

**Wilderness, Race, and African Americans:
An Environmental History from Slavery to Jim Crow**

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Abstract

Historical relationships between African Americans and wilderness have been largely overlooked by scholars. This project analyzes the role of race in existing wilderness scholarship and the historical relationships between African Americans and wilderness. Wilderness scholarship from the 1960s to the 1990s is analyzed. African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos are almost entirely absent from the scholarship. Native Americans receive some attention with varying degrees of sophistication. Whites are almost exclusively the subject of the literature. These racial biases impact the scholarship in several ways. Scholars make universalized assertions which leave out much of the population. The reasons for and meanings of attitudes towards cities, cultural significance of savagery, and reasons for criticisms of wilderness ideas are poorly interpreted and misleadingly described. Racial biases also tend to reproduce themselves over time and in the environmental movement. A variety of African American relationships with wilderness were found. These perspectives and experiences were traced from slavery through Reconstruction and into Jim Crow. Themes during slavery were wilderness as refuge, testing ground, location for spiritual and religious practice, and subsistence provider. In Reconstruction, African Americans attitudes towards wilderness largely focused on economic transformation of the land, wage labor, and landownership. In the Jim Crow period, the woods became associated with fear of white violence, although that relationship did not hold in all cases. Subsistence use continued, and wilderness became incorporated in political debates concerning migration. Gender and class affected relationships between African Americans and wilderness. The research illuminates some relationships between race in environmental scholarship and racism in environmental politics in the early 1970s. The research on African American experiences could be used in the design of outdoor education curricula, shift both self perceptions and public perceptions of African Americans to recognize the significance of relationships with wilderness, and promote increased racial diversity of participants in wilderness activities.

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1. Introduction

“To go with [my wife and three children] ... on Sunday afternoons, into the woods, where we can live for a while near the heart of nature, where no one can disturb or vex us, surrounded by pure air, the trees, the shrubbery, the flowers, and the sweet fragrance that springs from a hundred plants, enjoying the chirp of the crickets and the songs of the birds. This is solid rest. I like, as often as possible, to touch nature, not something that is artificial or an imitation, but the real thing.”

- Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 1901

“I was always frightened. The woods were said to be full of soldiers who had deserted the army, and I had been told that the first thing a deserter did to a Negro boy when he found him alone was to cut off his ears.”

- Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 1901

“Athens ... This is the most beautiful town I have seen on the journey, so far, and the only one in the South that I would like to revisit. The [N]egroes here have been well trained and are extremely polite. When they come in sight of a white man on the road, off go their hats, even at a distance of forty or fifty yards, and they walk bare-headed until he is out of sight.”

- John Muir, *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, 1916

In the above quotations, Booker T. Washington points to the depth and complexity of African American relationships with wilderness. As the founder of the Tuskegee Institute which was the leading black agricultural and technical school at the time, Washington maintained both a love for and a fear of the wild. Arguably the most famous African American in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, his views, in this case, are a public representation of sentiments that were held by much of the rural black southern population of the time. In the first quotation, Washington describes the pleasure he finds in going with his family on a day trip into the woods. His evocative language comes from having spent much of his life in the rural South,

among the farms and forests that dominated that landscape. In the second, he describes the fear he experienced going through the woods to run errands as a child during the Civil War. These passages, taken from his autobiography *Up From Slavery*, suggest the complex experiences of freedom and fear that African Americans have had with wilderness areas.

The third quotation, from John Muir, suggests some of the ways in which race and racism have interacted with wilderness, its advocates, and its scholars. Muir has received some criticism for the disparaging words he used to describe his encounters with the Yosemite Indians and, as his statement here indicates, he held related views regarding African Americans (Burnham; Merchant). Coming from a significant figure in the history of wilderness preservation, Muir's words and beliefs provide an example of the ways that wilderness advocates have often devalued or excluded people of color from their ethical frameworks. In *Wilderness and the American Mind*, historian Roderick Nash reveals a related bias, and as an indication, the first word of the first chapter is "European," in a book that is about the *American* mind (Nash 2001, 8). The entire first chapter of Nash's influential text is not about the United States at all but about Europe. The chapter is titled "Old World Roots of Opinion," and according to Nash, apparently neither Africans nor indigenous Americans contributed anything worth considering as part of the "roots of opinion" in the United States, despite the clear presence of both in significant numbers at the founding of the nation.

In this study, I investigate and analyze of the relationships of African Americans with wilderness and the effects of race in the existing historiography of wilderness, which includes the exclusion of these relationships. Several themes have emerged through this research. African Americans have both affinities for and are alienated from wilderness in ways that have received little scholarly attention. The wilderness was a refuge during slavery. It was also a physical and psychological testing ground, an unknown and potentially dangerous place in which strength, knowledge, and endurance were put to the test in a quest for freedom. Woods and rivers provided subsistence, wage, and recreational opportunities for blacks. Violence perpetrated by whites placed physical and emotional constraints on the use of wilderness areas.

Most environmental scholarship from the 1960s to the present (and especially in the 1960s through 1980s) has excluded people of color, and wilderness provides examples of this racialization. In this study, I explore some of the ways that race has impacted scholarship on

wilderness and how this scholarship can in turn reproduce some of these same racial biases in its audience.

During the twentieth century, there was a significant change in predominant representations of and beliefs about the nature of African American identity. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, blacks were almost always seen as inherently rural. According to this view, Africans were living in or recently emerged from the jungle. American Negroes were slightly different, having been domesticated and trained to do farm work. The most natural and best place for Negroes was on the farm; blacks did not yet understand civilization, would not be able to handle life in a modern city, and would be out competed in the workforce by the more adept and urban whites. In the twentieth century, however, black identity in the United States became naturalized as urban. At this time, “urban” and “black” became code words for one another—“urban” radio means radio stations that play music predominantly by black artists, the “Urban League” advocates on behalf of African Americans, and so forth. The change occurred not only in representations but also affected the self-identity of African Americans. Perhaps as a result, the environmental justice movement has generally been linked to urban struggles, particularly in regards to African Americans. It is important to recover some of the history that has been obscured by this shift. The urban identity of blacks today hides important aspects of black experiences and cultural perspectives. African Americans have rural roots and have traveled along wild routes throughout the history of the United States. Some of these experiences, particularly relationships with wilderness, are considered here.

The subtitle of this project, “Environmental History from Slavery to Jim Crow,” refers to both the environmentally situated lives of African Americans during this time and the ways in which environmental historians have written about this time period. Within North American history, the period refers to the period from approximately 1640 to 1954. This paper covers the approximately one hundred years from the publication of Douglass’s *Narrative* in 1845 to Richard Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices* in 1941. Referring to this time period as “from Slavery to Jim Crow” highlights the lack of attention that environmental historians have generally given to race when covering this same time period—except in the sense that race has been used as a factor, perhaps the key factor, in selecting who is and is not included in the analysis. This time period spans from just prior to the publication of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) through the careers of John Muir and Bob Marshall and on to near the end of the

Aldo Leopold's life (1948). Muir's early adult years were during slavery and he rose to fame during the aftermath of Reconstruction and the solidification of Jim Crow; the careers of Pinchot and Leopold were in the context of a segregated nation. These things are almost never mentioned in histories that feature these men, despite their overwhelming importance to the development of the nation, its economy, and its culture. For example, throughout much of the lifetimes of Muir, Pinchot, and Leopold, African Americans comprised the majority of workers in some positions in the timber industry of the U.S. South, again a fact that is left unmentioned despite the obvious relevance (Greene and Woodson 1930). Well over half of the nation's national parks were founded during Jim Crow.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section outlines the theory and methods. A third part of the paper looks at the role of race in existing wilderness scholarship, and it is divided chronologically into two subsections. Next is the section on African Americans relationships with wilderness, which is divided chronologically into three sections. A fourth part investigates some links between environmental scholarship, politics, and race and applies some of the ideas developed earlier. A fifth section considers potential applications of the research and suggests some starting points for additional work. The paper closes with a brief conclusion.

2. Theory and Methods

In writing this environmental history, I have attempted to remain true to the interdisciplinary perspective of the field. While the focus here is social, cultural, and intellectual, I also consider of the role of historical changes in the material and political-economic environment as well. Physical changes occurring during slavery and Jim Crow rule include transformations of "the wilderness" into pastoral landscapes and results such as degradation of soil and changing forest cover due to the timber industry. Changes in political economy were also important, as economic institutions moved from slavery, to sharecropping, to wage labor for African Americans.

A study that addresses biases in existing literature faces the challenge of trying to limit its own biases. For historians, the typical approach for insuring balance and reliability of results has

been to work with a variety of different primary sources on any particular research project. The bibliography begins with a general description of the sources that I have used in this research.

African Americans are only beginning to be recognized as part of the community of people who have historical relationships with wilderness areas that should be considered by environmentalists and environmental scholars and also that some African Americans scholars and popular writers have written about these relationships. Being mentioned, however, is just one step along the path towards true engagement and consideration. Inclusion can and should happen in several different dimensions—recognizing the existence of black people in varied environments; considering how white views of wilderness have been affected by their relationships with African Americans; investigating the relationships of blacks with indigenous, Latino, Asian American, and international communities regarding wilderness areas; and exploring African American relationships with wilderness by critically engaging with literature by and about blacks and studying the material processes through which these relationships were constructed, changed, and recreated. This work can include the roles of African Americans in transforming the wilderness and in both policy-making and material practice regarding the preservation of wilderness areas. It is one thing to have one's existence recognized, but it is another empowering step to have one's experiences and perspectives critically and thoughtfully engaged.

The categories I have introduced in the title of this paper, namely, wilderness, race, and African Americans are worthy of comment. Wilderness is a difficult term to define. Many authors refer to Wilderness Act of 1964 which states, “[W]ilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (Wilderness Act 1964). This relatively recent definition conceals much of the conceptual and ideological connotations of the term but is also revealing in its erasure of the history of Native American land management practices in many areas that were later categorized as “wilderness.” Both Nash and William Cronon provide useful discussions of the meaning of wilderness (Nash 2001; Cronon 1995). The word “wilderness” itself has some cultural associations; in the sources for African Americans, “the woods” is the term commonly used to describe these types of wild areas or the areas are described as swamps or as areas containing “wild beasts.”

According to environmental justice scholar Mei Mei Evans, wilderness is part of “an ideological construction ... whereby heterosexual white manhood (i.e. ‘real men’) is construed as ... the ‘true American’” (Evans 2002, 183). In addition, others who “venture into or attempt to inhabit nature ... are viewed as intruders or otherwise out of place” (Evans 2002, 183). For the purposes of this paper, wilderness is broadly construed, includes areas described as forested and areas which the historical figures themselves identify as being wilderness, as well as its more philosophical aspects and implications. In addition to interrogating the boundaries of wilderness, we should also recognize that racial boundaries are not as distinct as they sometimes seem. African Americans hold many views that overlap with those of white Americans, and there are many African Americans who hold views that are more accurately represented by what has been implicitly identified as a “white” perspective throughout this analysis. Also, who is and who is not considered to be African American, white, Asian, Latino, or Native American can change with time as these categories shift in relationship to each other.

The racial structures of society are built over time, through collective actions, and individual practices. These structures are not a predetermined or fixed set of relationships, created at one point in the past, continuing unchanged until the present, possibly to be overturned in the future. Similarly, human relationships with the rest of nature are constructed, relying again on temporal and spatial processes.

In a 1989 essay entitled “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” Toni Morrison looks at the erasure of black people from much of the literature and criticism in the United States. Her insights are relevant to the consideration of wilderness scholarship. She asks “what intellectual feats had to be performed for the author or his critic to erase me from a society seething with my presence, and what effect has that performance had on the work?” (Morrison 1989). She further developed this analysis in a book that undertook only a small portion of the much larger project and challenge that she outlined for the scholarly community (Morrison 1993a). Her question provides some guidance for the research.

The whiteness of the American wilderness has been materially and discursively produced. Rifles, nooses, and bloodhounds ensured that Native Americans, African Americans, and even poor whites were removed from and barred entrance to state parks, hiking trails, hotels for weekend retreats, and so forth that dotted and defined the American wilderness.

In thinking about race and its functioning in social systems, I consider the work of Michael Omi and Howard Winant. In *Racial Formation in the United States*, they argue “race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies. Although the concept of race invokes biologically based human characteristics (so-called ‘phenotypes’), selection of these particular human features for the purpose of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process” (Omi and Winant 1994). In their definition, biological factors shape the characteristics upon which we base racial designations—skin color, eye and nose shape, and hair texture—the resulting designations of and attitudes towards race and racial groups are the result not of biological factors but of social forces, including the distribution of wealth and income, processes of institutional and family education, and the positioning of certain cultural traditions as norms or exceptions. They point to race as a socially constructed category. To say that something is socially constructed, in this sense, does not mean that it is unreal; rather, the term social construction draws attention to (1) the individual and collective work involved in creating and understanding social categories and (2) the power of these understandings and beliefs in further shaping our social experiences. Omi and Winant refer to “racial projects” where they state, “a racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (Omi and Winant 1994). In my interpretation of their framework, a racial project does not have to involve conscious or organized efforts focusing on race, but suggests that many behaviors can contribute to larger trends in a seemingly haphazard, but describable, manner. This perspective can help to explain how race effectively jumps scales from micro-level interpersonal experiences to macro-level effects on social policy and cultural norms.

