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Wilderness Is Not a Safe Space: How Nature Has Been Used as a Form of Oppression Towards Black People Throughout American History

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Wilderness Is Not a Safe Space: How Nature Has Been Used as a Form of Oppression Towards Black People Throughout American History

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Dedication:

This paper is dedicated to the Black and Brown lives lost fighting for racial justice, and the Black and Brown people still fighting for reparations today.

Introduction

What is a safe space? At surface level, it is a space where someone can safely exist. Beyond the surface, the meaning of a safe space is much debated. To what extent does one's safety come at the expense of another's safety? Does creating a safe space suppress the rights of others? Safe spaces cannot be efficiently explored on surface level because safety is such a complex issue: physically and psychologically. Typically, "safe spaces" refer to academic settings; but what happens when you take the concept of safe spaces and apply them, not just outside of the classroom, but to the actual outdoors? Is the natural world (specifically secluded wilderness) a safe space, and to what extent? After researching safe spaces and how they pertain to-academia, I conclude that safe spaces are spaces where social and cultural differences can co-exist civilly. These differences should be able to exist without eliciting harm on one another. With this definition in mind, I will argue that throughout American history the natural world has not been a safe space, specifically to Black people. America has abused and exploited Black people in wilderness, and natural settings continue to be an unsafe space for Black people to this day.

While researching safe spaces and how they pertain to the relationship between nature and Black Americans, I noticed a severe lack of scholarly materials on the subject. When it

comes to the sphere of the natural world, a safe space would be a place where people, regardless of race, gender, or sexuality (especially race for the purpose of this paper), would be able to experience wilderness and the outdoors without threat of harm. The lack of materials on the subject speaks volumes as to why I chose to write about safe spaces for African Americans with a concentration on the natural world. The lack of resources demonstrates a lack of acknowledgement. Wilderness is a space that has not only been dominated and created by white people throughout American history, but has specifically been a space unsafe for Black people. White people have forcefully dominated wilderness through colonization, wiping out thousands of indigenous people to have sole occupation of American soil. This fact needs to be acknowledged, and the experiences of Black people in the wilderness deserve to be amplified.

Skidmore Professor Lisa Grady Willis offers this perspective through the lens of Africana Studies and Intergroup Relations. When asked about safe spaces in the context of Black Americans and wilderness, Willis noted "the stark contrast of nature used as a tool to exploit, denigrate, and kill (lynching trees, swamps, toiling in soil, etc.)" juxtaposed against her understanding of safe spaces "as a sociological and psychological term applicable to contexts ranging from organizing (historically) to social justice community-building (contemporary)." Grady Willis highlights why there is a lack of research regarding Black wilderness when it comes to safe spaces. Sociologically and psychologically speaking, the term "safe space" refers to community-inhabited areas, which are typically explored in more industrial and developed settings, rather than wilderness. The space that nature provides for Black people is unsafe because it is "used as a tool to exploit, denigrate, and kill" (Grady Willis). Developed spaces have technology and security, which acts as a means of protection for Black people. The uncivilized natural world does not have these protective measures, and this threat of insecurity,

combined with America's history of white nationalism, acts as repellant, distinctly making it an unsafe space for Black Americans. Though physically, the natural world would be the same regardless of the people who step on it, the history that has occurred on the land makes it safe for some and unsafe for others.

Environmental historian William Cronon defines wilderness as "the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover our true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives" (qtd. In Garrard 69-70). This definition starkly contrasts the definition from Kimberly N. Ruffin, a Black female professor of both ecocriticism and English at Roosevelt University, who describes wilderness as "a site of racialized violence" (Ruffin 73). These two definitions highlight the different lenses that wilderness can be viewed through when it comes to people of different races and gender. Cronon is a white man and has the privilege to view wilderness as a place free of corruption, a safe space. Cronon referring to the unnatural world as fallen, having lost its soul, and artificial, shows his distaste towards a world that is consequently safer for Black people. His language is ignorant and distasteful, completely disregarding the torture that Black people have suffered in wilderness. Ruffin views wilderness as a place that can elicit harm.

