

AN ANALYSIS OF NATURE IN THREE AFRICAN AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES

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The study of race/ethnicity and leisure has been an area of great interest to researchers since at least the 1970s. Numerous studies have shown that differences exist in the ways people from different racial/ethnic groups participate in outdoor recreation (Floyd, 1998). Most of these studies have found that racial and ethnic minorities (i.e. non-White groups) participate in many outdoor recreation activities at proportionally lower levels than do Whites. However, many of these studies have not examined the socio-cultural history of the relationship between race and nature. In this study we analyzed narrative and historical autobiographical accounts of African Americans from the three major racial eras in United States history in order to examine African Americans' relationship with nature over time. The slavery era is examined through Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave by Frederick Douglass (written in 1845); the Jim Crow segregation era is examined through Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil by W. E. B. DuBois (originally published in 1920); and the contemporary era is examined through Mississippi Solo by Eddy Harris (published in 1988). Each of these works allows a glimpse into the relationship of the author with nature and outdoor recreation. The authors of each book shared a reverence for and a fear of nature, while each encountered nature in unique and different ways. Taken together, the three works offer us a deep and expansive glimpse into the complicated relationship between the wild places of our country and African American people.

According to Johnson (1998), African Americans in the South have less place attachment to outdoor places than do Whites. One of the reasons for this is that African Americans' "collective memory" of wild places is that of slavery, Jim Crow, and lynching. In order to bring about more diversity in those who take part in outdoor recreation, we must understand the deep historical roots of why more non-Whites have eschewed outdoor environments. The social context for which non-participation occurs is crucial. Outdoor recreation participation by any person, regardless of race, requires that many things happen in that person's life before he or she visits a natural area. For African Americans and other minorities, multiple barriers must be overcome due to layers of social and economic oppression. This marginalization comes in direct forms (e.g., segregated swimming pools) and indirect forms (e.g., impoverishment leading to lack of resources for outdoor

recreation). To say simply that Blacks and other non-Whites do not participate because they cannot afford associated costs or because members of their social world do not enjoy these activities is to ignore nearly 400 years of racial oppression. The problem of disparate participation is not an anomaly; it is a symptom of the larger social situation in our country where Blacks and Hispanics are seeing a widening wealth gap (White & Henderson, 2004) among other worsening social problems. For outdoor recreation to be relevant and available larger social issues must be recognized and addressed. At the same time, providers must seek ways to reach out to minority populations despite social constraints.

A useful exercise toward this end would be to examine the lives of individual African Americans and their relationships to nature. One way we can do this is through analysis of autobiographical narratives. In his book about systemic

racism, Joe Feagin (2006) used analyses of historical figures, both White and Black, from each of what he described as the three racial periods in United States history: antebellum slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and contemporary racial relations. By analyzing figures from each of these eras, Feagin was able to outline how a systemic racist system has been perpetuated through time and how it has affected individuals and institutions. In the same way, an analysis of African Americans' relationship to nature through autobiographical narratives can provide us with insight into how nature may have been construed by African Americans over time.

The three periods identified by Feagin (2006) form three very distinct socio-political epochs, with different laws, standards of behavior, racial relationships, and racial identities. The slavery era in the United States began in 1619 when 20 Africans aboard a Dutch ship landed at Jamestown. The Africans were put to work under White owners (Feagin). Over the next three centuries upwards of 12 million African people were transported to the Americas for the purpose of slavery (Segal, 1995). The relationship between enslaved Africans and their European owners were "asymmetrical and hierarchical" (Feagin, p. 54) and the system of hierarchy was institutionalized into every facet of existence. By the time of the United States founding, slavery was a contentious issue, but it persisted legally through the 19th century until it was abolished by the 13th Amendment in 1865.

The period of legal segregation that followed abolition of slavery continued the hierarchical relationship between African Americans and Whites. This period, which lasted from the end of the 19th century through most of the 20th century, subjected African Americans to a severely restricted existence in society. According to Feagin (2006), African Americans faced discrimination in "an array of institutional areas, including employment, housing, education, politics, policing, public accommodations, religion, medical and health care facilities, social services, and recreation" (p. 125). This multi-faceted institutional discrimination formed the backbone of society for African Americans who lived in this era.