The racialization of wilderness can be seen as occurring at these two levels. The creation of wilderness areas involved policies that shifted resources along lines of class and race. Native Americans, and in some cases poor whites, were removed from areas a few years before the land became designated as a protected area for its “natural” qualities (Spence 1999; Jacoby 2001). In many cases, areas thus designated required continued military and policing presence to maintain the park or preserve in the condition that was desired. With respect to cultural norms, wilderness came to be understood as an area that was free of permanent human residence, yet it was open to the consistent and effectively permanent presence of hikers, campers, recreational hunters,

whitewater rafters, and other people using the areas in a culturally sanctioned manner. In cultural constructions—in images ranging from the Hudson River School painters to the pages of the Sierra Club Bulletin—the appropriate and sanctioned users were almost always white people. At the micro-level, the people creating and uncritically consuming these images and corresponding texts are involved in the racial project. Wilderness scholarship enters here with the production of texts in which it is assumed that nearly all actors—whether positive or negative—are white. From the 1960s through the 1980s, in texts and articles in the social sciences and history that address environmental issues, this assumption is pervasive and largely continues through today. This writing is then read by a younger generation of students and future scholars who reproduce many of the same exclusions that had formed earlier. Wilderness was forged as a form of social control, and in its creation, articulation, and defense, the concept of wilderness shifted resources across lines of race. Wilderness discourses are embedded within processes of racial formation, within a racial project which involves exclusion, suppression, and denial—three themes which have emerged from the study.

A reason for fusing an analysis of race in existing scholarship with a history of African Americans is described in a quote from William Loren Katz:

“The distortions of the Afro-American’s History have been as enduring as his oppression. One must conclude that indeed there is a link between white distortion and white oppression. More precisely, the assertion that the Afro-American has no history worth mentioning has always been basic to the argument that he has no humanity worth defending. It is logical that the current movement for black liberation emphasizes the importance of correcting the racist history taught in our schools” (Katz, 1969, 430).

This connection has been made by many scholars, including W. E. B. Du Bois with inclusion of “The Propaganda of History,” his analysis of white scholarship on Reconstruction, as the last chapter in *Black Reconstruction* (Du Bois 1935).

We should understand that racial designations can vary geographically and historically, but these changes are not always appreciated by all actors, in the same ways. Cornel West has provided a review of theories of race which parallels the work done by Omi and Winant. West

suggests that we use a genealogical approach to race, which incorporates insights from Nietzsche, and that we consider cultural aspects of racial “logics” and understand the histories of contemporary understandings of race (West 1993). Work by bell hooks provides useful perspectives on the ways in which seemingly progressive discourses can contain reactionary trajectories, often based on cleavages along the contours of gender or race (hooks 1990). Arturo Escobar has done important work in bringing the insights from discourse analysis to environmental problems, and his work in *Encountering Development* considers reminds us of the links between the environment and other contemporary social concerns, as well as pointing to power of language and bias in affecting and often limiting the understanding of complex environmental issues (Escobar 1995). These insights and the frameworks put forward by Morrison and by Omi and Winant can help illuminate and clarify some of the issues considered in this study.

3. Race in Scholarly Discourses on Wilderness

3.1. The First Generation, 1960s – Today

At its inception, it was not predetermined that environmental scholarship would exclude African Americans. From today’s vantage point, it may seem obvious and unavoidable that environmental history began by focusing almost entirely on the experiences of white people, excluding people of other races, but this exclusion is not simply “natural.” Rather, the racializations of wilderness scholarship, and the larger modern environmental movement, were the result of choices made by people—choices made within constraints and with conceptual blinders, but choices nonetheless. By thinking of them in this way, we can conceive of ways in which we can make different choices going forward.

One example can point to the ways in which perceptions about race have impacted scholarly and popular understandings of wilderness areas. Figure 1 is a photograph from 1899 that shows members of the 24th Infantry, an all black unit, which was assigned to Yosemite as rangers. The presence of these soldiers in Yosemite had been ignored for decades until a park ranger came across the photo and published an article in the *Yosemite Guide* commenting upon



Figure 1. 24th Infantry, Yosemite National Park, 1899

this lost piece of history (S. Johnson 2003). Who were these men? How long were they present in Yosemite? What were the relationships between these African Americans and the whites and Native Americans who were also involved in managing and maintaining the park? These questions have not been answered in part because they are outside of the prevailing frameworks for understanding wilderness and its importance.

The major existing conclusions in wilderness scholarship thus far are (1) in 17th and 18th century America, the majority of (white) Americans were hostile to wilderness areas and a frontier mentality of subduing and transforming nature dominated, (2) Native Americans held different values than whites relative towards wilderness areas and these values were more appreciative of nature and in many cases Native Americans did not conceptualize wilderness areas as separate from humans, but of interconnected world in which human, plants, animals, rocks, and so on were all spiritually animated, (3) in the mid 19th century transcendentalism emerged as a philosophy that began to transform American attitudes towards wilderness as more appreciative and supportive of wild areas, although the cowboy mentality continued to predominate, (4) white Americans have tended to either romanticize or demonize indigenous people regarding their relationships with nature as a result of racist or ethnocentric beliefs, (5) the construction of many National Parks relied upon the removal of Native American communities, and (6) wilderness is culturally constructed and culturally situated.

Several people have analyzed the role of race and racism in environmentalism and the environmental movement. Two interesting examples of this work are by Murray Bookchin and Laura Pulido. Bookchin's debates with Dave Foreman, founder of Earth First!, are summarized

in *Defending the Earth* (Chase 1991). Among the topics discussed by Bookchin and Foreman were racism and how it related to the politics and framing of population control and international aid. In “Reflections on a White Discipline,” Laura Pulido analyzed the role of race and racism in scholarship in environmental justice and geography (Pulido 2002). My analysis contributes by looking at wilderness scholarship in particular and by describing several additional ways in which race and racism can impact environmental scholarship and environmentalism.

Roderick Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind* is one of many texts involved in the formation of the whiteness of environmental studies. To understand this process, we can first consider the ways in which race is handled in the text and then second analyze the implications of this racialization. To be clear, the following analysis does not assume that Nash intentionally included racial biases in his text; to the contrary, assuming that these biases probably are in opposition to the author’s personal views, actually sharpens our understanding of the complex and destructive role of race in society. Race impacts Nash’s text in several ways.

The whiteness of Nash’s text is signaled from the beginning where the word “European” opens the first chapter, pointing to the Eurocentric framing that is incorporated in much wilderness scholarship. Before he gets to the first chapter, however, Nash’s text has a preface, introduction, and prologue. The prologue explores the difficulty of finding a satisfactory definition of wilderness. Nash begins this exploration by quoting “An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary.” Anglo-Saxon—the whiteness is almost oppressive here. He defends this focus by writing, “Among the Anglo-Saxons, from whom most of the first Americans descended, there were long traditions of locating horrible beasts in the wilderness” (Nash 2001, 12). That might make this a defensible starting point, but it is as Nash becomes more inclusive that his racial exclusions become clear. Nash goes on to include Scandinavians, Russians, Czechs, and Slovaks, which, if we were to follow the strained logic of counting the percentage contribution to the American populace, were of much less importance than African Americans or Native Americans at the time (Nash 2001, 11-12). Also, one could argue quite convincingly that the “first Americans” were not descended from the English at all but were the indigenous people present before Europeans and Africans arrived. Throughout the entire text, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos are never mentioned.

Nash does include some brief but interesting comments on Chinese and Japanese attitudes towards wilderness. He observes that the landscape painting tradition suggests that

wilderness in Asia had a more positive meaning than it did in Europe at the same time.

Unfortunately, wilderness scholars have effectively ignored these observations. Although Nash hasn't explored it any further, his observations do open up some space for additional work.

The segregation of African Americans from the wilderness becomes more apparent when *Wilderness and the American Mind* is compared to another text by Nash, *The Nervous Generation*, which describes the intellectual and cultural history of the 1920s in the United States (Nash 1970). In the latter text, Nash both includes some African American cultural and intellectual icons and analyzes the role of racism in shaping the society and culture of the period which he describes. None of these concerns enter into *Wilderness and the American Mind*, even when the same historical figures are mentioned.

The importance of Nash's text to environmental history has been expressed numerous times. A statement by Hal Rothman is one example. After a decade as the editor of *Environmental History* (the leading U.S. journal on environmental history, formerly called *Environmental History Review*), Rothman reflected upon the discipline. He wrote, "Throughout the first generation, wilderness stood at the pinnacle of environmental history scholarship, unquestioned as an absolute virtue. In large part, this position resulted from the popularity of Roderick Nash's *Wilderness in the American Mind*, which debuted in 1967. ... Nash set the agenda for much of the first generation. He brilliantly joined an older tradition in American Studies and American intellectual history ... Nash's message became the dominant position in 1970s and even 1980s environmental history" (Rothman 2002)

Each edition of *Wilderness and the American Mind* has been praised, and it has played an important framing students understanding of wilderness. In 1985, a review in *The English Journal* advised that the text "is of particular value to teachers because it furnishes a background of American ideas about wilderness" (Haas 1985, 92). While some aspects of the text are outdated, it continues to be routinely cited, usually without criticism, as the authoritative historical analysis of the particular issue of wilderness.

To think about the role of scholarship in the social construction of wilderness, it is useful to consider where, how, and how often particular texts and authors are assigned, cited, or used. One method of inquiry would be to survey environmental leaders regarding books most influenced them. Robert Merideth's *The Environmentalist's Bookshelf* contains a list of the top 40 most influential environmental books based on responses to a questionnaire survey of over

200 environmental leaders and experts (Merideth 1993). Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* is ranked 7 and is the highest ranking text by any historian. These books played a role in shaping the first and second generation of leadership in the modern environmental movement.

Despite the book's importance and its almost complete exclusion of people of color, I have been unable to find a single review or study that analyzes how the text deals with race. It is reasonable to conclude that the issue has been understudied, at the very least, and likely it has not been addressed anywhere in the scholarly literature.

When Nash, his research advisors, and his publishers, produced the book *Wilderness and the American Mind*, it was conceivable that they would have included African American, Asian American, Latino, and Native American experiences. In particular, think of the social turmoil that was occurring in U.S. society at the time. Nash was writing in the 1960s, when the modern Civil Rights movement was at its peak and yet there is no mention of African Americans anywhere in his text. Subsequent editions have been published in 1973, 1982, and 2001 with each edition adding new material to his analysis. At no point does Nash include Latinos, Asian Americans, or African Americans. This move becomes more strained as the years pass. By 2001, a scholar of the environment should have been aware that non-whites had experiences with nature that should be addressed. Nash's work actively creates a white wilderness. The constructions are active, but not necessarily intentional. In fact, for the most part, we can give Nash the benefit of the doubt and consider them not intentionally damaging or malicious. He is not the only one involved in this process, but his work is important to consider because of its influence.

Another example is *Politics of Wilderness Preservation* by Craig Allin, which was published in 1982. In this valuable book on development of wilderness policies in the United States, Allin frames his discussion in part with a figure titled "The Development of Resource Issues in American Politics: The Case of Wilderness" (Allin 1982, 4). It is one of only two figures in the book (the other is on consumption of energy by fuel source). The figure is his attempt to summarize "the economic and intellectual development ... so as to make an issue of wilderness preservation" (Allin 1982, 3). It moves chronologically from left to right with the "social-intellectual" section beginning simply with "European heritage" (Allin 1982, 4). Again the assumption is that the views of Americans regarding wilderness were only rooted in the

beliefs of white people. A more accurate depiction would include interactions with Native American and African American heritages, potentially complicating and adding additional layers to his analysis. Allin's book does not contain a single reference to Asian Americans, African Americans, or Latinos, and race and racism are not discussed.

The Idea of Wilderness by Max Oelschlaeger is a third text that can be considered here (Oelschlaeger 1991). The book is similar to *Wilderness and the American Mind* in its attempt to trace the changing meanings of wilderness through time. Oelschlaeger's text is more ambitious in scope, and one of his goals for the book is "to write what might be understood as a universal history organized around one steadfast theme—namely, the idea of wilderness (Oelschlaeger 1991, x). He attempts to cover "four phases or moments of history: Paleolithic (prehistoric), ancient, modern, and postmodern (Oelschlaeger 1991, 4). It soon becomes clear that what he means by "universal" is a typical narrative of "Western Civilization" told from a U.S. perspective with the addition of a generalized Paleolithic culture and including ancient Egypt and Sumeria as part of the narrative. After discussing Paleolithic and ancient Egyptian and Sumerian ideas of wilderness, all largely based on conjecture but interesting nonetheless, he moves to "modernism" in Europe and then romanticism and other critical responses to modernism. The bulk of the book focuses on the United States with chapters on Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold and closes by looking at the poetry of Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder, contemporary philosophy, and postmodernism. African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans are not mentioned, and race and racism are not considered. Indigenous people receive scant attention and typically are presented as similar to Paleolithic peoples with phrases such as "'Alaskan Eskimo' or other archaic people living in prehistoric fashion" and "The Paleolithic mind likely ... Modern aborigines, such as the Lakota Sioux, still ..." (Oelschlaeger 1991, 15, 16). This conflation of time period and culture can be seen as racist in itself, and Oelschlaeger does it without referencing indigenous authors. Similar to Nash, it is precisely when Oelschlaeger becomes more inclusive that his racial exclusions become more noticeable. He brings in popular white authors, such as Kurt Vonnegut, Richard Dawkins, and Joseph Campbell, who are not typically associated with wilderness at all, but does not do the same with people of color.

These books and the debates of the past decade concerning the meaning of wilderness further illuminate the processes through which wilderness and wilderness advocates are racialized. The vast majority of wilderness scholarship—traditional, radical, revisionist, and

reactionary—reveal the ways in which these colorblind actions are actually terribly color-conscious. This scholarship forms part of a larger racial project that can be identified as “exclusion, suppression, and denial,” which includes both discursive and material aspects: (1) exclusion from narratives of national identity and many of the privileges of socio-economic legacies, (2) suppression of attempts to be (re)inserted into those national narratives and the flows of material heritage, and (3) denial of the contributions of people of color to economies and cultures and of entry into institutions that benefit from these contributions.

How does the exclusion of people of color affect wilderness scholarship? There are many answers to this question, and they appear in numerous places. Two examples from *Wilderness and the American Mind* are considered first and followed by examples from other the writing.

