Racial and Environmental Justice in the Wild.

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[THIS WAS THE SUBMITTED PAPER]

My paper today is an investigation of the racial, environmental, and political implications of "the wild" in what I am calling the tradition of *radical Romanticism*. Typically, the wild is understood as that which is untouched by humans—as the pristine and the pure and the ahistorical, as the strength of the Nation or the redemption of the solitaire. This idea of the wild has been broadly and justifiably critiqued.

Today, I present an *alternative account* of the wild as found in radical Romanticism, paying attention to its normative contributions to environmental and political justice; and then I explore this alternative account in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois (whom I read as an American radical Romantic). In the first part of the paper, I put forward an account of the wild *as not only a place but a condition and process: the wild as that which cannot be subject to radical control, as that which surprises and disorients, and as that which contests long-standing (often oppressive) practices and conventions.* In the second part of the paper, I present Du Bois' notion of the wild *as that which unsettles and condemns racist practices, including practices that exploit black farmers and the very land on which they work*. In *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, for example, we will see that the wild swamp is not simply a place, but a *culture* and a *hopeful process of transformation* that challenges racist and exploitive capitalist institutions and practices. The wild, for Du Bois, becomes a marker for those who struggle against injustice; but it also takes the form of an

invitation to all Americans to be willing to be unsettled for the sake of social and environmental justice.

Romanticism is commonly understood as *artistic productions of the distant, removed, sublime landscape*. This account of romanticism, in my view, is largely an academic construction. While it certainly does capture *some* aspects of Romantic work, it does not capture its dominant features—at least not of such British Romantic authors as Dorothy and William Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Mary Shelley [When I teach a first year (freshman) seminar on British Romanticism and ask my students—who know next to nothing about Romanticism—to bring to class songs that accord with the poetry, they mainly bring in social protest songs.] Nevertheless, Romanticism continues to be frequently depicted *as fanciful art focused on the sublime and an escapist replacement for religion*. Yet there is, in fact, a robust tradition of R*omantic realism,* especially *a Romantic realism of the everyday*—everyday suffering and injustice, everyday beauty and dignity, everyday lands and ecosystems and the human activities within them. This is a tradition in which the wild or wilderness is in their own way not sublimely looming *out there*, outside human dwelling and activity, but rather is found closer to home—in our lands, our histories, our communities, our cities, *our bodies*.[1]I call this tradition *radial Romanticism*, and I claim that it carries *alternative notions of the wild and wilderness* that have informed such *American Romantic* authors as Thoreau, Du Bois, and Terry Tempest Williams.

In these alternative accounts, wilderness is understood not only as a *place* but also as a *condition* and *process*. Wilderness exemplifies the condition and process of that

which cannot be subject to radical control, as that which surprises, awakens, and disorients, and as that which gives birth to creativity—and to social justice. "Wilderness," in radical Romanticism, confronts all things tame, domesticated, or highly controlled and regulated. It threatens to lift "the veil of familiarity" (and, in the case of Du Bois, to lift the Veil of racial oppression).[2] Wilderness as a condition is, in part, a *human* condition. It is that which, potentially, fires the imagination and challenges conformist, harmful practices. In particular, wilderness, in this view, confronts those practices that exemplify our dangerous attempt to manage and exploit every inch of the earth and every minute of the worker's and consumer's day—to dominate the natural and social worlds and the transactions between them.

None of this is to say that domestication and cultivation—social conventions, laws, routines, things predictable, and so on—are *per se* deadening, dangerous, or bereft of wilderness. Life-affirming and social justice conventions acknowledge wilderness and the lack of control and vulnerability that wilderness conveys. Harmful conventions, in contrast, disavow wilderness. Our choice is to embrace wilderness as the *vulnerable, interdependent selves* that we in fact are, or else to attempt to conquer wilderness as delusional, *invincible sovereign selves*. To embrace the wild is to foreswear Promethean invincibility, to challenge boldly oppressive conventions and institutions, and to work together, as vulnerable selves, on the unending task of justice for exploited individuals and communities. Wilderness is something we *find*, something we *make*, and something we ought to *cultivate* in our lives and culture. In radical Romanticism, it is not oxymoronic to wish that wilderness would become part of our

second nature—specifically, *our progressive democratic social nature*. This alternative tradition of Romanticism and its accounts of wilderness are expressed in exemplary fashion in the work of Wordsworth, Thoreau, and W.E.B. Du Bois. Today I focus on Du Bois. Adding Du Bois to the Romantic canon of authors not only expands the canon, but transforms it.

