

W.E.B Du Bois and the Place of African American Youth in Histories of Environmental Thought.

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Abstract

In this article I reflect upon the development of my research on African American environmental thought as it emerged through the coincidence of my PhD research with the COVID-19 pandemic and the international Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. I situate my research at the intersection of Environmental American Studies and literary studies to highlight the intersections between environmental thought and racial justice movements through a focus on the ways that childhood and race are intertwined in African American thought and literature. I finish by offering a case study of my research on the children's magazine of W.E.B Du Bois, *The Brownies' Book* and its representations of Black children's relationships to the outdoors and nature.

During the first COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020 I started watching the birds in my garden. I learnt to distinguish the calls of robins from blue tits and the markings of the latter from great tits. On daily walks across a local golf course, I followed the chirps of goldfinch and learned the difference between the crows and jackdaws that gathered in the trees around our block. As I learned more about the common visitors to our garden I installed different feeders for peanuts, suet, meal worms and various seeds to keep them all happy. I was a few months into my PhD and trying to homeschool my then 10-year-old son and like many Brits amidst the growing anxiety and isolation of the first year of the global pandemic, I found

comfort in observing the regular comings and goings of local birdlife¹. On the 25th May 2020 the world witnessed George Floyd's murder by police officer Derek Chauvin and in the months that followed a resurgence of mass protests led by the Black Lives Matter movement prompted international discourse around the persistence of racism and the urgent need for antiracist organisation. On the same day, African American birdwatcher Christian Cooper posted a video of a white woman, Amy Cooper, making a false accusation against him to the police after he had asked her to put her dog on a lead in a popular bird watching spot in Central Park. Amy Cooper saying she will tell the police there is 'an African American man threatening her' on the same day that global attention was focussed on the all too familiar result of racist police brutality feels almost like a bizarre moral tale. But the inadvertent concurrence of the two incidents highlights nothing new about the persistent threat to Black life under the rule of white supremacy, nor that outdoor recreation has always been fraught with the threat of danger for African Americans.

That my own interest in birdwatching developed during this period of global anxiety and unrest did not immediately occur to me to be in any way significant to my PhD research on African American children's literature; it was merely a way to switch off from thinking about broad and personal anxieties. That birdwatching and other forms of outdoor activity could be a form of peace for me because I am a white woman living in mostly white suburb in England was not lost on me, but I cannot say that this knowledge galvanised me either. Whilst an interest in local ecosystems began to coincide with the pressing need for widespread reform in the face of the climate emergency it took longer for me to acknowledge that my understanding of environmental concerns was conceived in ignorance of environmental racism. It was through reading *The Brownies' Book*, the first magazine for African American children which W.E.B Du Bois established in 1920, that I began to form an understanding of the ways that environmental thought has always been urgently and necessarily linked to movements for racial justice.

¹ Quach, G. (2021). 'Tweeting appreciation: bird-watching groups take flight in lockdown.' *TheGuardian.com* (Friday 29 January, 2021). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jan/29/tweeting-appreciation-bird-watching-groups-take-flight-in-lockdown> Accessed 15th February 2024.



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As I read *The Brownies' Book* I came across the writing of Effie Lee Newsome (formerly Mary Effie Lee) for the first time. In the April 1920 issue of the magazine, she published an essay called 'The Birds at my Window.' The essay was not what I expected of a piece of writing ostensibly about bird watching for children. Its tone is melancholy, and the birds Newsome observes are often trapped or panicked, perching 'disconsolately' on a window sash, 'desperately clinging to the [window] screen' or 'imprisoned' in the porch (1920, 105). She observes fear and confusion in the birds and her own excitement in getting to observe them in close proximity is also often undercut by fear or disappointment. Newsome's nature writing for children between her contributions to *The Brownies' Book* and *The Crisis* from the 1910s to the 1930s and her own published collection of poetry *Gladiola Garden* in 1940 combines taxonomy with descriptions of the strange affective experiences of observing the natural world. Newsome's observations did not chime with what I understood nature writing to be; its expression of the relationship between humans and nature was not focussed on the conservation of natural habitats and the peace one finds in nature so much as it was about the barriers between people and the outdoors. As a strategy of teaching children about their relationship to nature it made sense only when I turned my research towards scholarship which traces a history African American environmental thought.

