

## What is Africa to Me? Wilderness in Black Thought, 1860–1930

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The concept of wilderness found in the black American intellectual tradition poses a provocative alternative to the preservationist concept. For black writers, the wilderness is not radically separate from human society but has an important historical and social dimension. Nor is it merely a feature of the external landscape; there is also a wilderness within, a vital energy that derives from and connects one to the external wilderness. Wilderness is the origin and foundation of culture; preserving it means preserving not merely the physical landscape but our collective memory of it. But black writers also highlight the racial essentialism that infuses both their own and traditional American concepts of the wild, giving us greater insight into why the wilderness celebrated by preservationists can be a problematic value for racial minorities.

*Herein the longing of black men must have respect: . . . the strange renderings of nature they have seen, may give the world new points of view.*

—W. E. B. Du Bois<sup>1</sup>

When environmentalists refer to wilderness, they usually have in mind a concept defined by the canonical texts of the wilderness preservation movement, including works by such familiar figures as Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold. There's room within this tradition for disagreement, of course (is Walden Pond a wilderness?) But we can nonetheless identify a broad consensus on the meaning of wilderness to those who provided key ideological support for the preservation movement. For the nineteenth-century romantics and twentieth-century preservationists, wilderness typically meant the part of the landscape that is unaffected by human impacts, a pristine region where "earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man is a visitor who does not remain."<sup>2</sup> Wilderness reflects a natural as opposed to human order, and can therefore serve as a place of moral regeneration and spiritual renewal.

It's a useful concept, to be sure, but it does have limitations. According to its

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<sup>1</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 90 (emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, eds., "Introduction," *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), pp. 3–4; *Wilderness Act, U.S. Code*, vol. 16, sec. 1131(c) (1964).

critics, it reinforces a problematic opposition between what is human and what is natural and provides little guidance on how to integrate wilderness into human society. Moreover, it is outdated; there are no longer any places we can sensibly view as truly pristine.<sup>3</sup> Like all concepts, *wilderness* bears the imprint of the historical and social location of the actors who formulated it. It undoubtedly captures an important dimension of the experience of some nineteenth and early twentieth-century middle-class white American men. John Muir apparently *was* able to experience Yosemite Valley as pristine and radically different from human civilization—but differently situated actors might not, and the traditional concept of wilderness may not carry much meaning for them. To discover such alternative understandings of wilderness we will need to look beyond the canonical nature writers.

One promising place to look is the black intellectual tradition. Conventional wisdom has it that the concept of wilderness was invented by and for white men,<sup>4</sup> but in fact wilderness also plays an important role in the political and literary works of black Americans. These works deserve greater attention from environmental theorists. The black intellectual tradition reflects both blacks' unique experiences and the broader American culture; it is, as Henry Louis Gates put it, "two-toned," both distinctly black and recognizably American. The concept of wilderness at play in this tradition thus bears some relation to the preservationist concept, but it carries a different inflection, reflecting the distinctive experiences and concerns of the black American community.<sup>5</sup> Exploring this concept can illuminate alternative meanings of wilderness, giving us a critical perspective on the traditional concept and making available a different understanding of humans' relationship to the undeveloped landscape.

The traditional concept imagines wilderness as radically opposed to human society, a physical region lying beyond society and outside of human history.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> J. Baird Callicott, "The Wilderness Idea Revisited," in Callicott and Nelson, *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, pp. 348–55; William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *ibid.*, pp. 471–99.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Bruce Braun, "On the Raggedy Edge of Risk," in *Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference*, ed. Donald S. Moore, Jake Kosek, and Anand Pandian (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 175–203.

<sup>5</sup> "Criticism in the Jungle," in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 4. There is a small but growing literature on the history of black environmental thought. See Melvin Dixon, *Ride Out the Wilderness* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Elizabeth Blum, "Power, Danger, and Control: Slave Women's Perceptions of Wilderness in the Nineteenth Century," *Women's Studies* 31 (2002): 247–66; Dianne Glave, "A Garden So Brilliant with Colors, So Original in its Design," *Environmental History* 8 (2003): 395–411; Cassandra Johnson and J. M. Bowker, "African-American Wildland Memories," *Environmental Ethics* 26 (2004): 57–75; Kimberly Smith, "Black Agrarianism and the Foundations of Black Environmental Thought," *Environmental Ethics* 26 (2004): 267–86; Christine Gerhardt, "The Greening of African-American Landscapes," *Mississippi Quarterly* 55 (2002): 515.

<sup>6</sup> Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," pp. 483, 484.

Indeed, under this view the value of wilderness lies in its separation from human society and detachment from human history. The black tradition, in contrast, is centrally concerned with the relationship between identity and landscape, and particularly the historical relationship between a community and the land as that relationship is mediated by memory. Those concerns give shape to a distinctive concept of wilderness that (at the risk of oversimplifying this complex tradition) I call "the black concept." Importantly, wilderness in this tradition is not always confined to the external landscape; there is also a wilderness within, an untamed vital energy that derives from and connects one to the external wilderness in which the race originated. Thus, wilderness is not radically differentiated from human society; it is the origin and foundation of culture, and intimately connected to one's cultural (and particularly racial) identity. Preserving wilderness means preserving not merely the physical landscape but the community's cultural forms and consciousness—its collective memories of the community's aboriginal environment.

This concept of wilderness is quite rich, but it has also been troublesome to black writers. Both the black concept and the traditional concept were influenced during the early twentieth century by scientific racism and primitivism. By the 1920s, black writers were raising concerns about the racial essentialism that infuses both concepts. Those concerns, I would argue, do not entirely undermine the value of the black concept of wilderness, but they do provide an important critical perspective on the wilderness concept in general.

This study is necessarily limited in scope. I focus on the writings of black elites, such as Alexander Crummell and W. E. B. Du Bois, because their works are comparable in richness and sophistication to those of the canonical preservationists. However, I begin with slave culture, which was an important source for later black writers. I continue with the nineteenth-century discourse on African colonization, and conclude by examining how scientific racism and primitivism influenced and complicated the black concept of wilderness.