As the 20th century unfolded and its two World Wars placed America in a

prominent position in the rest of the World, pressure to deal with the blight of segregation grew (DuBois, 1995; Feagin, 2006). Civil rights legislation finally made its way through Congress officially ending legalized segregation in the United States. For many, this falsely marked the end of racial difficulties for African Americans. The reality of African Americans' experiences in this contemporary era reveals the difficulties of a society that was founded with a hierarchical system placing African Americans at the bottom. Disparities in many of the areas mentioned by Feagin still act to make life difficult for African Americans. The context of each of these three eras is important to understand before evaluating each autobiography for revelations about interactions with nature.

Three autobiographies spanning each of the major eras of African American relations in the United States were selected for analysis. The slavery era is examined through *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* by Frederick Douglass (written in 1845); the Jim Crow segregation era is examined through *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* by W. E. B. DuBois (originally published in 1920); and the contemporary era is examined through *Mississippi Solo* by Eddy Harris (published in 1988). These three works serve as portraits of life in the three major eras of racial stratification in this country. Each is examined from a systemic racism perspective and examples pertaining to nature and recreation and nature are highlighted.

Autobiographical analysis has been conducted in leisure studies within the context of a poststructuralist feminist analysis of dystopian fiction (Daniels & Bowen, 2003). However, we could find no analyses of historical biographical accounts regarding leisure or the outdoors analyzed from the perspective of systemic racism. An example of this type of analysis can be found in Vera and Gordon's (2003) *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness*. In this book, the authors examined portrayals of Whiteness in popular Hollywood films. In a similar analysis, we examined the ways in which the experiences of Douglass, DuBois, and Harris impacted their relationship to nature and leisure. It is important to keep in mind the larger socio-cultural context of racism within each era. Interactions with and held meanings of nature are not created in a vacuum. The meaning of nature for these authors is shaped in part by their cultural milieu.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND THE AMBIVALENT WOODS

For Frederick Douglass, born into slavery in Maryland somewhere around 1818, nature seemed to mean a number of different things over the course of his life, as he served different slave masters, both in the city and on the plantation, and finally as a free man. Douglass' account of his life as a slave is one of a very select group of slave autobiographies. It is accepted as one of the best examples of the slave narrative and certainly is a classic American autobiography (Wilson & Ferris, 1989). Douglass, who escaped from slavery when he was 20 years old, became a prominent abolitionist and wrote passionately against slavery for numerous newspapers. He became so well known that he served as an advisor to President Abraham Lincoln (Wilson & Ferris). Douglass lived to see slavery abolished and turned his efforts against legal segregation. He died in 1895.

One of the first mentions of nature in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845/1968) is when Douglass talked about the separation of field and house slaves, or those who worked in "The Great Farm House." Douglass likened sending a slave to the farm house for an errand to the election of Congressional representatives. Douglass noted, "few privileges were esteemed higher" (p. 28). This no doubt stemmed from the severity of treatment he received in the fields. Douglass described in detail the treatment he received from numerous overseers he slaved under. His first overseer, aptly named Mr. Severe, would use a large hickory stick and heavy cow skin to intimidate those who might miss the morning call to the field. Douglass recalls seeing this man beat a woman "until the blood ran half an hour at the time" (p. 27). But Douglass made the point that *the field* is where Mr. Severe's cruelty and profanity were witnessed. The connection between the fields and the overseer's whip, the symbolic and literal manifestation of slavery's cruelty, is a key theme throughout Douglass' narrative. He made the connection early on between the house slave and the field slave, but later when Douglass was moved from the fields to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Auld in Baltimore, he again emphasized that the city slave "enjoys privileges altogether unknown to the slave on the plantation" (p. 48). Indeed, Douglass attributed his selection from the fields to go to Baltimore as a sort of "kind providence" that led to his eventual freedom. The move to the city, along with better circumstances permitted to slaves there, laid the groundwork for hope that allowed Douglass to persevere through his time in

slavery and later attempt a bid for freedom.