Scholars such as Dianne Glave, Colin Fisher, Carolyn Merchant, Kimberley K. Smith, and John Claborn have examined histories of African American environmental thought and highlighted the centrality of race and the need for racial justice in Environmental American studies. I draw from this scholarship in my research on *The Brownies' Book*, situating the establishment of new forms of African American children's literature amongst scholarship from African American literary studies, Black studies, and environmental American studies to highlight the intersections between race, childhood and environmental histories. As Claborn notes Du Bois's work in the 1910s and 1920s was published against a backdrop of significant moments in both US environmental and civil rights history: the 1919 establishment of the Grand Canyon as a National Park following the 1916 National Parks Act which solidified state control over the nation's wilderness spaces; and the Red Summer of 1919 in which race riots spurred on by urban segregation raged across the country. Civil rights issues in this period always intersected with environmental concerns,

concerns about the ways segregation impacted experience of outdoors spaces as well as access to the health benefits of nature. Kimberly K. Smith notes that Du Bois's questioning of why more African Americans did not indulge in outdoor recreation and rest was a 'question worthy of Thoreau, who similarly wondered why so many men live lives of quiet desperation' (2007, 2). Unlike Thoreau, Du Bois knew that the beauty of nature and the reprieve it could offer could not be disentangled 'from the ugliness of racial injustice' (Smith, 2007, 2). Claborn too notes that Du Bois's reasons for visiting US national parks were similar to those of prominent white environmentalists like John Muir: 'exhaustion with urban life and war' (Claborn, 2017, 54). But both note that Du Bois is rarely thought of as an environmental thinker because of his main focus on civil rights. Du Bois's descriptions of natural beauty in articles in *The Crisis* as well as in his published collections like *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil* in 1920 were to some extent precursors or asides to his broader points about racial injustice, but they were also descriptions written by someone who was deeply invested in the natural environment itself, and who was concerned with its beauty, peacefulness and its benefits to the health and wellbeing of humans.

As Smith in particular has shown, the environmental thought of African Americans has a long history that at the very least became common to Black political thought in the progressive era. The environmental thought of African Americans in the early twentieth century emerged out of an even longer history of both isolations from and a desire for the natural world. Kimberley Ruffin similarly calls this the beauty and burden paradox, whereby slavery's 'coupling of racism and ecological alienation' (2010, 2) informed the ways that African Americans perceive nature as both beautiful and troubling. Whilst the environmental movement in America has historically been focussed on wilderness preservation, for African Americans reckoning with nature has often been about trying to reconcile a relationship to the outdoors that has been marred by violence and trauma. Additionally, the emerging ideologies of scientific racism in the progressive era served to legitimise the notion of environmental determinism that insisted that Black people has no capacity for free action (Ruffin, 2010, 8).

In my own work, I illuminate the representation of children's relationships to the environment as fugitive strategy. I examine Newsome's essays on birdwatching for



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example, in terms of how they resist exclusion from an access to nature through their affective responses to the world. The centrality of fugitivity to contemporary Black thought as it has been articulated by scholars like Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, Tina Campt and Celeste Marie Bernier helped me initially to think through the use of photographs of children in the magazine. But Moten and Hartman's discussion of *The Black Outdoors* as part of Duke University's Humanities Futures series in 2017 has been particularly illuminating as I trace this line of thought. Organized by J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Jane Cervenak, *The Black Outdoors* series explores ideas of 'propertied personhood and racialized, sexualized, ecological enclosure' as it seeks out expressions of 'another kind of environmental ethos, another ecology' (Carter and Cervenak, N.d, N.pag). *The Black Outdoors* inherently refers to its presumed opposite, the Black indoors, both spaces proving 'elusive because of the ongoing terror of anti-black violence' (Carter and Cervenak, N.d, N.pag). As a concept, the Black Outdoors is the alternative imaginative space created out of this exclusion and history of violence, of being continuously denied a clear sense of place and space. As Laura Traffí-Prats notes the notion of the Black Outdoors is difficult because 'it disrupts the outside-inside binary around which modernist nature pedagogies are organised' (2020, 362).

My research contributes to Environmental American studies and Environmental Area Studies in its examination of African American children's literature. I consider how new forms of literature created in the 1910s and 1920s responded to the fact that white authored American children's literature was developed through notions of both childhood and the outdoors that were tied to racial exclusion. I examine the intersection between the racial politics of childhood and the racial politics of the environment, drawing from scholarship which highlights the development of a racialised construction of American childhood, and from scholarship which traces tradition of African American environmental critique in this same period (from the Reconstruction Era to the Harlem Renaissance (1860-1930)). Since there has been a long tradition of writing about outdoor spaces in children's literature, I am interested in questioning the role of race in the development of this tradition. Building on the scholarship which understands the history of African American environmentalism, this project focusses on the ways that children's relationships to the environment are understood as similarly constructed alongside racialized crises. I ask: how did

restricted access to leisure in outdoor spaces inform African American writing about the outdoors for children, and how did this writing model early environmental criticism? In light of the contemporary climate crisis and in the wake of the international Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, my research traces the connection between the contemporary moment and the aftermath of the race riots of 1919 since both moments of protest respond to the same racial continuum. *The Brownies' Book* was established and published in response to the increased racial tensions of 1919's summer of race riots. It was a magazine which was politically engaged from its inception. Moreover, as Colin Fisher notes, the 1919 riots themselves were first sparked in Chicago by an incident involving an African American teenager that took place on an informally segregated beach of Lake Michigan. Eugene Williams, a fifteen-year-old boy who was swimming and drifted into the 'white' section of the beach, was stoned by a group of white men and drowned in the lake. Williams's murder sparked the four-day riot which left 38 dead and 537 injured. What the example of William's murder highlights is that African American youth are often at the centre of the intersecting issues of civil and environmental rights. *The Brownies' Book's* sustained engagement with the ways in which childhood is central to the development of Black political thought is at the heart of my current research and it is through an exploration of the different facets of this that I came to consider the role of environmental thought within this.