The way that Black people and white people in America view wilderness—the deep, secluded natural world— is influenced by America's history of lynching, as "lynching is part of the American, especially southern, tradition of vigilante terrorism" (Hair 164).To refer to "lynching" as a "tradition" of the American south gives it a connotation of comfort and acceptance. This illustrates the severe corruption coursing through the bloodstream of the American south. Ultimately, the ability for Cronon to view wilderness as a safe space comes from patriarchal white privilege. For Ruffin, her position in society as a Black woman

contributes to the lens that nature is a place where Black people, and other marginalized groups, can be targeted without the safety measures of "unnatural civilization" (Garrad 69). The world of the unnatural contains measures that can protect Black people from how white people behave in the wild. A lynching is more likely to occur in the forest or by a river, where security is not in sight. Using "unnatural" as a descriptor for a safe space for Black people shows how unsafe the natural world is. Nature historically has provided a setting for white nationalists to get away with terrorism.

Various texts, ranging from nonfiction autobiographical essays, to novels inspired by historical events, convey the chilling relationship that Black people have with nature. Colorado State Professor Camille Dungy's article "Tales From a Black Girl on Fire, or Why I Hate to Walk Outside and See Things Burning" explores how America's racist history of lynching impacts her perception on the natural world as a Black woman. Her background as a scholar of environmental literature shows in her descriptions of her view of wilderness, as she is familiar with the elements of the land she includes in her writing. Similarly, Evelyn White, *San Fransisco Chronicle* writer and Black women's rights advocate, demonstrates in her essay "Black Women and the Wilderness" how the lynching of Emmett Till impacts the African American experience with nature, specifically for Black woman. Meanwhile, Shelton Johnson's novel *Gloryland* follows the experience of Elijah Yancy, a Black man who journeys across the United States to become a Buffalo Soldier in Yosemite. His journey is prompted by his father telling him to move, warning that their home in South Carolina is not a safe space for him. These works, compared to the experiences of acclaimed nature writers such as John Muir, demonstrate the inherent white privilege that comes with nature writing and experiencing the natural world as a whole. I will analyze historical events such as the brutal lynching of Emmett Till, as well as

recent lynching statistics, to demonstrate the relationship between the natural world and white violence towards Black Americans. Through these texts and historical events, I will illustrate how nature has not served as a safe space for Black Americans.

White Wilderness: A Privilege

Acclaimed white male nature writers, such as John Muir, have experiences with wilderness that differ significantly than those of Black Americans. In his autobiographical work *My First Summer in the Sierra*, Muir writes about his titular first experience in the mountainous Sierra. In this text, he uses stunning imagery to paint an alluring picture of the wilderness as a safe, spiritual place of bliss. In the chapter titled "In Camp on the North Fork of the Merced," he writes

> After dark, when the camp was at rest, I groped my way back to the altar boulder and passed the night on it, --above the water, beneath the leaves and stars, --everything still more impressive than by day, the fall seen dimly white, singing Nature's old love song with solemn enthusiasm, while the stars peering through the leaf-roof seemed to join in the white water's song. Precious night, precious day to abide in me forever. Thanks be to God for this immortal gift.

Muir's experience in the wilderness is encapsulated in this quote, as it shows just how comfortable he is in the natural world. Muir is able to sleep in the wild, not afraid of the vast, open darkness. What constitutes a safe space for Muir, free from any harm in the wilderness, is primarily rooted in his privilege as a white man. Muir sees wilderness as divine, a gift from God. But who did God make this gift out to? To refer to wilderness under the blanket-term of a gift,

Muir is disregarding all experiences that differ from his own. While that makes sense given the context of his autobiographical journaling, it distinctly serves as evidence that Muir was able to achieve success as a nature writer due to his privilege. God gifted Muir a beautiful landscape to explore and milk for his own success. No one would want to hurt a white man, for this gift was his and that was known. This gift of safety in the natural world was kept specifically by white people from Black people and other people of color. Specifically, white people have kept Black people as slaves and publicly humiliated and lynched Black people throughout American history. The American soil has been used by white people as a killing ground.