## WILDERNESS IN SLAVE CULTURE

White immigrants to the New World in the seventeenth century arrived already equipped with a concept of wilderness. "Wilderness" referred to the part of the landscape that was not under agricultural cultivation or human settlement of the European pattern. It was the abode of savages and beasts, a place of danger—but also a place governed by a natural order, in opposition to the human order reflected in rural and urban landscapes. It could therefore be a spiritual or political refuge.<sup>7</sup>

The Africans enslaved and forcibly transported to the New World brought a different set of conceptual resources. Although religiously diverse, most enslaved

<sup>7</sup> Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 8–22, 44–66.

Africans embraced an animistic belief system that imbued the natural world with spiritual meaning. In some respects, however, their views of the landscape were similar to those of their white captors, and they had a category for the part of the landscape that Europeans called wilderness. In many West African cultures, “the bush”—the region beyond the human settlement—was an important spiritual resource, the location of religious rituals and spiritual transformation.<sup>8</sup> These African religious beliefs persisted among American slaves well into the nineteenth century, particularly in regions such as South Carolina where there were large concentrations of slaves. However, intermittent efforts at Christianization also had effect, as did the influence of various white folk traditions. By the nineteenth century, these influences had resulted in a distinctive slave culture—not uniform or universal, to be sure, but shared by the majority of slaves who worked on large plantations. We should not overstate the differences between slave culture and white folk culture, of course; there was much interaction between them, and white folk culture in the South was itself a mosaic of beliefs that included religious, magical and scientific perspectives on nature. Nevertheless, slave culture did have some distinctive emphases.<sup>9</sup> In particular, the slaves’ symbolic culture imbued the natural landscape with moral and spiritual meaning, emphasizing the close relationship between human morality and the condition of the landscape. This interdependence between the community and the land would become central to the concept of wilderness as it developed in the black intellectual tradition.

Two aspects of nineteenth-century black culture were particularly relevant to the evolution of the black concept of wilderness: the spirituals and the fugitive slave narratives. The spirituals, a rich body of religious vocal music, drew heavily on Christian imagery to imbue the landscape with religious significance—a tendency probably reinforced by the persistence of African spiritual beliefs, which also infused the natural landscape with spiritual meaning. Slaves sang “O Canaan, sweet Canaan, / I am abound for the land of Canaan”; called on the river to “roll, Jordan, roll”; and asked “Did yo ever/ Stan’ on mountain / Wash yo’ han’s / In a cloud?” Black troops marched into war singing “Go in de wilderness, / Jesus call you. Go in de wilderness / To wait upon de Lord.” According to Lawrence Levine, these songs illustrate that “the sacred world of the slaves was able to fuse the precedents of the past” with “the conditions of the present” so that the material world and the spiritual world merged.<sup>10</sup> The result was a sacred geography that could be imposed on the natural landscape: a river could become a type of the river Jordan, the North a type of Canaan, and wild spaces could become the desert in which the children

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Creel, “A Peculiar People”: *Slave Religion and Community—Culture among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), pp. 47–51.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Joyner, *Shared Traditions* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), pp. 35–36.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 39, 51–53.

of Israel wandered or a place to which one retreats to seek spiritual transformation.<sup>11</sup>

We find a striking example of this rhetorical practice in Martin Delany’s serial novel, *Blake* (1861–1863”). Henry, the hero, has escaped from a plantation with the intent of leading a slave revolt. As he enters the wilderness and reaches the Red River, he is overwhelmed by the task in front of him:

Standing upon a high bank of the stream, contemplating his mission, a feeling of humbleness and a sensibility of unworthiness impressed him. . . . Henry raised in solemn tones amidst the lonely wilderness:

Could I but climb where Moses stood,  
And view the landscape o’er;  
Not Jordan’s streams, nor death’s cold flood,  
Could drive me from the shore!

The modern reader may be struck by the sudden emergence of an Old Testament landscape in the American wilderness, but Henry is thoroughly at home in this biblical world. He climbs his mountain and crosses the alligator-infested Jordan, his faith “now fully established.”<sup>12</sup>

The imposition of foreign geographies onto the American landscape persists in black literature, as do biblical imagery and the depiction of the wilderness as a place of spiritual trial. But black literature drew on other traditions as well, including the fugitive slave narratives published by abolitionists.<sup>13</sup> These narratives added another dimension to the black concept of wilderness. Although the narrators did frequently echo the spirituals (describing the South as “Egypt” and the North as “Canaan,” for example), they also drew on conventions familiar to the white audiences to which they were directed—particularly the literary conventions of pastoralism. Fugitive Henry Bibb echoed a common pastoral theme in describing the beauties of nature “on free soil”: “the green trees and wild flowers of the forest; the ripening harvest fields waving with the gentle breezes of Heaven.” Charles Ball’s narrative contrasts the pastoral North with a South so corrupt that agriculture was failing and wilderness was overtaking the plantations: “In some places, the cedar thickets . . . continued for three or four miles together,” a melancholy “deserted wilderness.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> John Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 145; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), pp. 242–55; Dixon, *Ride Out the Wilderness*, pp. 3–4, 13–14; Nell Painter, *Exodusters* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1970), pp. 191, 195.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Delany, *Blake, or the Huts of America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), pp. 69–70.

<sup>13</sup> Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Slave’s Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Williams Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Mary Wilson Starling, *The Slave Narrative* (Boston: G. K. Hill, 1981).

<sup>14</sup> “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb” [1849], in Yuval Taylor, *I Was Born a Slave* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 2:36; Charles Ball, “Slavery in the United States” [1836], in *ibid.*, I:279.