In an examination of *The Brownies' Book* I am interested in how Du Bois, Fauset and their contributing writers navigate these intersecting considerations in a variety of literary forms. One of these considers the representation of the outdoors and African American children's relationship to it. Along with Newsome's writing I consider the role that outdoor experience played in *The Brownies' Book's* examination of children's understanding of racial politics was the magazine's sometimes complicated representation of African American children outdoors. For example, in the December 1920 issue of *The Brownies' Book* a story called 'Bunny Cotton-Tail's Christmas Dinner' by Katheryn M. Campbell was printed. The story follows the struggles of a group of rabbits who live in a cotton field worked by a group of children. The children chase and capture rabbits on their breaks, so they look forward to Christmas when cotton picking season is over and the children leave the rabbits in peace. When the story ends with one of the older children telling the younger ones about the suffering of the

rabbits, they learn a lesson in being sympathetic to vulnerable animals, a common moral in children's literature. In the context of a magazine for African American children, the vulnerable rabbits might be read as an allegory for racial suffering; terrorized they struggle to survive whilst mothers try to protect their young from torment. But its setting in a cotton field amongst labouring children complicates the more straightforward reading of its moral position. Whilst Campbell does not name the race of the children in her story, the implication of the cotton field and its association with slave labour would have been obvious to contemporary readers. In the context of a magazine for African American youth the story's apparent moral lessons are complicated; what effect does it have to make the animals the victims of children, if those children are in turn cotton field labourers? This question becomes more difficult to answer when you also consider the photograph which accompanies the story. A snapshot of five young black children standing in front of what looks like cotton plants sits in the middle of the text on the story's second page, captioned 'The Little Cotton Pickers' (Figure 1). If the story itself does not mention the race of the children, the image makes the implication clear. The inclusion of the photograph is not unusual in itself; the magazine regularly used snapshots, often sent by readers, to illustrate its content. It was part of a strategy of representation and functioned alongside fiction to insist upon the visibility of African American children as main rather than marginal characters.

Nevertheless, this photograph in is jarring even without the story and its references to child labour. The association of happy children and cotton field labour seems to suggest an erasure of exploitative labour in the way that it seems to render innocent of history the image of Black children amongst the cotton. Whilst the story resolves the suffering of its vulnerable characters, the photograph of the children remains strange. But it is this strangeness that I find compelling

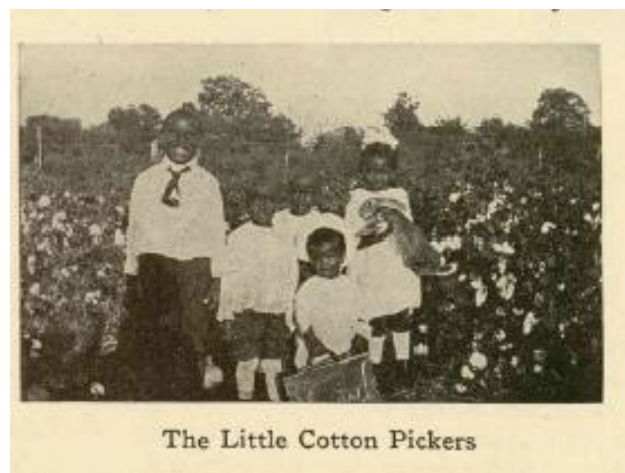


Figure 1: 'The Little Cotton Pickers.' cropped from *The Brownies' Book*, (December 1920). New York, N.Y: DuBois and Dill. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/22001351/362>.

