Celebration of Wilderness in Selected Afro-American Narratives

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Abstract

The conception of wilderness established in the black American intellectual tradition poses a challenging and provocative option to the ecologist thought. In support of Afro-American writers, the wilderness is not completely divided from human society but has a vital historical and social aspect. Nor is it merely a quality of the external landscape; there is also a wilderness within, an imperative energy that draws from and connects one to the external wilderness. Wilderness is considered as the origin and root of culture; preserving it means preserving not merely the physical landscape but the whole collective memory of it. Other than this, the paper focuses on Afro-American writers who emphasize the slavery and racial essentialism that inculcates both their individual and traditional American ideas of the wild, giving us greater insight into why the wilderness celebrated by preservationists and a challenging worth for racial minorities.

Keywords: *Wilderness, Slavery, Land, Culture, Nature, Afro-American.*

Introduction

Wilderness term is hard to describe. For the nineteenth-century romantics and twentieth century ecologist, wilderness in general is the part of the countryside that is natural and not affected by human impacts, a pristine area where "earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man is a visitor who does not remain" (Baird and Nelson 3-4). Wilderness reflects a natural as contrasted to human order, and can serve as a place of moral rejuvenation and spiritual regeneration.

Eco-critics besides understanding class, gender and race observe human perception of wilderness and ideate the notion of wilderness in diverse ways. The idea of wilderness refers to the absence of humanity; though wilderness has no meaning in outer context of the civilization that defines it, it is frequently analyzed as a place of refuge, or even a condition that needs to be faced. It is the site of final legitimacy and incorporates the whole habitat into an ecological community, which is equally symbiotic. For example the forest can be viewed as primordial unit, a dwelling and a teacher. Relationships with wilderness were also shaped by gender and class. Gender continued to have an effect on relationships with wilderness. Men performed wage labor in the woods and sawmills, but the most common wage occupation for black women was working in homes as domestic servants. Agricultural extension programs partitioned the landscape and the roles that men and women had in domesticating nature. Women received training in how to keep a tidy garden, located near the house, and men were trained for farm labor in the fields (Glave 1998).

Peter Barry, in *Beginning Theory*, divides the nature in four areas – the wilderness (desert, oceans, and uninhabited continents), the scenic sublime (forests, lakes, mountains, cliffs, and waterfalls), the countryside (hills, fields, woods) and the domestic picturesque (parks, gardens, lanes).

From the mid nineteenth to the mid twentieth century, Afro-Americans experienced and professed wilderness in varied ways. The wilderness was considered as a place of freedom, danger, religious ceremony, healing herbs, food, fear, fuel, wage labor, and recreational activities. During this time, the mainstream Afro-American inhabitants lived in the rural South. When Afro-Americans looked at the land around them, they found a rural landscape occupied by farms and forests, and it was 'home' for them. From the woods to the farm, from sharecropping to the timber industry, and from economics to religious conviction, dealings with the land contributed to the social as well as economic routes moved by Afro-Americans. These economic and substance setting played a major and significant role in shaping Afro-American experiences with and perceptions on wilderness.

Melvin K. Dixon's *Ride out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (1987) is momentous for its examination of spatial and natural metaphors of mountaintop, wilderness and underground. These metaphors shape topography for an Afro-American search for selfhood; they invent "alternative landscapes where black culture can flourish apart from any marginal, prescribed 'place'" (2). This book is a study of

geographical and identical themes which have played a noteworthy role in both Afro-American literature and slaves songs. He explores slave songs and the writing of a number of key authors across the twentieth century, comprising of Zora Neal Hurston, Toni Morrison and Ralph Ellison. Slave songs also featured the wilderness. For example, consider the following song, quoted in Melvin Dixon's book:

> "If you want to find Jesus, go in de wilderness
> Go in de wilderness, go in de wilderness
> Mournin' brudder, go in de wilderness
> I wait upon the lord"

Relations between Afro-Americans and wilderness have taken a number of forms, with a marked transformation taking place around the period of Civil War. For the duration of slavery, the woods were being considered as a place of shelter of protection and security for blacks and an understanding of these relationships sets the ground for understanding the viewpoints that developed afterwards. Slaves went to the woods to escape punishment, to run away with the hope of reaching the North in search of new world, to join with Indians who offered them place of safety from slavery and racist oppression. Enslavement made wilderness seem a 'home' while cultivated pastoral spaces represented the loss of freedom.

