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Anthony Kwame Harrison



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Writing Black Life in Mountains: Race and Representation in an Emerging American Literary Field

Anthony Kwame Harrison

- 1 The Great Migration of African Americans (circa 1910 to 1970s) from the rural South to Northern and Midwestern cities recast representation of Black life in the United States (U.S.) from rooted in vernacular folk culture to essentially urban.¹ Yet starting in the 1970s, a pattern of reverse migration—back to the places that earlier in the century Black families had left—began. Not surprisingly, the field of African American literature, followed suit. Whereas formerly Black American writers had primarily showcased urban sophistication and struggle,² in the final decades of the twentieth century, a renewed interest in embracing southern rurality arose. Still, amidst these literary twists and turns, the experiences of Black people living in mountain settings remained largely invisible.
- 2 This invisibility supported the prevailing idea that Black people do not belong in mountainous areas. Such perceived racial geographies are founded, in part, on the erroneous belief that the American South—the region considered by many as the epicenter of Black American cultural life—is predominantly flat. In fact, the Appalachian Mountains, which in their broadest conception span the Eastern United States from Alabama to Canada, cover significant territory (and elevation) in traditional Southern states like Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and North Carolina. Not only have African Americans resided in the mountainous regions of these states for centuries (Cabbell, 1980), they have had smaller but no less important presences in the mountains of the Northeastern U.S. as well as the American West (see DuBois 2007 [1940]; Wood, 2021).³
- 3 In this article, I explore the emergence of a developing literary field centered on African Americans living among mountains. In doing this, I examine a selection of post-1970s books that center Black mountain life. Whereas a handful of short story and essay collections have been written about this topic (see for example hooks, 2009;

Spriggs and Paden, 2018), I focus on novels and memoirs as examples of long-form writings that feature Black mountain communities. This specificity allows me, first, to spotlight sustained, book-length works that present Black highland communities as part of their main theme and, second, to achieve a more comprehensive coverage of the field.⁴ The historical dearth of writings about African Americans living among mountains is particularly notable given the frequency with which mountain metaphors appear in Black literary and political traditions. Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Martin Luther King Jr., and numerous others have employed mountains as important symbolic devices when crafting calls for racial consciousness and uplift. While rarely appearing as natural features of the landscapes where most Black literature is set, mountains clearly occupy a significant place in the Black literary imagination.

- 4 I primarily focus on three books, all by African American authors, which I believe represent notable milestones in the development of this emerging literary genre. David Bradley's 1981 novel, *The Chaneyville Incident*, is one of the first post-civil rights era works by an African American writer to center Black people living among mountains. Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s 1994 memoir, *Colored People*, extended this tradition—in fact, few if any books about Black mountain communities were written in the interim—and, in notable ways, anticipated the development of a distinct Affrilachian writing movement aimed at spotlighting the experiences and perspectives of Black Appalachians. The term “Affrilachian”—combining African (America) and Appalachian—is credited to Kentucky poet, Frank X Walker, one of the founding member of a collective called the Affrilachian Poets (Taylor, 2011). Another founding member, Crystal Wilkerson, authored the 2016 novel *The Birds of Opulence*, which serves as an exemplar of this budding literary tradition.⁵ Although these are not the only post-1970s books about Black mountain life in America, both their contemporary (i.e., non-historical) subject matter and the centrality of mountains to their storylines make them suitable selections for tracing the genealogy of a nascent literary movement that seeks to recognize and open-up space for Black people in mountain areas.

Affrilachia: a Bellwether for Black Mountain Writing

- 5 In naming Affrilachian as a distinct identity, Walker not only drew attention to the invisibility of Black Appalachians, he unsettled fixed notions of who was Appalachian, thus creating space for “all kinds of hidden identities in the region” (Taylor, 2011). These include previously unrecognized social groups—for example, queer Appalachians—as well as intersectional diversities contained within social groups (see Appiah, 1994). Over the past decade, such revisions to the region's identity have resulted in a wellspring of Affrilachian writings. Much of this takes the form of poetry (see Spriggs and Paden, 2018) and short stories (see Turner, 2021); however, a number of novels and memoirs have also appeared. In addition, there has been a significant increase in scholarly research on Black Appalachian communities. In spring 2024, the *Journal of Appalachian Studies* published a special issue on Black Appalachia; at the same time, June Appal Recordings—the longstanding Kentucky-based record label—released its first definitive Appalachian hip-hop collection, featuring primarily Black Appalachian artists (*No Options*, 2024). Black Appalachia is experiencing a moment of unprecedented recognition. Through examining three books, written in different decades, I trace the

dynamic relationship between Black mountain people and their evolving senses of Black being within these highland environments.

