

Blend Of Colo(R) Ace and Nature Writing: Du Bois's *Darkwater: Voices*

From Within the Veil

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The present chapter focuses how W. E.B. Du Bois analyzed natural beauty and gave rise not only to the combination of anti-racist protest but also described potential contribution to a better understanding of the intersection of race and colonialism in the eco-critical tradition. Afro-American voices on the issues of forestry, pastoral and environmental justice have been largely underestimated. The environmental discourse mediated by the privileged, both intellectually and materially, have woven the dominant narrative while the Afro-American perspective and the legacy of their pastoral experience has been down played. Hence just as the pastoral/ wilderness spaces have been racialized and white-dominated, so has been the literature on these – a veritable legitimization of the invisibility of the Afro-American legacy of experience and wisdom. In black native writings, eco-criticism/environmental justice and imaginary have been important aspects of the black writings in America. Therefore, Kathleen Wallace and Karla Armbruster while rightly questioning, “why so few Afro-American voices are recognized as part of native writing and eco-criticism” (2) have taken up narratives of colors to develop a reactionary discourse what Paul Tidwell called “racist defense of an essentialized idea of nature”(The *Blackness of the Whale*). Rereading Afro-American narratives eco-critically reformulates and revises the dominant precepts. Richard Wright, Du Bois and Washington among other Afro-

American writers have been eco-critically conscious. Amidst epistemological congestion, it is rather overlooked that environment justice movement in the U.S. began in 1980s when scattered groups of mostly Afro-Americans in Warren County, North Carolina struggled.

W. E. B. Du Bois raises not only existential and racial but also environmental themes in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, which is his rather lesser popular/known self-narrative. Du Bois is widely famous for his works *The Souls of Black Folk* and *The Crisis*. The text incorporates both narrative as well as poetic pattern that were all written by Du Bois himself. Du Bois maintained that the text was written to develop an understanding of the complications of the racial discrimination amidst pastoral and wilderness having political implications and capitalism. *Darkwater* is a fiery, re-approaching work, in which Du Bois makes such claims as that “white Christianity is a miserable failure” (*Darkwater* 36) because of racism, and that white civilization is to a large extent “mutilation and rape masquerading as culture” (37). Du Bois’ new approach consists of the attempt to wake up the reader from their racist slumber and to force them to see the racist ideology as rampantly pervasive round the globe. This work, in which Du Bois counter pointedly asserts that, “a belief in humanity is a belief in colored men” (49), has become particularly important for later, critical race/environmental theory. His broad vision towards pervasive racialized environment is his efforts that bend toward a common goal of the equality of colored people and acceptance of their humanity in order to establish a humane order in the world. His philosophy is significant today because it addresses what many would argue is the real world problem. So long as racist white privileges exists, and suppress the dreams and the freedoms of human beings, Du Bois is relevant as a thinker. For him, employing thought for exposing this privilege, in order to eliminate it is a service to a greater humanity.

For Du Bois, contradictory images of whites and blacks were commonplace in the era of segregation. He contrasted nature's opposing potential as a rejuvenating and re-envisioning power with dark places representing oppression. On the one hand, wilderness is scary and uncultivated on the other it is splendid and laudable. Du Bois tapped this ambivalence. He shared both a respect and a fear of nature, while encountering nature in an exclusive way. To escape nature indicated progress, one step beyond the land of labor, plantation and slavery. At the same time, nature held within it a healing power for the oppressed. Du Bois clearly articulated the romantic view of nature embodied in the wilderness movement of the later twentieth century but understood the ambivalent attitudes of Afro-Americans towards nature. He realized that the pastoral and wilderness both are wrapped within the context of the Afro-American legacy. He had a vision of how nature could rise above social context and race and provide transcendental joy. His narrative offers a profound and broad glimpse into the complex relationship between the South American wild places and Afro-American people: "Why do not those who are scarred in the world's battle and hurt by its hardness travel to these places of beauty and drown themselves in the utter joy of life?" (*Darkwater* 228). The question that W. E. B. Du Bois faced in "Of Beauty and Death" is the one with which environmentalists have struggled through the ages. Although many people are attracted to 'places of beauty' for solace from the malevolent world, a small proportion of the solace seekers have been Afro-American. Du Bois describes what has been called "the wilderness ethic or wilderness ideal" (qtd. in Nash, 1982), which is basically the idea that wilderness has the power to heal human suffering. The idea of wilderness mostly has been discussed by Americans and Europeans. Du Bois held his encounters with wild areas in high regard. In his affluent description of the area around Bar Harbor, Maine, he says, "God