Gloryland

In contrast to Muir's real experience in the Sierra, Shelton Johnson's novel *Gloryland* follows Elijah Yancy and his experience crossing the United States as a Black man. *Gloryland* starts on Emancipation Day 1863 when Elijah Yancy is born. Yancy's birthday is significant as it pertains to the history of Black Americans' positionality in the United States. Emancipation Day marks the abolishment of slavery, but, despite this seemingly big step towards Black liberation, "lynching became more widespread in the Reconstruction years and was directed mostly at ex-slaves, because the free Blacks no longer valued as property, were often viewed as threatening the existence of white civilization" (Hair 164). Freedom was not automatically granted to all African Americans after Emancipation Day. Yancy described his experience being Black in the American South, as "There's one thing colored people in the South have in common with the dead. The dead have no rights" (Johnson 36). This comparison of being African American in the South to being dead, coming from a Black Southerner himself, depicts the magnitude of how

subjugating life is for them in a Confederate state. They exist, but barely. What can they do that the dead cannot besides eat and breathe? Otherwise, their lives are confined to the walls that white America has built for them. Yancy's birthday is ironic, as is "Emancipation Day" itself, since any freedom he, or other Black people, is granted is a farce. Yancy is not given freedom through Emancipation Day but through his own journey out west to escape the American South.

A passage in *Gloryland* that particularly illustrates the relationship between the land and white on Black violence is when Elijah watches a lynching in the woods. When Elijah witnesses the lynching, he specifically describes the tree from which George Washington was hanged, saying "I wanted the branch to break or at least bend a little, but it was an oak and it was strong, and the weight of Mr. Washington was no weight at all to the oak ... Even the oak was still and calm, and I was mad that it would do such a thing" (Johnson 48). Elijah projects his anger at the Ku Klux Klan onto the tree. The white on Black violence is not what Elijah says he is mad at, but the oak tree. Elijah notes that the oak "was still and calm" and that angered him. He doesn't understand how the tree can simply exist and stand tall during such horror. On one hand, this anger is irrational, as trees are not sentient and are not able to be calm like Elijah says. On the other hand, Elijah's anger comes from a place where the tree is the only other witness of the lynching. Elijah is horrified that he watched George die, but also that nothing else changed around him. The tree was unphased. The outdoor setting in which the hate crime takes place is what Elijah responds to, suggesting that the natural world does not serve as a safe space for Black individuals, especially during the Emancipation and Reconstruction eras. The environment is a space where lynchings are able to occur. Through the ethnological lens, wilderness is a socially constructed phenomenon: a hunting ground for white people to play at. This gives nature the connotation that shapes Elijah's anger towards it. The natural structures, such as the large oak

tree, combined with the lack of other people, allows white nationalists to commit these atrocious hate crimes. Thus, this natural world is not a safe space for Black people because it allows for white on Black violence to occur.

The place-based plot of *Gloryland* demonstrates how certain spaces were safer than others for Black Americans in the Nineteenth century. For one, Spartanburg is a "civilized" area with people and industry. Elijah's relationship with Spartanburg, specifically the sidewalks, is one example of how certain spaces are specifically unsafe for Black people. Though they were built by Black people, the sidewalks were only ~~meant~~ for white people to walk on. Though they were built by Black people, the sidewalks were only meant for white people to walk on. This fact is unsettling to Yancy, prompting his decision to walk on the sidewalk. Elijah decides to walk on the sidewalk, noting that he had "never felt so alive before, and all it took was stepping up just a few inches onto that sidewalk" (57). Elijah's choice to walk on the sidewalk demonstrates a shift in the power dynamic of Spartanburg. Elijah took matters into his own hands and walked on the space that was not meant for him. He knew what he was doing. Elijah went "up" on the sidewalk, putting him at a more even status with the white oppressors. Walking on the sidewalk was an act of rebellion for Elijah, as demonstrated when he tells the readers that he "got back up on the sidewalk like [he] had every right to, and [he] didn't even say 'pardon' or 'excuse me'" (56). By stating that he got on the sidewalk like he had the right to, Elijah is implying that he normally does not have the right. Furthermore, Elijah drives home the fact that he really should not be on the sidewalk by noting that he did not even say "pardon" or "excuse me" for simply being in the space of the sidewalk. Normally, Black people would not be allowed on the sidewalk, a clear, unspoken social law. Yet, Elijah went against this and did not even ask for permission from the white man. *What made a space safe for Black people during the Nineteenth*

century were the people inhabiting it. If it was a space occupied by white people, then the permission of the white man is what would or would not make it safe. Elijah's walking on the sidewalk is a prominent exception to this rule, as he safely escapes danger from a seemingly unsafe area for Black people.