While forced labor in the fields created distaste for the land among enslaved Black people, they held other sentiments toward the land as well. The land provided food for Douglass and his fellow slaves, but this provision was not without costs. Douglass spoke of the days of summer, when slaves would steal fruit from the master's gardens to supplement their rations only to face the whip if discovered. Additionally, Douglass told of fellow slaves fishing for oysters during free time in order to make up for "the deficiency of their scanty allowance" (p. 40). These attempts to seek from the land provisions beyond what the slave masters provided represent an innate knowledge that the land and sea can provide, and that there is a connection between nature and man. The only other positive notions that Douglass expressed about nature revolved around the idea of leisure, something slaves of Douglass' era did not often enjoy. Sunday was typically the only day when slaves did not work through every minute of daylight, but even then, the activities they were allowed to pursue were limited. Douglass spoke of how he felt on most Sundays as he spent his time "in a beast-like stupor, between sleep and wake, under some large tree" (p. 73). At some moments he felt a glimmer of hope about his situation, only to have the hope dashed by the realization of his "wretched condition." He recalled standing on the banks of nearby Chesapeake Bay, wishing that he could be on one of the passing ships. For him, these vessels were the embodiment of freedom.

Beyond Sundays Douglass mentioned that slaves typically were given the time between Christmas and New Year's Day as a holiday. Leisure activities varied during this time. Industrious people made items useful to their work, while others hunted small varmints. Slaves were allowed to participate in "sports and merriment" such as playing ball, foot races, and drinking whiskey. While it is assumed that all these activities occurred in the out-of-doors, hunting activities are of particular note. Douglass does not go into detail, but the fact that some slaves spent their time hunting on their only significant break of the year seems to indicate some connection between nature and leisure. However, this "vacation" was not without an ulterior purpose. Masters knew that allowing slaves this leisure time was "the most effective means in the hands of the slaveholder in keeping down the spirit of insurrection" (p. 82). Douglass construed this holiday as a sort of opiate thereby curbing the slaves' desire to escape. This

use of leisure (and by proxy, nature) by a master to subdue thoughts of escape, seems to have sullied Douglass towards the “gift” of having this leisure time.

Douglass’ dread of nature went beyond his experiences working the land. After an incident with unruly oxen, Douglass found himself alone in the woods in an unfamiliar place. His feelings of peril and danger subsided only after he was able to extricate himself from *the woods*. Later in Douglass’ life, as the deep yearnings for freedom started to overwhelm him, he toiled in the fields under a man named Mr. Covey. One of Mr. Covey’s tactics was to hide on the edge of the fields in the woods, making sure that the slaves stayed on task and waiting for possible escapees. The possibility of Covey hiding “under every tree, behind every stump, in every bush” (p. 71) was a constant source of stress. The woods were seen as a place that was both the path to freedom (i.e. escaping through the woods) and a place replete with fear.

While the narrative of Douglass’ life did not center on his relationship with nature, there are components that speak to how Douglass may have perceived the natural world around him, both in the fields and surrounding woods. There is a distinct ambivalence between the opportunities for leisure and relaxation in nature contrasted with danger and forced labor found there as well. Douglass’ relationship is expressed in his notions of fear and sometimes reverence or yearning towards nature. This ambivalence towards nature as it relates to slavery can be seen as well in Johnson’s writing (1998) when she discussed the collective memory of African Americans towards wildlands. Douglass’ experiences gave a sort of beginning point for those memories of forced labor, sharecropping, and racial violence. At the same time, African Americans became knowledgeable stewards of the rural landscape and nature provided some respite from the harsh world of slavery. With the Douglass account of slavery and its ambivalent notions of nature, we can trace the memories discussed by Johnson back to the experience of slavery.

DUBOIS AND THE WILDERNESS ETHIC

Why do not those who are scarred in the world’s battle and hurt by its hardness travel to these places of beauty and drown themselves in the utter joy of life? (DuBois, 1920/2003, p. 229)

The question that W. E. B. DuBois confronted in “Of Beauty and Death” is one with which environmental scholars have struggled through the ages. DuBois

(1868-1963) was a prominent sociologist, civil rights activist, and author. He was the first African American graduate of Harvard, earning a PhD in history in 1895. DuBois’ best known works include *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), and *John Brown* (1909). DuBois helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909 (Lewis, 1994).

