

## Aufsatz

# “The beauty of this world is not to be denied”: African American Eco-Memory and Environmental Thinking<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The environment is as much a nurturing constituent of African American cultural memory as it is a locale of cultural trauma. Along the two strands, but not restricted to them, African American eco-memory illustrates the essential multidirectionality of African American cultural memory in that the braid of the nature-individual-community triad proves sustaining despite the ruptures between the environment and the African American self and community. The paper reviews the literature in the field, identifying some of the topoi constructive of African American eco-memory.

*Keywords:* African American eco-memory, eco-spirituality, ecoracism, environmental injustice

As W.E.B. DuBois's words indicate in the title, despite the apparent ruptures in the African American attachment to the environment, it has remained a permanent reference point for the self and community. A primary means of managing identity construction and sustaining cultural identity, remembering—as in “re-membling” (see Dixon 1994, 21)—nature and the environment has nurtured an African American eco-memory that references and subsumes reactions to various social, political, and cultural challenges that the African American community has encountered. While

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the centrifugal forces of displacement caused by slavery and the subsequent Jim Crow era sought to produce the African American body in space—imposing deformations on the African American perception of the environment—the objectifying attempt was counterbalanced in many ways, but first and foremost, by the bondedness with the community through the environment with all its communal and spiritual aspects, maintaining the integrity of the self and the community, as well as by the politicization of the cultivated environment, resulting from the appropriation of the cultivated land (also in a Heideggerian sense). The diversity suggests the inherent multidirectionality of African American eco-memory, albeit multidirectionality refers here to a centripetal mechanism, strengthening identity and community.

African Americans have taken a different angle at the environment than white America, which has formed a distinct ecocritical and ecopoetic tradition, “defy[ing] the pastoral conventions of Western poetry” (Dungy 2009, xxi) and “reveal[ing] histories stored in various natural bodies” (Dungy 2009, xxii) as Camille T. Dungy’s anthology *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (2009) aptly proves. The environment has been interpreted on multiple levels as the memories of the environment reveal the subject position of the African American remembering subject, be it the individual or community. It also provides for the multidirectionality of African American eco-memory due to the multifaceted interpretation of the environment. DuBois’s contemplation of the land illustrates the multilayeredness of the environment for the African American observer:

Here, then, is beauty and ugliness, a wide vision of world-sacrifice, a fierce gleam of world-hate. Which is life and what is death and how shall we face so tantalizing a contradiction? Any explanation must necessarily be subtle and involved. No pert and easy word of encouragement, no merely dark despair, can lay hold of the roots of these things. And first and before all, we cannot forget that this world is beautiful. Grant all its ugliness and sin—the petty, horrible snarl of its putrid threads, which few have seen more near or more often than I—notwithstanding all this, the beauty of this world is not to be denied. (1920, 225)

Beyond the “doubleness”—a label Du Bois is famously credited for—of the authentic black self and the racialized self, crystalized in the quote as the beauty of and “dark despair” in the world, there lies a nuanced stratification of African American eco-memory. In fact, “the roots of these things” can be traced back to slaves’ environmental thinking as a response to the political and cultural environment of the American South and their experience of the environment as an agrarian space and a spiritual/cultural resource, the latter imbued with African heritage surviving on the new continent. On the one hand, the environment has served as a source of self-interpretation, which is partly due to the symbiotic attachment to nature in African

cosmology and the heritage of African agrarianism (see Fields-Black 2008). On the other, it has possessed an othering effect as African American alienation has born down on their relationship with the land. In the nuanced dichotomy of longing and fear, thus, the environment has engaged African American memory work. It is in the inbetweenity of the dichotomy that different foci within African American eco-memory can be identified, further stratified by the differentiation between nature and cultivated land, indicating the directionality and positionality of the memory work.