precisely because it draws attention to the fact that the history of outdoor experience for African American children is complicated and fraught with the violence that its allusion to enslaved labour compels one to remember. As an image of resistance to the poor representation of African Americans more generally in children's culture, it asserts itself as part of the magazine's aim to counter racist stereotypes by depicting well dressed, happy and playful children. In its more specific reference to the cotton field, we might read resistance to the spectacle of Black child labour captured in the photographs of Lewis Hine, for example. In this image the children are only associated with labour in the context of the story and the caption which draws from it. The image alone simply depicts the children posed in a field in front of what might be cotton plants. They wear smart looking clothes, one of them holds what looks like a briefcase, and the girl to the far-right side of the group wearing a large bow on top of her head holds a large rabbit. It does not in of itself depict their labour at all. Likely, it is an image sent in by readers and it has been included alongside the story as a largely arbitrary editorial decision; the story is about children and rabbits and amongst the photographs of children the magazine has been sent there is a photograph of children and a rabbit. However, its captioning is clearly provocative in the way it evokes a history of labour and in its refusal to erase the association it evokes the photograph becomes one of resistance, insisting on recognising a past that is not past as it also presents its multiple possibilities for its reading. This kind of complex representation was not something that *The Brownies' Book* shied away from, and this image is part of the magazine's broader efforts to question what it meant to represent African American children. In all its complexity and strangeness, 'The Little Cotton Pickers' is an image which draws together intersecting issues of race, childhood, and racialised experience of the outdoors in ways which illuminate their difficult relationship to each other. I would suggest that the image of 'The Little Cotton Pickers' is one which also collapses the unstable indoor/outdoor binary allowing for a speculative imagining of space for African American children. It is a photograph which challenges both the stability of the notion of childhood innocence and of the outdoors as a consistent space of safety for children. Evoking joy and safety in a space that has been historically violent, it is insistent upon the presence of the children in the cotton field being one which allows for joy in relationship with the outdoors as its history as space of racialised violence is both evoked and pushed aside.

My research interest in the complex place of African American children in histories of environmental thought emerges from this photograph's instability and its insistence on highlighting this instability. This insistence was pertinent to *The Brownies' Book* as an extension of Du Bois's contemporary thinking about race and the environment. In his 1920 book *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil*, Du Bois writes about travelling across the United States, taking in the immense beauty of national parks. He writes about seeing 'meadows, black pine forests, with here and there a blue and wistful mountain' and describes the shifting colours of the seas (1920, 216). Taken in by the beauty of the country he asks '[w]hy do not all 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?' (1920, 217). Nature, as it offers people the chance 'to renew their spirit' (1920, 216) seems an obvious place for African Americans suffering hardship in modern America to seek respite. But Du Bois notes, 'the thought of a journey [seems] to depress them' (1920, 218) before he goes on to describe the harrowing conditions of Jim Crow travel. Du Bois's descriptions of segregated travel ultimately function as a critique of civil rights failures and the racial terrorism of the Jim Crow era. But as it appears alongside his descriptions of pleasurable travel in the country's natural parks it draws attention to the profound impact segregation had on how African Americans experienced nature. Du Bois writes about both de facto and de jure segregation, but also offers insight into a history of African American environmentalism. Where environmentalism was historically understood as a discussion of wilderness preservation and conservation, issues Black Americans were seen as being uninterested in, Du Bois's writing in the 1910s and 1920s can be appraised as decidedly environmental, not in spite of its civil rights activism, but as part of it.

He was often concerned with leisure especially vacations and travel where he combined often romanticised narratives of the experience of the natural environment with critiques of both Jim Crow travel conditions and of the broad racialized disparities that plague African American's experiences of leisure. For *The Crisis* he edited semi-regular 'Vacation Numbers' where he solicited accounts of vacationing from readers and wrote and published essays and articles on travelling as a Black American. Sometimes these were fairly straightforward criticisms centred on the discomfort of Jim Crow travel. Writing in August 1912 for example about a summer trip out of Virginia he notes that: 'In these warm and perspiring days Negroes are

cooped up in the smallest possible space' (1912, 174). But he emphasised too that it was not only the south that posed a problem for African Americans wanting to travel, issues of both wealth and access to vacation destinations were scarce. He points out that even for wealthy African Americans, the options for travel are limited whereas for whites the options are numerable. They 'may choose from a thousand different places. He may turn to the hills and camp out in the Adirondacks or board among the white Mountains; or, loving the sea, he may settle in some of the innumerable little village towns among the rocks along the coast of Maine' ('Vacation Days,' 1912, 186). It is whiteness rather than wealth which informs an ability to experience the various pleasures of the north-eastern US; New York, New Hampshire and Maine are all places in which the vacationing African American will not find reprieve. Whilst the Jim Crow restrictions of the south highlight the racial disparity of travel provision, it was the pervasive yet more subtle complexities of trying to access the benefits of vacationing in the north and north-east which Du Bois draws attention to more often.

In August 1917 Du Bois wrote about his recent trip to Idlewild, in Michigan, an African American owned vacation resort that was the most popular vacation destination for the Black elite (Fisher, 2005, 74). He offers the existence of Idlewild as a reprieve from the restricted access to vacation resorts for African Americans, he also acknowledges it as an imperfect solution for most. Both because it was located 'too far away for many of us, and often for persons of modest income who must, therefore, stay near home and at the same time avoid the ever-recurring race discrimination it is a puzzling query as to what to do with vacations' (1917, 169). In the article this comes from, 'Vacation Days' Du Bois wrote about the barriers to African American's summer vacationing. Commenting on his call to readers to send accounts of their vacations he notes that many of the responses received detailed an inability to take time off work in order to vacation, for these readers he notes 'the evening car ride, the excursion to some neighbouring park is the only escape from the city's toil and heat' (1912, 186). This comment on the brief reprieve from living in a city during the summer is undercut by his next line which notes that even these spaces for African Americans who can't afford a full vacation are not guaranteed. In these 'you are tolerated if you are very careful...you may go to the beach but you may not hire a bathing suit; you may walk about under the trees, but you may not dance in the newly erected hall; you may ride in the trolleys, but you may not take the

sightseeing automobiles' (186). Here he draws attention to the many unofficial 'rules' that restrict experiences of leisure even where African Americans are ostensibly allowed to go.