Darkwater (1920/2003), a collection of essays, socio-political analyses, and poems, contains many of the classic works that brought DuBois to prominence as a social scientist. The question asked in “Of Beauty and Death” is a pertinent, yet curious, question for DuBois to be asking. Although many people are attracted to “places of beauty” for solace from the cruel world, a small proportion of the solace seekers have been African American. DuBois described what has been called the wilderness ethic or wilderness ideal (see Nash, 1982), which is essentially the idea that wilderness has the power to heal and transform human suffering. This idea is not new, nor was it new when DuBois pondered the African American disconnection. The idea of wilderness is one that largely has been discussed by White Americans and Europeans. DuBois held his encounters with wild areas in high esteem. In his rich description of the area around Bar Harbor, Maine, he said, “God molded his world largely and mightily off this marvelous coast and meant that in the tired days of life men should come and worship here and renew their spirit” (p. 228). DuBois clearly encapsulated the ideals of the modern wilderness movement even though most minorities would not be part of debates in the late 1950s and 1960s (Taylor, 1997).

DuBois aptly contradicted the beauty and mystery of the natural world with the wretchedness of life as a Black person during the period of legal segregation. Following his description of the remote coastal town of Bar Harbor, DuBois relayed a conversation he had with a group of Black people in a “Southern home.” The conversation centered on travel, travel perhaps to a soul-restoring place like Bar Harbor. To these Black people from the South, however, travel did not seem so appealing. “Did you ever see a ‘Jim-Crow’ waiting room?” (p. 229). The question is rhetorical. 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 would usually be a “smoker” car where riders would have to pass

through White smokers and be subjected to sneers and stares. Service for Black riders was poor, if available at all. Most “colored” cars were extremely dirty. The physical conditions, no matter how bad, never compared to the humiliation and degradation of being considered less than human. “‘No’ said the little lady in the corner...We don’t travel much” (p. 230).

DuBois continues his pattern of contrast by discussing the plight of the American Negro in the U.S. Army during World War I. “From such heights of holiness men turn to master the world” (p. 232). Black Americans felt the call to fight in the Great War, but when they answered it, they were segregated into separate units and sometimes drafted for labor. The war effort would not have been the same without the contributions of African Americans. DuBois points this out along with the fact that many Whites would not fight beside Blacks, even when their battle readiness was proven. Amidst the turmoil of WWI there were riots in St. Louis and Houston where numerous Black soldiers were executed or imprisoned.

DuBois transitioned here to express his love for the Grand Canyon, and described this natural wonder as the “one thing that lived and will live eternal in my soul” (p. 237). For DuBois, the Grand Canyon represented something eternal, something which held the imprint of God. The expansiveness of the Canyon, it seems, provided him with some perspective on the atrocities committed against him and his people. It’s as if he is saying “maybe, just maybe there is something else out there, something that provides a basis for hope.” If the natural world is so grand, majestic, and beautiful, then maybe humanity could be someday as well. After describing the eternal void of the canyon, he described a place where hope has been found, where a “community of kindred souls” (p. 239) lives and where the racial hatred of America was nonexistent. This place was Paris, 1919, a place where Black and White people could “laugh and joke and think as friends” (p. 239).

The back and forth manner of this chapter reflects a similar contrast in our world today. African Americans are oppressed by forces both current and historical. Our wild and beautiful natural areas are still there, waiting to be experienced, waiting to heal, and welcome the oppressed. Due to the taint of destructive oppression and subjugation, however, many Blacks do not realize the power of such places, nor do they have the means to journey to them. DuBois clearly had a connection to the powerful natural places of this country. The

contrasting descriptions offered in “Of Beauty and Death” reveal his belief in the healing and mending power of nature, even in the face of brutal oppression. Unlocking this connection for today’s generation of African Americans could be tremendously powerful for healing the hurts that still deeply affect so many people.