First is Nash’s explanation of how changing attitudes towards cities interacted with changing attitudes toward wilderness. According to Nash, wilderness was appreciated more and more by people of the middle and upper-middle classes, and at the same time negative views of cities were developing. Nash writes, “Indicative of the change was the way in which many of the repugnant connotations of wilderness were transferred to the new urban environment” (Nash 2001, 143). Throughout this analysis, however, he fails to consider the ways in which these changes were being shaped, in part, by attitudes towards African Americans. The geography of the United States has been significantly shaped by processes of racism which have been instrumental in determining where people live and where people feel safe. Racism can restrict, expand, or simply change the places on the landscape which people can experience—through socioeconomic and cultural processes and even through the law. During Jim Crow states passed laws that racially segregated public parks, and an Oklahoma statute even segregated fishing by race (National Park Service 1998). Describing the changing attitudes towards cities in the United States without discussing race actually seems like a rather difficult task, and it is worth reflecting here upon Morrison’s question “what intellectual feats had to be performed for the author or his critic to erase me from a society seething with my presence, and what effect has that performance had on the work?” (Morrison 1989). The effects of erasure in the current example are that readers, scholars, and practitioners won’t understand just how strong and lasting these changing attitudes might be or fail to understand what might be the events that cause them to shift significantly again.

A second example is when Nash employs phrases such as “the general optimism and hope of the antebellum years” to refer to the condition of “the American mind” (Nash 2001, 144). This analysis fails to acknowledge that for the enslaved blacks, who formed a significant portion of the population, the general mood would be better described as discouragement and pessimism, perhaps punctuated with brief and curtailed moments of excitement or happiness which interestingly may have been associated with wilderness as a place for escape or religious practice.

Exclusion of African Americans from historiography of wilderness may help explain why the South is often absent from this scholarship and is commonly excluded from historical narratives of the environment and environmentalism. There is a tendency in wilderness historiography and elsewhere to think of American environmental experiences as beginning in New England and then moving to the West. Sometimes the story includes movement across the Midwest and the Great Plains with rampant environmental destruction before finally reaching the West.

An example of the framing which excludes the South is found in “Wilderness & American Identity” by the National Humanities Center, which is part of a larger project by the Center which is intended to provide teachers with references and material for inclusion in the classroom. Each section includes writing by leading scholars. “Wilderness & the American Identity” consists of three essays:

- (1) “The Puritan Origins of the American Wilderness Movement” by J. Baird Callicott
- (2) “The Challenge of the Arid West” by Donald E. Worster
- (3) “Rachel Carson and the Awakening of Environmental Consciousness” by Linda Lear

A fourth essay entitled “The Roots of Preservation: Emerson, Thoreau, and the Hudson River School” is listed as “Coming Soon.” The narrative is structured by the first two articles which explicitly follow the trajectory from New England to the West Coast; the essay by Lear continues the story toward the present and expands the scope to include pesticides and other topics with a focus on Rachel Carson (National Humanities Center 2003).

In this type of story, environmental attitudes begin in New England and basically involve distaste for wilderness and belief in a religious mandate to subdue nature and transform the wilderness. Over time these attitudes change and nonhuman nature begins to be valued more.

Then the story jumps to the West with battles over wilderness areas such as Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Hetch Hetchy. The story completely leaves out the South. It is as though the South somehow does not contain real wilderness; rather it is seen as pastoral, domesticated, all farms and plantations, and so on.

The inclusion of Asian Americans or Latinos would complicate this narrative and more accurately represent the American past. For Asian Americans, for example, the dominant narrative moves geographically from West to East (Limerick 1992). Chinese Americans, for example, settle in rural, wild, and urban areas of California in the 1850s during the gold rush and railroad construction. Most of the rural population was subsequently removed and transplanted to segregated urban neighborhoods. Native Americans provide additional challenges for the first generation narratives.

There are many opportunities where an analysis, such as those by Nash, Allin, Oelschlaeger, or The National Humanities Center, can be deepened by thinking carefully about the racial implications of the material. For example, consider the “wilderness cult” described by Nash which emerged in the 1890s and early 1900s. The philosophy of this “cult” included the idea that primitive, barbarian, and savage qualities needed to be maintained for the health and vigor of self and society. Theodore Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell wrote that hunting in wilderness was needed to maintain people as “vigorous and masterful” and in order to “be sound of body and firm of mind” (Nash 2001, 152). Nash describes how William Kent, a conservationist and California congressman, “rejoiced in the savagery of hunting,” and Kent himself stated that after a kill “you are a barbarian, and you’re glad of it. It’s good to be a barbarian ... and you that if you are a barbarian, you are at any rate a man” (Nash 2001, 153). It’s one thing for a white congressman, member of an elite political and economic class, to celebrate the virtues of playing at being a barbarian. What would this kind of behavior have meant for African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, or Native Americans? While there would certainly be some differences between these various minority racial groups, it is clear that collectively they held a different relationship with notions of “primitiveness” or “barbaric qualities” than did the politically and economically elite white men who made up the bulk of the wilderness cult. What would it mean for groups of African Americans to spend their weekends or holidays out in the woods and attempting to prove their savagery? African Americans, for the most part, could not participate in nor enjoy an activity based upon demonstrating one’s

primitiveness in a cultural context where that primitiveness was already assumed. This is not to say that all African American activities were designed to demonstrate culture and sophistication conceived of as the acceptance of white norms—not at all—but the demonstration of savagery was not a priority.

3.2. Critical Responses and Reactions: 1990s – Today

The Great New Wilderness Debate edited by J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson brings together a varied assortment of scholarly and popular writing on wilderness and its meanings, exploring the ways in which “[t]he received wilderness idea is currently the subject of intense attack and impassioned defense” (Callicott and Nelson 1998, 2). The book presents essays by critics and defenders of what is considered to be the dominant conception of wilderness held by environmentalists. A few of the essays have been particularly influential or are by authors that reach large audiences. Consider the contributions from J. Baird Callicott, Dave Foreman, Ramachandra Guha, and Michael P. Nelson. Together these four authors present four different views on wilderness: the common environmentalist positions on wilderness (Nelson), a critique from a Third World and social justice perspective (Guha), a defense of the wilderness idea (Foreman), and a statement of the dominant scholarly critiques of wilderness (Callicott).

Callicott presents “A Three-Point Critique of the Received Concept of Wilderness,” arguing that the wilderness idea “perpetuates the pre-Darwinian Western metaphysical dichotomy between ‘man’ and nature,” that the concept “is woefully ethnocentric,” and it “ignores the fourth dimension of nature, time” (Callicott and Nelson 1998, 348-9). For the purposes of the current analysis, we shall focus on the second point.

The ethnocentric problem which Callicott explores is that the designation of areas as wilderness, without the mark of human influence, ignores the presence of indigenous people and their land management practices. He also cites Guha, who argues that the wilderness idea causes problems when it is exported to other nations and that this is also the result of ethnocentrism (Callicott 1998; Guha 1989).

Callicott's analysis, as well the entire volume of which he is a co-editor, reveals an additional type of ethnocentricity. African Americans are apparently mentioned in only one paragraph in a volume of over forty essays and approximately 700 pages (Henberg 1998, 503). Two more paragraphs mention the institution of slavery, but without discussing the experiences or perspectives of the slaves or black people more generally (Nelson 1998, 176, 178). Asian Americans also appear in one paragraph; it is the same paragraph in which African Americans are mentioned (Henberg 1998, 503). Latinos in the U.S. do not appear at all, although there is one essay on Mexico.

Reading *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, one would have no idea that people of African descent ever arrived in the United States and thought about or experienced wilderness. In the pieces by the most influential authors, such as those by Callicott, William Cronon, Foreman, Guha, Nash, Val Plumwood, and Arne Naess, African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans are completely absent, regardless of the position that the author takes. It is almost as if the erasure of U.S. racial minorities is a requirement for acceptance into the wilderness canon. The one exception is Native Americans, who are the subject—or more often the “object”—of many of the essays. There is a section titled “Third and Fourth World Views of the Wilderness Idea,” and it contains an interesting essay on being “black and green” written by Fabienne Bayet, an Australian aboriginal scholar (Bayet 1998). In this context, “black” refers to the identity of indigenous people in Australia.

It is important to note that African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos are absent from the discussion regardless of the position taken by any particular author. The ways in which this absence makes its “presence” felt does depend, however, on the arguments which the author is making.

Analyzing the role of race in wilderness scholarship can provide insights about the ways in which race is used more broadly in contemporary scholarship. First, there are the critics, including Guha, Callicott, and Cronon. Ramanchandra Guha, in a 1989 piece reproduced in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, presents a critique of deep ecology based, in part, on its overemphasis of wilderness and its specificity to the United States experience (Guha 1989). For Guha and Callicott's related arguments, the erasure of people of color from the United States facilitates a broad brush critique of the U.S. or of the “First World” more generally (Guha 1989; Callicott 1998). The move is quite standard in much of the social justice oriented scholarship

which is critical of the colonialist and imperialist practices of the First World or the so-called Western civilization, and Guha and Callicott are hardly unique in this respect, which is exactly the point. For the purposes of both analysis and polemic, the United States is socially constructed as a white nation—a white nation placed (violently) over oppressed indigenous peoples. Almost any American historian, however, could describe the numerous ways in which African Americans, for example, have contributed to the culture of the United States. In much of the literature, the bodies of Native Americans are included, but not the minds. African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans are absent entirely. The critical and social constructivist approaches open up more space for the presence of these groups within wilderness writing, but the authors have yet to even acknowledge the existence let alone develop an in depth analysis.

“The Wilderness Idea Revisited” by J. Baird Callicott provides an excellent example of the continued exclusion of African Americans, even as concerns about race are brought into the fold. This occurs despite the significant roles of black people in U.S. culture. One of the many places in which African Americans could enter the analyses is when Michael P. Nelson discusses the religious uses of the American wilderness (Nelson 1998, 168-9). When he mentions “that only a minority of people actually ‘go to church in the woods’,” it might be interesting to spend some time considering the historical uses of the woods as religious sites for African Americans, particularly during slavery, for practicing both Christianity and traditional African religions.

Wilderness and the American Mind creates a single, reified, pseudo-universal mind, containing ideas that change only through time, and William Cronon’s “The Trouble With Wilderness” then deconstructs the late version of this same mind. Nash’s early text excludes much of the American public, but Cronon’s work is similarly troubled in that his critique continues to focus almost entirely on this largely white male conception of wilderness.

When scholars writing about wilderness do confront race, it is almost always presented as a Red-White dichotomy and sometimes on the so-called “Third World.” The focus on these groups (Indians, Whites, the Third World), with the exclusion of others (other people of color in the so called First World), is not necessarily better or worse than the focus on a Black-White dichotomy that is dominant in most U.S. scholarship on race. A valuable contribution of environmental historians to scholarship on race in the United States is precisely the analyses of the American Indian presence and of Indian-White relationships that are often not present in

scholarship on race. It is, however, a focus worth noting and exploring. The roots of this emphasis likely include that (1) many environmental historians are also Western (U.S.) historians and (2) environmentalists so often valorize mythical versions of Native American culture, history, and spiritual practices. One implication of the focus (again, only when looking at race, otherwise Native Americans are generally excluded) on Red-White dichotomies is that environmental historians reproduce some of the essentializing moves made by environmentalists regarding American Indians. The scholarship reproduces connections between Native Americans and wildness and perpetuates the representation of indigenous peoples as part of nature as opposed to part of humanity. This connection is also seen in the inclusion of Native Americans in museums of “natural history.” The issue is complicated, however, by the ways in which many native cultures encourage people to view themselves as part of nature. The problem appears, however, when white scholars unreflectively place Native Americans as part of nature while not making a similar move for whites.

William Cronon’s essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness” received significant attention when first published in 1995, and it has since received substantial criticism for the way in which it appears to dismiss the reality and importance of nature apart from humanity and his criticism of wilderness as an organizing idea for environmentalism (Foreman). In my view, these aspects of his analysis are not the essay’s weak point since I largely agree with both his depiction and critique of the wilderness experience and, in my reading, his analysis of how we understand and influence nature does not dismiss the existence of nature out there somewhere that we have not helped create, rather he simply acknowledges that any nature that we observe is nature of which we are a part. Cronon’s essay primarily (perhaps exclusively) engages the first half of his “key insight” for the book, namely that nature is socially constructed, but the essay falls short because it fails to take seriously the second half of the insight, that nature has been experienced in different ways by different people. The irony of “The Trouble with Wilderness” is that in a book which claims, in large part, to be about understanding the different ways in which people have conceived of nature, the flagship essay focuses so narrowly on a very particular way of understanding nature. Cronon describes the often solitary search for, and reflective stroll in, nonhuman nature, and then he argues that environmentalists must do better (Cronon 1995).

At one of the crescendos of his essay, Cronon writes that the way in which wilderness is framed and valued “would seem to exclude from the radical environmentalist agenda problems

of occupational health and safety ... toxic waste ... agricultural sites ... lead exposure in the inner city ... famine and poverty ... problems, in short, of environmental justice” (Cronon 1995, 84). Despite Cronon’s emphasis, at this key point in the article, that the things which he sees missing from the radical environmentalist agenda are problems of environmental justice, it is precisely environmental justice that Cronon leaves out of almost his entire analysis. Nowhere in his discussion does he mention or cite any environmental justice activists, scholars, or events in the movement. He fails to cite any of the significant and growing literature on environmental justice that was available at that the time the book was first published, such as Bullard’s groundbreaking *Dumping in Dixie*, Dorceta Taylor’s analysis of the participation of people of color in environmental activism, or Capek’s work on the framing of environmental justice issues or (Bullard 1990; Taylor 1993; Capek 1993). The presence of humans in nature can be seen in the ways in which environmental justice scholars and activists had already articulated the insight that the environment is “where we live, work, and play” (Novotny 2000). The phrase has since been expanded by some to be “where we live, work, play, learn, and worship” which can expand our thinking regarding the extent of human practices but also to extend our thinking of the role that nature plays in religious practices—can be used to think about transcendental, Christian, and Africanized spiritual practices and religious experiences occur in those “natural” wilderness settings. Cronon’s argument in that section mirrors the opening of *Dumping in Dixie*, in which Bullard wrote, “The environmental movement in the United States emerged with agendas that focuses on such areas as wilderness and wildlife preservation, resource conservation, pollution abatement, and population control. It was supported primarily by middle- and upper-middle-class whites. Although concern about the environment cut across racial and class lines...” (Bullard 1990, 1).