molded his world largely and mightily off this marvelous coast and meant that in the tired days of life men should come and worship here and renew their spirit” (*Darkwater* 227).

Following his description of the remote coastal town of Bar Harbor, Du Bois relayed a conversation he had with a group of black people in a ‘Southern home’. The conversation centers on travel perhaps to a soul-restoring place like Bar Harbor. To these black people from the south, however, travel did not seem so alluring. “Did you ever see a “Jim-Crow” waiting-room?” (*Darkwater* 228). The reality of segregated train travel was less than inspiring as there was no heat or air in ‘colored’ section of the train station. The train car itself is typically a ‘smoker’ car where riders would have to pass through white smokers and be subjected to sneers and stares. Service for black riders, if available at all was poor. Most ‘colored’ cars were enormously dirty. The physical conditions, no matter how bad, never compared to the humiliation and degradation of being considered less than human. ““No”, said the little lady in the corner... We don’t travel much” (230). The comment bespeaks of the racialized environment answering the question why there are very few travel writing in Afro-American literature in spite of the central theme of migration.

Du Bois continues his subtle patterns of ironic contrast while alluding to Negro participation the U.S. Army during World War I. Black Americans felt the call to fight in the Great War, but when they answered it, they were segregated into separate units and sometimes dwarfed for labor. Racism became the main objective of Du Bois’s denunciation in *Darkwater* and he powerfully objected to lynching, Jim Crow Laws, and other discriminations through education on national horizon. His cause included people of color everywhere, particularly Africans and Asians in colonies. He was a supporter of Pan-Africanism and helped others too to fight for liberty of African colonies from European powers.

Darkwater starts with “Credo”. It was written in a way comparable to a Christian dogma having a statement of belief in revelation for change. He changes ‘race’ to ‘nation’ in *Darkwater*, reflecting again the book’s globalist turn. It begins with the equality of humanity and its visionary statement:

I believe in God, who made of one blood all nations that on earth do dwell. I believe that all men, black and brown and white, are brothers, varying through time and opportunity, in form and gift and feature, but differing in no essential particular, and alike in soul and the possibility of infinite development. (3)

Thus attributing a new spirituality to the environmentalist discourse, he speaks of freedom and dreams in a revelation mode as an earthly version of heaven:

I believe in Liberty for all men; the space to stretch their arms and their souls; the right to breathe and the right to vote, the freedom to choose their friends, enjoy the sunshine and ride on the railroads, uncursed by color; thinking, dreaming, working as they will in a kingdom of beauty and love. (4)

Du Bois supports a pastoral pedagogy, saying that, ‘little souls’ be lead out into the “green pastures and beside the still waters, not for pelf or peace, but for life lit by some large vision of beauty and goodness and truth” (*Darkwater* 4). This pastoral scene appears to bring together the racial burden that black bear and the idyll in the country that whites take pleasure in. For Du Bois nature is not an upper-class white playground but a breathing space where existential truths are revealed. His writing is an account of complex pastoral; he structures nature and wilderness tropes within a larger social critique of racism and the experience of double environments. “Credo” expands this complex pastoral, linking it to travel and free movement to the understanding of the national space in general.

In the South, Afro-Americans do not have as much affection to outdoor places in comparison as whites have. One of the reasons behind is that Afro-Americans ‘collective memory’ of wild places is that of slavery, Jim Crow, and lynching. One must comprehend the deep historical roots of why blacks have avoided outdoor environments in order to bring about more variety in those who take part in outdoor recreation. Outdoor recreation involvement by any person, regardless of race, requires that many things happen in that person’s life before his/her visits to wilderness area. Through this autobiographical narrative, Afro-Americans and their relationship to nature provide us with insight into how nature may have been understood by Afro-Americans.