EDDY HARRIS’ MISSISSIPPI VOYAGE

Unlike Douglass’ narrative, and to some extent DuBois’ essay, Eddy Harris’ *Mississippi Solo* (1988) is unreservedly about the experience of a Black man in nature. To be more precise, this book is about a man encountering nature, while at the same time trying to come to grips with his own “Blackness” and what that means in the United States. The experiences Harris recounted in the memoir are rich. He reflected on the beauty of nature, nuances of being Black, intensity of solitude, and exhilaration of physical endurance. Eddy Harris is an author who grew up in New York City’s Harlem neighborhood before moving to Missouri. Harris’ works focus on the Black experience in varying places across the globe. He currently resides in Paris, France.

Harris was not an expert canoeist as he began his journey down the Mississippi River, from its origins in Northern Minnesota to its terminus in the Gulf of Mexico. He learned as he went. This inexperience is, in part, a piece of his struggle with the river and inherent fear of the currents, rapids, winds, and barges. Likewise, Harris struggled with the social dimensions of the river, a river that “is laden with the burdens of a nation” (p. 1). His account reflects the same ambivalence towards nature as Douglass and DuBois. Throughout the book he reflects on the various dangers of the river as well as the joys of being on the river. Most of Harris’ peers and family discounted his desires to travel down the river, thinking him a bit insane. One friend summed up their concerns about the river and human nature. “Maybe they don’t want you to get shot by some redneck in the woods. Maybe they don’t want you to fall in and drown” (p. 8). Despite the detractions of his friends and his low level of canoeing skill, Harris “ached” to be on the river. Eventually, he found himself at the headwaters with a canoe full of camping gear. In this he exhibited resistance to stereotypes, fear (in numerous facets), and peer pressure.

Harris reflected on the history of the river wondering how it would come to bear on his journey as “a black man alone and

exposed and vulnerable” (p. 7). When he envisioned the river, he saw it flowing with the “tears and sweat” of slaves. Harris did not dwell too long on these notions for he had an adventure to experience. He was keenly aware, however, that the river passed through various regions of the country that had different meanings toward and relationships with Black people. As his friend and mentor Robert put it, he traveled “from where there ain’t no Black folks to where they still don’t like us much” (p. 7). Being Black for Harris “has never been such a big deal, more a physical characteristic rather like being tall: an identifier for the police and such. Part of my identity, but not who I am” (p. 13). He hoped people would treat him with kindness despite his skin color and lack of experience on the river. In light of these colorblind dreams, he acknowledged that being Black took on new meaning during his river trip shaping how he perceived situations and how others perceived him.

Before he began his trip, Harris contemplated the lack of Black tourists in Minnesota and the fact that “there are places blacks don’t much go to” (p. 14). He suggested some of the reasons might include financial constraints, apathy, and lack of targeted advertising. In the end he was left with the question, “Is the exclusion self-imposed or by hints both subtle and overt?” (p. 14). Since Harris was raised mainly in the post-civil rights era, this distinction between self-imposed and societal-imposed restrictions arose frequently. Harris concluded that “the only restrictions are the ones I (we all) put in place” (p. 14). His reflection tapped into a colorblind ideology that affirms everyone’s chances to succeed. Regardless of this declaration of individual rights, Harris understood the potentially perilous and nuanced way a Black person interacts with the world.

But for all my boldness and my reaching out to embrace the world, what would be waiting for me out there on the river? Kindness or evil? Beauty or savagery? Whatever, I didn’t want to miss a thing. The ups days would make up for the down, I knew; the beauty worth the pain. (p. 15)

With this, Harris started down the river.

One common theme throughout the memoir was Harris’ curiosity about the various people he encountered from food store clerks to tug boat operators to people he passes on the riverbanks. He wondered what impression they would have of him and decided that they looked at him mostly as “a bit on the loony side” (p. 21). In time, the nature of the river and its solitude gripped and changed him. This

trip was a bold foray into the world of nature, and Harris was enthralled. His desire to be recognized for his accomplishments may have been a reflection of his somewhat novice status as well as his racial status as a Black man. Harris mused that people stared because he was an odd site with his life preserver and gear or that Black people were a rarity in town. Either way, he was faced with the burden of being out of place.