Cronon argues that we must find a way “in which all of these things, from the city or the wilderness, can somehow be encompassed in the word ‘home’” (Cronon 1995, 89). He writes, “‘nature’ is a human idea, with a long and complicated cultural history” but falls short of taking seriously his claim that it is important to understand how “different human beings ... [have] conceive[d] of the natural world in very different ways” (Cronon 1995, 20).

It is often claimed today that racial minorities, through multicultural and diversity initiatives, are the cause of continuing racial strife, segregation in schools, and any number of social problems (e.g. Schlesinger 1991, Hollinger 2000). The claim is often that whites and

some people of color are breaking down racism through colorblindness. I do not claim to agree or disagree with the proposition that colorblindness is an effective way to fight racism—it seems reasonable to say that it forms part of a larger set of policies and programs, some of which are hopefully transitional in nature. Observation, however, indicates that whites continue to practice self-segregation, racial exclusion, and racial oppression—both in the forms of overt racism and unconscious, taken for granted actions.

In many cases black cultural contributions are more significant to shaping the views of whites in the United States than are the contributions of seventeenth century European philosophers. When Stevie Wonder sings “packing my bags, going away, to a place where the air is clean” the image of escapism likely reaches more people than even the most influential wilderness advocates. Stevie Wonder singing “we can't trust you when you take a stand with a gun and bible in your hand and the cold expression on your face saying give us what we want or we'll destroy” likely brings these particular criticisms of imperialism to more people than an essay by Ramachandra Guha or J. Baird Callicott (Wonder 1974).

What would be the effect of including African Americans in a significant way in a history of American attitudes towards the wilderness? The following section of this study provides some answers to this question by looking at the experiences of African Americans with wilderness during a particular time and region in U.S. history. Existing scholarship by Elizabeth Blum, Melvin Dixon, Earl Leatherberry, and others provide further insights. For an even broader impact, we can only speculate, since the complete project has not yet been undertaken. Some possibilities are considered later in the paper in the “Implications and Applications” section of the paper.

4. African American Relationships with Wilderness

4.1. Themes and Images

From the mid nineteenth to the mid twentieth century, African Americans experienced and perceived wilderness in many diverse ways. The wilderness was a place of freedom, danger, religious ceremony, healing herbs, subsistence food, fear, fuel, wage labor, and recreation.

These themes have emerged from the primary documents. Throughout this time, the majority of the African American population lived in the rural South. When African Americans looked at the land around them, they saw a rural landscape dominated by farms and forests, and it was home. From the woods to the farm, from sharecropping to the timber industry, and from economics to religion, relationships with the land contributed to the social and economic trajectories traveled by African Americans (Anthony 1995; Taylor 1997). These economic and material conditions played a role in shaping African American experiences with and perspectives on wilderness.

The changes in the African American relationships with wilderness and the land in general are strikingly depicted in the paintings of Aaron Douglas. His paintings from the Harlem Renaissance describe African Americans as having rural roots and also having persevered on journeys through a variety of wild routes. Douglas's depictions are not without problems and oversimplification. His paintings are powerful representations of the ambiguous relationships of African Americans and the shifting ground of history.

Douglas's paintings of blacks in Africa often feature a wilderness scene. Figure 2 presents *Into Bondage*, a painting from 1936.



Figure 2. *Into Bondage*, Aaron Douglas, 1936

This painting depicts Africans in both a wild and a rural landscape captured, in chains, and on the path towards being sold into slavery. Wilderness is in the foreground with a slave ship on the water in the distance. The image of sorrow suggests that with enslavement an abundant, fertile land—both wilderness and home—is being left forlornly behind.

Arguably Douglas's greatest work is a series of four paintings collectively titled *Aspects of Negro Life*, which he created in 1934. The giant canvases, ranging from 6' x 6' to approximately 11' x 5' were produced for the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library and show four stages of African American history (Campbell 1994). Figure 3 shows the second in the series.



Figure 3. *From Slavery Through Reconstruction*, Aaron Douglas, 1934

This painting depicts actions throughout different parts of the southern landscape. There are slaves toiling on the plantation and then the soldiers of both sides are seen marching in the distance. One slave is depicted breaking the chains of bondage, indicating emancipation, while the central figure is of an African American pointing towards the big house on the plantation. On the left side of the painting, coming from the dark woods, is the Ku Klux Klan riding on horseback. The image is framed by the wilderness, appearing bright and even peaceful in most of the painting and dark and ominous in the upper left.

Figure 4 shows the third painting in the *Aspects of Negro Life* series.



Figure 4. *Idyll of the South*, Aaron Douglas, 1934

This painting portrays the lives of African Americans during Jim Crow. In the center is shown the joyous and perhaps stereotyped images of black musicians and dancers. This is surrounded by the hard work of farmers in the pastoral landscape. The outer rim of the painting shows the wilderness. On the left hand side, there is a scene of several African Americans in mourning and over their heads can be seen the two feet of a lynching victim. These images point to some of the themes that are present in black life throughout the time periods considered in this study. The research has focused primarily on the U.S. South, although there are a few comments on other regions.

What is meant here by “African American perspectives” and “African American experiences”? Does it include each perspective and experience of every African American person? Is it possible that there are some experiences and perspectives which African Americans have that are somehow not actually “African American”? Can people who are not African American have an African American perspective or experience? And perhaps even more fundamentally, who is, and who is not, African American?

Answering these questions is not a trivial exercise. Asking the questions is an important step in developing an understanding the positions and meanings of black people within U.S. society. What may appear at times to be clearly delineated categories are and become quite complex. They ask the question to what extent is there such a thing as a unitary “black culture” or singular “black community.” For the purposes of the current study, it will be useful to consider, or at least think in terms of, varied people, perspectives, and experiences connected by

cultural, history, and identity. On the one hand, there are certain experiences and beliefs that are identified as black which are also held by or influential upon people with other identities. On the other hand, there are experiences and beliefs which are not usually or specifically identified as black yet are held by or influential upon black people. Finally, there is of course no singular black experience or perspective; rather there are complex and often contradictory set of histories and beliefs.

The physical landscape of the South changed throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During the first decades of the time period considered in this section of the paper, forested area in the South was declining in extent. Forested area reached a low point and then began to slowly expand and continue to do so throughout the twentieth century due to the abandonment of croplands, with cropland area peaking in the first decade of the 1900s for most of Virginia and Kentucky, in the 1920s for the majority of the land in Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee, and throughout much of the rest of the South since the 1950s (Ramankutty and Foley). Major wilderness areas in the South include the Great Smoky Mountains, Everglades, and Shenandoah national parks.

There is a small body of existing literature which addresses the relationships between African Americans and wilderness. Melvin Dixon broke new ground with *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Dixon 1987). This book is a study of geographic themes which have played a significant role in African American literature and slaves songs. The themes that he identifies are wilderness, underground, and mountain. He analyzes slave songs and the writing of several key authors spanning the twentieth century, including Zora Neal Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison. Dixon's book has been largely overlooked by mainstream literature on wilderness, African American studies, and other disciplines, perhaps because of its interdisciplinary nature and because it appeared a few years before the scholarly community working on environmental issues was forced to confront issues of race. More recently, Elizabeth Blum has written about the historical relationships of slave women with wilderness (Blum 2002). Her conclusions are discussed in this paper in the section of relationships with wilderness during slavery.

Cassandra Johnson has published several papers, alone and with colleagues, regarding African Americans and what she refers to as "wildlands" (Johnson 1998; Johnson et al. 1997; Johnson et al. 1998). She is probably the most active scholar in this area. Johnson is a

sociologist with the USDA Forest Service stationed in Athens, GA. Her work employs quantitative and qualitative sociological methods, and some of her work explores historical issues. In addition to considering African Americans, she has done important work on cultural diversity and wildlands recreation more generally. Earl Leatherberry of Forest Service and Shelton Johnson of the National Park Service are practitioners who have contributed to research and writing on the African Americans relationships with wilderness. Leatherberry has written about spiritual and religious connections to wilderness in African American history, and Johnson has looked at African American soldiers in the West—Buffalo Soldiers (Leatherberry 2000; S. Johnson 2003).

My research contributes to this literature in several ways. First, by analyzing the role of race in mainstream wilderness literature—work which focuses on white or White-Red experiences—I provide a context for the work regarding African Americans, as well as for work on Asian Americans and Latinos. Second, the time period considered in this study has received relatively little attention, with more work being done on slavery or on late twentieth century experiences. Third, I bring together a variety of primary sources in order to investigate the social history of African American relationships with wilderness, including many which have not yet been explored in this context.

4.2. Seeking Refuge: African Americans and Wilderness During Slavery

Relationships between African Americans and forests, or woods, swamps, and other types of wilderness have taken several forms, with a marked change occurring around the Civil War period. During slavery, the woods were a place of refuge and safety for blacks and an understanding of these relationships sets the ground for understanding the perspectives that developed later. Slaves went to the woods to delay or escape punishment, to run away with the hope of reaching the North, to join with Indians who provided them refuge from slavery and racist oppression, or to establish their own independent maroon communities (Franklin and Schweninger 1999). Forests provided locations for religious practices and other meetings. Ex-slave Mandy Jones recalled how, “Da slaves would runaway sometimes, an’ hide out in de big woods,” and once they were clear of the master’s eye, they “way out in the woods, an’ de slaves

would slip out o' de quarters at night, an' ... would have a school." Former slaves, such as Susan Rhodes, remembered times when "We used to steal off to de woods and have church ... had dem spirit-filled meetings at night on de bank of de river" (Chiles 2001, 56, 71). The ambiguities of night and day, dawn and dusk as times of safety or fear become interesting in this context. Business man H.C. Bruce recalled how during his childhood as a slave, he saw that many of the other slaves "when threatened or after punishment ... would escape to the woods or some other hiding place." Each of these people, living during Reconstruction, remembered this earlier period. Their generation provided a transition between slave and free perspectives on the land (Bruce 1895, 52).

As Melvin Dixon has observed, geography and identity have been linked for African Americans in several different ways. In *Ride Out the Wilderness*, Dixon identifies three major geographic themes in African American music and literature: "the wilderness, the underground, and the mountaintop" (Dixon 1987, 3). Dixon's analysis of slave songs points to the meaning of wilderness as refuge, for escape from the terrors of slavery and escape from the troubles of earthly life.

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

Douglass described the wilderness as a refuge elsewhere and continued to also conceive of it as dangerous and uncivilized. In his words,

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

Douglass juxtaposes “wilderness” and the “cultivated” landscape, and wilderness is the more preferable of the two environments.

The word “wilderness” appears in many of Douglass’s speeches and writing. Three additional examples are considered here. In his famous speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” Douglass described how, in his view, at the founding of the United States, “The country was poor in the munitions of war. The population was weak and scattered, and the country a wilderness unsubdued” (Douglass 1852). Douglass is working with the dominant narrative of the triumph of American ingenuity over wild lands and against an oppressive British government. The reference to wilderness is used strategically in laying the groundwork for the rest of the speech in which he examines the contradictions in this story and “base pretence” of American freedom and American slavery.

The Heroic Slave, a novella, was Douglass’s only work of fiction. At one point in the story, the protagonist states “I had partly become contented with my mode of life, and had made up my mind to spend my days there; but the wilderness that sheltered me thus long took fire, and refused longer to be my hiding-place” (Douglass 1853, 192-3). He is forced to leave the refuge and return to the oppressive society.

Frederick Douglass spoke at the Second Annual Expedition of the Colored People of North Carolina in 1880. In this speech, Douglass outlines the importance of “small farms” to the economic security and improvement of African Americans. Throughout the speech, he uses rhetorical strategies to affirm and inspire in his audience a sense of pride as people of color. He points to the contributions of non-European peoples to the advancement of agricultural, effectively telling his audience not to be intimidated or discouraged by the comments, behaviors, and ideologies of their white neighbors. For example, Douglass says “the plow, the king of agricultural implements, comes to us all the way from Africa. The Egyptians knew the plow

[before] the white race was known to history.” Describing general techniques for small farms, Douglass states “the philosophy too, of keeping the soil in good condition, was understood in the earliest dawn of history. It was known that the soil must be fed as well as fed upon. China knew this when Britain was a wilderness” (Douglass 1880).

In these passages, Douglass first states an Afro-centric viewpoint, and then he shifts to embracing a larger community of people of color, presenting a counterpoint to the type of white nationalism somewhat uncritically described by Nash and Nelson without analysis of the racial content embedded in arguments such as those put forward by Theodore Roosevelt or George Bird Grinnell (Nash 2001, 152). Douglass was using the term “wilderness” here to refer to a primitive condition; the word describes both the people and their environment. He used the term in a manner similar to whites who viewed Native Americans as uncivilized and therefore in a wilderness condition. Douglass inverts the direction of the critique, pointing to what he saw as the late development of European culture and technology as counterevidence to prevailing white supremacist beliefs. This example shows both the ways in which African American views of wilderness align with beliefs held by whites and also how these views can become applied in ways that have different cultural meanings.

Slave songs featured the wilderness. For example, consider the following song, quoted in Melvin Dixon’s book:

“If you want to find Jesus, go in de wilderness
Go in de wilderness, go in de wilderness
Mournin’ brudder, go in de wilderness
I wait upon the lord”

The wilderness contained the possibility of freedom. Slave songs are an example of how multiple cultural traditions interact to create new cultural forms. This song contains Christian themes brought from the Middle East to Europe and on to America and is being sung African immigrants who brought other spiritual and vocal traditions across the ocean. The “immigrants” were of course violently and brutally coerced but persevered, and the song reflects the continuing struggle. The slaves sing about both reaching salvation in heaven and freedom on earth.