Despite Elijah's success with the sidewalk, we know that the sidewalk is an unsafe space for him because his father tells him that he thinks "Spartanburg ain't a good place for [Elijah] no more. As a matter of fact, I'm certain of it. I mean, it's never been a good place for someone colored, but now it's worse cause you're grown up" (65-66). Elijah's father explicitly states that Spartanburg is not a safe space for Elijah as a Black man. The word choice of "good place" parallels the connotation that comes with "safe space." A good place is one that would allow for safety. If Spartanburg is not good, it cannot be safe. Community researcher Zanib Rasool views "safe spaces as being enshrined in the everyday, where new knowledge is being created and shared" (Rasool 113). To view safe spaces as being a space that is safe every day, Spartanburg would thus not be considered safe for Yancy. During the Emancipation era, South Carolina was not a state that granted Black people freedom. Elijah is acting too free given the restrictions on Black people in Spartanburg. Elijah is more likely to act out and think for himself, as demonstrated through walking on the sidewalk, according to his father. Thus, Spartanburg is not a safe space for Elijah, despite it being his home. Home is not always a space that elicits safety, despite the comfortable connotation the word carries with it. Doing something as small as walking on the sidewalk could have landed Elijah with the same fate as George Washington. Elijah's father's telling him to move is what prompts Elijah's course of action throughout the rest of the novel: the journey to find a safe space.

The role of a soldier, in uniform and armed, puts Elijah at the head of the social order. He even gains leverage above white people, as shown through his encounter with Mr. Unimportant. Mr. Unimportant is at the mercy of Elijah, who has the power to set him free or to hand him over to Corporal Bingham. Mr. Unimportant realizes Elijah's authority through his soldier uniform, and his tone shifts from snarky to helpless, "like he was talking to a dog that he suddenly realized had teeth and wasn't friendly" (176). Yosemite becomes a safe space for Yancy once he has the soldier's uniform on and the extension of protection from the United States government. Mr. Unimportant asks Yancy to grant him permission to leave, saying that he must be on his way "With your permission, of course" (176). Now, it is Yancy, a Black man, having power over this white man. Before granting him permission, Yancy "waited a minute, holding his eyes" (176). This entire exchange illustrates how Yosemite becomes a safe space for Yancy once he becomes a soldier. Yancy transcends the social hierarchy, and knowing that he has the protection of the government behind him as a soldier, Yancy thus has more power than Mr. Unimportant, a white civilian. Through the extension of White privilege that comes with being a soldier, Yosemite becomes a safe space for Elijah Yancy. The safety is in Elijah's uniform, and therefore puts into question what safety truly means if it is only granted through the extension of whiteness. In *Gloryland*, safety only exists at the helm of white hands.

Yancy found a level of safety in Yosemite, which can be attributed to his status as a Buffalo Soldier. This raises the question of what safe spaces truly look like in nature. Safety is hierarchical, and race is prestigious. In *Gloryland*, white people are at the top of the food chain, and the Natives are at the bottom, despite being on their own land. The Buffalo Soldiers were a product of Congress' Army Organization Act, passed in 1866. Some of the responsibilities of the Buffalo Soldiers consisted of "help control the Native Americans of the Plains, capture cattle

rustlers and thieves and protect settlers, stagecoaches, wagon trains and railroad crews along the Western front" (*History.com*). The control that the Buffalo Soldiers have over the Native Americans of the Plains demonstrates the racial hierarchy at the helm of Elijah's occupation. A white Congress used Black soldiers to control Native Americans. Safe spaces in nature are directly related to race. With white people in control of the land and Congress, they get to pick and choose who gets to experience the natural world as a safe space. Thus, this implies that the safety in question is safety from white people and their abuse of power.