In general, these stories depict wilderness in a negative light; it is a perilous place teeming with dangerous beasts and savage men (sometimes native Americans, but more often violent, uncivilized white men). Moses Roper escapes from his plantation only to “wander through the wilderness for several days without any food,” and encounter alligators and wolves in the forest. William Wells Brown nearly freezes to death during his wilderness journey. Josiah Henson also confronts hunger and wolves.<sup>15</sup> To slaves, the wilderness was hostile and frightening—but no more so than the tyrannical plantations, where a worse kind of wildness reigns. This emphasis on the frightening aspect of the wilderness may be surprising, since most plantation slaves were probably familiar with the forests and swamps surrounding the plantation, where they often hunted and gathered roots and herbs.<sup>16</sup> But the narratives remind us that slaves were severely restricted in their freedom of movement; although their immediate locale might be familiar, a fugitive would quickly find him or herself in an unknown and dangerous landscape. The political purpose of the narratives is relevant here: narrators probably emphasized the dangers of escape in order to win the audience’s sympathy and admiration.<sup>17</sup>

The narratives’ political purpose also accounts for the fact that they were less likely than the spirituals to give the landscape spiritual meaning; narrators typically described the wilderness not as a place of spiritual transformation but as a temporary—and dangerous—refuge from tyranny.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the slave narratives like the spirituals invest the landscape with moral significance. Plantations turn into desolate wilderness, in Charles Ball’s narrative, because the planters lack the virtues necessary to maintain the land’s fertility; the South, in Frederick Douglass’ words, was “cursed with a burning sense of injustice.”<sup>19</sup> This relationship between the natural environment and human morality rehearses an old theme in the Christian tradition: the notion that nature as well as humanity was corrupted by Adam’s transgression, and is similarly in need of redemption. These themes of interdependence between the landscape and human morality and the land’s need for redemption shape black

<sup>15</sup> “A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper” [1838], in *ibid.*, 1:495, 511–12; William Wells Brown, “Narrative” [1847], in *ibid.*, 1:712; “The Life of Josiah Henson” [1849], in *ibid.*, 1:746.

<sup>16</sup> Stuart Marks, *Southern Hunting in Black and White* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 27–28; Mart Stewart, *What Nature Suffers to Groe* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 134–36; Sharla Fett, *Working Cures* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> Kimberly Smith, *The Dominion of Voice* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), pp. 175–76, 231. On slaves’ fear of wilderness, see Blum, “Power, Danger, and Control,” pp. 251–56.

<sup>18</sup> See Smith, *Dominion of Voice*, pp. 221–23, for further discussion of the narratives’ spiritual meaning.

<sup>19</sup> “Address before the Tennessee Colored Agricultural and Mechanical Association,” in *African-American Social and Political Thought*, ed. Howard Brotz (New Brunswick: Transaction Publications, 1992), p. 291.

discourse about wilderness through the nineteenth century, becoming intertwined with a related theme connecting wilderness and black identity.

### WILDERNESS AND DESTINY

Wilderness for nineteenth-century white Americans typically meant the western frontier, and attitudes about the wilderness were linked to the ideology of manifest destiny: the belief that it was the duty of white Americans to civilize the West. The ideology is a nineteenth-century gloss on a long-standing theme in American thought, that God intends for the wilderness to be subdued and that this intention justifies colonization of the New World.<sup>20</sup> Slaves and freedmen were important agents in this project, of course. But some black Americans, both before and after Emancipation, believed that the frontier they were destined for lay in Africa.

Africa was central to both black racial identity and to black discourse about wilderness; indeed, it constituted the primary conceptual connection between identity and nature in black thought. It was a troubled connection, however. While many American blacks apparently preserved a sense of African identity into the nineteenth century, others strongly objected to being called African and worried that claiming their African heritage would make it more difficult to win acceptance into American society. To most white Americans, after all, Africa was a wild region inhabited by savages unfit for participation in American civilization.<sup>21</sup> The problem of black identity was therefore intimately connected to the meaning and value of the African wilderness.

One influential approach to this problematic connection is represented by the nineteenth-century African colonization movement. Throughout the nineteenth century, black leaders such as Martin Delany, Edward Blyden, and Alexander Crummell urged black Americans to colonize the African wilderness—essentially, to elevate the black race by transforming the African landscape. Colonizationists claimed divine sanction for their project, citing the Ethiopian Prophecy (Psalm 68). “Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God,” declared Martin Delany in his call for the colonization of East Africa. The land belongs to the black race, and “all that is left for us to do, is to make ourselves the ‘lords of terrestrial creation’” by possessing it.<sup>22</sup> It is more than a right; it is the duty of black Americans to “civilize” Africa: “Africa is our fatherland and we its legitimate descendants.”

<sup>20</sup> Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 35–43; Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, pp. 24–25.

<sup>21</sup> Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin’ On* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), pp. 40, 72, 227; Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, pp. 86–87.

<sup>22</sup> “The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States” [1852], in *African-American Social and Political Thought, 1850–1920*, ed. Howard Brotz (New Brunswick: Transaction Publications, 1992), pp. 111, 101, 103.

Delany recognized that much of Africa was already settled, but he nevertheless evoked the familiar image of Africa as a tropical jungle: undeveloped, unpossessed, and inhabited by savages. His plan, he declared, was “the first voluntary step that has ever been taken for her regeneration.”<sup>23</sup>

Edward Blyden also relied on the Old Testament—Deuteronomy 1:21—in making clear God’s intent that black Americans “possess the land” (in this case, Liberia). Africa is “ours as a gift from the Almighty,” who preserved it for centuries from European domination.<sup>24</sup> He described what they might accomplish: the visitor to Liberia today, encountering a lonely, unbroken forest, would wonder “when and how are those vast wildernesses to be made the scene of human activity and to contribute to human wants and happiness?” A few years later, however, the visitor might return to find roads and bridges. As Blyden imagined the transformation, “The gigantic trees have disappeared, houses have sprung up on every side. . . . The waving corn and rice and sugarcane . . . have taken the place of the former sturdy denizens of the forest.” These “wonderful revolutions” were all to be accomplished by the American Negro colonist, who would cause “the wilderness and the solitary place to be glad—the desert to bloom and blossom as the rose—and the whole land to be converted into a garden of the Lord.” Blyden went on to compare Liberia favorably to the iconic American wildernesses, the Rocky Mountains and Yosemite Valley. But he emphasized that he was not advocating the settling of a new country by strangers; he was calling for the “repatriation” of Africa.<sup>25</sup>