Wilderness is very well featured in the slave narratives. It again comes out as a refuge, but it is not without dangers. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), Frederick Douglass depicted the wilderness as a refuge, but he also considered it as a testing ground. He portrays the wilderness as a hazardous and mysterious place. The slaves faced a complex option between enslavement in the known "civilized" world or the potential of freedom in the unknown wilderness. Douglass described his uncertain thoughts about the path to freedom and recalled thinking "away back in the dim distance, under the flickering light of the north star, behind some craggy hill or snow-covered mountain, stood a doubtful freedom-half frozen-beckoning us to come and share its hospitality" (Douglass 1845, 85). Here we see Dixon's theme of the mountain. It appears as both a metaphorical and a physical place on the way to the freedom. For Douglass, however, seeking this sanctuary also involved a different relationship with wilderness. He risked being "stung by scorpions, chased by wild beasts, bitten by snakes" (Douglass 1845, 85).

Douglass depicts the wilderness as a refuge elsewhere and continued to imagine of it as dangerous and uncultured. In his words,

> "One of the most telling testimonies against the pretended kindness of slaveholders, is the fact that uncounted numbers of fugitives are now inhabiting the Dismal Swamp, preferring the untamed wilderness to their cultivated homes-choosing rather to encounter hunger and thirst, and to roam with the wild beasts of the forest, running the hazard of being hunted and shot down, than to submit to the authority of kind masters" (Douglass 1850).

Douglass contrasts "wilderness" and the "cultivated" landscape, and wilderness is the more preferable of the two environments.

Elizabeth Blum has written about the associations of women slaves with wilderness. She inscribes about the danger of snakes and the occurrence of supernatural powers. She also points out how the wilderness was included into interactions between blacks and whites in the Antebellum South. She illustrates how "black mammies" told ghost legends and tales regarding the wilderness to white children which could also serve as a caution against infringement into the woods which was first and foremost the slaves' field. In addition to, Mistresses sometimes tried to control their slaves by promoting panic through stories of wild beasts (Blum 247-265).

Afro-American writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor and Alex Haley through their prominent works have demonstrated how slaves employed their traditional pastoral values for survival as well as defiance and subversive acts and how the Afro-Americans have sustained their roots and identity all the way through their relatedness with wilderness by focusing on their cultural and spiritual values. The dislocations though corrosive to their cultural identity eventually lead to relocations within the wilderness. They celebrate wilderness which often served as a refuge for slaves escaping from plantations or as a meeting place for friends and families where stories and traditions from African culture could be shared and passed along.

Wilderness has always been a source of healing and confrontation for Afro-Americans. Toni Morrison effectively narrates the effect of slavery on Afro-Americans' views of wilderness as well as their potential of resistance:

In representing the conquered and dominated perspective of Afro-Americans, Morrison is distinguished for exploring how the wilderness or natural world like – plantations, landscapes and moreover cultivated areas have been used as an instrument of repression and subjugation but it at the same time bestowed with a source of nourishment and console. (Wallace and Armbruster 213)

Morrison calls attention to how the South was a home to Afro-Americans and although they felt strong connections with the landscape and wilderness, violence carried out by white culture split that relationship. The racial division helped in maintaining white dominance because it kept Afro-Americans from asserting the Southern landscape as their own. Rachel Stein makes a parallel argument:

. . . social geography of racial segregation and white supremacy *dispossesses* blacks of any secure relationship to homeland, history, and self-determination. Ironically, the historical conflation of blacks with nature severs them from any secure relationship to southern land; while blacks continue to be seen as naturally suited to agricultural labor, as serfs they are unable to purchase the land they worked. (89)

Toni Morrison's texts challenge national narratives of patriarchal history ingrained in pastoral narratives. According to Morrison, iconic rural landscapes in America such as the South, frontier and wilderness landscapes have every time been locations of maltreatment for minority populations. Morrison is proficient to illustrate wilderness environments. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* recreates the emblematic journey between the rural and the urban. *Song of Solomon* amply reflect how the wilderness of South is retained as food habits by a character named Pilate whose house is full of raw fruits and in *Paradise* how black women improvise their kitchen gardening and culinary habits to sustain themselves. Family ties play a leading role in *Beloved* and 'wilderness' conversely signifies positive possibilities too. Sweet Home men were like brothers and they acted as a small extended family. And Baby Suggs holds sermons at 'the Clearing', a glade in the forest where blacks go to instead of church, to attend preaching about the importance of self-worth. The Clearing lies in the forests and acts as a connector between the Afro-Americans' and the wilderness. The forests connect the black slaves with their heritage and to their African roots.