Elizabeth Blum has written about the relationships of women slaves with wilderness. She writes about the danger of snakes and the experience of supernatural forces. She also points to how the wilderness was incorporated into communications between blacks and whites in the Antebellum South. She describes how “black mammies” told ghost stories about the wilderness to white children which could also serve as a warning against intrusion into the woods which was primarily the slaves’ domain. On the other hand, mistresses sometimes attempted to control their slaves by fostering fear through stories of wild beasts (Blum 2002).

Black women provided medical care on the plantation through their knowledge of wild remedies (Blum 2002). Wild lands fulfilled other needs. Rivers, woods, and lakes contained fish, birds, rabbits, raccoons, and numerous other sources of protein to supplement the slave diets.

Rhodes’s and Douglass’s experiences with freedom and religion in the woods can be compared to the experiences of John Muir and Henry David Thoreau, two white men whose work in the nineteenth century has become part of the canon of writing on wilderness. All four speak of the wilderness as places of potential salvation. Whereas Muir and Thoreau describe solitary individualistic endeavors, Rhodes takes the religious experiences a step further or in a different direction by moving from an individual to a collective relationship with nature. It was the entire church and congregation—or in some cases followers of traditional African spiritual practices—who had religious experiences in the wilderness. These experiences were often kept secret and included an immediacy of survival strategies.

4.3. Land, Labor, and Fear: Change During Reconstruction

The end of slavery brought an important set of changes in the relationships between African Americans and the land on which they lived. These changes were both material and metaphysical and became part of the new set of parameters in which they lived. Blacks were no longer property, located at the same level of domesticated animals and not far in status from the crops, soil, and fertilizer. Through emancipation, blacks moved into a position where they could gain ownership and control over the land and its constituent parts in ways that only a select few could do previously. They no longer had to run to the woods to grasp for freedom because now they claimed freedom, at least in theory, wherever they lived. Material conditions didn’t

necessarily improve for African Americans, especially with the collapse of Reconstruction, but there was certainly change. Emotional ties to the land became more significant in some senses because black people now had a role in decisions over whether to stay or leave the South—whether the South was a place worthy of calling home—whereas previously personal attachments to a particular area or type of the land had little to do with whether or not a person continued to live in that area. Blacks could gain greater control over land management practices with their nominally increased independence. The changes of African American relationships with the land were constrained, however, by the economy created by the overthrow of Reconstruction by the white south (Foner 1988).

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

Blacks believed nearly universally that owning the land was central to their economic development. From Frederick Douglass to W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, black leaders argued for land ownership in the South as one means of economic advancement. Sharp differences existed, however, regarding how this ownership was to be achieved. Some of these differences occurred in explicit debates, but many times they were embedded in a wider set of beliefs and perceptions about those relationships between blacks and the land that were developed through labor.

For some, the land rightly belonged to blacks. The ground had been worked by generations of black slaves and their labor had earned them a right to the land, and it was being unfairly occupied and owned by their former slaver masters who had rebelled against the union. According to this view, land rights should be granted as a form of reparations, although that particular term was not yet used. A convention of African Americans in Illinois, operating with this basic perspective, argued for redistribution and subscribed to the position articulated by Thaddeus Stevens, which held that by seceding the states and citizens forfeited their property rights and that these areas would be reincorporated as territories where land would be distributed by federal policy. Along these lines, the convention stated that confiscation of land from the

former slave owners was justified because through rebellion each state in the South had “cease[d] to exist as a State, reverting back to its territorial relationship” (Foner and Walker 1986, 382). The land would symbolically revert back to a wilderness condition, and the process of colonization and settlement could begin again. From this perspective, the federal government had the power to redistribute land among the freedmen.

The Union passed two Confiscation Acts during the Civil War, which were intended to be used to take land from the rebellious plantation owners and make it available for redistribution, but the acts were not implemented on any significant scale. Another source of land for redistribution was the millions of acres of public lands that existed in the South. The Southern Homestead Act of 1866 was passed with the aim of opening these lands to small farmers, both black and white, who had been loyal to the Union. Homesteading was not a program which in itself would guarantee land for African Americans because it required capital in the form of tools, animals, and some money to get a farm started. The Southern Homestead Act failed to achieve its goals due to the failure of implementation, and homesteading under the act was closed after only ten years, never approaching the scale of the Homestead Acts which opened the West for predominantly white settlers who continued to stake claims for over a century after it was initially passed in 1862 (Lanza 1990, 5-11, 112-5; Magdol 1977). The different outcomes are part of a racial project that distributed material resources across the social cleavages of race by taking land from Native Americans, giving it to whites, and denying access for blacks. The changing divisions, transformations, and domination of the American wilderness were done according to ideologies of race with material implications for both people and nonhuman nature. Other policies and practices would have created a different social and natural landscape.

General Sherman’s Field Order No. 15, granting forty acres to each freedman in the island and coastal regions of South Carolina, was one instance in which a policy of direct redistribution was undertaken. The federal government quickly backtracked, however, and sent General Howard, the top representative of the government’s Reconstruction programs, to explain to blacks in the region that the mandate was going to be abandoned, and the land that blacks had already begun to settle would be returned to their former owners (Hahn 2003). In a meeting with Howard, a group of South Carolina blacks expressed their frustration and demanded, “General, we want Homesteads, we were promised Homesteads by the government.” This group stated

that if the government “now takes away from them [the freedmen] all right to the soil they stand upon save such as they can get by again working for your late and their all time enemies ... we are left in a more unpleasant condition than our former.” African Americans presented their claims in other arenas. Freedman Harry McMillan testified before a federal Inquiry Commission. The Commission asked him, “What would the colored people like the government to do for them here?” His immediate and only response was “They would like to have land. ... The people here would rather have land than work for wages” (Foner 1988, 160; Kai Wright 2000, 366).

The *New Orleans Tribune* reported on efforts to gain ownership of the land through direct redistribution in Louisiana. The paper published the program of the Freedmen’s Association of the City of New Orleans, which was “to develop the agriculture of the State of Louisiana by means of the Freedmen.” The Association stated that the “division of large plantations in Louisiana has begun, and some of the lands of those persons engaged in the rebellion have been taken possession of by the Government, and parceled and rented to the Freedmen. They are now cultivating these portions of the soil of the State, in squads of men, women, and children” (*The New Orleans Tribune* May 5, 1865, Vol. 2, No. 213). This Association epitomized a sense of both optimism and determination that existed for some early in the period of Reconstruction. The statements in the *Tribune* argued that African Americans were best suited to turn wild lands into a productive agricultural landscape. Blacks were involved in the transformation of the land in new ways and many willingly and even enthusiastically joined the national project of subduing nature with the hope of receiving some of the benefits of these efforts. Black landownership did increase for a while, until approximately 1920 when it peaked and has since continuously declined. The achievements were limited by the force of the white south and the dereliction of the federal government.

The Freedmen’s Bureau backed away from and then seemingly forgot its mission of distributing land as part of the Reconstruction. The abandonment of this duty was so significant that the bureau’s name—The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands—was usually abbreviated as the “Freedmen’s Bureau.” This name change was both an indicator of the bureau’s shifting focus and an action that facilitated that shift by removing the controversial land issue from the center stage of public discussion of Reconstruction. On the whole, the land policies constituted a suppression of black efforts to gain the full rights of true citizenship.

The differences between postbellum land distribution in the South and in the West can be seen as related to conceptions of wilderness. The Homestead Act relied on the idea of wilderness. The Act was one example of institutionalization of the Lockean principle of property rights being created by mixing labor with soil.

Throughout these changes, African Americans were continuing the process of transforming the wilderness to a controlled landscape. That the land was not previously uninhabited, however, was in the consciousness of many black people at the time. African Americans and Native Americans had a long and complicated history of interaction (Katz 1986). These relationships included living together in what many whites would have considered to be wild areas. Ralph Ellison, the influential black writer, was the descendant of African Americans who came with Native Americans to the Indian Territory, and wrote about blues singer Bessie Smith singing “Goin' to the Nation, Goin' to the Terr'tor” which referred to this migration (Ellison 1986). African Americans moved west in the Trail of Tears with the Cherokees in the 1830s and again later in the Kansas Exodus of 1879. These expeditions into what many considered to be the Western wilderness were the result, in part, of frustrations encountered in the South.

Belief that forty acres and a mule were justly deserved continued for some in the black population for many years. T. Thomas Fortune, an ex-slave turned newspaper man, expressed this position in the 1880s, prior to his conversion to a more conservative viewpoint. In his book *Black and White: Land, Labor and Politics in the South*, Fortune argued “the justness of the ‘forty acre’ donation cannot be controverted ... the slave had earned this miserable stipend from the government by two hundred years of unrequited toil” (Fortune 1884). Years later, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier noted that “the unfulfilled hope of the Negro after emancipation; namely, that he would be given forty acres and mule” remained a common sentiment, although he did not see it as a useful campaign during his own time (Frazier 1936). Seven decades after he received his freedom, ex-slave Henry Banner still remembered clearly, “It got out somehow that they were going to give us forty acres and a mule,” although he also hadn’t expected much to come of it (Rawick 1972, *Arkansas Narratives*, Volume 2, Part 1).

4.4. A Segregated Wilderness: African Americans and Wilderness During Jim Crow

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

Ida B. Wells-Barnett described the Janus-faced meaning of wilderness in relation to white violence under Jim Crow. Wells-Barnett was an anti-lynching advocate, arguably the most famous of her time, and a reporter who investigated and documented numerous lynchings and presented the horrors to a broad audience through her writing. In her description of a late 1890s incident in Palmetto, Georgia, she writes of the woods as follows: “A mob of more than 100 desperate men, armed with Winchesters and shotguns and pistols and wearing masks, rode into Palmetto at 1 o'clock this morning and shot to death four Negro prisoners ... [they] fired two volleys into the line of trembling ... pleading prisoners, and to make sure of their work, placed pistols in the dying men's faces and emptied the chambers ... then the mob mounted their horses and dashed out of town, back into the woods and home again” (Wells-Barnett 1899, Chapter 1). The nighttime woods are, in this case, home to the perpetrators of anti-black violence. On the other hand, in another incident described later in the same text, *Lynch Law in Georgia*, the woods serve as a hiding place and refuge for the potential victims of violence. During the lynching of Samuel Wilkes, “while Wilkes was being burned the colored people fled terror-stricken to the woods” (Wells-Barnett 1899, Chapter 4). The role of wilderness areas in the

experience of and escape from actual lynchings is ambiguous. In terms of cultural impact, lynching and its photography seems to have fostered fear of the woods.

A short story titled “Goldie,” written by Angelina Weld Grimké, and published in 1920 described terror caused by lynchings and is an example of their cultural impact. With vivid imagery, Grimké writes how that for the story’s main character “it seemed to him, the woods, on either side of him, were not really woods at all but an ocean ... [and] this boundless deep upon deep of horrible, waiting sea, would move, rush, hurl itself heavily and swiftly together from the two sides, thus engulfing, grinding, crushing, blotting out all in its path” (Grimké 1920).

Booker T. Washington placed his personal fear of white violence in the woods as far back as the Civil War, which was at an earlier point in this particular change in the meaning of wilderness. In his autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, Washington recalled how, as a child, he sometimes had to walk on roads “through dense forests” which produced the fear that he described in one of the two opening quotes (Washington 1901, 32). Hosea Hudson, a farmer in childhood and labor activist as an adult and born just before the dawn of the twentieth century, recalled how “It was common to hear the sounds of Negroes being chased through the woods by bloodhounds. We would hear the older people say, ‘You better be careful tonight, there’s a runaway out in them woods’” (Hudson 1972, 4). White reactions to strategies of the older generation imprinted a new relation of fear on the generations born after slavery.

This story of the woods changing from a place of refuge to a place of fear was complicated and did not hold in all cases. Many African Americans continued to see the woods as a part of the world in which they felt comfortable. The woods, for many southern families, were a place where they supplemented their livelihood. African Americans valued forested land for the income it could bring through the timber industry and the food that it provided to fill out their diets. Both Ned Cobb and his father went to the woods and hunted to help support their families, with the father spending many of his working hours away from the farm and in the woods to the displeasure of the son. Ned Cobb, like many southern African Americans, supplemented his farming income by working in the timber industry, and he “hailed lumber until the mill shut down” (Rosengarten 1974, 238). Selena Foster, a restaurant owner in California as an adult, had been raised in Texas. Described her experience as a child in Texas in the 1920s, Foster recalled how her family “would be on the creek somewhere, on the river, fishing,” and she would help her mom by going into the woods to “get kindling to go in the fire” (Foster 1992).

The woods were important to African Americans for subsistence and wage labor. Subsistence relationships with wilderness area were important throughout the entire time period considered in this study. African Americans relied on hunting and fishing to supplement their diets which were often impacted by insufficient rations during slavery and by high prices during Jim Crow. James Bolton, an ex-slave, described the use of wilderness areas to gain subsistence because the rations on his plantation were generally insufficient. “We had plenty er ‘possums, an’ rabbits, an’ fishes, an’ sometimes we had wild turkeys and partridges. Slaves woan ‘spozen go huntin’ at night, an’ evvybuddy know you kyan’ ketch no ‘possums ‘ceppin at night. Jes the same, we had plenty ‘possums, an’ no buddy ax’ how we cotch ‘em” (Berlin et al. 1998, 186). Bolton continued his description and stated “We saved a heap er bark form wile cherry, an’ poplar an’ black haw, an’ slip’ry ellow tress, an’ we dried out mullein leaves. They was all mixed an’ brewed to make bitters. ... well Ma’am, they was good far what ailed ‘im. We tuk ‘em fer rheumatiz, fer fever, an’ fer the mis’ry in the stummick, an’ ‘fer mos’ all sorts er sickness. Red oak bark tea was good fer so’ th’oat” (Berlin et al. 1998, 187).