African colonization rhetoric thus characterized Africa as wilderness, and like the rhetoric of manifest destiny it assumed that wilderness must be subdued and given value through human labor. In this respect it echoed the rhetoric of white Americans intent on settling the western frontier. But it lacked the ambivalence often expressed by white elites—an ambivalence stemming from a competing set of ideas, rooted in eighteenth-century romanticism, that informed American preservationism. In this tradition, wilderness is a place to escape the corruptions of civilization; savages even have a certain nobility by virtue of their natural innocence. For writers such as Thoreau and Muir, the wilderness was a place of spiritual and moral regeneration, to be valued for its own sake.<sup>26</sup>

The rhetoric of black colonizationists contrasts with this preservationist tradition in three respects. First, as noted above, in this preservationist tradition

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>24</sup> “The Call of Providence to the Descendants of Africa in America” [1862], in Brotz, *African-American Social and Political Thought*, pp. 115, 117.

<sup>25</sup> “The African Problem and Its Method of Solution” [1890], in *ibid.*, p. 136; “The Call of Providence,” in *ibid.*, p. 125, 137.

<sup>26</sup> The classic studies of this tradition include Smith, *Virgin Land*; Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*; Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

wilderness is typically conceived as outside of human history; it is “detached from all temporal relationship.” Because humans have no history with wilderness areas, they are places where we can escape our own bad history and start over. To preserve wilderness is to preserve this possibility.<sup>27</sup> For the black colonizationists, in contrast, the African wilderness has an important historical dimension. True, nineteenth-century blacks often shared white historians’ view that Africa itself had no political history. Nevertheless, interest in Africa among black elites in the late nineteenth century was aimed at claiming their history, a history that began in the African wilderness.<sup>28</sup> For them, the African wilderness was located in the historical past; going to Africa meant recovering one’s own history. In fact, the colonizationists urged black Americans to return to Africa *because of* their historical ties to it; they argued that black Americans had obligations to Africa based on that history. As Alexander Crummell put it, “The land of our fathers is in great spiritual need, and . . . those of her sons who haply have the ability to aid in her restoration will show mercy to her, and perform an act of filial love and tenderness which is but their ‘reasonable service.’”<sup>29</sup> In this tradition, black Americans’ relationship to the wilderness is fundamentally historical: while white Americans “discover” the West, black Americans “return” to Africa. That historical relationship is the basis for black Americans’ obligations to redeem the African landscape.

Second, in the preservationist tradition, wilderness is typically a place of natural innocence, where natural law rules.<sup>30</sup> Journeying into the wilderness can therefore lead to moral regeneration, as the corrupting influences of society are replaced by the positive influences of nature. This idea is largely absent from nineteenth-century black colonization rhetoric. Blyden and Crummell usually described Africa as spiritually dark, at least amoral and possibly corrupt. The wildness of the landscape is evidence of this corruption: enlightened, civilized people would cultivate the land. “Regenerating” the land is therefore both a moral and a physical task; it involves enlightening the “benighted heathens” as much as transforming the landscape.<sup>31</sup> Of course, after the turn of the century, black elites would question this judgment. Du Bois, for example, had a more favorable view of traditional African culture, and also argued that the moral corruption that Crummell condemned was the result of white imperialism and the slave trade.<sup>32</sup> Other twentieth-century developments, discussed below,

<sup>27</sup> Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” pp. 483–84.

<sup>28</sup> August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880–1915* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), pp. 50–51.

<sup>29</sup> “The Relations and Duties of Free Colored Men in America to Africa” [1860], in Brotz, *African-American Social and Political Thought*, p. 174.

<sup>30</sup> Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, pp. 46–48.

<sup>31</sup> Crummell, “Relations and Duties,” in Brotz, *African-American Social and Political Thought*, p. 173.

<sup>32</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Negro* (1915; reprint ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 62–85, 93–94.

would undermine the negative judgments of the African wilderness further. Nevertheless, this element of the colonization rhetoric had lasting impact on black thought. Although it implies that wilderness is without intrinsic moral value, it also makes regenerating the land a moral duty—a duty rooted in history and requiring positive action by black Americans.

Finally, some American preservationists went beyond the rhetoric of manifest destiny, suggesting that conquering nature was an end in itself, a way to exert one's independence and express one's masculinity. This version of rugged individualism celebrates the domination of nature, but not through transforming the landscape. Instead, it aims at preserving the wilderness in order to preserve the opportunity to cultivate the "physical independence," "individuality and competence" achieved by adventuring in the wild.<sup>33</sup> Such rhetoric of rugged individualism was sometimes echoed by Booker T. Washington, who saw struggle as the primary means of racial development. But even Washington recognized that blacks did not have to test themselves against mountains and forests; the social environment provided enough challenges. And Washington notwithstanding, black thought is generally less individualistic than other varieties of American liberalism. It highlights the individual's dependence on the community, and typically defines freedom as the freedom to create a home and community.<sup>34</sup> This tradition therefore focuses on the relationship between the wilderness and the *community*, not just the wilderness and the individual. The goal of African colonization was to create homes and communities in Africa, and it was an obligation rooted in group history and solidarity, not an expression of individuality.