Du Bois conveys his love for the Grand Canyon by illustrating it as the “one thing that lived and will live eternal in my soul the Grand Canyon” (*Darkwater* 237). Grand Canyon was a national park with tale about life under Jim Crow, bringing double consciousness to bear on the history of conservation. According to Du Bois, the Grand Canyon represents unending impression of God. The scope of the Canyon provided him some beliefs on the violence committed against him and his people. He believes if the natural world is so splendid, magnificent, and beautiful, humanity and kindness could make it greater as well. After unfolding the perpetual bareness of the Canyon, Du Bois describes a place where hope has been found, where a “community of kindred souls” (240) lived and where the racial detestation of America is absent. He realizes that this place was Paris, 1919, a place where black and white people could “laugh and joke and think as friends” (240).

Afro-Americans were subjugated by forces both contemporary and historical. Wild and beautiful natural areas were still there, waiting to be experienced, to heal, and welcome the exploited. Many blacks neither realized the power of such places due to the taint of vicious and harsh

oppression and suppression nor did they have the resources to undertake a journey to them. Du Bois clearly had a connection to the leading natural places of this country. The distinct descriptions offered in “Of Beauty and Death” reveal his belief in the healing and re-establishment power of nature, even in the face of cruel oppression. Realizing this connection for today’s generation of Afro-Americans could be greatly powerful for curing the hurts that still acutely affect so many people.

Darkwater is a medley of thoughts and ideas, which is basically arbitrated by the harsh realities of racism. Du Bois sees it from communist perspective and discusses it not only on color line but also on class line. In *Darkwater*, Du Bois bows to communism to attain equality. He envisions communism as a society that supports the well-beings of all in place of a few. Du Bois considered that the economic condition of Africans and Afro-Americans was one of the prime modes of their oppression, and that impartial allocation of wealth, as advanced by Marx, was the cure for the situation:

The indictment of Africa against Europe is grave. For four hundred years white Europe was the chief support of that trade in human beings which first and last robbed black Africa of a hundred million human beings, transformed the face of her social life, overthrew organized government, distorted ancient industry, and snuffed out the lights of cultural development. Today instead of removing laborers from Africa to distant slavery, industry built on a new slavery approaches Africa to deprive the natives of their land, to force them to toil, and to reap all the profit for the white world. (*Darkwater* 58)

Through *Darkwater*, Du Bois analyzes how natural beauty gave rise to the combination of anti-racist protest. He highlights its potential contribution to a better understanding of the

intersection of race and colonialism in the eco-critical tradition. It suggests that Du Bois's explorations of the double environments of (black) Jim Crow and (white) national parks or from shadows of hill to Veil, from pastoral to urban in the text foreground practices of segregation across both natural and urban spaces. Du Bois also uses veil as imagery. For Du Bois, the veil primarily refers to three things. First, the veil suggests the darker skin of blacks, which is a physical demarcation of difference. Secondly, the veil suggests white people's lack of clarity to see blacks as 'true' Americans. And lastly, the veil refers to blacks' lack of clarity to see themselves outside of what white America describes and prescribes for them. He shows how a veil has come to be put over Afro-Americans, so that others do not see them as they are; Afro-Americans are obscured in America; they cannot be seen clearly. They are seen through the lens of race prejudice. Du Bois repeatedly puns on 'veil', for nature is continually veiling and unveiling itself: "Before the unveiled face of nature as it lies naked on the Maine coast, rises a certain human awe" (*Darkwater* 226). This unveiled space offers Du Bois a respite from the social world, somewhere where he can rejuvenate his spirits Afro-Americans have this alien perception but at the same time they feel themselves alienated from their own legitimate feelings and traditions.

