

## Diaspora Diaries #5: No to the Black Box

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Black people don't play in the rain. They don't drink milk, they don't ride bikes, they don't play Frisbee, and they don't- wait, what? You drink milk? *And* you listen to Dave Matthews Band? *\*shaking head in disapproval\**

It irks me when black people have a list of criteria against which they measure each other. I've met a few people who spoke like they were expert on black people, not a particular group of black people, just black people. That's a lot of people. One day, I was feeling sick and tried to explain to one girl how I was feeling:

Me: "You know how your stomach feels when you drink milk and –"

Girl: "Black people don't drink milk."

Me: "Oh."

I don't even remember what was said after that. I just remember being dumbfounded by her statement. She wasn't the first or last to make blanket statements about the entire black race. To be fair, she was likely referring to African Americans and its true, differences are real among the various ethnic groups and races, but I can't stand it when people make them a rule. The so-called rule that's been on my mind lately is that black people don't like nature. I like nature (I also used to drink milk too, so that says a lot about me right?). I'm no David Suzuki, but I do like to go for a walk in the woods or along a nice path every now and then. I admire wild flowers and am in awe of giant trees and I'm an advocate for smarter water consumption.

Historically, we've been very in tune with nature and many people still are today for means of survival. But this relationship isn't always pretty and we've often had to deal with nature's rough and wrathful side. During slavery days in the Americas, there wasn't a lot of frolicking with butterflies that could be done when one was toiling in the scorching sun all day. Today, large numbers of the population live in inner cities where there are no parks, or ponds or outdoor recreation clubs. But does this mean that we can't like nature if given the opportunity to experience it from a different angle?

Sometimes people have a way of making "black people don't" statements that trail a silent "and if you do, you're not really black" at the end. They take pride in announcing what Black people do and don't do as a way of defining themselves as a people. But I think that, instead of helping create a common identity to be proud of, these statements often limit us.

I'm pleased to have learned about a number of Black men and women who appreciate the beauty, provision and complexity of nature and the environment. They include: Ken Saro Wiwa, a Nigerian author and environmental activist who fought the exploitation of human and land rights by Shell and was executed in 1995; Wangaari Mathaai, founder of the Green Belt Movement and 2004 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize; Majora Carter- founder and former executive director of Sustainable South Bronx;

and Mbarouk Mussa Omar, Director at Community Forests Pemba who I had the opportunity to interview(hyperlink the word 'interview' to this please: <http://tempoafrika.com/2010/12/butterflies-lemon-and-clover-replanting-life-with-community-forests-international/>) last year for Tempo.

I don't want to restrict myself to a box for fear of not fitting into the group. I believe that to define African Canadians in one sentence would be to scribe the most lengthy and vivid run-on sentence in the book because our attributes, successes, and potential shouldn't be able to be contained that easily. It's all about continuing to grow and develop ourselves into any shapes and colors we can imagine- anything but a black box.