In sum, African colonization rhetoric casts the wilderness in a different light: the African wilderness is intimately connected to black Americans' identity; it is part of the group's history that must be reclaimed and restored through positive action. Unlike preservationism, this tradition focuses on regenerating a degraded landscape rather than preserving a pristine one. It calls for action based on the group's historical ties to an ancestral homeland, rather than mere contemplation of a newly discovered landscape. These themes of historical connection and obligation continue to shape the black concept of wilderness into the twentieth century, as the relationship between wilderness and culture becomes a central focus of black thought.

### BLACK PRIMITIVISM

Albert Barnes announced in 1925 that the art of the New Negro would make us feel "the majesty of Nature, the ineffable peace of the woods and the great

<sup>33</sup> Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, pp. 526–27; Robert Marshall, "The Problem of Wilderness," *Scientific Monthly* 30 (February 1930): 143; Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 392–97, 490–98.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Dawson, *Black Visions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 11.

open spaces." The Negro has "kept nearer to the ideal of man's harmony with nature"—not just Africans but American Negroes, who enjoy "a primitive nature upon which a white man's education has never been harnessed."<sup>35</sup> Strange things to say about the highly educated, city-dwelling artists of the Harlem Renaissance, perhaps, but Barnes' language was not out of place in Alain Locke's *The New Negro*. It reflects an important evolution in black thought in the early twentieth century: the connections between nature, human culture and racial identity remained central to the concept of wilderness, but they took on a new dimension as black writers came to conceptualize wilderness as a reservoir of creative energy, a source of culture that lay not only in the historic past but in the consciousness of the race itself.

To understand this evolution, we have to explore its roots in two nineteenth-century intellectual trends: scientific racism and artistic primitivism. Racists and artistic primitivists held opposing views on the value of non-Western cultures, but they shared the late Victorian anxiety about the loss of cultural vitality. To many social critics, Western culture in the late nineteenth century seemed to be stagnant. Preservationism itself reflects this fear; one rationale for preserving wilderness was to revitalize Americans by giving them more opportunities for contact with nature.<sup>36</sup> Black Americans, drawing on scientific race theory and artistic primitivism, suggested another source of cultural revitalization: the creative energy of a race that, through centuries of oppression and dislocation, had never lost its primitive connection to nature.

The idea that contact with nature is the primary source of cultural vitality draws on the vitalist concept of nature associated with nineteenth-century romanticism. According to vitalists, nature is animated by a vital force that drives and governs all biological growth. Under this view, nature is a reservoir of creative energy, and because humans are also part of nature, they also share in its vital power—a power that a sensitive soul can draw on in order to create great works of art. For the romantics, contact with external nature was the most obvious way to tap into its vital force. Thus, individuals or groups who interacted with the natural world on a practical, spiritual and emotional level were the most capable of creating a rich, vital culture.<sup>37</sup> Hence, the romantic interest in "primitives," rural folk and others who lived "close to nature."

These ideas were particularly influential among white supremacists and the artists who developed the intellectual foundations of modern art, both of which groups would have profound influence on the development of black thought. White supremacists, for example, remained obsessed with vitality long after

<sup>35</sup> "Negro Art and America," in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (1925; reprint ed., New York: Touchstone, 1992), pp. 24, 19, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Roderick Nash, "The American Cult of the Primitive," *American Quarterly* 18 (Fall 1966): 520–37.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Beach, *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry* (New York: MacMillan, 1939), pp. 17–20, 45–109; Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 17–18.

the rest of the scientific community had abandoned vitalism in favor of a mechanical model of nature. American race theorists such as Nathaniel Shaler, Joseph LeConte, William McDougall, Madison Grant, and Lothrop Stoddard contended that human races evolved out of a dynamic interaction between the race's inner vital force and the external environment.<sup>38</sup> Le Conte, for example, contended that there was a vital principle in nature, and that "resident or inherent forces" in a race determine how successfully it will respond to the natural environment. Grant similarly argued that each race had an "inherent capacity for development and growth"—a capacity that cannot be altered by environmental influences. The "vigor and power" of the Nordic race explains its dominance, which should continue as long as the "energy" of the race does not dissipate in its increasingly urbanized, less demanding environment.<sup>39</sup>

Scientific racists argued that the inner vitality of the race, in reaction to the natural environment, determines cultural as well as physical development. Indeed, they posited a close connection between natural environment and culture: mental processes, they claimed, are directly determined by racially differentiated brain structures. Therefore, biological adaptation produces a mental life and culture peculiarly adapted to the natural environment.<sup>40</sup> Shaler elaborated this relationship between nature and culture through the concept of the cradle land: humans, he argued, are like all organisms affected by environmental conditions such as climate and the condition of the soil. Although evolving originally in one place, humans spread out over the earth and settled into environmentally diverse niches: the "cradle lands." As they adapted to these different environmental conditions over the course of many centuries, they developed into distinctive races. For Shaler (as for virtually all the scientific racists), the environmental conditions of northern Europe made it the cradle of "strong peoples," because its climate was harsh enough to require vigor and industry, but not so harsh as to discourage effort. In contrast, Africa did not produce great peoples because (Shaler imagined) tropical climates are easy to live in. Thus, the races cradled in these lands never developed civilization; their native vitality and capacity for culture dissipated in their undemanding environment.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> This notion reflects the continuing influence of the Lamarckian view that acquired characteristics could be inherited. Therefore, characteristics acquired as a response to the environment could be inherited by one's offspring and become a racial trait. J. B. Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy* (1809; reprint ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Le Conte, *Evolution: Its Nature, Its Evidences, and Its Relation to Religious Thought*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1902), pp. 28, 328; Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 4th rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), pp. 97–98, 169–70, 215.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., Herbert Spencer, "Social Statics" [1851], in *On Social Evolution*, ed. J. D. Y. Peel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 8–9, 33; Nathaniel Shaler, *The Neighbor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1904); Joseph Le Conte, *Evolution*; William McDougall, *The Group Mind*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1920); Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*; Stoddard, *Rising Tide of Color*.