- 6 While all three of the books I discuss are set in Appalachia, I maintain that the project of writing Black life into mountains represents an important symbolic intervention that has wide-reaching implications beyond the Appalachian region. Expanding representations of African America to include people residing in mountain communities affirms the diversity of Black experiences in the U.S., countering one-dimensional presentations of Black life that fuel popular stereotypes and notions of racial essentialism (Appiah, 1994). In many instances, especially the Appalachian case, sizable, though historically unacknowledged, African American communities exist (Cabbell, 1980). Yet even in mountainous regions where Black people do not have a significant demographic presence, the project of portraying Black life in what are essentially *racial frontier spaces* extends the imagined racial geography, challenging notions that Black people only belong in certain environments. Indeed, one important outcome of this work is to reframe understandings of all mountain areas—whether Appalachia or the Green Mountains of Vermont—as exclusively white spaces (Anderson, 2015).
- 7 Shattering the hegemony of whiteness over mountain spaces also helps to facilitate the integration of non-white residents and recreators (Harrison, 2013). Where historically such people have been presumed out-of-place—and therefore subject to microaggressions,⁶ extra-ordinary difficulties, and open hostilities—by representing Black mountain life in writing, these authors enhance possibilities for both non-white migrants attempting to create new homes and non-white visitors interested in recreational pursuits.
- 8 For Black Appalachians in particular and Black mountain people more generally, the emergence of a potential Affrilachian literary canon signals an important assertion of identity and belonging.⁷ Drawing from the theories of Paulo Freire (1993), a wealth of research confirms the connections between literacy and the development of a critical consciousness (see for example, Seider *et al.*, 2020). In her study of Afrofeminist literary spaces in Switzerland, Pamela Ohene-Nyako (2019) found that women of colour's first encounters with readings featuring peoples and cultures they could directly identify with produced liberating effects. This included recognition, for the first time, of their lack of representation in the literature they had previously been exposed to, feelings of affirmation and validation, and ultimately empowerment (Ohene-Nyako, 2019). Similarly, as African American residents of mountain regions encounter writings that center their lives and stories, there is the potential to awaken new planes of political consciousness that counter prevailing images of rural, mountain, and Black people being ignorant and apathetic.
- 9 In the remainder of this piece, I discuss the three selected books, emphasizing how they represent progressive efforts to frame the relationship between Black people and mountains. These efforts, I argue, not only challenge existing ideas that Black people are out-of-place in mountains, they offer new conceptions of Black liberation grounded in affective attachments between multiple generations of people and land (Huehls, 2021). Before doing this, I briefly outline the hegemonic association between Whiteness and mountains that these Black writers are contending with and responding to.