Nature as an enframing and all-imbuing cosmological reality differs from land as a cultivated area while both devise different modes of inhabitation. The eco-memory of nature signifies the claim of being part of it, i.e., in an apriori way, it expresses the cosmological/spiritual need to make sense of the self as an embedded entity; and, spatio-culturally, it reveals the attempt to identify a terrain where reunion can take place with the people through the embedding relationship with the environment. In African American terms, eco-memory signifies embeddedness in nature, an interrelatedness between the African American subject, community, and the environment. Dianne D. Glave identifies the African American environmental heritage similarly, “Broadly speaking, Africans believed in the interconnectedness of the human, spiritual, and environmental realms and felt that harm toward or care for one necessarily affected the others” (2010, 44). John Mbiti’s study of African religions foregrounds that African slaves must have imported their view of nature and despite the traumatizing experience of the Middle Passage and plantation life it was not erased. Quite the contrary, the sites in nature were turned into place (see Raboteau 2004, Wardi 2011), i.e., sites of memory as vehicles of their sustained worldview, proving the subjective (not objectified) and authentic reading of the environment by (freed) slaves and free African Americans (see the early memoir of Olaudah Equiano [1789] and slave narratives like Harriet Tubman’s). Inhabiting the new land, they turned it into place by imbuing it with their own meanings. The appropriation of the environment represents an act of cultural syncretism also since it reflected, what James Houk calls, “a compromise between the need to retain those things that give meaning to everyday life and the desire to embellish and broaden that meaning in the context of an ever changing sociological and ecological matrix” (qtd. in McNeal 2010, 203). As Sheryl Tucker De Vazquez maintains, “A spiritual belief in the continuing cycle of life, death, transformation and rebirth continues to inform the whole of African American cultural life and is revealed to us in the art and architecture of African-American [sic] people [with] art objects [. . .] often dressed in the accouterments of the ordinary, the discarded and the abandoned” (1998, 304). In America, it has meant the reappropriation of the environment to express the African American subject and community, which has its roots in the African sentiment of improvisation. As John

Michael Vlach, also referred to by Tucker De Vazquez, insists regarding African American decorative art, it aims “to constantly reshape the old and familiar into something modern and unique to simultaneously express one's self and reinforce the image of the community” (1978, 3). The art and the built environment of African Americans center on a memory of an environment that has the potential to resist change and the transformative capacity to appropriate the surroundings. In this way, an eco-memory emerges from the transatlantic memory since it devises the same “rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation” Paul Gilroy defines as the Black Atlantic (1993, 4) in that it flexibly reinvigorates, recycles, and (re)incorporates black traditions related to the environment with all the intricacies tradition may entail (see Gates 2010, 13).

Traumatic memories of the Middle Passage and the dehumanizing treatment of African Americans in space, on the other hand, have also left haunting imprints on the perception of the environment (see Brogan 1998, Khedhir 2020), which, in combination with the former, provide a multilayered texture of eco-memory. The plastic metaphor of the water as the reminder of the Middle Passage with “the image of the ship [as] a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion” (Gilroy 1993, 4), the horrific trope of the Igbo landing deployed nature, the haunted places in the slaves' ghostlore representing “social control, paralyzing actions and even undermining personal safety [i.e.,] to produce a climate of ‘collective insecurity’” (Fry 1975, 46), or the “contested terrain” combed to control by “slaveholders, overseers, drivers, slave hunters, dogs, militias, and patrollers” (Diouf 2014, 11) epitomize few but revealing examples of the threat and terror that seeped into African American eco-memory. Torn out of their familiar cultural spaces, African slaves were taken to a social space that sought to objectify them, denying them subjectivity, i.e., the ability to inhabit it. The microcosm of the ship embodied a satellite entity of the slaveholding power structure forestalling the appropriation of the environment for the enslaved Africans during the passage—much as the ship also signifies a “space in-between, rejecting the stringent opposition” (Diedrich, Gates, and Pedersen 1999, 7)—and after they arrived in the new land, the plantation economy solidified displacement. The striving to extend the policing control to the natural environment was a logical mechanism to semanticize it as yet within the scope of the slave system. Dominating the built environment with slaves as part of the livestock carried over into the attempt of subjugating the natural environment, using it as an insecure place through lynching (see Allen, Lewis, Litwack, and Als 2000) and slave-hunting (see Parry and Yingling 2020), or working slaves in the unbuilt environment (including accompanying white masters hunting, turpentine camps, etc.).