Elijah's encounter with the Native American woman and her child demonstrates his white extension of power. They are distinctly uncomfortable by the presence of a soldier in their homeland, which can be demonstrated Elijah says "How do you tell someone you ain't a threat when you're a soldier wearing a uniform and carrying weapons, and they're Indian?" (203). By referring to himself as "a soldier wearing a uniform and carrying weapons," and the Native American woman as just an "Indian," Elijah is distinctly separating himself from her. His security as a soldier comes at the expense of other people of color, specifically indigenous Americans. This is a result of Congress—white authority figures using their power to place the responsibilities of "managing" Native Americans on Black Americans, ultimately pinning minority races against one another.

Johnson himself is a park ranger and used *Gloryland* as a vessel to rewrite history. With the inclusion of the epigraphs beginning each chapter, Johnson's novel serves as a platform to amplify Black voices and their experience with the natural world during the formation of the National Parks. Johnson refers to his duty as being a "spokesperson for the dead" (Nelson). This responsibility allows Johnson to put African Americans in touch with their direct or indirect connections to the Natural Parks. Buffalo Soldiers were crucial in the maintenance of the

National Parks yet do not get full recognition for this. Johnson refers to this lack of acknowledgement when saying “It’s a great story and people don’t know about it. [...] It’s not just an African-American story. It’s an African in the Americas story” (Nelson). Referring to the Buffalo Soldiers as “Africans in the Americas story” illustrates the separation between African Americans and the America they live in. America collectively is a space built on the exploitation of African Americans. The sidewalks in *Gloryland* are built by Black people “but colored folks had to walk in the dirt of the street, and that never made any sense to [Elijah]. Why build something you can never use?” (52). Through Elijah Yancy in *Gloryland*, Johnson is able to tell his own story as a park ranger, but more importantly the story of other Black people trying to find their place in the natural world.

Emmett Till

Less than 100 years after the fictional tale of *Gloryland* takes place, a true event went down in American history as one of the most brutal lynchings of all time: the murder of Emmett Till. Till was just 14 years old when he was murdered in Money, Mississippi by Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam for allegedly whistling at Roy’s wife, Carolyn. In the early hours of August 28, 1955 Bryant and Milam abducted Till from the house of his uncle, Mose Wright. They then proceed to violently murder Till, eventually dumping his body in the Tallahatchie River only to be discovered three days later. Bryant and Milam “savagely pistol whipped him, gouged out one of his eyes, ripped his tongue from his mouth, [and] knocked the back of his head off” before throwing him in the river (Kolin 259). Till’s horrific cause of death illustrates how many different forms lynchings can take.

The corpse was completely unidentifiable, and Wright was only able to recognize the corpse as his nephew due to an engraved ring that Emmett was wearing when he was abducted. His mother, Mamie Till, held an open-casket funeral which allowed for the media to truly visualize how brutal Emmett's lynching was. A child was fatally injured beyond recognition. Rather than just hearing that a child was murdered, people across the country were able to see the murdered child and the horrific extent to which these white men murdered him. Despite Mamie's efforts to show the public how brutally her son was murdered, the jury found Bryant and Milam not guilty. Emmett's highly publicized death provides a new perspective on the role that the environment plays in America's deep history of lynchings. The manner of Till's gruesome death is significant to the conversation of safe spaces in relation to the natural world, and how wilderness is specifically an unsafe space for Black Americans due to how white people infiltrate it.

Till's death sparks the conversation: what constitutes a safe, or unsafe, space for Black Americans? Mississippi during the 1950s was plagued by lynchings and racial discrimination. Till did not even survive a vacation down south to visit a family member. This space was specifically unsafe for Till, a fourteen year old Black boy, due to its political and social climate. America saw what was done to Till, how racism physically manifested itself into his horrific fate, yet let the murderers get away. Till is one of thousands of Black people lynched on American soil. However, his case is unique in the sense that his body was publicized and his killers were brought to court. Nevertheless, these efforts proved futile, as the guilty men walked away free. This fate proves how unsafe the American South was for Black people. The Mississippi wilderness served as a space where white men were able to enact and get away with a hate crime against a Black boy.

Till's death also was a massive component of the Civil Rights Movement, sparking iconic actions prominent to the movement's progress. For example, "Claiming that she was inspired by Till's murder, Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of a Montgomery, Ala., bus just three months after the trial" (Kolin 259). The lynching of Emmett Till, a publicized event that showed Americans just how unsafe wilderness was for Black people, was a tragic catalyst for a string of movements in the fight for racial justice.