Du Bois's writing about Idlewild and other natural environments was always paired with critiques of racial injustice whilst the beauty of Idlewild was such especially because Du Bois emphasised it as a specific reprieve from the struggles of modern African American life. For Du Bois, it was only here that he experienced the 'fine joy of life, absolute freedom from the desperate cruelty of the color line and [...] the wooing of the great silence which is Peace and deep Contentment' (160). Du Bois described Idlewild as the only place in the US in which he had the ability to enjoy the peace and freedom that the natural world can offer. Comparing it to a visit to Chicago and Hopkinsville, a city in Kentucky in 1921 Idlewild again stands out for Du Bois as a place especially beneficial for African American leisure. Whilst he found beauty in the hills and 'tiny ivied cottages' (1921, 158) of Hopkinsville and hope in the Black owned hotel he stayed in in Chicago, Du Bois was poetic in his descriptions of Idlewild, writing that its natural beauty was unrivalled:

for sheer physical beauty-for sheen of water and golden air, for nobleness of tree and flower of shrub, for shining river and song of bird and the low, moving whisper of sun, moon and star, it is the beautifulest stretch I have seen for twenty years (1921, 160).

In part, Idlewild offered itself as a standout place for Du Bois because it was accessible in the north without having to use segregated travel cars and because it was Black owned. He exalted the journey there as well as he did history. Whilst it was once owned by white men and sold for profit to African Americans Idlewild, unlike the Vincennes hotel he stayed in in Chicago was not marred by this history. The Vincennes was 'beautiful and quiet' now it was owned by African Americans but still hosted 'the ghosts of white folks who used to live' there (158). Idlewild, however, was not tainted by its former white ownership because it had been left in its natural beauty to be shared, unlike Chicago which was marred by 'the ruthless raggedness and grime of the blazing streets' and the fight for housing on the South Side (158). In this way Du Bois mirrored the views of elite white environmentalists in his view of the natural

world as a space free from the dirt and racialised segregation of urban spaces. But he also saw Idlewild as a space with potential to be a 'center of Negro art, conference and recreation' now it was entirely Black-owned (160)._ His comments celebrating the renewed purpose of the land reveal his intersecting beliefs in access to the environment as a matter right of civil and democratic rights and of nature as a space which supported cultural development.

It was not only in northern natural environments that he thought this was possible. Whilst Idlewild represented a specific kind of freedom to create and recreate in nature in its exclusivity to African Americans, Du Bois also celebrated the ability for communion between Black people and nature in other places too. In 'Vacation Days' he also wrote about returning to the south as a vacation for many northern migrants. On what most readers had provided as an answer to how they vacation he wrote:

'We go home to visit,' is the most frequent answer received from our vacation questioning. The elevator boy who has worked twelve hours a day in the hotel for seven days in the week saves his tips and takes the boat to his mother in far-away Jacksonville. The West Indian porter carries his savings to the steamship company and sails down to the island paradise that hems in the Caribbean Sea. The busy physician feels the breath of the Blue Mountains in the midst of the city's heat, leaves his practice with his neighbor and returns to the farmhouse in the high hills. The tired seamstress finds herself one morning walking among the pines, past the log-cabin schoolhouse, on down the road to the open door of home. The welcome is so hearty, the memories so pleasant, that the return home marks the brightest of vacation days (1912, 188).

The main point Du Bois makes in this article is that for most African Americans vacationing is not a viable option. They cannot afford the time off work, or if they can they are barred from the resorts, not everyone has the privilege of time or money to visit Idlewild or its equivalents. Migrants from the south, and in this example from the Caribbean too, find instead that a return home is the best option. In part this evokes the extent to which northern African Americans and other Black immigrants were estranged from their homes, the implication of the desire for better economic