Du Bois: "Music of wildness"

Michael Starkey notes, "Historical relationships between African Americans and wilderness have been largely overlooked by scholars... Whites are almost exclusively the subject of the literature."[3] This is in part because many assume that there simply are no African-American "nature writing" or ecological traditions. Du Bois, however, offered nuanced accounts of the complex relation between African-American socioeconomic conditions and the land on which African Americans worked and dwelled. Environmental justice, then, figured importantly in Du Bois' work. Like Wordsworth and Thoreau, Du Bois usually understood the wild and wilderness not as the sublime or pristine outside humanity, but rather as a condition and process—a vitality and dynamism—that includes humanity. For Du Bois, the wild is neither limited to place nor is it removed from place, history, or community.[4] Rather, memory and experience of wildness, in relation to place, become a source of dignity, cultural vigor, and social protest.

In *The Souls Of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois claimed that "the *wild* sweet melodies of the Negro slave"—"the soul of the Sorrow Songs"—are distinctive

African-American contributions to the "American Republic."[5] What makes the Sorrow Songs *wild*? They are nurtured by a particular place *and* a particular cultural experience. In Du Bois' words, "Sprung from the African forests, where its counterpart can still be heard, it ["The music of Negro religion"] was adapted, changed, and intensified by the tragic soul-life of the slave, until, under the stress of law and whip, it became the one true expression of a people's sorrow, despair, and hope." [6] The Sorrow Songs were nurtured by the African forests and were then intensified by the slave's experience of an oppression was delivered by cruel public laws and brutal individual hands. The wild, then, is that which will not be subdued by unjust laws, chains, and whips. Challenging the unjust public and private conventions of the land, conventions that sought to control and manage every aspect of the black chattel, the wild nurtured the beauty, longing, and hope of the Sorrow Songs. The wild permeated a slave-culture that, against all odds, resisted practices of oppression and thereby produced the Sorrow Songs—songs of hope and resistance.

Africa, in relation to the Sorrow Songs, is not the "Dark Continent" bereft of civilization. Africa is indeed identified as a source of the wild, yet not a bestial wild but rather a life-enhancing wild that sustains culture, heritage, and hope. And the wild of Africa is not only a place but also a condition or quality of being and a process of becoming. This wild resists those oppressive practices that would attempt to subdue it and shackle its sources of hope. Like Thoreau, Du Bois linked hope to the wild, and—as we will now see—the wild to the swamp.[7]

Thoreau had his wild swamp in the essay "Walking" (1862), and Du Bois had his in his first novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911).[8] Thoreau's swamp was a non-conventional entity that resisted the market economy by its very non-productive power. Du Bois' wild swamp, in contrast, became productive, not to contribute to white, racist capitalistic markets, but to provide a cash crop, cotton (as well as diversified food crops), thereby enabling the local African-American community to become liberated from local white oppression. The swamp, having been partially drained, was to supply wild (non-conventional) cash, wild (anti-market) food crops, and a wild (non-conformist) culture.

In *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, Zora—a child of the wild—leaves her swamp in Alabama to gain an education in the north (New York City). When she returns home, she and her swampland are mutually transformed. Both become Thoreau's (normative) bean field: half cultivated, half wild. Her education in the north does not remove the wild "vigor and life" of the swamp culture in which she was raised; rather the wild becomes infused with new ideas and perspectives.[9] Zora returns home from the north with a wild idea: drain a portion of the swamp and on it create "a free community," namely, a collective cotton farm that would protect local African Americans from cruel, white economic power.[10] (Note that the direction of her "Romantic," transformative journey—from the country to the city and back again—is the opposite of the journey in "Of the Black Belt," in which Du Bois and his readers return from the southern country to the northern city with new insights). For years white landowners had been exploiting both the tenant black farmers and the

land. As Brett Clark and John Bellamy Foster note, "[White] landowners built their wealth on the exploitation of the laborers and the exhaustion of the soil. At harvest time, they stole the silver fleece [the cotton] from the tenant farmers, buying the cotton at bargain prices, subtracting rent, food, and supplies, leaving the farmers with little money for a year's work."[11]

The white farming practices of cotton monoculture abused and degraded laborers and soil alike. Zora, "child of the swamp" and its "music of wildness," understood that the liberation of her people and the land depended on the creation of a just community.[12] This revolutionary idea and its implementation are portrayed as the work of *a genius of the wild*: someone who is vital, non-conformist, and *free*—that is, someone who is practiced in the ways and disciplines of freedom. Not only are the crops of the collective farm nourished by the swampland; the people, too—their spirit—is nourished by it. The swamp, then, is not only a place. It is a culture, a condition, and a process of transformation: a wild way of being that challenges a variety of institutions and conventions, including racist and exploitive capitalist ones.