Common lands in the South were used by blacks and poor whites who fished and hunted for wild game and whose livestock foraged in the woods. In the postbellum period, these subsistence practices were limited by the institution of stock laws which mandated the construction of fences and reduced access to the land (Hahn 1982). Use of the woods and rivers of the South was restricted, but as Cobb and Foster indicated, these restrictions were far from absolute.

African Americans dominated many of the positions in the lumber industry in the Jim Crow period (Woodson 1930). Blacks held positions in turpentine production as well; many of these workers were prisoners organized as gang labor (Washington 2005). Segregation in the forests and sawmills of the Jim Crow south are an understudied aspect of U.S. forest history. These institutions of labor had ramifications in the Western timber industry as well with African Americans sometimes getting caught in clashes between white labor and management (Mann 2002).

Gains in black land ownership around the turn of the twentieth century produced a new set of concerns. Blacks went from owning a few tens of thousands of acres at the outbreak of the Civil War to a peak of 15.6 million acres in 1910. Since that time, African Americans landownership has declined in each decade and by the early 1980s, it had fallen to less than a

fifth of the 1910 value (Marable, Black Farmers and Agriculturalist Association). Fear was ensnared in relationships with land as private property. As blacks gained property—and with it social and economic standing and independence—whites were often quick to respond to these achievements with violent intimidation. Lynchings were linked not just to fear of the woods but also to the difficulties in achieving and maintaining property ownership. Black newspapers reported with pride the property ownership achieved by African Americans, particularly noting that they were paying taxes and contributing to society, but these same papers reported on the repercussions that blacks faced. An 1899 letter from a W. H. Matthews to the editor of *The Savannah Tribune* stated, “They say that the Negro is shiftless and they do not accumulate earnings, or accumulate homes as white men do. Tell me or tell them please where is the encouragement to accumulate anything when the breadwinners of our people are being hunted down” (*The Savannah Tribune*, March 25, 1899). Audley Moore, a labor and civil rights activist, described the death of her grandfather who “... was lynched for standing up to some white people who wanted his land. This was all it amounted to, because after he was lynched they ran my grandmother off the land” (Audley Moore, 121).

The two quotes from Booker T. Washington presented earlier suggested the complexity of African American relationships with wilderness. In addition, Washington described the “rest and enjoyment” that he experienced while working in his garden (Washington 1901, 265). He spent most of his career advocating that African Americans use agriculture as a path towards economic advancement, and the Tuskegee Institute, which he founded, trained people in modern methods of agriculture. He wanted “to teach the students the best and most improved methods of farming” (Washington 1900). But in addition to his interest in modernization and progress, Washington also felt that he was a man of the people and he took pleasure in simple, traditional aspects of the farm, “spading the ground, in planting seeds, in digging about the plants” (Washington, 1901, 265). As a boy he was sometimes sent on errands “through dense forests,” and he feared white violence at those times.

In addition to forests, water is an important aspect of the areas in which people experience as wilderness. In two important literary pieces, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston describe the wild nature of water and its relationships with African Americans. In Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a critical event in the story occurs when the two main characters are caught in a hurricane and subsequent flood. Hurston contrasts the reactions of

local whites and Native Americans to the impending danger. While the whites choose to stay on their farms, hoping for economic advantage, the Native Americans read the signs of the storm and choose to leave the area. Hurston works with the idea that Native Americans possess intimate knowledge of the environment, and in the end, the African American protagonists choose poorly by deciding to stay behind with the whites. They make the decision despite their own senses and intuition indicating that the storm was coming. The wilderness comes in and wipes out the landscape on which they were living (Hurston 1937; Lamothe 1999).

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

The attempts of society to transform woods, swamps, fields, and rivers into timber stands, rice fields, farms, and transportation corridors produced changes in environmental conditions. Some African Americans experienced the deterioration of southern farmlands as an injury to themselves. Richard Wright captured that sense of painful loss in *Twelve Million Black Voices* in which he wrote, “We ... watch the men with axes come through the Southland ... and whack down the pine, oak, ash, elm, and hickory trees, leaving the land denuded as far as the eye can see. And then rain comes in leaden sheets to slant and scour the earth until it washes away rich layers of top soil, until it leaves the land defenseless” (Wright 1941, 78). In this passage, Wright critiqued a particular form of economic growth and its impact on the land, which was linked to the struggles of black communities. Wright noted, “Cotton crops have sapped the soil of its fertility ... enough to drain the land and leave it a hard, yellow mat, a mockery to the sky and a curse to us.” (Wright 1941, 78). Hosea Hudson described the struggle of using branches from the woods and other materials to protect the farm against erosion (Hudson 1972). A similar environmental concern over unrestrained, or uninformed, growth came from farmers themselves. In the words of Ned Cobb, “Some things may do more than God put em here to do—that’s the human, he do more things than God put him here to do” (Rosengarten, 228). Wright, Hudson,

and Cobb indicate both a love for the rural landscape and ambivalence about the methods with which that landscape was formed.

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

Northern urban blacks of the early twentieth century saw the South in a couple of different ways. For some, it was an idyllic place with beautiful lush natural surroundings where children could experience the wonderment of the world. Esther Mae Scott described how “We’d have so much fun eating that candy and listening to Grandfather’s stories, going over the lake and Big Black bridge from Warren to Hinds County ... going across Big Black River. ... I’ve been across it many times” (Scott 1991). Scott’s description also reveals that while that landscape holds a dear place in her heart, it is also clearly in her past. Born in 1893 and interviewed in 1976 and 1977, Scott recalled when the river “wasn’t much more than a stream, but it’s a huge place now. Least it was in ’47, because I haven’t been back to the place since mother died. She died in 1947” (Scott 1991).

For George Washington Carver, the black agricultural scientist, religion informed his views of nature, and he was relatively open in comparison to other scientists at the time in expressing these ideas. He revealed his appreciation for the natural world, “More and more as we come closer and closer in touch with nature and its teachings are we able to see the Divine and are therefore fitted to interpret correctly the various languages spoken by all forms of nature around us” (Kremer 1987, 120). Carver’s view is reminiscent of some of the writings of John Muir and the transcendental view of nature associated with Henry David Thoreau.

Relationships with nature were also shaped by gender and class. Gender continued to have an effect on relationships with wilderness. Men performed wage labor in the woods and sawmills, but the most common wage occupation for black women was working in homes as domestic servants. Agricultural extension programs partitioned the landscape and the roles that men and women had in domesticating nature. Women received training in how to keep a tidy garden, located near the house, and men were trained for farm labor in the fields (Glave 1998).

Similarities between ideas presented by Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Booker T. Washington are one indication, however, that many of the relationships with wilderness were not gender specific.

Class differences also affected the ways that African Americans interacted with wilderness. This can be seen in the different periods of Booker T. Washington's life. As an enslaved youth, at the bottom of the class structure, Washington's relationships with the woods were different from his experiences as an adult and member of an elite economic class. In the latter period, his personal experiences with wilderness areas consisted more of leisure than labor. His relationship with nature was somewhat similar to that practiced by Thoreau. Washington's description of therapeutic and tension decreasing digging in the ground in his garden is reminiscent of Thoreau's meditative weeding outside his cabin at Walden Pond. It is interesting that Carver and Washington—colleagues at Tuskegee but also sometimes bitter rivals—shared a similar love of nature, which perhaps was shaped by their careers in agricultural education.

The differences between the experiences and attitudes of Ned Cobb and W. E. B. Du Bois further illuminate the relationships between class and nature for African Americans. As a sharecropper, Cobb's multifaceted relationships with rural and wild nature included market economy engagements in farming and forestry, subsistence connections through hunting and fishing, and spiritual and emotional connections to the land that he loves. For Du Bois, the academic and author situated in an upper economic class, his experiences were quite different. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois described the southern countryside as an observer of, rather than a participant in, the shaping of the landscape (Du Bois 1903a). Despite these class differences, Du Bois saw connections between the conditions of the land and of the people. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, he used evocative descriptions of the land to help his readers gain a fuller picture of the scenes that he described. These descriptions also served as metaphors for the social conditions of the people and for their future prospects. The chapter "Of the Black Belt" contains the most detailed of these kinds of passages. He begins the chapter by taking his readers on a train trip from the North, while slumbering along, "the train thundered, and we woke to see the crimson soil of Georgia stretching away bare and monotonous" (Du Bois 1903a, 77). This region is not the focus of the chapter; the story quickly moves further South, and as "the bare red clay and pines of Northern Georgia begin to disappear, in their place appears a rich rolling land, luxuriant, and here and there well tilled," the reader reaches the "Black Belt" where Du Bois locates both hopes and trials of the southern black population. In this region, "for a

radius of a hundred miles about Albany, stretched a great fertile land, luxuriant with forests of pine, oak, ash, hickory, and poplar; hot with the sun and damp with the rich black swamp-land; and here the cornerstone of the Cotton Kingdom was laid” (Du Bois 1903a, 80). Du Bois described a rural Negro town, within this prosperous land, set in “wide patches of sand and gloomy soil,” and this downtrodden soil was a reason for, an indicator of, and a metaphor for the economic poverty of the town. Du Bois made explicit the material and symbolic connections between the condition of the people in phrases such as “the half-desolate spirit of the very soil” and “lonesome square miles of land”, and “the whole land seems forlorn and forsaken” (Du Bois 1903a, 287 – 289). The planters’ neglect of the land was linked to the nation’s neglect of what Du Bois famously called “the problem of the color-line.”

Du Bois used the term “wilderness” in his essay “The Talented Tenth,” a piece which epitomizes the elitist class ideology that framed some of his early work. In the beginning of the essay, Du Bois referred back to previous African American leaders, and he wrote of “that Voice crying in the wilderness, David Walker” (Du Bois 1903b). Engaged in ongoing political debates, Du Bois is critiquing modern society, particularly the failures of morality, by referring to society as a wilderness. In the quote which Du Bois selected, Walker argues that whites appeared to “think God ... made the Africans for nothing else but to dig their mines and work their farms,” a critique of the extractive economic practices and an observation of their relationship to natural resources (Du Bois 1903b).

Ideas of wilderness were also sometimes incorporated into political debates within African American communities. Debates about emigration from the South have been important and complex throughout African American history, and with the collapse of Reconstruction, these debates increased. Newspapers such as *The Savannah Tribune* and political leaders, notably Frederick Douglass, spoke out on the issue. In these debates, the issue of land and landscape were often present. The already known Southern landscape was often contrasted with unknown wilderness in the American west and West Africa.

In 1888, a meeting of Negroes in New Orleans expressed frustration with their treatment and disfranchisement since the end of the Civil War and with being forced to live under a “feudal system.” The attendees called for help for “the removal of our people” to undertake a migration “to the public lands and other places of the northwest.” They and their constituents did “not feel safe as property holders ... [and] the laws ... [and] officers of the government ... afford no

protection to the lives and property of the people against armed bodies of whites.” As the attendees discussed migration, they drew upon the history of African American relationships with the woods, and they stated that “if you are without other means to travel take to the public roads or through the swamps and walk away” and urged their fellow freedmen to remember “your forefathers dared the bloodhounds, the patrollers, and innumerable obstacles, lived in the woods on roots and berries in making their way to Canadian borders,” and the current generation would have to overcome similar obstacles to achieve a fuller experience of freedom (Aptheker 1951, 741-3).

In 1895, *The Savannah Tribune* published a series of articles regarding African colonization plans along with editorials opposed to emigration and letters from people who saw it as the best way to improve their condition. The debate in the paper epitomized the disagreements over emigration proposals, and the expressed the arguments of many opposed to them. The paper observed, regarding advocates for emigration, “One of their main reasons for going is the fertility of the soil, all kinds of vegetable can be raised in abundance, and a plenty of game, etc. can be found.” The editors argued in response, “we do not see what use on earth there is for them to leave a place like Savannah when they can get goods just as cheap and wholesome as they can in Africa.” One of the columns arguing against emigration was particularly glowing in its description of the United States landscape; the author wrote,

America, prodigally lavished with her might lakes likes oceans of liquid silver; with her mountains and their bright aerial tints; with her valley’s teeming with wild fertility; with her boundless plains waving with spontaneous verdure; with her broad and deep rivers rolling in silence to the ocean; with her trackless forests where vegetation puts forth all its magnificence; with skies kindling with magic of summer clouds and glorious sunshine; with her tremendous cataracts thundering in their solitude, is the home of the Negro by reason of exploration, conquest, and other hallowed associations.

The author contrasted this glorious landscape with “gigantic and multitudinous obstacles which will inevitably confront him on the shores of wilderness” in Africa. And when Dr. C. McKane, an advocate of migration, sent a letter from Liberia back to the paper, he commented on the

condition of the natural environment in his arguments in favor of migration (see comment on *The Savannah Tribune* in the bibliography for sources).

Debates over emigration to Africa were often infused with a Eurocentric view of Africa as a wilderness in need of improvement and that African Americans were uniquely qualified with the technical knowledge and cultural affinity to guide and hasten that change. Relationships with Africa throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were varied and complex. W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey represented two different and conflicting views of how these relationships should develop.

Perception of the land and its quality was an issue not just for overseas emigration but also for migration within the United States. The editors of *The Huntsville Gazette* argued against Western migration, stating “Farmers stick to your country homes, make the best of them” (*The Huntsville Gazette*, February 17, 1894). Selena Foster talked about, “This one man who used to come and sharecrop with my father ... he called California ‘God’s Country.’” After describing beautiful mountains and valleys, “He said you’ll find this place looks like heaven between Arizona and California.” But her family’s ties to their rural southern environment were not so easily broken: “A lot of people used to say, ‘Oh that’s tinted. That can’t be real’ ... and they would say ‘Oh, I don’t believe that. We would have to go and see that to believe it’” (Foster 1992, 68).