opportunity as well as a lesser threat of racialized violence in the elevator boy's seven day a week job, the porter's desire for his 'paradise', the busy physician's need to escape the city's heat, and the tired seamstresses return to the forest. All of them Du Bois implies work tirelessly for little relief. But all of them too find in their returns home that relief, and for most of the examples he names this is explicitly tied to an experience of nature as well. In the less specific 'island paradise' of the Caribbean, and the more evocative 'breath of the Blue Mountains' and the pines that line the country road on the way to cabin school houses in the high hills, Du Bois captures the spirit of restful relationships to the environment. For many African Americans vacations were inverted, not trips away from home, but returns to them. Du Bois borrows from the narratives of experiencing nature common to mainstream environmentalism which exalt experiences of nature as returns home to a truer version of the self. As Carolyn Merchant notes, for white environmentalists nature represented sublime places in which to glimpse the face of God and therefore purer versions of yourself. But for African Americans as well Native Americans, perceiving wilderness was marked much differently (2003, 381). In Du Bois's descriptions the return home is both literal and metaphorical, nature and home go hand in hand in ways which exalt the natural spaces of the US south and the Black diaspora whilst also highlighting the difference between white and Black experiences and perceptions of nature. For many African Americans rural places and wildernesses were not escapes from home, they were home, but they were spaces from which they were isolated. Returning home in this piece was both a criticism of the lack of access to established vacation resorts at the same time as it was a celebration of African Americans' relationships to nature.

In much African American literature in this period nature and natural metaphors emphasised the fact that racialised violence had led to the impossibility of finding any peace in the natural world. But Du Bois was insistent that such peace was possible and desirable for African Americans. In *The Brownies' Book* Du Bois insists upon children's access to the outdoors and on exploring their relationship to nature in ways which illuminate this sustained interest in environmental thought. *The Brownies' Book's* fiction and nature writing responded to these complex issues highlighting both historical trauma and the impossibility of nature as an escape from the problems of modernity as they also insisted on nature as a space of joy and restoration for Black

children. The ideas of what it meant for African Americans to have a relationship with the natural environment were very much explored in *The Brownies' Book*. In the context of migration and the relationship to the southern landscape and nature mediated through trauma and fear, it was important to find ways for children to experience the outdoors joyfully through various narratives of the natural world, animals, and reporting on outdoor recreation, travel and play. Additionally, the relationship between children and nature in children's literature had always been based on racialised ideas of both children and the environment in ways that made representing the natural world and children within it as well as their relationships to it pertinent to these magazines. Sidney I. Dobbin and Kenneth B. Kidd write that the romantic notion of children's innocence in Victorian literature assumed and emphasized children's proximity to nature as a matter of purity and pastoralism (2004, 4). The social agenda of narratives which emphasised this mind of innocence, like those Robin Bernstein (2011) highlights more broadly in children's culture in this era, privileged whiteness in their representations of children spending time in the great outdoors as a way of distinguishing them from both racialised child labour and also in the case of 'American Bad Boys' like Huckleberry Finn, 'the civilising influences of the home' (2004, 6). Traditions of writing about nature in children's literature ranged from representations of wilderness to more domestic settings like gardens where plant nurture or animal care formed narratives of sympathy and innocence. Nature has always been a feature of children's literature, and in the early twentieth century representations in popular children's literature included largely pastoral depictions of the child outdoors which in hand with Victorian literature's emphasis on idealised spaces formed narratives which saw children romanticised in both more domesticated outdoor spaces like gardens as well as in wilderness.

Children's literature has traditionally depicted the natural world as an idealised space but for African Americans the idea of escaping into the natural world is more complicated because these spaces were not typically safe retreats and/or represented past violence. For African American children's writers such escapes might have more pertinent appeal as reprieve from the difficulties of modernity but neither Fauset nor Du Bois were set on the idea of children's content in general being solely retreats from the issues facing modern Black life. Just as African American environmental thought has its own specific relationships to natural experience, Black children's literature

navigates children's relationships to nature in culturally and politically specific ways as well. Encouraging critical engagement in children's texts, *The Brownies' Book* featured writers who drew from the common tropes of children's literature, nature writing, contemporary conservation concerns as well social justice concerns. It fit into a broader contemporary moment in which Black Americans like Du Bois were questioning what it meant to spend time outdoors, to have a relationship with the American natural landscape which was haunted by past trauma and mired by present difficulties like lynching and both de jure and de facto segregation. They asked: How is it possible reconcile a relationship with the land when the land has been a site of violence for generations? *The Brownies' Book's* representations of nature picked up on these in its own various explorations of how the relationship between Black children and the natural environment were navigated. *The Brownies' Book's* depictions of Black children in nature were part of its broader navigation of representing childhood and its racialised associations as they considered what it meant for Black children to play and explore in nature. This was in some ways quite straightforwardly about the civil rights activism of the NAACP and other progressive organisations that was reflected in Du Bois's vacation writing. In *The Crisis* he had often written about the right for children to access playgrounds and arks, or organisations like The Negro Fresh Air Committee establishing a retreat for children's day trips in New York. The examination of Idlewild and the right to recreation and leisure was also present in *The Brownies' Book*, mainly in its reporting on Young Women's Christian Associations Girl Reserves activities. These were not written by Du Bois but reflect his vacation writing in their emphasis on the benefits of civic involvement in nature and their insistence on Black joy. In the rest of this article I will examine an example of how *The Brownies' Book* depicted African American youth in relationship with outdoor spaces.