In either case, through eco-memory, African Americans have been able to reconnect to the environment and the land by re-appropriating it to make it habitable and to reference the self and community in a historical presence. The environment as a cultural constituent proves a distinctive point of the particularization of the African American individual and community and the differentiation from the cultural other, i.e., white society. Houston Baker’s “black (w)hole” (1984, 5) and Robert Stepto’s concept of “immersion” (1979, 167) verify the ontological necessity of connecting through the environment to the African American community. More recently, Carolyn Finney (2014), Stefanie K. Dunning (2021) argue similarly that returning, or, rather, reclaiming nature (Dunning 2021, 23) is a source of contestation and maintenance/restoration of collective ties. As Finney argues, “Remembering and re-creating [. . .] is a way to acknowledge the African American experience and a way for African Americans to acknowledge themselves” (2014, 64), but, in effect, more as “*re-membering* [the traces to places] is an alternative to extinction” (Savoy 2015, 160).

The spiritual/communal aspect comes to the foreground in African American ecowomanism. As an offshoot of the environmental justice movement including ecofeminism, it aims to conduct “raceclass-gender analysis to examine climate injustice, expose environmental racism, and explore ecological reparations” (Harris 2019, 42). From a more centripetal angle, it, in fact, “creates and honors eco-spiritualities” (Harris 2019, 42), which include a symbiotic approach to the environment based on African cosmologies and backed by theological inquiries. Melanie Harris, Kimberly Ruffin, and Diane D. Glave, among others, seek to re-establish the connection to and embeddedness in nature by emphasizing an African American environmental spiritual tradition of ancestors engaging the environment and, in this way, reasserting and authenticating the black community through contextualizing it in the environment. The environmentalist focus bears ethical and moral demand that ranges from individual concern, through community bonding, to the stewardship of the lived environment.

The stewardship of nature is a further theme indicating, beyond inert connectedness to the environment, engagement with the land as a possession. Black agrarianism goes back to African roots as enslaved Africans were often farmers, whose agricultural knowledge was utilized on the plantations (see, e.g., Carney 1993). Much as inhabiting the place through cultivating did happen in the sense that African Americans constructed an identity in relation to it, foregrounding the tradition of black agrarianism also as a political movement, the exploitation of their work and knowledge caused “a conflicted relationship to the land—by coercing their labor, restricting their ability to own land, and impairing their ability to interpret the landscape” (Smith 2007, 7–8). Impairment can under no circumstances mean disruption, though, as explicated above, but deficiency as in distortion and

woundedness (see Smith 8). Whereas the cultivation of the land was and could have served as a source of pride on both individual and community levels, the denial of possession of the land seriously impaired any hope for the land to be the means of proof of social acceptance. The ambivalence stemming from refusal and verification of an agrarian ideal has shaped a memory of the land that carries trauma and promise simultaneously. As land reclamation has held the possibility of political acceptance and proof of freedom and, thus, citizenship, it has also reflected on the self-constructing self-evaluation through toil and the results of it. Beyond the early examples offered by Kimberley Smith (2007) or later ones by Lu Ann Jones, showing both black and white female agency prevailing through “self-provisioning” (2002, 5), more recent publications such as *Homecoming* (2000) depicting the struggles and pride of black farmers, Debra A. Reid and Evan P. Bennett’s *Beyond Forty Acres and a Mule* (2012) highlighting black agency, land projects as in *Farming While Black* (2018), or *We Are Each Other’s Harvest* (2021) celebrating the legacy of black farmers illuminate the persistent tradition and memory of the land in this respect, too.

The eco-memory of nature and land, however, also entails a racially contaminated reading with the reassertion of African American subjectivity as accompanied and always already enframed by white oppression directly and indirectly. Tactics of racism as accounted for by, e.g., Pete Daniel led to persisting discrimination and displacement (2013, 24) bearing down on blacks’ relationship to the land. The corrupted representation of the land marked by suffering, fighting for survival, and loss in memory has gravely influenced the shaping of the memory of the African American agricultural heritage in the South (see for this, e.g., John Francis Ficara’s photo documentary *Black Farmers in America* [2006] unveiling the ambivalence between connectedness to the land and deprivation).