Harris expounded more on the idea of racial identity and racism as he passed through a town in Wisconsin. He reiterated that he “would not make my being black a part of my success or failure or too great a factor in how I perceive things” (p. 67). This perception influenced his life in subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways. His knew racism existed but felt “its effect and effectiveness depend as much on reaction as on the action” (p. 69). In this regard, he was at odds with many other Blacks. A clear example of this was when Harris entered into a conversation with a White insurance salesman in a local diner. The salesman joked that Harris should wear a jacket with “River Nigger” (p. 70) on it, laughing loudly. Rather than become angry Harris continued to converse with the salesman. Eventually, they shared a genuine moment of reflection and the salesman expressed regret for his actions. Harris mused about giving people the opportunity to “carve at the core of American racism that lies inside if given the chance” (p. 73).

Harris’ journey from Lake Itasca in Minnesota to his home in Saint Louis, Missouri, passed with only minor incidents and little in the way of racial interactions beyond the aforementioned racist joke. Harris noted frequently, that aside from an odd stare, most people were kind and helpful to him. As he pulled into Saint Louis for a short respite he looked forward to the balance of his trip where the river was wider, swifter, and free of locks to negotiate. He spoke of “ghosts” waiting for him and images of the South that “die hard” including slavery, lynching, and segregation. He felt exposed and vulnerable, wondering how much his positive, colorblind attitude would protect him, but took solace in the river and the “ghosts” there to protect him.

For a short while Harris picked up a co-traveler, his older brother Tommy. Tommy was an unlikely companion since he had a deep fear of sleeping on the ground with bugs and snakes. After the first miserable night (for Tommy), Eddy questioned why their father did not make campers out of them. It seemed that Tommy’s fears echoed the larger Black

communities' distaste for intimate contact with nature. This pairing lasted only a few days, and Eddy became more appreciative of the solitude he had enjoyed previously.

After Tommy's departure, Harris progressed further into the South. Harris' experiences embodied the ambivalent and contradictory nature of American race relations. For example, Harris developed an unlikely friendship with a tugboat driver named Don despite the fact that he used the "N-word" frequently in conversation. Don invited Harris to ride on the tugboat and fed him along the way. Over the course of a few days, their relationship grew to the point where Don shared personal secrets with Harris. The conversation at one point turned to inter-racial relationships, with Don suggesting that such a relationship would be allowable for a Black woman and a White man, but not vice-versa. Harris did not question or challenge this opinion, but instead allowed Don to continue his sentiments. When the two parted ways, Harris truly considered Don his friend.

This relationship was in stark contrast to the most harrowing experience of the trip. While building a campfire in Arkansas, two "greasy rednecks" (p. 206) with shotguns approached Harris menacingly. They harassed him, called him "boy," and made veiled threats. Harris, who had carried a pistol the whole trip, escaped to woods, and had to fire a warning shot to prevent their pursuit. As soon as he was confident they were gone, he broke camp and spent a restless night searching for more secure shelter. Eventually, he broke into a summer cabin so he could feel safe. He debated whether or not to end his trip prematurely but decided to continue on regardless of his fears. In the end, the river afforded him adventure, solitude, beauty, and moments to reflect on his place in the universe. These enriching facets of his journey define his experience on the river.

Harris' narrative focused on the many ways a Black man experiences nature, which are inherently different from those of a White man. Consistent with the works of Douglass and DuBois, Harris demonstrated ambivalence towards being in nature. Harris' love for nature was palpable. He was enthralled by bends and twists in the river and the way rapids "sing." His attitude was conducive to adventure and enduring uncomfortable situations but did not protect him from racial intolerance. His perceptions of race allowed him to resist incidents that might be intolerable for others or turn them into positive experiences. This interplay between race,