The Girl Reserves was a faction of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) established in 1918 to promote the organisation's values amongst girls. The Girl Reserves broadly promoted good Christian citizenship to tomorrow's women and sought to promote post-war patriotism and community building through activities similar to Scouting organisations. It was, unlike the Scouts at this time, open to African Americans, Native Americans and established branches for a variety of marginalised groups. Jennifer Helgren notes that most contemporary organisations of

this kind had racialised and gendered ideas of citizenship (2022, 2) and whilst the Girl Reserves was ostensibly more inclusive the organisation's mission was based on racist, xenophobic and classist stereotypes as it promoted the need for good Christians to help civilise othered populations. Its manual for group advisors highlights for example 'the needs of colored girls' in ways which focus largely on the poverty of the US south, the lack of recreation options and the attempts of various health organisations to improve attention to their needs. Most progressives, Black and white alike were attentive to these issues, but the Girl Reserves manual also emphasised the low desire amongst African American adults to support their children's educational improvement in these areas as well. Nevertheless, many African Americans did find value in running youth factions within the YWCA. Aside from the organisational dimensions of the Girl Reserves, what I am most interested in is the way that *The Brownies' Book* reported on its activity. How did a magazine at odds with the organisation's racism promote its activities for young readers?

The first article published in June 1920 written by Crystal Bird gives an overview of the organisation and is mostly focussed on its mission to 'train girls for citizenship, to give them a sense of responsibility toward their community and their country; to give them strong, vigorous bodies; trained, alert minds; an appreciation of spiritual values; and a knowledge of the joy of life; thus making for a happy girlhood and a useful womanhood' (1920, 187). It quotes from the YWCA manual and outlines activities as well as emphasising the hope of the organization to tender racial integration between white and Black members. It was typical of a progressive era organisation that sought to train young people towards good citizenship, but its promotion of good citizenship was pertinent for African American youth because of their tenuous access to full citizenship rights in the US. The articles also wrote often about the outdoor activities the groups took part in; hikes, swims and camping were regular occurrences amongst Girl Reserves and were written about in terms of their value for personal progress. One article describes a hiking trip: 'the girls were taken on a long hike through Fairmount Park and after an arduous climb up one of the steepest hills of the park, they stopped at the summit for their meetings. This elevated position assisted their minds also to rise and take a wholesome outlook on life' (July 1921, 214). Written by the Washington D.C branch secretary, Olive C. Jones, it goes on to detail the code of conduct the girls came up with alongside their leaders after this hike which included

health and hygiene rules like 'take at least one hour's exercise daily (out of doors)' and 'eat only nourishing food' as well as rules on modest dress like wearing 'low heeled sensible shoes' and 'no cosmetics' (July 1921, 214). Respectability, discipline, and good health were common values for progressives invested in groups like the Girl Reserves. For Du Bois these were, despite the racialised notions of these values, still important. It is evident that Du Bois supported the Girl Reserves; in a July 1921 article on the 'Girl Reserves Conference' notes that 'a short speech by Dr Du Bois' was delivered after their dinner (212). It makes sense that he supported the organisations work, since its dual interest in the civic action of Black youth and its reporting which emphasised the joyful experience of natural environments are reflective of his own writing on these issues. The articles written about the organisation reflect the kind of civic action that Du Bois had written about in *The Crisis* around giving urban children the chance to experience both the pleasure and the health benefits of outdoor retreats.

However, the way that the Girl Reserves articles were framed in *The Brownies' Book* deviates from these more straightforward reflections on the benefits of outdoor activity. The use of photographs alongside the articles, which show girls smiling and laughing as they swim, or posing playfully before hikes, I argue, add a different dimension to the organisational reporting which favours outdoor activity for the purpose of self-improvement. The photographs emphasise joy and play in ways which insist upon these activities as sources of pleasure and these sit in tension to the reports which name the same activities as ones of improvement and exercises in learning restraint. Occasionally the articles do directly describe outdoor activity as joyful, but these usually sit alongside other descriptions of more formal activity. In the January 1921 issue Elizabeth Morton and Olive C. Jones write about a camping trip in Chesapeake Bay where swimming is a much-anticipated activity, a reward for completing chores and education: 'What excitement we felt each time we changed our middies and bloomers for our bathing suits! The delightful sensations we felt as we swam about in the cool waters of the bay were ever new' (January 1921, 14). This description of joy is significant in part because it contrasts so much of what the reporting on Girl Reserves activities was focussed around but the article is still largely focussed on more restrained and educational activity. What is more interesting about this example though is the location of the camp mentioned. The camp at Highland Beach at Chesapeake Bay, was an African American resort founded in 1893 by Charles