It should be noted that the positions held by African Americans need not be unique to African Americans in order for those positions to be included in the analysis. If blacks share with whites a particular view, then it is still worth bringing African American voices into discussions of that issue. In the wilderness literature, these voices are left out, too. When Selena Foster speaks of the mountains of Arizona and California as “God’s country,” it is worth including her voice, if simply to describe the ways in which cultural views are shared across racial groups. So inclusion need not lead to segregation. In fact, any particular narrative could focus on the divergence, convergence, or overlapping of particular views.

Reflecting upon his decision to stay in Alabama and work the land, sharecropper Ned Cobb remarked, “If I lived in the city I wouldn’t have no spaces to look out on, no trees in my yard and maybe no yard; no garden and no small crops.” Like many black farmers, Cobb appreciated the land on which he lived and worked. He “wanted to stay and work for better conditions” rather than migrate to another part of the country (Rosengarten 1974, 499).

Transforming land has been a path towards claiming land ownership throughout American history. Land improvement has played an important role in both the mythology and policy of the United States. The beliefs of African Americans regarding land transformation form part of this American story but also follow their own distinct path. African Americans of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century pointed to the changes in the land which had been produced by their labor for several reasons. First, like millions of other Americans, those lucky enough to file for homesteads had to justify their claims to the land based on improvements which they made. The smaller number of homesteads actually granted, however, to blacks under the Southern Homestead Act reduced the importance of this aspect of changing the land. Instead, for African Americans, transforming the land became part of the evidence that blacks were American citizens and that black people contributed to the development of the economy and advancement of society. In other words, for African Americans, their role in changing the land was evidence that they were human and deserved to be treated fairly and equally. Transforming the land was, in its own way, part of the battle against oppression.

Black people had contributed significantly to the creation of a vibrant economy, linking the Southern states into a global economy, and had helped make cotton the leading export of the United States for much of the nineteenth century. Blacks cleared forests, dug ditches, and reclaimed swamp land. Like many people in the Progressive Era, African Americans tended to see nature as consisting of natural resources—resources for human use—rather than having intrinsic value. Physical transformations of the land provided a clear mark to which African Americans could point with pride and stake their claim to citizenship. A “Mrs. Garnett” in 1895 argued “America is our home ... Who helped to build her railroads, made cities out of marshes and forests, but the manual labor of the colored man?” (Garnett 1895). African Americans had been particularly important in the development of the rice economy of coastal South Carolina and Georgia. Rice production relied on the knowledge and skills of slaves who were brought from the rice growing regions of West Africa (Carney 2001; Steward 1996; Wood 1974).

African Americans used their associations with the land in other ways to demonstrate that they belonged to the nation and deserved to be protected from discrimination. By pointing with pride to the amount of property accumulated, blacks argued that they were advancing as a people. Gaining land as property provided both a path towards economic development and evidence of what could be called racial development—the development of African Americans from a

supposedly primitive people to a people that belonged and also thrived in the modern world. To counter arguments that blacks would disappear under the weight of white demographic and economic power, blacks pointed to both their physical numbers and their physical accumulations. With the understanding that transforming, or improving, land was a method to claim both ownership and citizenship, a black political convention in Illinois recommended to “our people the propriety of getting an interest in the soil, believing that there is power in so doing; moreover, to cultivate and improve the same is one of the great means of elevating ourselves and every disfranchised American” (Aptheker 1951, 615-6). Racial pride and the desire to demonstrate achievement helped shape African American relationships with wilderness and the land.

Drawing upon their Christian religious traditions, African Americans felt a special connection with the story of the Israelites going to the Promised Land. In the Old Testament, the Israelites lived under the oppressive regime of the Pharaoh, and in nineteenth and twentieth century America, African Americans lived under an oppressive regime of white racism. Given this analogy, people could ask where is the Promised Land for African Americans? Could it be created in the land of the South or did it have to be sought elsewhere? This question was raised at an 1874 convention in Alabama: “Shall we be compelled to repeat the history of the Israelites and go into exile from the land of our nativity and our homes, to seek new homes and fields of enterprise, beyond the rule of Pharaoh?” The sentiment of the convention was in favor of staying in the South and trying to make the best of it. The Promised Land then, for many, was a spiritual place where African Americans would arrive after their time on this earth (Aptheker 1951, 600-1).

Until that day would come, most blacks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century chose to stay, live, and work in the rural South. Once again, Nedd Cobb provides a statement that summarizes this decision: “I absolutely had my heart in farmin ... that’s where I decided I had my best hope” (Rosengarten 1974, 177).

The material presented thus far in this paper describes some of the many ways in which African Americans interacted with the changing landscapes of the U.S. South. Relationships with wilderness varied over time, in different places, and across individuals. A passage from William Still’s 1872 book on the underground rail provides a closing for this section of the paper. Still was an African American who had been personally assisted in many escapes from slavery and had spoken to numerous successful runaways in compiling his book. His description of an

escape by Henry Banks and Isaac Williams includes several of themes—refuge, testing ground, subsistence, and freedom—discussed above:

“That night Henry Banks and Isaac Williams started for the woods together, preferring to live among reptiles and wild animals, rather than be any longer at the disposal of Dr. James [a slave trader] ... they went far into the forest, and there they dug a cave, and with pains had every thing so completely arranged as to conceal the spot entirely. In this den they stayed three months. Now and then they would manage to secure a pig. A friend also would occasionally serve them with a meal. Their sufferings at best were fearful; but great as they were, the thought of returning to slavery never occurred to them, and the longer they stayed in the woods, the greater was their determination to be free. In the belief that their owner had about given them up they resolved to the North Star for a pilot, and try in this way to reach free land” (Still 1872, 285).

The meanings of these themes and of the analysis of race in wilderness scholarship are considered in the remaining sections of the paper.

5. Effects of Racial Exclusions

In this section, some consequences of the ways that wilderness scholarship has been racialized are considered. Returning to a few of the points discussed earlier in this paper, it is interesting to consider the ways that whiteness and race in environmental scholarship have already impacted our understandings of wilderness and to some extent influenced the racial composition and ideologies of the larger environmental movement. Environmental advocates and policy makers may rely heavily on economics, natural science, and engineering literature, but they are also strongly affected by work in the social sciences and humanities. Arguably, it is work in the latter disciplines that have longer and deeper impacts.

Toni Morrison has commented upon the impacts of “lethal discourses of exclusion blocking access to cognition for both the excluder and the excluded” (Morrison, 1993b). Her

remarks are relevant to the current study. By considering the racially and ethnically diverse population of the United States, scholars and readers might gain a better understanding of how whites, even in exclusively or almost exclusively white organizations and communities, actually developed relationships with nature. When one says that wilderness provides an escape from the city, what is that people are actually escaping from? As with the process of “white flight” to the suburbs, the valorization of the wilderness and demonization of the city can be seen as part of white desires to be away from blacks and from the problems which African Americans embody.

It is also important to recognize that racial boundaries are not as distinct as they sometimes seem. African Americans hold many views that overlap with those of white Americans, and there are many African Americans who hold views that are more accurately represented by what has been implicitly identified as a “white” perspective throughout this analysis. In these situations, it is useful to remember the principle that, in the language of environmental justice, “we speak for ourselves” and the voices of people of color should be heard (Alston). Also important is that there are many whites who hold views that are imbued more with beliefs and attitudes that are more closely related to African American traditions than to white or European traditions. In other words, the art, music, and writing of African Americans may have a more formative influence on a white person’s “mind” than many of the whites that Nash cites. For any particular person, Richard Wright might have been a greater influence than William Faulkner, and Stevie Wonder might be more important than Paul Simon. Predictably, in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Nash quotes both Faulkner and Simon, who are white, and not Wright and Wonder, who are black. This paper has hopefully shown that the writing of Richard Wright has relevance to the environment and more specifically to American relationships with the wilderness as his description of the denuding of the southern landscape should indicate. Asian Americans and Latinos are rarely included in mainstream environmental scholarship which has created further biases research and writing. Native Americans have been included in writing on the environment and on wilderness, and over time the work has become more sophisticated.

An example can point to the ways in which the framework presented at the beginning of this study can be used to analyze the interrelated development of environmental scholarship and environmental politics. An interesting early attempt to bring issues of race and social justice to the center of U.S. environmentalism occurred at a 1972 conference and is documented in the

book *Environmental Quality and Social Justice in Urban America* (Smith 1974). The book provides some unique insights into the way that environmental leaders were struggling to deal with the positioning of the dominant aspects of the environmental movement within a racial project that was often in opposition to the strategies, actions, and even goals of those advocating on behalf of people of color communities. The conference was attended by leaders of environmental, labor, and civil rights organizations, including the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, the National Tenants Organization, the United Auto Workers, the Urban League, and several academic, religious, and government leaders. The conference demonstrates the effects that scholarly literature can have in a social movement. In this case the writing of authors such as Lynn White, Jr. and Garrett Hardin combined with a certain defensiveness, helped push the environmental movement to the racial right.

Reverend Richard Neuhaus made a presentation that was critical of the willingness of some environmentalists to abandon progressive social causes and what he saw as some of the fascist overtones in the environmental movement. In the discussion that followed, Neuhaus stated,

“I’ve followed Lynn White and [Kingsley] Davis and [Garrett] Hardin and others who ... readily linked up with notions of a natural order in terms of some selective process within the human community” (Smith 1974).

At this point, Carl Pope of Zero Population Growth—and later president of Sierra Club—was apparently incensed by the suggestion that environmentalism might have any links to such reactionary social ideas, and he felt that a defense of Hardin was particularly important as he fired back:

“You [Neuhaus] slip from the biological concept of carrying capacity and say that it inevitably leads to a 19th-century concept of the organic community, with an organic hierarchy. Who, in the environmental community, is talking in terms of 19th-century organic hierarchy? You may not like what Hardin does with the question of numbers, but Hardin does not draw hierarchical

social conclusions. Hardin has always said that everyone's equal" (Smith 1974)

Pope was presumably somewhat familiar with Garrett Hardin's writing which makes his response particularly jarring. In contrast to Pope's claims, Hardin had repeatedly and explicitly argued that people are unequal, had referred back to nineteenth century notions of hierarchy, and was deeply interested in selective processes within the human community. These points are revealed by reviewing almost any of Hardin's writing, including the following excerpt from *Nature and Man's Fate*:

The first half of the twentieth century, like the first half of the nineteenth, was a time during which a scientific subject was crying to be heard ... it was human inequality. If we listen to the literature of the earlier period, we hear the whisper ... *men are, by nature, unequal* (Hardin 1959, emphasis in original).

Pope's statement is one of many defenses of Hardin, Davis, and others in which the defense was flatly contradicted by readily available evidence. His argument seems to flow from an assumption that because Hardin at least appeared to be arguing for environmental protection and was certainly received that way by many scholars, Hardin's work is therefore somehow inherently not racist or at least should not be the subject of criticism in that way. In these circumstances, there seemed to be little that could be done to move the movement in the socially progressive direction that Neuhaus and others desired. At the time, Neuhaus was a force for progressive social change and had been active in the anti-war and civil rights movements. Pope's unwillingness to listen to simple reason was but one instance in which certain environmentalists actively, and perhaps tragically, separated environmentalism from other progressive concerns. It is interesting and even tragic that Pope expressed his dislike for Social Darwinism by aligning himself against its critic and with people who were specifically articulating those ideas. Pope actually supports racism in his attempt to deny it.

An interesting exchange occurred when the reverend next argued that "warfare", "ecosystems", and "Spaceship Earth" often become "mythological construction[s]" when applied

by some in the environmental movement. Pope, who has held several leadership positions in major environmental organizations including president of the Sierra Club, continued to not listen to and at this point chose to insult Neuhaus. Pope fired back, “I will submit that you may not understand it, but it is not a mythological construction. An ecosystem is not a myth.” Neuhaus attempted to clarify his meaning, stating that a myth is not something that is necessarily false; instead, “A myth is an ordering model ... from which you begin conceptually” (Smith 1974). The meaning of myths, in the sense used by Neuhaus, has been subsequently explored in environmental scholarship, including in Cronon’s “The Trouble with Wilderness” (Cronon 1995).

Later in the conference, Ted Pankowski of the Isaac Walton Leagues described the positions that some people in his organization had taken when presented with a suggestion to collaborate on a project with a racial minority group:

“Our environmental community reacted to this proposal with a knee-jerk ‘No.’ ... I’m deeply concerned that this kind of opportunity seems to slip by us on a regular basis for lack of some kind of way of communicating these things. ... It’s certainly going to be the cause of a lot of problems that environmentalists are going to have to face in the future if they don’t get with it” (Smith 1974).

Peter Borelli of the Sierra Club responded to Pankowski and an African American state senator from Illinois:

“Ted and the Senator to a certain extent are pleading with us to blend our politics, if not our issues. I think that those of us who have tried blending issues have found that it’s very difficult, since blending issues very often obscures the political force associated with those issues. Politically, you can’t be saving national parks and improving minority housing at the same time” (Smith 1974).

Borelli certainly has a point, but his comments failed to account for the ways in which environmental politics were repeatedly changing and incorporating new issues and merging

disparate existing ones throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Nuclear power and weaponry, food security and population growth, and international economic development were being discussed or addressed (maybe or maybe not effectively) at this time by mainstream environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society which had previously focused on wilderness and wildlife. The question was not so much whether a group would blend its politics but which particular issues and perspectives would be included in the mixture. People of color in the United States, for the most part, were not included. The disturbing power of Borelli's last sentence is probably its degree of accuracy in capturing the effect of the movement in placing wilderness and recreation in conflict with and before minority housing.