nature, and personality provide a rich picture of a contemporary Black man's relationship with the outdoors.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of these works, which follow experiences of three African Americans during different eras, reflects some of the factors that may inhibit African Americans' participation in outdoor recreation. For Frederick Douglass, the root of collective memory is found in his interactions with nature. These interactions were facilitated through the institution of slavery via cruel overseers and harsh labor in the fields. Douglass did not feel the woods' powerful draw as the others; at least no evidence for such an attraction was apparent in this narrative. The woods were places associated primarily with the overseer's whip. Douglass' experiences as a slave served to embody the stories that hundreds of thousands of Black families have related to subsequent generations. Cassandra Johnson (1998) spoke of these associations in her discussion of African Americans' collective memory of wildland places. It remains one of few studies that examine the socio-historical influences on African Americans' perceptions of wildland. As Johnson stated, "these 'memories' are retained by younger African Americans and become a part of their collective identities" (p. 6). Johnson cited slave labor, sharecropping, and lynching as factors that entered into the collective memory of Blacks' experiences with the land. Douglass' narratives, which spoke of both slave labor and of lynching, serve as an intimate window into the emotional, psychological, spiritual, and physical costs of such practices. These deep impacts are difficult for subsequent generations to overcome. The fact that an affinity for nature has not become a part of most African American communities is a side effect of the larger picture of oppression.

For DuBois, contradictory images of White and Black were commonplace in the era of segregation. He contrasted nature's opposing potential as a rejuvenating power with dark places representing oppression. To escape nature indicated progress, one step beyond the land labor of slavery. At the same time, nature held within it a healing balm for the oppression that weighed so heavily. DuBois clearly articulated the romantic view of nature embodied by the wilderness movement of the later 20th century but understood the ambivalent feelings of most African Americans towards nature. He realized that the wilderness ideal is wrapped within the context of the American cultural ethos, that it is an actor in the centuries-old

drama between White and Black. He did not encounter wilderness outside of this context as he was firmly connected to it. However, he had a vision for how nature could rise above social context and race and provide transcendental joy.

The work of contemporary novelist Eddy Harris reflected a resistance to racial stereotypes and peer pressure. The misgivings of his friends and family represented his subculture, one that did not have room for prolonged wilderness adventures. While Harris did not discuss his socio-economic background extensively, he shared some of the collective memories of lynching and sharecropping particularly in the South. His interactions in predominately White spaces produced feelings of alienation and, in some cases, fear. His ability to overcome these obstacles demonstrated the ability to use leisure as a form of resistance (Shaw, 2001). He conquered stereotypes of Black people, namely that they do not canoe down the Mississippi River. At the same time, he questioned why more people do not challenge themselves within nature. This type of resistance to personal inhibitions could be a key element for attracting people to outdoor pursuits.

Through the experiences of Douglass, DuBois, and Harris, we gain a rich historical perspective on the relationship between African Americans and nature. Douglass' account of life during slavery served as the basis for the collective memories of African Americans. As the larger ethos surrounding wilderness evolved and matured, W. E. B. DuBois astutely recognized the redemptive potential of natural places in the face of segregation. The positive experiences, perseverance, and open mind of Eddy Harris serve as examples of what may be necessary for prolonged African American participation in outdoor recreation. Taken together, the three narratives offer us a deep and wide glimpse into the complicated relationship between wild places and African American people.

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Despite Western autobiographical theory's ongoing efforts to render it impossible, African autobiography and autobiography in general thrives. Examining the process of decolonization in African autobiography, this essay traces a discursive shift from tragedy to comedy in three African autobiographies by explaining how these texts negotiate the challenging terrains of history, language, genre, modernity, and colonialism. Camara Laye's haunting *The Dark Child* tragically narrates his discursive alienation from African society, while the other two, Dugmore Boetie's *Familiarity Is the Kingdom of the Dead* and John Barth's *A Letter Home*, stand a better chance to choose what suitable narrative devices that will best convey his message to the readers. The main narrative methods include the following:

A. Epistolary. This is a letter writing method. When a book takes the form of a series of long letters, such book will be said to be in epistolary mode.

Flashback narrative method can be exemplified by this quotation from the 1964 African novel of Chinua Achebe: *Arrow of God*; "In the distant past, when the lizards were still few and far between, the six villages - Umuachala, Umunneora, Umuagu, Umuezani, Umuogwugwu and Umuisuizo - lived as different people, and each worshipped his own deity."