollution disproportionately affects poor people, people of color, women, and children. So when you work for environmental justice, you work for social justice, and vice versa.

Parker: Do you see this disproportionate impact as environmental racism?

Dungy: Yes, and the African American community experiences more examples of it than I could name. I might point to the flooding in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and how the responses of government agencies disproportionately put people of color at risk. Or the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927, in which black people and poor people suffered deeply. Or the fact that municipalities so frequently choose to locate dumps, water-treatment plants, and other toxic sites in or around black communities.

Some suggest that black people or poor people ought to just move if they don’t want to live in toxic areas. Such mobility, of course, is not always possible or even desirable. In my mind, a better solution would be to stop polluting our neighbors’ backyards.

Parker: You write so much about identity. I’m painfully aware that we haven’t talked much about some parts of your identity, like gender and motherhood.

Dungy: We didn’t even talk about my identity as a cook! [*Laughs.*] But we can’t discuss it all. I honor that.

Parker: You’re primarily a poet, but you also write essays. What made you decide to branch out?

Dungy: Over the course of this conversation, I have stressed the importance of radical empathy, of being compassionate and conscientious, of choosing what to care about and how, of paying attention to the history of things and the ways those histories have made us who we are today, of understanding the interconnection of all living things. It is the same with writing. By making me pay attention in a precise and imaginative way, poetry has helped me build this ethic for how I choose to live. This has helped me be a better essayist. This has helped me be a better wife, a better mother, a better daughter, a better friend, a better professor, a better gardener, a better activist, a better human being. This attention means that I have learned to honor

variations in my own writing, just as I work to honor the differences in the people I meet in the world. Sometimes poetry is the appropriate package for what I need to write, but sometimes a different form becomes necessary.

When I started traveling with my daughter, people responded differently to me. Strangers who would not have broken the wall between us had I been alone did so because I had this adorable human in my lap. I was curious: What was the life force that bridged that divide? I started taking notes and writing directly about the barriers that divide us — how we know each other and how we don't. That writing often came in the form of essays, where I could spend a significantly longer time directly exploring the questions that confronted me.

My poems are more condensed. They find metaphorical links and rely on the power of the senses. This, too, is a real form of communication. Poetry sometimes communicates emotion, and sometimes it provides a space for resistance and renewal. I want poetry that makes me feel the way good music does. I want my poetry — all of my writing — to be of use. I want it to reveal things about this world — its history, its ecologies, its interconnections, its realities — that a reader might not have previously understood.

AIRICA PARKER is an author and massage therapist who lives in Fort Collins, Colorado.

Correspondence

WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR •

I am a seventy-five-year-old Minnesota liberal with a PhD in psychology. I consider myself well educated and well read. But what I learned from Airica Parker's interview with Camille T. Dungy ["Poetic Justice," June 2018] was well worth the cost of my thirty-plus years of subscribing to *The Sun*. Shame on me for being oblivious to what is so obvious to her.

Harvey Leviton
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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