Douglass, Frederick Douglass's son. Douglass set up the exclusive resort as a retreat after he was turned away from a restaurant in a nearby beach town. Du Bois was amongst famous visitors to Highland Beach (Katherine Capshaw, 2021, 385) and it served mostly an elite class of Blacks. However, the Girl Reserves article itself omits any facts about the history of the destination. Katherine Capshaw notes that the article's focus on play within a community of girls rather than the history of segregation that informed the establishment of places like Highland Beach suggests the ways in which the girls flourish 'outside of white spaces and it sets aside the possibility of reading Highland Beach directly through an uplift agenda' (2021, 385). But the articles do largely focus on uplift as the purpose of the organisation's activities and it is in the photographs that accompany them which challenge the reading of the Girl Reserves activities as solely part of an uplift agenda. A focus on play and pleasure spans the rest of the magazine, as Capshaw has discussed in her reading of its snapshots and games, but the girl reserves photograph alongside this suppressed history of Highland Beach speak to something about the magazine's specific engagement with pleasure in natural environments. It is this focus on pleasure and play in outdoor spaces that distinguishes the magazine's framing of the organisation, and I argue in its use of photographs to accompany the articles it engages fugitive strategies in order to resist the civilisation rhetoric of the organisation more broadly.

The photographs which accompanied the articles as well as photographs of Girl Reserves elsewhere in the magazine (i.e. not accompanying specific articles referring to the organisation) were more explicitly focussed on play and joy. The photographs printed alongside the reports are usually snapshots of outdoor play: swimming, preparing for hikes, or playing sports. In other photographs of the organisation's activities play was not the focus, like Figure 2



Figure 2: 'Girl reserves' (1919). Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, The New York Public Library. The New York Public Library Digital Collections.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47de-1d45-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

which shows a 1919 photograph of Girl Reserves mid-activity, with three rows of uniformed girls stood in formation holding at the end of stretched arms a pole. *The Brownies' Book* however only printed photographs of Girl Reserves that wore this uniform. Instead, they capture girls in playful snapshots, swimming, getting ready for hikes and playing sports. The photographs capture movement and playfulness in ways which contrast the organisational duties described in the articles. They depict an emphasis on joy and play as a form of defiance to the demonisation of these characteristics in black children as well as to their restricted access to outdoor recreation, leisure time, nature.

Images of Girl Reserves appear a couple of times in *The Brownies' Book* apart from the articles which specifically name them. In two photographs which appear in June and October 1920 groups of girls are photographed outdoors. In one, six girls are sitting or lying in the grass in front of tents pitched along a line of trees. The photograph is attributed in the bottom right-hand corner and in a logo printed in the top left of the image to the 'War Camp Community Service' which was a recreation focussed service aimed at raising the spirits of service men. The uniforms of the girls in the picture, their white shirts with a darker coloured scarf, seen worn by the girl seated second from the left of the image, is likely a Girl Reserves uniform. Although the magazine does not attribute any connection between the Girl reserves and War Camp Community Service it is not unlikely that they would have been involved. However aside from the attribution to the War Camp Community Service, there is no reference to it or its specific work in *The Brownies' Book* and none of the Girl Reserves articles in the magazine mention it either. Instead, the caption on this photograph reads 'What is so rare as a day in June?' Here, in the June issue of the magazine it is likely attributed for no more than arbitrary reasons, but the effect it creates is one which highlights the leisure seen in the photograph rather than the work that that camp and organisations emphasised. The girls in the image are seen at rest, their poses informal as they look in different directions, none of them looking towards the camera. They are captured in a moment of rest and leisure outdoors. Similarly, in October 1920 another image of eight girls paddling in water underneath a bridge appears unattributed to any specific article. In this image you can again see one girl in full uniform, the others without their scarves. They stand or crouch ankle deep in the water, captured on film mid activity. A few girls look towards the camera, one in the



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left of the image poses jauntily with a hand on her waist and her head tilted to the side. Another two crouch the right of the image, tilting their heads upwards to look at the camera from where it appears they have just been looking into the water, searching one of them holds a stick in hand. It is another image which captures girls in the midst of their leisure outdoors. *The Brownies' Book's* articles and photographs on the Girl Reserves focus on Black youth's enjoyment of outdoor recreation reflected Du Bois's contemporary thought on access to the environment as a civil rights issue, in how they draw attention to how African American youth might navigate their relationships to spaces they have historically been denied access to. Du Bois's answer to this in his writing on leisure insisted on the joy that comes from playing outdoors as a challenge to the exclusion of African Americans from these spaces. In the insistence on the joy that playing outdoors brings, the magazine frames the Girl Reserves content in a similar vein, removing any explicit history of this exclusion and emphasising only the pleasure. In the images printed none of the uniformity of the organisational values or activities described are highlighted, only the pleasure which was rarely expressed in the articles. The Girl Reserves articles insist on the possibilities of finding the natural world a refuge from the realities of the colour line, just as Du Bois had found at Idlewild, and they do so through emphasising images of play. In these images the magazines emphasis on play, agency, feeling and fugitivity come together in their thematic focus on representing Blackness in the outdoors.



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