This fertile ground of Zora's swamp stands in sharp contrast to the "gloomy soil" of the desolate town of African Americans that Du Bois described in *The Souls of Black Folk*.[13] Due to the white practice of over-farming and the falling price of cotton, "the whole land seems forlorn and forsaken." In the wake of white flight, the remaining African-American population must struggle with "the half-desolate spirit of neglect born of the very soil." Owing to the sins of the previous population, people and place now suffer together. How can hope and vitality return to such a

community and its land? How can hope and vitality return to such a community and its land? An answer comes eight years later with the publication of *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, where Du Bois offered the wild as prospect and strength embodied by a people and place. Spiritual and economic transformation flowed from the swamp, not by exploiting it but by identifying with its sources of life.

There are aspects of "the wild" in *The Souls Of Black Folk* and *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* that are potentially problematic. Did Du Bois imply that there is an *essence* to sorrow songs that derives from the African forests? Did he suggest that there is an *essence* to African-American culture and that it springs from such "wild" sites as the Alabama swamp?[14] In spite of the potential here for problematic essentialism (which Du Bois himself later identified and criticized), we can eschew essentialism and critically appropriate from Du Bois an alterative account of wilderness that beneficially locates human cultures within wilderness and that portrays wilderness as a condition and process of transformation.

But this brings us to a still more serious problem for the project of critically appropriating the wild. Euro-American colonizers have employed "the wild" derogatorily to characterize indigenous populations and, more to the point for this paper, white Americans have used the term to dehumanize and demonize slaves and African Americans more generally. African Americans and Native Americans were frequently stigmatized as "wild savages," that is, as dangerous creatures that stood outside of civilization and culture due to their lack of moral formation or even lack of innate capacity for moral formation. In this derogatory usage, the wild is not that

which is *sublimely* distant from humans (I'm thinking here of William Cronon's and Michael Pollan's *characterization* of Romantic usage). Nor is the wild, in this derogatory usage, the radical Romantic alternative account of the wild, that is, the wild as a condition and process that is beneficial to humans.[15] Rather, the wild in this derogatory sense conjures a bestial, willful force that needs to be tamed and controlled by domination, lest it become a menace to white civilization.[16]

What, then, are we do in light of this racism associated with "the wild"? Should we abandon the wild? I would not recommend that course. Rather, the task, as I see it, is twofold: 1) critically appropriate and construct helpful notions of the wild and wilderness (accounts that assists us in our pursuit of environmental and social justice); and 2) critique and censure racist and otherwise problematic notions of the wild, specifically a) those that separate humans and their histories from the wild; and b) those that denigrate the racialized other—for example, the African American or the Native American—by associating this "other" with a nonhuman or inhuman wild. It would be a mistake not to embark on this reconstruction of a beneficial notion of the wild. Yes, the concept does carry much deleterious baggage. But the promise of the wild remains great, and it must be kept for *all* Americans. It must contribute to the eradication, not the reinscription, of "the color line."

Again and again, Du Bois argued that an American democracy would need to be based not only on an institutional but a spiritual foundation—that is, on a substantive culture and set of practices that support *a progressive democratic second nature*. And an aspect of that democratic second nature is its wildness: its capacity to

challenge and unsettle and to incite hope and transformation. In Du Bois' account, we hear the genuine voice of democratic culture in that "*wild* voice" of the courageous abolitionist, David Walker, as he boldly condemned the atrocities of slavery to an audience of southern legislators.[17] And we hear it as well in Zora's voice as she stood in front of her congregation, "with a *wild* yearning to help," and proposed the wild idea of a collective farm, imploring, "Oh my people,…rescue your own flesh and blood—free yourselves—free yourselves!"[18]

I have focused on the concepts of the wild and wilderness in Du Bois' work. I should note, however, that a broader argument could be made about Du Bois as an American Romantic nature writer who employs a radical, political aesthetics. This argument would focus on how Du Bois brought together aesthetic, political, and environmental themes and insights in order to wake up his readers to the suffering of black Americans laboring under Jim Crow laws and other forms of racism and economic exploitation. It would show how Du Bois employed a variety of tropes associated with nature writing, yet with them he depicted not only the complex beauty of the land but how that land had become a curse to African Americans toiling under distant landlords, unjust rents, and over-farmed fields. This larger argument would illustrate Du Bois' usage of radical aesthetic strategies to enable his readers to see—to *experience*—the humanity of those in front of them: *this* tenant farmer in semi-slavery, *that* black child (Du Bois's!) who died because no doctor would treat him, *those* four disheartened black men in *that* Jim Crow train car.