Thus forests as pristine nature itself become slippery as Morrison portrays it as both a place of fear as well as spiritual healing. To define it is to make it exclusive and static with little

room for negotiation, so Morrison portrays the fluid relationships of race, gender, nature, identity and history by blurring boundaries and defying definitions. No room would be left for negotiation, recognition of alternate views, possibility of reconciliation and experiences if *Beloved* had portrayed the landscape as solely a space of fear for black women. Fluidity allows readers to identify the multifaceted relationships between wilderness and the Afro-American (women) as well as the possibilities for healing

Toni Morrison develops the prospects of Afro-American environmental writing through a black male protagonist and the healing potential of southern woodlands. Thus she forces an evaluation of Afro-American attitudes towards wilderness as well as wildlife. Her remarkable novel *Song of Solomon* observes the intricate relations of an Afro-American protagonist with nature like southern fields and woodlands, as do narratives by Zora Neale Hurston and Alex Haley in this paper. The significant difference is that Morrison's depiction of a black man returning to the South in wilderness, learning his family-history (a version of genealogy) and experiencing a pristine sense of rootedness in the place, relates an affirmative alliance of Afro-Americans with Southern landscape, otherwise held in awe, in a language recalling narratives of regeneration through wilderness in the American nature-writing tradition.

Morrison in her novels celebrates wilderness which often served as a refuge to slaves for escaping from plantations or as a meeting place for relatives and families where experiences of duress could be shared and pastoral legacy could be passed along. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* likewise deals with how human communities connect with wilderness. Her primary landscape and countryside is the 'Glades' of Florida. Hurston believes that wilderness exists, not only in the traditional locations of farms, plantations, or country estates, but also in the frontier like settlements of North Florida.

Black women provided medical care on the plantation through their knowledge of wild remedies (Blum 2002). Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*'s setting is in the southern landscape and it strives to re-establish the importance of wilderness in Afro-American identity. The world of Afro-American emerges from wilderness. Therefore it is closely linked to nature.

Wild lands in wilderness fulfilled other needs also. Rivers, woods, and lakes contained fish, birds, rabbits, raccoons, and numerous other sources of protein to supplement the slave diets. In addition to forests, water is an important aspect of the areas in which people experience

as wilderness. In two important literary pieces, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston describe the wild nature of water and its relationships with Afro-Americans. In Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a critical event in the story occurs when the two main characters are caught in a hurricane and subsequent flood. Hurston contrasts the reactions of local whites and Native Americans to the imminent danger. While the whites choose to stay on their farms, hoping for economic advantage, the Native Americans read the signs of the storm and choose to leave the area. Hurston works with the idea that Native Americans possess close knowledge of the environment, and in the end, the Afro-American protagonists choose poorly by deciding to stay behind with the whites. They make the decision despite their own senses and intuition demonstrating that the storm was coming. The wilderness comes in and wipes out the landscape on which they were living (Hurston 1937; Lamothe 1999).

Langston Hughes, in his poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers,* portrays a strong connection of wilderness between Afro-Americans and rivers. After a short but powerful listing of relationships with the Euphrates, Congo, Nile, and Mississippi, the poem closes with the lines "I've known rivers: Ancient, dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like the rivers" (Hughes 1926). In addition to describing this deep connection with wilderness, the list of rivers traces a narrative of African and Middle Eastern historical roots of Afro-Americans, different from the narrative of exclusively European roots which has been included into some of the presented literature on wilderness.

Alex Haley in *Roots* also presents a complete account of the circumcision celebration. The boys in secluded deep in the woods learned to fight like a Mandinka, the people of a tribe, becoming proud warriors, never feeling defeated. They learned how to survive alone, hunting and fishing enough for themselves and for their future families. The wilderness taught them the language of forest, the meaning of bird's songs and the sounds of the other animals. In *Away Down South* (2005), James C. Cobb describing *Roots* as a work of "faction" (312) presents the wilderness as paradise that was Africa in Haley's story. It was in many ways simply evocative of the 'golden age'. The Afro-American writer concentrates on not only cultural and spiritual values of Afro-Americans pastoral past but also of wilderness through multiple migrations. Amidst displacements and dislocations the blacks preserve their roots & identity through their relatedness with wilderness. They celebrate black wilderness, which reminded them of their roots

and often served as a 'refuge' and 'home' for slaves despite the catastrophic consequences of slavery associated with it.

With Reconstruction, the relationships between Afro-Americans and the wilderness changed, going through periods of hope, uncertainty, disappointment, and perseverance. Coming out of the Civil War, land ownership was the most significant issue in the relationship between Afro-Americans and the land, and it shaped relationships wilderness. The land question loomed over the South. Afro-Americans pursued several strategies to achieve land ownership and improve their economic conditions, and these efforts impacted relationships with wilderness.