Wilderness for Black Women

While *Gloryland* focuses on a male's tale navigating the racism-gripped wilderness, this oppression is not gender exclusive. In her essay "Black Women and the Wilderness," Evelyn White explores connections between race, nature, gender, and American history, referencing the case of Emmett Till. While reflecting on lynching cases of Black American youths, White writes "In [Till's] pummeled and contorted face, I saw a reflection of myself and the blood-chilling violence that would greet me if I ever dared to venture into the wilderness" (White 1065). Here, White, a Black woman, is demonstrating the parallel between racial violence towards Black people and the environment. White views what happened to Emmett, or at least the magnitude of the brutality, as a result of the environment he was lynched in. No one was able to hear Emmett scream in the wilderness just as -no one (besides Elijah), was able to witness the fictional lynching of George Washington in *Gloryland*. Despite witnessing the lynching, Elijah was not able to help George, for if he tried to help in any way he most likely would have suffered the same fate. The images of 14 year old Till's "pummeled and contorted face" scarred White's mind, instilling a fear of wilderness in her. This demonstrates how the oppressive dominance wilderness has on Black Americans applies to all genders.

Similar to Evelyn White, Camille Dungy writes about her experiences with nature as a Black woman, and how the history of racial violence in America has impacted her perspective in "Tales From a Black Girl on Fire, or Why I Hate to Walk Outside and See Things Burning." Outwardly, Dungy highlights how America's racist history influences how she views the natural world, specifically fires, noting that she "Came to associate open fires with historically informed terror" (Dungy 29). The word "informed" cements the notion that Dungy's viewpoint is one that is backed by objective parallels between fires and racial violence. As seen in *Gloryland* when George Washington is lynched, a common theme with lynchings was that the bodies were often burned postmortem. This association instilled a fear, or general aversion, to flames in African Americans including Camille Dungy. While exploring the deep country wilderness, Dungy uses rich imagery to illustrate how the neutral elements of nature can come to resemble a lynching scene. Dungy describes the scene of stumbling upon a bonfire in the wilderness, mentioning how "Dead ropes of kudzu dangled here and there" and that the campers' "bright skin glowed pinkly in the light of a ten-foot fire" (Dungy 29). The nature imagery of dangled kudzu, combined with the haunting vision of white faces illuminated by a roaring flame, mimics the scene of a lynching.

What Muir finds beautiful is what Black women like Evelyn White and Camille Dungy would find horrifying. The outdoor space that would swallow the screams of victims of racial violence is the space that Muir views as God's immortal gift. This signifies a connection between whiteness and privilege, and how the wilderness is experienced through the basis of race. White men in specific get to experience nature without fearing that they will be attacked for their race or gender. They get to experience nature for what it has to offer, the sweetness and beauty of "Nature's old love song" (Muir). Meanwhile, White experiences nature with caution, as she fears

she will be a victim of "blood-chilling violence" as a result of her race and gender (White 1065). Additionally, White writes "I was certain that if I ventured outside to admire a meadow or to feel the cool ripples in a stream, I'd be taunted, attacked, raped, maybe even murdered because of the color of my skin" (White 1063). White explicitly stating how she feared for her life whenever she would try to enjoy nature further supports the notion that her experience as a Black woman cements nature as an unsafe space. It is therefore impossible for White to enjoy wilderness, because of the threat that white people would impose if they shared the space. White explicitly mentions that the violence would be "because of the color of [her] skin." White sees herself in Till, and ever since seeing his corpse, that image traumatizes her, causing her to view nature as an unsafe space for Black people in general.

For Dungy, this element of danger comes from the relationship between "history and experience," resulting in a "fear of violence against the body to those bonfires, the trees and the woods that permitted them, and the people who allowed them to blaze" (Dungy 31). Similar to Elijah's anger at the tree during George Washington's lynching, Dungy relates the elements of the natural world to the acts of terrorism. Specifically, Dungy says that "the trees and the woods" "permit" the lynchings. By suggesting that natural structures and the people who allowed the blaze are the forces that permitted the deaths, Dungy is putting wilderness at an equal level of evil as the terrorists themselves. There is an unnatural blame put on nature, when in reality, it is the people who tie the noose and light the fires.