Similarly, the memory of nature is no less ambivalent. Even though examples like that of the Great Dismal Swamp in North Carolina and Virginia show that “despite the difficulty of navigating this kind of terrain, runaway slaves shared their knowledge of this environment with each other to build a life apart from the watchful gaze of their white owners while successfully avoiding capture” (Finney 2014, 59), allowing them to reach a certain degree of a sense of freedom, they could not escape the “disconnectedness from the environment” and “psychological divorce” from it (Finney 2014, 59). As Cassandra Y. Johnson and Josh Mcdaniel account for the instilled fear and disobedience (2006, 56) in turpentine camps, establishing that “the wilderness is benign; however, in the case of turpentine workers, it provided the backdrop or context for oppression” (2006, 56). Much as nature served as a means of escape, since slaves “also saw the woods as a safe hideaway from plantation overseers” (2006, 52), offering a contrast to white civilization, the latter yet sneaked into the wilderness in multiple ways. Slave

narratives conceptualize the wilderness as an unsafe place of escape, especially as it was always escape from, keeping the point of departure lingering in the background and haunting during the journey. The places of work under white supervision in nature as in turpentine camps presented satellite entities in a Foucauldian surveillance system, where engagement with nature was overshadowed by the power structure. Wilderness itself could represent a place of terror as racist activities such as lynching took place in nature and the lynching tree was emplaced in nature, disrupting any univocal understanding of nature—as it represents a “palpable rupture from nature” (Dunning 2021, 17)—and rendering, thus, the expression of a symbiotic relationship with nature problematic. One palpable example represents Billie Holiday’s rendition of the song “Strange Fruit” (1939), referring to the lynching trees that “littered the American landscape” (Cone 2011, 95). Undoubtedly, cultural trauma resurfaces in eco-memory in natural images linked to traumatic experiences such as the Middle Passage—“a geographic and metaphysical marker of transformation” (Wardi 2011, 24) or Hurricane Katrina—“a traumatic occurrence, a shocking incident that threatened established routines of understanding and action” (Eyerman 2015, 6).

Eco-memory entails reflections on environmental racism both as traumatic narratives and as ones deployed to contest it. As William Bunge’s classic essay “Racism in Geography” proves, it is prevailing politics to marginalize ethnic and racial groups in geographical space. It pertains to dislocation, discrimination, dispossession, as well as to the unequal accessibility of resources and the maltreatment of the places inhabited by minorities. Urban or rural areas alike are involved in the various studies by black and white scholars by now, e.g., Melissa Checker (2005), Carl A. Zimring (2015), or Dorceta Taylor (2014) to address issues of environmental injustices for the reason that

Millions of African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans are trapped in polluted environments because of their race and color. Inhabitants of these communities are exposed to greater health and environmental risks than is the general population. Clearly, all Americans do not have the same opportunities to breathe clean air, drink clean water, enjoy clean parks and playgrounds, or work in a clean, safe environment. People of color bear the brunt of the nation’s pollution problem. (qtd. in Melosi 2006, 127)

However, from the point of view of eco-memory, the memory of environmental racism comes to the foreground as the memory of the utilization of the environment to oppress African Americans as introduced above (i.e., traumatic memories); and as the memory of resistance with the possibility of alliance-building through reconnecting with each other via shared experiences (i.e., the cultural memory of an authentic black community) as in subversive activities, e.g., fishing and hunting (see Giltner 2006, 31) or

the use of herbal medicine to regain control (Covey 2007, 70). In a mutually supporting way, memory and the environment are confluent as land reclamation is motivated by and triggers the reclamation of memory. As Gregory Bush points out, “reclaiming land by reclaiming memory is a growing trend in this country as sprawl and increasingly contentious fights for public land are heightened” (2006, 167). In a multilayered approach to ecoracism, Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll’s *To Love The Wind and The Rain: African Americans and Environmental History* (2006) exemplifies the dual focus, examining the role of nature and of rural and urban places in facilitating environmental injustice and envisioning resistance, i.e., activism even through multiracial alliances. African American eco-memory comes poignantly to expression in Glave’s proposal of Black Environmental Liberation Theology (BELT), “both a theology and an ideology that is actualized by shielding contemporary African Americans exposed to toxins and pollution from landfills, garbage dumps, auto mechanics’ shops, and sewage plants” (2006, 190), that palpably brings together foci discussed above, but, most visibly, African American engagement, spirituality and community, as well as ecological thinking to tackle ecoracism.

As part of African American cultural memory, eco-memory has been an all-pervasive and persisting notion in the vortex of African American identity construction. The triad of nature, the individual, and the community has proved a braid that could neither be separated nor torn. The recent revival of eco-memory, nevertheless, offers yet another way for African Americans to reposition the self and reconnect to the community while exerting activism in the interest of nature—a multidirectional endeavor of utmost significance in the present day of ecological crisis.

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