As a sociologist, Du Bois could and did marshal powerful sociological arguments. Moreover, he understood his sociopolitical work to be, in its own way, aesthetic works designed to move and persuade people.[19] But he also recognized that the language of the social sciences could not always sufficiently convey such complex social and psychological circumstances as the oppressive life behind the veil—behind the color line. Therefore, in *Souls* and elsewhere, he reached for and employed a language of radical aesthetics and poetics as a powerful way to *touch*—to move, inform, and transform—individuals for the sake of social and environmental justice. His skillful artistic depictions were to have the effect of waking us up, helping us to *see* more fully, to *feel* more keenly the reality of the social and natural world around us. His radical aesthetics was not engrossed with that traditional aesthetic triad, the sublime, the beautiful, and the picturesque (though to some extent Du Bois employed these motifs, often to express a sense of loss and nostalgia). [20] This triad typically removes art from the everyday and renders the spectator distant and detached—a far cry from the *engaged* witness that Du Bois sought to create. Du Bois' radical aesthetics, in contrast to "traditional aesthetics," placed art at the center of an everyday realism—everyday suffering and injustice, everyday beauty and dignity (and in this way Du Bois anticipated John Dewey's central argument in *Art as Experience*).

I have focused on the wild, but with more time, I would argue that Du Bois is one of American's greatest radical Romantics. Thank you.

Notes

[1] In this paper, I employ the wild, wildness, and wilderness as synonymous to convey not only a place but also a condition and process that brings surprise and that contest (often oppressive) practices and conventions.

[2] Percy Shelley, "In Defence of Poetry," *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. D. H. Reiman and S. B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 505.

[3] Michael Starkey, "Wilderness, Race, and African Americans: An Environmental History from Slavery to Jim Crow," Masters Thesis, Energy and Resources Group, University of California, Berkeley, 2005, p. i.

[4] For an excellent account of Du Bois on "the wild" in relation to place, history, and community, see Kimberly Smith, "What is Africa to Me? Wilderness in Black Thought, 1860-1930," *Environmental Ethics* 27:3 (2005): 279-297.

[5] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls Of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 13-14. Emphasis added.

[6] Du Bois, *The Souls Of Black Folk*, p. 129.

[7] It is likely that Du Bois had read Thoreau's celebration of the swamp, that "the jewel" of the land (see Michael Beilfuss, "Ironic Pastorals and Beautiful Swamps: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Troubled Landscapes of the American South," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 22.3 [2015]: 496).

[8] In his essay, "Walking" (1862), Thoreau famously called a swamp the most valuable part of a piece of property (Thoreau, "Walking," in *Thoreau: Walden, The Maine Woods, Collected Essays and Poems*, eds. Robert Sayre and Elizabeth Witherell [New York: The Library of America, 2007], p. 767).

[9] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Quest Of The Silver Fleece* (New York: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016) p. 2.

[10] Du Bois, *The Quest Of The Silver Fleece*, p. 362.

[11] Brett Clark and John Bellamy Foster, "Land, the Color Line, and the Quest of the Golden Fleece" *Organization & Environment* 16:4 (2003): 446.

[12] Du Bois, *The Quest Of The Silver Fleece*, pp. 23 and 2.

[13] See Du Bois, *The Souls Of Black Folk*, p. 80-81.

[14] Kimberly Smith skillfully addresses these issues of essentialism in "What is Africa to Me? Wilderness in Black Thought, 1860-1930," *Environmental Ethics* 27:3 (2005): 279-297.

[15] See William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Environmental History* 1:1 (1996): 7-28; and Michael Pollan, *Second Nature* (New York: Grove Press, 1991) p. 167.

[16] I am grateful to Anna (Fannie) Bialek for helping me think through this issue of derogatory usage of wild. In her correspondence to me on an earlier draft she wrote, "black people are often 'wild' in racist literatures because they can't learn virtue; they're willful but untutored and unable to be tutored such that they can only be *tamed,* through domination."

[17] Du Bois, *The Talented Tenth* (New York: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2003), p. 7.

[18] Du Bois, *Quest Of The Silver Fleece*, p. 245.

[19] See Melvin Rogers, "The People, Rhetoric, and Affect: On the Political Force of Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*," *American Political Science Review* 106:1 (2012) 195.

[20] See Michael Beilfuss, "Ironic Pastorals and Beautiful Swamps: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Troubled Landscapes of the American South," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 22.3 (2015): 489.