Lynching as Seen in Pop Culture

Lynching is not terrorism of the past. The effects of lynchings throughout history still resoundingly impact the way in which America functions today. Lynchings themselves still occur. There is no escaping the impact of lynching culture, especially not from the south. Though many Black people fled the south, “these largely involuntary relocations compounded the trauma suffered by terror survivors, even as leaving the South improved their physical safety” (Stevenson). Having to flee your home to survive is not freedom. Though spaces such as the north, or for Elijah, the west, may be safer, the act of relocating brings trauma. There are safer spaces, but not truly safe spaces for Black people in America. Between 1880 and 1930, “more than three thousand Black men, women, and children were lynched across the United States” (Young 640). This massive number of Black people killed simply for being Black is a giant stain on American history, thus resulting in the creation of many pieces of art, which serve purposes such as to acknowledge and educate.

Lynching and terrorism still run through America’s veins, as the country is literally founded on the exploitation and abuse of African Americans. The regions of the country where the most lynchings took place are the places that most blatantly show the effects of racism, as “lynchings occurred in communities where African Americans today remain marginalized, disproportionately poor, overrepresented in prisons and jails, and underrepresented in decision making roles in the criminal justice system—the institution most directly implicated in facilitating lynching and failing to protect Black Americans from racial violence” (Stevenson). Today, wilderness still holds a connotation that separates it from civilization. This distinction is one that has been used against Black people, weaponizing the wilderness as a place for white people to murder and Black people to be murdered. Music and art are media that have been used

to express how the natural world contributes to an unsafe space for African Americans in pop culture.

The idea of nature being an unsafe space for Black Americans is present in creative works apart from literature as well. Billie Holiday's song "Strange Fruit" explores the act of lynching through the metaphor of fruit. The song was originally written in 1937 by Abel Meeropol. Released in 1939, Holiday's covers of "Strange Fruit" became some of the most prominent versions of the song, and ultimately "landed her in prison [and] banned her from select nightclubs" (*Genius*). Nevertheless, she performed the song frequently throughout her career, using her platform to call out the white on Black violence. Holiday was dedicated to the song and amplifying the Black experience in the south, and it ultimately "played a large factor in her untimely passing in 1959" (*Genius*). Holiday died from liver disease, and this shows the indirect way in which racism killed her. Through singing "Strange Fruit," Holiday dealt with tremendous stress, such as prison, and it can be inferred that her struggle with alcoholism was a product of this discrimination. Fighting for Civil Rights played a role in Holiday's tragic passing, despite looking different from other lynchings or assassinations of prominent Civil Rights figures.

The first verse of Holiday's song goes "Southern trees bear a strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root / Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees" (Holiday). This imagery shows Black bodies swinging from the trees of the South. These bodies, in their state of decay, are the product of the southern trees, swinging in the southern breeze, highlighting the frequency of lynchings in this region specifically. Blood is on the leaves, the endpoint of the crop, and at the root, the very beginning of the crop. This crop is riddled with blood. "Poplar trees" are cottonwood trees. Though

cottonwood trees and cotton are not the same, the similarity in name parallels the brutality that slaves were forced to endure in cotton fields. The relationship between the cotton crop and the crop of Black bodies blurs the boundaries between the people who work in the fields and the fields themselves. Despite slavery being emancipated when Holiday sang this, this image is a nod to how little has changed. Though slavery is abolished, Black people are still abused and lynched at the hands of white people.

In the second verse of "Strange Fruit," Holiday sings "Pastoral scene of the gallant south / The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth" (Holiday). The description of the American south as "pastoral" gives the land specifically a positive connotation. A pastoral setting is one that cultivates life, specifically based on the land and its lushness. Yet, Holiday is singing about precisely the opposite of this. The southern land is the antithesis of life-bearing for Black people. Here, the natural world is the stage for a murderous "gallant south." Holiday's referring to the south, which was crawling with racism and infested with lynchings at the time, "as gallant" is a nod to the white nationalist mindset that accompanied the vigilante terrorism. It was a killing ground. Immediately following the description of the pastoral south is the graphic description of a lynched body. This powerful juxtaposition showcases the deadly relationship that Black people had with the wilderness. Additionally, the following lyrics of the second verse "Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh / Then the sudden smell of burning flesh" parallel themes earlier highlighted in this paper surrounding the presence of fires at lynchings (Holiday). The natural world offers smells of sweet flowers, yet it is a place where Black people like George Washington are burned to death by white nationalists. Sweet flowers contrasted against the rancid smell of burning flesh emphasizes the horrific sensory experience that is a lynching. The overall metaphor of lynched Black bodies being a strange fruit implies that they serve a purpose