Ronald Takaki has written "in *The Age of Jackson*, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., left out blacks and Indians. There is not even a mention of two marker events—the Nat Turner insurrection and Indian Removal, which Andrew Jackson himself would have been surprised to find omitted from a history of his era" (Takaki 1993, 6). I think this observation can be applied to scholarship on wilderness. Thomas Jefferson, Henry David Thoreau, Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir, and the many other white male historical figures would probably be surprised that African Americans and Native Americans do not appear at all in a history of each of their respective eras. They each lived in a time when both Native Americans and African Americans figured largely in the public discourse of the nation. To exclude blacks is to present a picture of the past that the people who lived it would not recognize.

Another impact is that the South is largely absent from wilderness scholarship. In its most simplified version, the geographic logic presented is that (white) people arrived in New England and were hostile to the wilderness, later they moved to the West and began to preserve wilderness. The South does not appear. Yellowstone is often credited as being the first national park in the United States, and in the world. The area that became the first national park was actually in the South, not in the West. In 1832, the first national, natural preservation area in the U.S. was created in Hot Springs, Arkansas and was designated as a National Park in 1921 (Allin, 1982; Shugart, 2002).

Also, the views of historical figures such as Henry David Thoreau and John Muir on race, freedom, and discrimination are largely overlooked, despite the importance of these issues to their time periods and the help that it would provide in understanding the lives, politics, and philosophies of these figures. In addition to reflection upon natural history, Thoreau also used

his cabin to shelter runaway slaves. He wrote “Many a traveller came out of his way to see me and the inside of my house ... runaway slaves with plantation manners, who listened from time to time, like the fox in the fable, as if they heard the hounds a-baying on their track, and looked at me beseechingly, as much as to say, -- ‘O Christian, will you send me back?’” (Walden 1854, ch 6). According to Austin Meredith, “Walden woods had been where Concord’s black slaves and housemaids had lived. Thoreau writes extensively about these people” (Meredith 1993).

The exclusion of people of color from a discipline or sub-discipline can sometimes push scholars into reactionary positions. For example, consider the fourth edition (2001) of *Wilderness and the American Mind*. African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos remain entirely excluded, but the word “racism” appears for the first time. It is in his discussion of “criticism leveled at wilderness in the concluding years of the twentieth century,” and here is extent of his consideration of race, along with its context:

“Some of it [criticism of wilderness] is essentially an extension of old-style pioneer bias salted with large doses of digitally fueled technological optimism. ... Added to this is the reasoning that expanded control and exploitation of nature is necessary if the entire human population is to enjoy the ‘good life’ of well-to-do people in the first world. Objections that there are already too many humans making too many demands on natural systems are met with cries of racism and ‘environmental justice.’ Moreover, the optimists add, our ingenuity is capable not only of solving all environmental problems but, if we need it, of creating surrogate wilderness” (Nash 2001, 378).

In his first inclusion of race in this text, Nash complains about “cries of racism” and paints environmental justice advocates as misinformed and counterproductive technological optimists. Nash cites no people of color in this discussion. Advocating for surrogate wilderness, or surrogates for any part of nature, is hardly a position common to environmental justice, if it is present at all. His analysis at this point becomes effectively incoherent, although it continues to receive high praise, with Edward O. Wilson and Dave Foreman providing blurbs for the jacket of the 2001 edition.

6. Applications and Looking to the Future

There are several ways in which this research on African American relationships with wilderness might be usefully applied. The analysis could suggest ways to increase the racial diversity of visitors to wilderness areas. This history might be useful in designing environmental education curricula and outdoor recreation programs. The analysis could contribute to a broadening of the identity and representation of African Americans to include both urban and non-urban associations more authentically.

One theory regarding contemporary African American attitudes towards wilderness is that memories of these experiences linger on and discourage trips to wilderness and through the small rural towns that are often on the way. Evelyn White has described how, as a black woman, the “memory of ancestors hunted down and preyed upon in rural settings countered my fervent hopes of finding peace in the wilderness.” Her statement points to the continuing effects of this violence and but another way in which lynchings were successful in circumscribing the behavior black people (Evelyn White 1995, 378). The analysis presented here might help reestablish positive memories of and associations with the wilderness. Of course, many reasons account for why people of color have low rates of participation in wilderness activities relative to whites. Chukundi Salisbury, an African American camper in Washington, says “People like my mom, who grew up in the South building a fire every morning for breakfast, don't see the value in cooking outdoors” (Turnbull 2005). Among the reasons that have put forth to explain the low usage rate by African Americans are “the specter of danger, the fear that small towns on the way to parks are unfriendly to blacks, or that camping and hiking and skiing are activities only white people do” (Turnbull 2005). Other hypotheses include lower average incomes, poor availability of transportation, lack of cultural affinity or interest, and greater concentration in urban centers.

National and state parks belong to all residents and all have a right to visit and enjoy them. Limitations on use to certain groups therefore constitute an infringement upon rights. Frank Galloway, the diversity-program coordinator of the State Parks and Recreation Commission of Washington State, makes this point when he says “All citizens own these parks, not just whites. Whether you pay to use them, you pay your taxes and they're yours” (Turnbull 2005).

The material developed here could be useful in designing wildland recreation and leadership programs that are culturally inclusive and engaging. According to researchers, “recreation service providers are becoming increasingly aware that making programs more accessible is much more complex than previously believed. To simply provide opportunity and the program is not enough. Very specific strategies have to be developed to ensure that programs are available and relevant to the diverse populations we wish to serve” (Allison 1993, 99). Research and experience indicate that simply making opportunities for wildland recreation available to people of color does not necessarily translate into increased use. Work has to be done to make the experiences and their framing culturally relevant. At the same time, it’s important to recognize the diversity of beliefs held by people within any one racial or ethnic category and that what may be appealing to one person might be off-putting to somebody else. Therefore, a range of possibilities should be available. Leaders of wilderness recreation programs, camp counselors, park managers, and others might be able to apply some of the material to help serve diverse populations.

The material may be useful in designing secondary school and college curricula in environmental studies that are relevant to a diversity of populations. The results of the research can help fill certain gaps in existing scholarship on wilderness and in African American history.

There is plenty of room for more research on race and wilderness and people of color and wilderness. First, the research presented here could be extended by considering other time periods and drawing more upon different regional experience. The research could be carried through to the present by including interviews and surveys. Study of a specific location and wilderness area could also provide useful insights.

Some starting points for additional research are suggested here. Racial and ethnic diversity and outdoor recreation has received some attention. A 1996 report by James H. Gramann of Texas A&M University reviews much of the literature from the 1970s and 80s, and its bibliography can serve a useful guide to the social science literature on people of color and wilderness areas. Much of that research is sociological and includes survey work done on outdoor recreation experiences and perceptions. A 1993 book titled *Culture, Conflict, and Communication in the Wildland-Urban Interface* provides another point of entry into this literature (Ewert et al. 1993). Kevin Deluca and Anne Demo have looked at the role of race and racism in the construction of wilderness writing of Carleton Watkin and John Muir (Deluca and

Demo 2001). Robert Gottlieb and Andrew Hurley are two environmental historians who have written about race and people of color who have not been mentioned yet in this paper, and their work may provide an entry along a different trajectory (Gottlieb 1993; Hurley 1995).

Asian Americans and Latinos are absent from most environmental scholarship, as was seen in the analysis here of wilderness scholarship. Considering the experiences of people of these backgrounds will be an important step going forward for scholarship on the environment. Native Americans do appear in some aspects of environmental scholarship, and this scholarship is becoming more nuanced over time. Including more Native American scholars and a greater diversity of experiences will help deepen this work. Experience suggests that these changes are likely to occur largely as a result of more people from these diverse backgrounds being included in the scholarly community of environmental history and social sciences.

A good starting point for further research on Asian American relationships with wilderness is a master's thesis by Karin Hung (Hung 2003). Her excellent study investigates the experiences with wilderness of people with Chinese ancestry in Vancouver, Canada. Her research involved a qualitative study based on interviews with Chinese in Vancouver regarding views of wilderness, outdoor recreation experiences, and awareness of recreational opportunities and parks. While Hung's study focuses on contemporary experiences and is set in Canada, she provides some historical contextualization and her references can help guide future work on Asian American experiences.

The bibliography of a 2002 article by Brijesh Thapa, Alan R. Graefe, and James D. Absher provides a possible starting point for research on Latino experiences and wilderness, although most of the material is focuses specifically on outdoor recreation (Thapa et al. 2002). Barbara Deutsch Lynch has also provided an overview on Latino discourses on the environment (Lynch 1993).

Mark Spence and Karl Jacoby are among the many authors who have written about Native Americans and wilderness, and Jacoby's book also includes the experiences of poor whites (Spence 1999; Jacoby 2001). A book that might provide some unique insights is *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place*, which considers environmental justice, Native Americans, Ecocriticism, and wilderness together (Adamson 2001).

Investigation of the ways in which wilderness, and the environment more generally, is addressed in existing Area Studies, African American studies, and Ethnic Studies programs provides another potentially fruitful line of research. Such a study would entail using an approach similar that applied here for race in wilderness and adapting it to analyzing wilderness in Ethnic Studies scholarship.

There is some work being done on environmental issues in these fields. Environmental justice scholars, such as David Pellow, have taken positions in an Ethnic Studies programs. There are a few places where wilderness and wild nature do appear in existing literature. Ronald Takaki touches upon the concept of wilderness in his book, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*. Chapter 2 of the text is titled “The ‘Tempest’ in the Wilderness: The Racialization of Savagery” (Takaki 1993). Takaki cites environmental historians William Cronon, Carolyn Merchant, and Alfred Crosby in this section, but the chapter focuses on images of wildness and savagery much more than it considers the environment per se. Melvin Dixon’s work, which has been previously described, is situated in the field of African American Studies.

Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll are the editors of a forthcoming book on African American environmental history which should shed further light on some of the topics that I have explored in this paper. The chapters cover time periods from slavery to the contemporary environmental justice movement and issues from gardening to the turpentine industry (Glave and Stoll forthcoming). In the foreword, Carolyn Merchant describes the interactions between President Theodore Roosevelt and Holt Collier, an African American hunter (Merchant forthcoming). The two traveled together in the wilderness of Mississippi and Louisiana in 1902 and again 1907. In 2004, Mississippi established the Holt Collier National Wildlife Refuge (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2005).

The importance of including perspectives articulated by people other than white men becomes particularly important if it is white men who are the outliers, holding “atypical values and beliefs” with respect to the environment, as some research has indicated (Kalof et al).

Conclusion

There are multiple paths through which people of color become involved in wilderness today. Some African Americans, for example, participate in camping and backpacking through programs specifically targeting “inner-city” and “urban” youth or “underrepresented” minority students. Still more African Americans participate in these activities as part of family and community traditions. People of color have experienced the wilderness in predominantly white groups often through the process of families moving into predominantly white communities. It might be interesting to consider if and how these children might be merging multiple perspectives on wilderness.

These varied experiences can be situated within a complex history of relationships with rural and wild landscapes. The perceptions and experiences of African Americans have often been overlooked, but they have not been erased. As research continues, an even more diverse set of understandings can be developed regarding the varied relationships that people have had with the wilderness, including important cultural roots. In the words of a slave song,

“I found free grace in de wilderness,
in de wilderness, in de wilderness,
I found free grace in de wilderness
For I’m a-going home”

Understanding where our home is and where home can be is a continuing process which carries through landscapes of hope, fear, and freedom.

Bibliography

I present a brief introduction to the bibliography here. I have divided the bibliography into primary and secondary sources, and within the primary sources, there are further subdivisions. Slave narratives provide useful information on black experiences with nature in the U.S. South during slavery. I have reviewed several published, book length slave narratives, including those by Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and H.C. Bruce. In addition to these narratives, thousands of interviews were conducted with ex-slaves during the 1930s by the Federal Writers' Project. These have been published in a set of 19 volumes (Rawick). Other autobiographies, memoirs, and oral histories provide a wealth of material on later years. I have reviewed oral histories from the following sources: *The Black Women Oral History Project*, a ten volume series containing approximately fifty oral histories; the collection of the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley, including interviews done through Berkeley's Regional Oral History Office and the Los Angeles Oral History Program; and (the published oral histories of Ned Cobb and Ed Brown.

I reviewed selected issues of black newspapers from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Two of the longest running newspapers in the South during this period were *The Huntsville Gazette* (Huntsville, Alabama), 1881 – 1894 and *The Savannah Tribune*, 1876 – 1960. *The New Orleans Tribune*, 1864 – 1869, is perhaps the most famous today both because it was founded during the Civil War, early for a black southern newspaper, and because of its strong stance in defense of black landownership and civil rights during Reconstruction. (Two of these three papers have since been reestablished: *The New Orleans Tribune*, 1985 – present, and *The Savannah Tribune*, 1973 – present.) Dozens of other black newspapers were also published during this time. The ones in the South were often short-lived, founded during Reconstruction and abruptly ceased as conditions took a turn for the worse for African Americans. Several black newspapers were founded in Kansas as a result of the Exodus of 1879, again often with short runs. I also looked at issues from some of the dozens of other newspapers from the time period have been collected in the microfilm series "U.S. Negro Miscellaneous Newspapers," which consists of at least eleven reels. For many of the papers, however, the microfilm includes only one issue, with information about the library where the originals can be found. *The Negro Farmer*, a newspaper published by the Tuskegee Institute 1914 – 1917, was also useful.

The discussion in *The Savannah Tribune* regarding emigration to Africa drew upon the following articles from the paper: “African Emigrants”, March 23, 1895, Vol. X, No. 24; C. H. Sparks, “Is Emigration the Hope of the Negro”, April 6, 1895, Vol. X, No. 26; Dr. C. McKane, “From Afric’s Clime! Liberia’s True Condition”, September 14, 1895, Vol. X, No. 49.

Novels and songs provided some valuable material. Finally, various reports, pamphlets, essays, speeches, convention records, reports, books, and miscellaneous published historical documents were used.

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The Huntsville Gazette (Huntsville, Alabama), 1881 – 1894

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