White Racial Imaginaries: White Wilderness, White Mountains

- 10 The common perception that African Americans are out-of-place among mountains is inextricably connected to their historically fraught relationship with wilderness spaces. A robust literature exists discussing the exclusionary practices that contributed to Black people's invisibility in, and general aversions to, the great outdoors (see Finney, 2014; Krymkowski, 2021). The very idea of *wilderness*, particularly in the North American context, is a human-made construction steeped in Whiteness. Whereas it suggests the absence of civilization and human intervention, the demarcation and preservation of such *wild spaces* can only be realized through boundary-making (DeLuca and Demo, 2001; Guyot, 2011). Boundaries involve a combination of natural and social elements. Where topographical boundaries are nearly always products of human delineation (Fall, 2005), the most conveniently created boundaries are supported by natural features—particularly landscape features like mountains and waterways that are not easily traversed. Accordingly, most mountain areas, even those with extensive human inhabitants, are shrouded in wilderness imagery and associations.
- 11 When Europeans arrived in the Western Hemisphere, their interactions with the environment, including the millions of people residing there, were governed by a *moral geography* that authorized conquest (Meeker, 1973). George Lipsitz (2011) theorizes this separation of humans and nature, with the imperative for the former to conquer the latter, as an early manifestation of a *white spatial imaginary*. Such racialized topographies “idealize[d] ‘pure’ and homogenous spaces, controlled environments, and predictable patterns of design and behavior” (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 29). The natural environment had to be harnessed, enclaves of civilization needed to be carved out, and, “in order to have pure and homogenous spaces, ‘impure’ populations [had] to be removed and marginalized” (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 29). Throughout the colonial period and continuing into the newly formed United States' Westward Expansion, racist philosophies, such as the *great chain of being* and *manifest destiny*,⁸ framed European settlers' encounters with both nature and the indigenous stewards of the land. White people, according to prevailing ideologies, had the right and duty to take ownership of the continent and to civilize/colonize its less-than-human inhabitants. Sylvain Guyot describes these early ecological frontiers as “highly racialised, contested, and politicised zones of domination” (2011, p. 683). The constructed American wilderness, and most particularly its mountainous regions, should therefore be recognized as “not a natural fact, but a political achievement” (DeLuca and Demo, 2001, p. 55), with a history and maintenance that acknowledges and invites specific groups of people in and, whether explicitly or implicitly, polices the inclusion of others.
- 12 Following the premise that “all social relations are grounded in spatial relations” (Hawthorne, 2019, p. 5), Polly Pter-Wilkins observes a relational ontology that frames “the human and non-human as mutually constituted in and through social relations” (2022, p. 4). Such an approach recognizes agency as existing outside of direct human actions and intentions, thus allowing for consideration of the role mountains, terrains, gradients, forests, roads, railways, and the like—what Pallister-Wilkins refers to as “more-than-human entanglements” (2021, p. 3)—play in determining mobility and access to particular places. Within mountainous regions, both mobility and access are severely constrained, which has the potential to simultaneously amplify and nullify

existing social hierarchies. As such, mountainous regions are productive spaces for considering how marginalized groups, in this case Black Americans, comply with, resist, and otherwise negotiate the hegemonic structures imposed on them.

Writing Black Mountain Life

- 13 *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981) is a pioneering work of Black mountain fiction that recounts the experiences of John Washington, a Black college professor, returning to the small, Western Pennsylvanian town where he grew up. John is beckoned by his mentor (and surrogate father) “Old Jack” Crawley, who years earlier had taught his young *protégé* the various skills of masculine woodcraft. Although a major theme of Bradley’s book is to expose White Supremacy’s most violent valences—both after the Civil Rights era and above the Mason-Dixon Line⁹—*The Chaneyville Incident* foregrounds a version of virile mountain masculinity that is remarkably conventional in privileging *man’s* mastery over *his* immediate surroundings. Both John and Old Jack relate to their mountain surroundings in ways that resemble Lipsitz’s (2011) *white spatial imaginary*. They are proud and defiant men, who seek freedom in the mountain wilderness, away from women and the trappings of civilization.
- 14 Yet Bradley does not portray these Black woodsmen as backwoods simpletons. John and Old Jack are generally logical and highly deliberate in their approach to mountain living. In a particularly enthralling passage, John tracks a young deer through a snowstorm across a mountain ridge. Far from a brutish quest to kill, readers cannot help but to appreciate the patient, precise, and strategic science of the hunt:
- By then I knew even more about [the deer]. I knew he was a little larger than I had thought . . . He was smart too . . . he had become aware of me. Not just something; me. He hadn’t spotted me, or scented me, and he wasn’t aware of what I was, but there was no doubt in his mind that there was something back there behind him where nothing ought to be, and so he was moving more sharply. . . But I still had my chance because he wasn’t running. (p. 245, 247)
- 15 John’s story is one of a cerebral Black man who rediscovers himself in the wilds of the mountains. John is excited by the thrill of the hunt and, particularly, by the return of his old tracking knowledge, which is juxtaposed to the book-learning that has defined his achievements in the city. By the end of the book, John is more than at home in the mountains; he is of the mountains.
- 16 In *Colored People* (1994)—a coming-of-age memoir—Gates discusses a disappearing era of Black mountain communities by describing the place that nurtured his childhood: a small Black neighborhood nestled in the Allegheny mountains.¹⁰ Gates’ nostalgia for a time now past intensifies as he recounts his community’s loss of isolation following desegregation, the introduction of television, and national economic shifts. For Gates, the relationship between Black people and the mountain wilderness is similar to that portrayed by Bradley. Through hyperbolic storytelling, Gates shares that he “never knew colored people anywhere who were crazier about mountains and water, flowers and trees, fishing and hunting” (p. 16). His Uncle Jim, especially, hunted and fished “like he *owned* the woods” (p. 158—emphasis in original).
- 17 Uncle Jim counseled his young nephew about the distinction between *man’s laws* and *God’s laws*. Regardless of what the former said about hunting licenses, seasons, and quotas, Uncle Jim followed the moral code of God’s land. To him, animals were put on

earth to be hunted and eaten. This perspective was echoed by Black feminist Kentuckian, bell hooks, when she wrote about a “counter hegemonic black subculture . . . usually in hollows, hills and mountains governed by beliefs and values contrary to those of mainstream culture” (hooks, 2009, p. 8, 20).