for someone else. Fruits are on trees to be plucked off and eaten. They satiate people's appetites. In this case, the "fruit" serves the purpose of satiating the perverted white appetite for Black blood. Lynched bodies hung from the trees for white onlookers to see, and then carry on with their days. Especially during the 19th and early 20th century in America, lynchings were frequent enough to the point where seeing a lynched body hanging in public would be common, just like seeing fruit from a tree.

Holiday concludes the song with her third verse, singing "Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck / For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck / For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop / Here is a strange and bitter crop" (Holiday). This last verse shows all of the ways that the crop can be used by the natural world. The Black corpse being plucked at and rotted signifies how wilderness acts as an unsafe space for Black Americans, even after death. Black people were lynched, hanged from the trees, and then dropped once it's too late. The lynched Black bodies are "a strange and bitter crop." This comparison of bodies to crops alludes to frequency. The rain and sun provide fertile grounds for the cultivation of crops. Though it is bitter and strange, this crop continues to grow. "Strange Fruit" emphasizes the connection between location and lynchings. Lynchings carry a distinctly southern connotation, as "southern" is repeated throughout the song. Holiday grounds the south as an unsafe space for Black Americans.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama is another art form that encapsulates the dangerous dynamic that wilderness has provided for Black Americans. On April 26, 2018, The National Memorial for Peace and Justice opened in Montgomery to the public. This memorial highlights the brutality of lynchings, specifically when it came to the South. The Equal Justice Initiative opened the memorial which features 800 6-foot wooden sculptures hanging from the ceiling, which symbolize lynched Black bodies. There is a

metaphorical cycle present in this installation. Wood is a natural resource that comes from trees. Similarly, the lynched Black people, who are memorialized through this exhibit, were predominately hanged on trees. Thus, there is a certain full circle of mourning in this piece. Grief is expressed through the fatal natural material representing the deceased.

Conclusion

No element of the natural world is excluded in the narrative that wilderness is unsafe for Black people. In the lynching of Emmett Till, his body was thrown into the Tallahatchie River. Camille Dungy sees lynchings in the fires she encounters in the natural world. The fictional Elijah Yancy focuses on the tree when he sees George Washington get murdered, and how it has become an instrument used by the Ku Klux Klan to kill a Black man. Both fiction and nonfiction have proved the distinct connection between wilderness and danger for Black Americans. Emmett Till's tragic lynching combined with literature such as *Gloryland* examine how the natural world contributes to harm towards Black people. Lynchings throughout American history are known to involve natural elements, causing wilderness to be considered an unsafe space for Black people.

Black people have faced discrimination in the American wilderness long before Till's lynching. *Gloryland* takes place during the Emancipation Era, but even before the novel, Black people were exploited on American soil on plantations. Slavery literally required Black people to work on the land for the white man's gain, of course American nature consequently acted as an unsafe space for Black people. This theme is present in Holiday's "Strange Fruit" when she mentions the Black bodies hanging from cottonwood trees. America is built off of Black struggle

at the hands of white nationalism, and cotton is a symbol of this horrific stain on American history.

The Black fight for equal rights is not over. With the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter movement boomed in 2020, sparking a national conversation, raising the question: is America truly the land of the free and the home of the brave? America has never been a safe space for Black people. The country profits off of Black deaths. Kyle Rittenhouse killed two protestors at a protest following the death of Jacob Blake, and got acquitted under the guise of "self-defense" even though he was not even legally allowed to possess a firearm. My goal with this paper is to leave you thinking about America's twisted history and mistreatment of Black people on its own soil. America is founded on white nationalism, for white people. The fight for Black liberation from a white, patriarchal America continues.

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