W. E. B Du Bois's *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920) documents that the wilderness that people sought to escape from also held within it a healing balm. His encounters within wilderness reveal the profound ambivalence that existed for the black community regarding nature. To escape nature indicated progress, one step past the land labor of the slave era. The simultaneous draw toward and repulsion from nature is palpable in his narratives: the dual nature of nature, a place to be feared, and a place to go and stand in fright. He realized how the notion of wilderness is wrapped in the context of the American cultural ethos, that it is an actor in the century's old drama between white and black. He did not encounter wilderness outside this context; he was resolutely connected to it. He had a vision, however, for how nature can rise above the social context in which his people encounter it. The narrative offers us a deep and wide peek into the multifarious relationship between the wild places and Afro-American people. Therefore, an analysis of Afro-Americans relationship with wilderness through autobiographical narrative, Du Bois provides an insight into how wilderness may have been construed by Afro-Americans over time.

In addition to this, by following the description of the remote coastal town of Bar Harbor, Du Bois relayed a conversation he had with a group of black people in a 'Southern home'. The conversation centers on travel perhaps to a soul-restoring place like Bar Harbor. To these black people from the south, however, travel did not seem so alluring. "Did you ever see a "Jim-Crow" waiting-room?" (*Darkwater* 228).The reality of segregated train travel was less than inspiring as there was no heat or air in 'colored' section of the train station. The train car itself is typically a 'smoker' car where riders would have to pass through white smokers and be subjected to sneers and stares.

With the arrival of Jim Crow in the late nineteenth century, the relationship between Afro-Americans and the wilderness changed. The Jim Crow period in part involved further constraints on the geography and activities of Afro-Americans (Litwack 1998). The rise of the Ku Klux Klan and the spread of lynching meant that the woods became a place to be feared and graphic imagery reinforced that fear. Photographs of lynchings were often set in the woods, showing a group of whites surrounding the body of a lone black man, dead, hanging from one of the trees. The publication of these photos served multiple purposes: reminding blacks of the repercussions they faced for transgressing the social order, providing newspapers with shocking images with which to tell a story, and instilling confidence and camaraderie in other similarly violent whites (Rushdy 2000). Over time, blacks used the images to communicate to the world about the brutality they faced in the South. These images connected the woods with white violence and terror, and this particular perspective has lingered, affecting the relationships of many Afro-Americans with wilderness.

The end of slavery brought an important set of changes in the relationships between Afro-Americans and the wilderness on which they lived and depended. These changes were both material and metaphysical and became part of the new set of parameters in which they lived. Blacks were no longer property, located at the same level of domesticated animals and not far in status from the crops, soil, and fertilizer. Through liberation, blacks moved into a position where they could gain ownership and control over the land and its constituent parts in ways that only a select few could do previously. They no longer had to run to the woods to grasp for freedom because now they claimed freedom, at least in theory, wherever they lived. Material conditions didn't necessarily improve for Afro-Americans, especially with the fall down of Reconstruction, but there was certainly change. Emotional ties to the land became more significant in some senses because black people now had a role in decisions over whether to stay or leave the South-whether the South was a place worthy of calling home-whereas previously personal attachments to a particular area or type of the land had little to do with whether or not a person continued to live in that area. Blacks could gain greater control over land management practices with their nominally increased independence. The changes of Afro-American relationships with the land were constrained, however, by the economy created by the overthrow of Reconstruction by the white south (Foner 1988).

Conclusion

For many urban and northern blacks, the wilderness of the rural south was tied to memories of childhood. Urban and northern Afro-Americans had a variety of perspectives on the rural South. The wilderness of the South was to some in some ways the homeland from which they immigrated. Their grandparents, great grandparents, and proceeding generations had come from Africa, but the emigration trip that they themselves experienced was from the wilderness and rural South to an urban center in either the South or North.

In recent decades, the wilderness clearly became the epicenter of ecological concerns with distinguished nature writers' like- Barry Lopez who known for environmental concerns in his writings like *The Future of Nature* (2007) and *Outside* (2014), Edward Abbey, and Annie Dillard. *Outside* consists of six enigmatic and evocative short stories about wilderness. Abbey was an author and essayist noted for his advocacy of environmental issues. His great works are *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) and *Desert Solitaire* (1968). Through his novels, essays, letters and speeches, he constantly voiced the conviction that the West was in danger, and that the only solution lay in the preservation of wilderness.

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