18 The ability to hunt, for both John Washington (who mentions being weary of game wardens) and Uncle Jim, brings questions of land ownership and legal rights to the fore. Both men refuse to observe existing societal laws and, therefore, could be described as poachers. Yet, hunting regulations in the U.S. were introduced to restrict African Americans’ access to self-reliant food sources as well as to limit their ownership of guns, both instruments of self-defense (Krymkowski, 2021). Accordingly, these Black mountaineers, through their actions and observances, challenge conventional notions of property ownership and citizenship by proposing alternative relationships between people, society, and land.

19 *The Birds of Opulence* (2016) represents a different kind of Black Appalachian novel whose genesis can be traced to both Walker’s designation of “Affrilachia” as a distinct place (see above) and important interventions made by Gates (and others) regarding the way Black America should be thought of and represented. In the opening pages of *Colored People*, Gates declares that he is not “Everynegro” nor a “citizen of the world”:

I am from and of a time and place—Piedmont, West Virginia—and that’s a world apart, a world of difference. So this is not a story of a race but a story of a village, a family, and its friends. And of a sort of segregated peace. (p. xv-xvi)

20 Rather than a denial of *Blackness*, here Gates is advocating for a specificity of Black experiences, which resist our inclinations to universalize race.

I want to be black, to know black, to luxuriate in whatever I might be calling blackness at any particular time—but to do so in order to . . . experience a humanity that is neither colorless nor reducible to color. (p. xv)

21 Throughout the 1990s, scholars like Lipsitz and Kwame Anthony Appiah attacked notions of racial essentialism by proposing that identities, which always involve a dialogue between how others see a person and how they see themselves, are crafted “from a tool kit of options made available by our culture and society” (Appiah, 1994, p. 155). This tool kit, of course, differs according to such things as race, gender-identity, religion, age, and place. Thus, when Gates announces that he is *from and of* both a specific place and a fleeting moment in time, he is delineating a particular cultural context that gave shape to his tool kit: it is Appalachian; and it is from a time when the mountains still offered a peaceful sense of seclusion.

22 In this way, *Colored People* can be thought of as a predecessor to Wilkerson’s story about four generations of Black women living in the fictional Kentucky mountain community of Opulence. Unlike John Washington’s *Chaneyville*, Opulence is presented as a female-centered world. Like Gates, Wilkerson mourns the loss of communalism, but pinpoints its erosion in what Mitchum Huehls describes as the “loss of affective and experiential attachments to land and place” (2021, p. 446). This drama plays out most powerfully in the dynamic between Minnie Mae Goode, the family matriarch, and her sons who have moved to the city. When the young men return home, self-conscious in their citified presentations-of-self, they mock their family’s country ways and encourage selling the family property—known as the “homeplace.” Minnie Mae and the other women of Opulence recognize a spiritual tie to the land. For them it is not a matter of conquest,

mastery of woodcraft, or flouting existing laws. Their understandings of who the land belongs to are instead predicated on experiential and ancestral connections.

- 23 Throughout *The Birds of Opulence*, the mountain landscape serves as an ever-present source of comfort and healing. The Goode women, in particular, experience the mountains as sites of freedom, fortified by enduring “attachments to land, place, family and faith” (Huehls, 2021, p. 435). Even at the novel’s close, with three of the four generations of Goode women deceased and the family property sold off to “city white folks,” the ancestral spirits of the land—possibly Minnie Mae herself—make their presence felt, confounding the new owners’ efforts to gentrify the homeplace by digging a man-made pond there (Wilkerson, 2016, p. 193). Thus, while *The Chaneyville Incident*, *Colored People*, and *The Birds of Opulence* all succeed in placing African Americans among mountains, Wilkerson’s novel most explicitly promotes a counter hegemonic notion of Black mountain being, based on more than simply extending the rights and abilities of white people, to inhabit mountainous regions, to Black people. The Black women of *Opulence* not only belong among mountains, their metaphysical connection to a specific mountain setting gives rise to greater forms of justice and Black liberation.