<sup>41</sup> Nathaniel Shaler, "Nature and Man in America," *Scribner's Magazine* 8 (1890): 360, 361–63, 365.

Of course, white supremacists had to account for the achievements of tropical and subtropical cultures, such as the Mediterranean and Indian civilizations. Defenders of Nordic civilization argued that such peoples were *limited* to artistic and spiritual achievements and would never make substantial progress in science, philosophy or technology. The influential English historian Henry Thomas Buckle, for example, argued that peoples living in severe environments—among the mountains and great rivers of India, or endless deserts of the Mideast—are stimulated by the scenery so that they become more imaginative and less analytical, and are also rendered passive by the sheer enormity of the natural forces they face.<sup>42</sup> Northern Europe, and particularly England, lacked such sublime landscapes; as a result, the Nordic race was more analytic, rational and active than southern races. Under this reasoning (endorsed, for example, by William McDougall) the hardy, vigorous races that originated in the forests of northern Europe could be expected to produce more and better cultural products than weak and passive races produced by tropical wildernesses.

Unless, that is, the Nordic race degenerated in its new environment. Not all race theorists believed that environmental pressures were still driving racial development, and American theorists tended to worry about miscegenation more than environmental degradation. Nevertheless, some race theorists expressed anxiety that the Aryan race, cradled in a rugged northern European climate, would languish in an industrialized and urbanized environment—a fear that led many (notably Grant, Le Conte and George Bird Grinnell) to support wilderness preservation. A careful reader of Buckle might have had some concerns about preserving the sublime landscapes of the American West, but American racists tended to view the American wilderness as precisely the right kind of environment to maintain the vitality of Nordic civilization.<sup>43</sup>

Artistic primitivists, on the other hand, weren't so sure. They were also concerned about the vitality of Western civilization, but they had a different perspective on tropical cultures than did the scientific racists. Artistic primitivism was an aesthetic movement that arose in opposition to the nineteenth-century academic school of painting. It drew on the more diffuse literary and philosophical primitivism that had long permeated Western culture, but artistic primitivism was a distinctive tradition, and highly influential among black theorists.<sup>44</sup> Artistic primitivists complained that European art was constrained by convention; it was too civilized, and therefore too far removed from the vital force of nature. To remedy this artistic ennui, they suggested that European artists look for inspiration to the art of the tribal cultures of Africa and Oceania. Following the scientific racists, primitivists characterized these peoples as a

<sup>42</sup> Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, 2 vol. (New York: D. Appleton and Co, 1880), 1:85–86. Buckle, we should note, did not claim such mental characteristics were heritable.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen Fox, *The American Conservation Movement* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), pp. 115, 118, 345–51.

<sup>44</sup> Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994).

kind of evolutionary cul-de-sac—a people without culture and therefore free of “the conventionalities and unnaturalness of the civilized.” But primitivists thought this lack of culture and analytic abilities an advantage: Primitive arts (particularly those nurtured in fertile, vibrant landscapes) drew more directly on the vital force of nature.<sup>45</sup> “Are not savages artists who have forms of their own as powerful as the form of thunder?” asked August Mack, of the Blau Reiter school. Under this view (developed, for example, by Wassily Kandinsky), artistic creativity is a matter of not merely imitating the forms of nature but producing in the audience the *feeling* that the artist experiences when communing with nature.<sup>46</sup> What these artists hoped for from primitive art was a direct if crude expression of that feeling, which could inspire Western artists’ more sophisticated and technically superior art.

Primitivism stimulated interest in African art. According to one enthusiast, “These Africans being primitive, uncomplex, uncultured, can express their thoughts by a direct appeal to the instinct. Their carvings are informed with emotion.”<sup>47</sup> Elie Faure declared that “even when transported in great numbers to places like North America that have reached the most original . . . degree of civilization . . . , the black man remains, after centuries, what he was—an impulsive child, ingenuously good, and ingenuously cruel.” He sought in Negro art “that still unreasoned feeling which merely obeys the most elementary demands of rhythm and symmetry. . . . Brute nature circulates in them, and burning sap and black blood.”<sup>48</sup> To be fair, not all primitivists were so blinded by racial stereotypes. But the underlying motive of the movement was to discover an art produced through an untutored, almost instinctual process free of culture, history and tradition: an art that was virtually organic, the product of nature’s vital energy.

Artistic primitivism became a major influence on black thought in the early decades of the twentieth century. Drawing on primitivism and scientific racism, black Americans could claim to be a young race, still in touch with the aboriginal wilderness, and therefore a source of creative energy that could regenerate American culture. Du Bois’ famous essay from 1897, “The Conservation of Races,” reflects this synthesis of racial and primitivist ideas. Although resisting a strictly biological concept of race, Du Bois insisted that

there are differences . . . which have silently but definitely separated men into groups. While these subtle forces have generally followed the natural cleavage of common blood, descent and physical peculiarities, they have at other times swept across and ignored these. At all times, however, they have divided human beings into races, which, while they perhaps transcend scientific definition, nevertheless, are clearly defined to the eye of the historian and sociologist.

According to Du Bois, the African race had as much to contribute to world civilization as the white race. In particular, it would contribute its gift of artistry and spirituality: Negroes “are that people whose subtle sense of song has given America its only music, its only American fairy tales, its only touch of pathos and humor amid its mad money-getting plutocracy.”<sup>49</sup> This is primitivism underwritten by race: Black Americans are members of a race characterized by the creativity and vitality of a primitive people—specifically, a tropical people, with the imaginative and spiritual gifts produced by a warm, fertile environment. They can regenerate American culture because their racial characteristics are those of true primitives. In short, black Americans retained a racial connection to the tropical African wilderness, and that connection is the source of their cultural vitality.