Du Bois's eco-critical concerns extend to women too. *Darkwater* through his chapter called "The Damnation of Women," seeks to elevate women by acknowledging their labor in homes, workplace and the black church. The chapter has been described as one of the first proto-feminist analyses by a male intellectual. Du Bois glorifies the black mother for her role as a child bearer and, therefore, considers her a healer and nurturer too. He writes, "No mother can love more tenderly and none is more tenderly loved than the Negro mother" (166). He calls for black women to seek a life of economic independence, and argues that black women have a right to

control their own bodies and reproductive choices: “The future woman must have a life work and economic independence. She must have knowledge. She must have the right of motherhood at her own discretion” (164-65).

This text, partly autobiography and partly philosophical expressions sees the racialized environment as not only limited to the Southern America but it also perceives the colonial inclinations affecting the whole world. His vision pierces the world scenario as he comes to talk about how gradually but definitely white culture considers that ‘darkies’ were born ‘beasts of burden’. The supporting point-of-views grow and twist themselves in the mouths of merchant, scientist, soldier, traveler, writer, and missionary:

Darker peoples are dark in mind as well as in body; of dark, uncertain, and imperfect descent; of frailer, cheaper stuff; they are cowards in the face of mausers and maxims; they have no feelings, aspirations, and loves; they are fools, illogical idiots, “half-devil and half-child”. (*Darkwater* 42)

In the essay of *Darkwater*, named “The Souls of White Folk,” Du Bois exposes some of the wisdom of his race. Du Bois observed that white men and their understanding of the nature of whites. The white man considered himself always right and a black man had no rights: “everything great, good, efficient, fair, and honorable is “white”; everything mean, bad, blundering, cheating, and dishonourable is “yellow”; a bad taste is “brown”; and the devil is “black”” (*Darkwater* 44). As Du Bois sees it, whites see themselves as superior, civilized, perfect and call upon to help other people with their wisdom. But, in fact, Afro-Americans can recognize quite plainly that whites are imperialistic, ugly, greedy, and more corrupt in their practices. Whites are incarcerated in their own fake self-conception. What blacks see, is that

white society has no higher wisdom; they see them indulging in only “mutilation and rape masquerading as culture” (37). Hence, Du Bois exposes the white colonial conspiracy.

Du Bois makes clear by noting that the concept of ‘whiteness’ is a concept that developed in the late nineteenth century and in the twentieth century. Before that, societies scarcely made much of differences in skin color. What is significant behind this fact is that western people wanted the material resources of the third world. Therefore they made-up the myth of their supremacy based on skin color, and the hypothetical inferiority of dark people, in order to assist them in their aspiration to steal.

The discussion in the chapter concludes that Du Bois not only raises the problem of the color line but also of class line, which is to be overcome and the races are to create together a greater and truer democracy. This inclusive political thinking is manifested in pastoral here. With careful attention to place names, Du Bois describes Bar Harbor, Mount Desert, and Frenchman’s Bay off the coast of Maine, where he admires the variety of intermingling colors: “white, gray, and “inken clouds”, a “shadowy velvet” that “veiled the mountain,” the sea’s “gray and yellowing greens and doubtful blues, blacks not quite black, tinted silvers and golds and dreaming whites”” (*Darkwater* 227). The motifs of integrated colors in nature become even more evident in the later Grand Canyon section. Personifying the Canyon as a “mighty drama” (238) brings it closer to the social world. The natural colors, ‘mauve’, ‘purple’, ‘blue shadow’, ‘greens’ associate the landscape to the problem of the color line. Ultimately, the canyon becomes a symbol of integration. Hence, having seen the world as a colonial bipolar of white and black, Du Bois simultaneously perceives a variety of colors in the nature/pastoral and envisions obliterating the difference to accept their plurality without hierarchy. Published in 1920, the midst of the riots and at the close of the First World War, *Darkwater* was written within the context of the violent

episodes in the long history of U. S, global race relations and world war. Therefore, it helps Du Bois to have an integrationist vision of the parks (Canyon) as a natural-cultural space that all together goes beyond race and political divisions.

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