Conclusion

- 24 Although millions of African Americans reside within Appalachia, Black people, on the whole, continue to have a fraught relationship with mountains. This is largely due to the historic refusal to recognize Black mountain communities (Cabbell, 1980). By writing Black people into mountains, today’s Black authors are unsettling sedimented beliefs and activating new collective imaginaries surrounding who Black Americans are and where they belong. In presenting these three books, I acknowledge that differences across rural spaces—for example, local dialects and customs—can often be more pronounced than they are between urban settings; and in representing these spaces, each author takes license to write their world according to their own values, sensibilities, and priorities. Nevertheless, in all these works we see Black people claiming their connections to mountains, and affirming modes of Black being that potentially provide new ways of thinking about race and racism in relation to space.
- 25 Two years after the publication of *Colored People*, bell hooks published *Bone Black* (1996), a memoir of her Kentucky childhood. Except for a few mentions of life “on the hill” in an early chapter, mountains are absent from hooks’ story (p. 10). Thirteen years later, hooks published *Belonging*, a collection of essays chronicling her life-journey as it connects with “issues of place and belonging” (2009, p. 3). In this later work, she continually references how growing up in the Kentucky hills, among “mountain folk, hillbillies, [and] Appalachians,” shaped her (p. 13). The striking difference between these two works illustrates the impact of Affrilachia’s emergence as a visible place along the American landscape, which, in turn, contributed to mountains being recognized as potential sites for locating previously underexplored Black experiences and perspectives. The three discussed books represent instructive moments in this progression. The development of a new literary tradition that centers Black mountain life both affirms and advances African Americans’ longstanding connections to mountains and their contemporary place among them.

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NOTES

1. Throughout this article, I use the terms “African American” and “Black (American)” synonymously.
2. Of course, a handful of early-twentieth-century African American authors, including Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright, set their writings in Southern, rural spaces.
3. The Adirondack Mountains of New York, the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts, the Green Mountains of Vermont, and the White Mountains of New Hampshire are all subranges of the Appalachian Mountains that are not part of the cultural region referred to as “Appalachia.”
4. While I do not claim to know of every novel/memoir ever written that features Black Americans in mountains, the project of surveying a close-to-comprehensive list is more manageable for book-length works than it would be if expanded to include various shorter pieces.
5. Whereas, a good deal of attention has been given to the emergence of Affrilachian poetry (see Taylor, 2011; Spriggs and Paden, 2018), I focus specifically on book-length, literary prose as a genre that has a broader potential audience.

6. Microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue *et al.*, 2007, p. 273).
 7. A notable step towards establishing such a canon was the 2018 publication of *Black Bone: 25 Years of the Affrilachian Poets* (Spriggs and Paden, 2018).
 8. The term *manifest destiny* symbolizes a combination of “American ideology, federal policy, settler action, demographic dominance, and military conquest” that justified and fueled nineteenth-century U.S. expansion (Isenberg and Richards, 2017, p. 5).
 9. The Mason-Dixon Line is a demarcation separating the American North and South—the two opposing sides in the Civil War, which had different laws regarding slavery and segregation.
 10. The Alleghany Mountains are a subrange of the Appalachians located primarily in West Virginia.
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ABSTRACTS

In this article, I explore the emergence of a developing literary tradition focusing on African Americans living in mountainous regions. In doing this, I discuss the appearance of the term “Affrilachian”—combining African (American) and Appalachian—as a distinct Black American mountain identity. I additionally examine three post-1970s books, all written by African American authors in different decades, that illustrate important contours in the development of this literary field: David Bradley’s *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981); Henry Louis Gates Jr’s *Colored People* (1994); and Crystal Wilkerson’s *The Birds of Opulence* (2016). All three books present alternative visions of how Black people belong among mountains and negotiate the racist structures that have historically worked to deny their connection to them. In tracing the differences between the three books, I underscore a steady progression towards more liberatory and affective attachments to land. Ultimately, I argue that the emergence of this new literary tradition, centering Black mountain life, both affirms and advances African Americans’ longstanding connections to mountains, and opens up additional space for recognizing their contemporary place among them.

mountains, Black Americans, literature, representation, Appalachia

AUTHOR

ANTHONY KWAME HARRISON

Virginia Tech