Primitivism and scientific racism thus gave new meaning to the concept of wilderness in black thought. Du Bois explored this meaning in his novel from 1911, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. The story follows Zora, a black girl born in a swamp in Georgia, as she educates herself, travels to New York, becomes politically active, and returns to Georgia to help the black community. The swamp is a central image in the novel: Du Bois describes it as wild and savage, a dark, “sinister and sullen” place of “strange power.” Zora, daughter of the swamp’s only inhabitant, the witch Elspeth, is “a heathen hoyden”; when we first encounter her she is dancing in the firelight to “wondrous savage music.” Du Bois underscores her primitive vitality and spirit; she glows “with vigor and life.”<sup>50</sup>

But Zora does not remain a primitive. Under the tutelage of her school-teacher, Zora’s savagery diminishes; she becomes “a revelation of grace and womanliness.” Without losing her energy and spirit, she develops into “a brilliant, sumptuous womanhood; proud, conquering, full-blooded, and deep bosomed—a passionate mother of men.” She also begins to speak “better English,” drifting into “an upper world of dress and language and deportment.” She continues her education in politics and economics in the North, but eventually returns to Georgia, intent on improving the economic and social

<sup>45</sup> Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, p. 16, 131.

<sup>46</sup> “Masks,” in *Blau Reiter Almanac* [1912], ed. Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc (Munich: R. Piper and Co., 1965), p. 85; Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art and Painting in Particular* [1912], trans. Michael Sadeir, Documents of Modern Art, vol. 5 (New York: Wittenborn Art Books, 1947), p. 23.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Gelett Burgess, “The Wild Men of Paris” [1910], in *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, ed. Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 39.

<sup>48</sup> Elie Faure, “L’Histoire de l’art,” in *ibid.*, pp. 55–56.

<sup>49</sup> *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. Eric Sundquist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 40, 41, 44.

<sup>50</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911; reprint ed., New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), pp. 13, 16.

condition of the black farmers. Her plan is “a bold regeneration of the land”: She encourages the farmers to clear the swamp and establish a collective farm. The result is a transformation akin to Zora’s own evolution from wild to civilized: the farmers create a thriving communal cotton plantation on the site of the swamp. The swamp does not wholly disappear, however. Its vital energy persists in the fertility of the soil, and the swamp itself remains in Zora’s memory—not “cold and still” but “living, vibrant, tremulous,” the origin of her strength and love.<sup>51</sup>

Du Bois’ story draws on primitivist themes, but there are also important continuities with the nineteenth-century discourse on wilderness. The swamp, although located in the United States, seems to be contiguous with the African jungle by virtue of cultural continuity between American blacks and their African forbears (represented by the witch Elspeth). Zora’s return to Georgia is, in a sense, a return to Africa. Moreover, the wilderness is located in history; it is a part of the heroine’s personal history and the history of the black community. In another respect, too, Du Bois holds to the older concept of wilderness: although the swamp is a reservoir of nature’s creative energy, that energy is essentially amoral—or even immoral. Zora’s mother, for example, is no noble savage; she prostitutes her daughters to the wealthy white landowners (a reference perhaps to Africa’s exploitation by Europeans as well as Americans’ exploitation of black slaves.) Thus, the swamp is not a place of spiritual regeneration. In order to provide the basis for a well-ordered human community, the land itself must be regenerated—transformed through human labor into higher cultural forms.

Nevertheless, for Du Bois, the point of transforming the wilderness is to *preserve* it—to maintain its vital energy and make that energy more widely available to the community. What is valuable in wilderness—its vital power and natural beauty—is still present after its transformation, in the fertility of the soil and in cultural representations of the swamp (the community’s collective memory of this original wilderness.) The swamp also remains within Zora herself, in her memory and racial consciousness. Du Bois’ heroine relates to the wild by remaining in contact with the inner vital force that is part of her racial heritage (the wilderness within) as well as with the culture that develops out of the group’s interaction with nature (the wilderness without.) Thus, the novel’s message is that the black artist must stay in touch with her roots in the wild earth; her task is to preserve that primitive energy in her own memory and to embody it in cultural products that reflect the race’s highest ideals.

To a traditional preservationist, this sort of preservation may seem inadequate; surely we need to preserve the swamp itself in order to maintain the land’s fertility, not to mention biodiversity. But Du Bois points out that if a goal of wilderness preservation is to forge a closer tie between wilderness and

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp. 125, 127–28, 400, 433.

human culture, then some sort of transformation may be necessary to make what is valuable about wilderness *accessible* to the human community. White, middle-class preservationists often elided this question of access, but for black Americans—who had provided much of the labor of transforming the wilderness and who had been subject to segregation and exclusion throughout their tenure on the American continent—access to nature’s gifts could not be taken for granted. Further, Du Bois suggests that the individual’s memory of the wilderness—his or her understanding of its place in the group’s history—is also critical to the connection between wilderness and human culture that ensures cultural vitality. Thus, to preserve and make available the creative power of the wilderness experience, we must attend to maintaining both the individual’s sense of membership in his or her community (in this case, his or her racial identity) and the community’s collective memory of its aboriginal wilderness.

### MODERN MAN-MADE JUNGLES

Primitivism remains a ubiquitous theme in black literature during the Harlem Renaissance period, as does the belief that the source of artistic creativity is the culture that one’s community developed during the period when it still had a close connection to nature.<sup>52</sup> Under this view, the vital elements of black culture were those shaped by the race’s history in Africa and in the American South. Black artists should therefore look back and within, in order to make contact with the vital creative energy of nature. As Jean Toomer said of his inspiration for *Cane*:

Georgia opened me. And it may well be said that I received my initial impulse to an individual art from my experience there. For no other section of the country has so stirred me. There one finds soil, soil in the sense the Russians know it,—the soil every art and literature that is to live must be imbedded in.<sup>53</sup>

But black artists, under this view, did not actually have to go to Georgia to find artistic inspiration. Because their wilderness lies within, they can get in touch with it in the city, through an inner journey aimed at becoming aware of one’s history and racial identity. The city can therefore be a “modern man-made jungle.” Claude McKay described a Harlem nightclub as “a real throbbing little Africa”; for Jessie Redman Fauset, people in Harlem lived “at a sharper pitch of intensity”—“coloured life” was “so thick, so varied, so complete.”<sup>54</sup> Just as

<sup>52</sup> See, e.g., James W. Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912, reprint ed., New York: Hill and Wang, 1960); Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven* (1926; reprint ed., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem* (1928; reprint ed., Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987); Jessie Redman Fauset, *Plum Bun* (1928; reprint ed., London: Pandora Press, 1985).

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Locke, “The Negro Youth Speaks,” in Locke, *The New Negro*, p. 51.

<sup>54</sup> Joel Rogers, “Jazz at Home,” in Locke, *The New Negro*, p. 218; McKay, *Home to Harlem*, p. 29; Fauset, *Plum Bun*, pp. 57, 96.

Martin Delany had imposed an Old Testament landscape on the American wilderness, twentieth-century writers imposed a tropical landscape on New York. In Countee Cullen's poem, the tropics appear suddenly in a New York market: "Bananas ripe and green, and ginger root/ Cocoa in pods and alligator pears" bringing "memories / Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills."<sup>55</sup> Harlem was imagined as a place of primitive vitality where even white Americans could get in touch with nature; as Albert Barnes suggested, the artistry of black Americans could regenerate American culture by showing us the "ineffable peace of the woods." But it can accomplish this goal only if black urban culture retains its consciousness of its roots in Africa and the American South—the places where the race formed through constant interaction with wild nature. The cultural vitality of black America depends on preserving the African wilderness and the America South in the community's consciousness and cultural forms.

This program, however, rests on a racial essentialism that many Harlem Renaissance artists found troubling. As Cullen pointedly asked, "What is Africa to me?" His poem seems to reflect the primitivist conceit that American blacks still hear the "great drums throbbing through the air,"<sup>56</sup> but it also questions that conceit. Could one "three centuries removed" still remember Africa's copper sun or scarlet sea? Alain Locke thought not; the culture of black Americans, he insisted, was *not* essentially African: "What we have thought primitive in the American Negro . . . are neither characteristically African nor to be explained as an ancestral heritage." He explained them as the result of blacks' "peculiar experience in America and the emotional upheaval of its trials and ordeals." For Locke, the American Negro's temperament was a product of social and historical forces "rather than the outcropping of a race psychology."<sup>57</sup>

Locke's concerns point to the basic difficulty with primitivism: It seems to be inescapably essentializing. It assumes the existence of a racial "essence"—the wilderness within—that was preserved in black Americans through centuries of acculturation and dislocation. Of course, an essentializing racial ideology could be politically useful for a people seeking to gain acceptance in American society. But racial essentialism was a major pillar of early twentieth century white supremacy, and by the 1920s black artists experimenting with primitive themes were under attack from activists (like Du Bois himself) for supporting harmful racial stereotypes.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, artists began to find the conventions of primitivism constraining. As they explored its limits and

<sup>55</sup> Countee Cullen, "The Tropics in New York," in Locke, *The New Negro*, p. 135.

<sup>56</sup> Countee Cullen, "Heritage," in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), pp. 244–45.

<sup>57</sup> Alain Locke, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," in Locke, *The New Negro*, pp. 254, 255.

<sup>58</sup> George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 65, 182–208.

examined the conflict between racial solidarity and individualism, they suggested that escaping from the past and community—and from white images of black identity—may be as important to artistic creativity as remaining in touch with the "wilderness within."<sup>59</sup>

Did this growing distrust of primitivism and essentialism affect blacks' attitudes toward the wilderness preservation movement? It's hard to say. The Harlem Renaissance artists did pose Harlem as an alternative to the American wilderness as a source of cultural vitality, but they offered little criticism of the preservationists' agenda. Du Bois' guarded remarks in *Darkwater* may represent a broader attitude: when asked by his white friends why he doesn't enjoy the wilderness more often, he lectures them on the indignities of traveling in the era of "Jim Crow."<sup>60</sup> Du Bois probably did not oppose preservationism; his prose exhibits an extraordinary sensitivity to natural beauty. But he had to be suspicious of a movement that claimed Grant and Le Conte among its supporters, and that showed little interest in challenging the segregationist policies that made the nation's parks inaccessible to many blacks.

By the end of the Harlem Renaissance period, the black intellectual community increasingly embraced a cultural rather than essentialist concept of race. The full implications of that transition are beyond the scope of this article. But rejecting racial essentialism does not require us to reject the insights derived from this exploration of the black concept of wilderness—the idea, for example, that a historical connection to the group's aboriginal wilderness, preserved in the group's collective memory, may be a source of inspiration, identity, and sense of obligation to the land. This concept of wilderness as a source of cultural creativity, a fatherland to which the artist must return (at least in memory) in order to unlock his or her own creative power, remains an important part of the black literary heritage. It could become even more relevant as the Romantics' pristine wilderness recedes into history, leaving in its place a degraded landscape burdened by a history of injustice.

On the other hand, black writers' critiques of primitivism require us to explore further the connection between landscape and racial identity. Indeed, the black concept of wilderness is useful to us precisely because it foregrounds questions about one's relationship to the community and to the land, and about the obligations of history—questions that the traditional concept seems designed to avoid. In sum, wilderness for black writers is not a receding frontier but an increasingly complex and difficult terrain; it is a place not to escape from but to confront one's history, community, and identity.

<sup>59</sup> Langston Hughes, "Slave on the Block" and "Rejuvenation Through Joy," in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, ed. R. Baxter Miller (1932; reprint ed., Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), vol. 15, pp. 30–36, 56–71; Nella Larsen, "Quicksand," in *Quicksand and Passing* (1928; reprint ed., New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

<sup>60</sup> *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil* (1920; reprint ed., New York: Humanity Books, 2003), pp. 229–31.