

Aufsatz

Wilderness as a Place of Eco-Memory in Arna Bontemps's *Bubber Goes to Heaven*

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Abstract

Arna Bontemps's *Bubber Goes to Heaven* draws deeply on African American religious and cultural traditions, blending environmental thinking, religion, and identity. This combination sets up a layered relationship between the natural world and the racial reality of the American South. At the same time, it creates a “liminal” space where Black identity can take root. Bontemps highlights this liminal space by framing the wilderness as an authentic site of cultural memory.

Keywords: African American culture, environmental thinking, ecomemory, liminality, religio-cultural identity

Arna Bontemps's *Bubber Goes to Heaven* capitalizes on the rich pantheon of African American religio-cultural memory, including the intertexture of nature, religion, and African American identity. The triad foreshadows the complex interplay of the binary of nature and Southern social space, on the one hand; and, on the other, yet in close connection to the latter, a liminal space, where Black identity can take shape. It is this aspect of the novel that I intend to investigate, showing the significance of the liminal in Bontemps's novels as it comes to the fore through the representation of the wilderness as a site of memory.

In the novel, the protagonist attains a religio-cultural vision through his return to nature, which—moving along the boundary between dream and reality—validates his Black selfhood. This return to nature takes place during a raccoon (“coon”) hunting trip. The hunting expedition, led by three white men—Zeke, Tom, and the “King”—is facilitated by Uncle Demus and Bubber. While Uncle Demus directs the hounds, Bubber, is tasked with “follow[ing] him up with a stick and shak[ing] the coon down from the

branches" (Bontemps 1998: 14) so that once the raccoon hits the ground, the dogs can catch it. As portrayed in Bontemps's novel, the practice of Southern hunting often "epitomiz[ing] the threat and terror that seeped into African American eco-memory" (Gaál-Szabó 2021: 20) serves to "reinforce racial and class divides" (*Between the Waters* 2016).

The racial divide is further reinforced by the portrayal of the Black characters, Uncle Demus and Bubber, who, in the eyes of white society, embody the "Uncle Remus" and "pickaninny" subtypes of the "coon" stereotype (Bogle 2001: 7). Bubber, along with the raccoon, exemplifies the "pickaninny" archetype, echoing the way Black children were frequently depicted in popular culture—often shown climbing trees, accompanied by animals, and referred to as raccoons on postcards (Turner 1994: 15). The degrading implication of such imagery was that Black children were perceived as animals rather than humans (Pilgrim 2000).

Uncle Demus's name strikingly echoes the figure of the "harmless and kindly" Uncle Remus, a character who "has always been used to indicate the Black man's satisfaction with the system and his place in it" (Bogle 2001: 8). The latter was employed as a narrator by Joel Chandler Harris—a white author—for the purpose of framing animal tales from Black folklore and presenting the struggles of Black people, while also incorporating African American dialect. These animal tales concern survival and the authentic Black self (see 'Br'er Rabbit'), yet Harris shifts the focus away from their identity-forming power by imposing an "idealized" framework of his own, which becomes "the primary element, depicting slavery as a benign institution filled with interracial harmony and good-natured humor" (Peterson and Gürel 2017: 25). Bontemps counters this idyllic framing of slavery and oppression by "appropriating and reworking" the stereotypical characters. On this issue, David Minter, the illustrator for the 1998 edition of the novel, expressed the following view:

For a long time, black people have suffered under negative stereotypes. Blackness was—and still is—seen as threatening and despicable. By taking those black stereotypes and using them to tell a positive story about a loving, hard working, and deeply religious black community, Bontemps makes an effort to reclaim them. (1998:10)

Bontemps thus consciously employs narrative strategies—such as the use of the vernacular (i.e., Black dialect) [10]—that enable a meaningful parallel to be drawn between his and Harris's representations of Black characters, while simultaneously setting them in contrast.

The story resonates with the memory of slave hunts inscribed in Black cultural memory, one of which is the legend of a slave named Jake Williams. After escaping, Williams sought refuge in a tree. The subsequent events—his overseer pursuing him with several "coon dogs"—vividly evoke the atmosphere of a raccoon hunt, in which Williams appears as the desperate, vul-

nerable “coon” and the overseer as the hunter. This narrative thus reflects the hierarchical power dynamics between white and Black individuals. Once the overseer located him, he climbed the tree after him, just as Bubber does after the fleeing raccoon. However, in this case, the story’s ending highlights its improbability: it is Williams who kicks the overseer to the ground, symbolically triumphing over the figure of slavery (Giltner 2008: 1).

In Bontemps’s novel, Bubber seemingly aligns himself with the hunters, as he appears to conform to society’s expectations by the fact that “he kept climbing, however, getting nearer and nearer to the top” (Bontemps 1998: 16), where the raccoon had been caught in the trap. The act of climbing to the top of the tree functions as a powerful symbol in the novel, representing his growing distance from—and eventual complete separation from—his social and communal environment: “Below all was dark. When Bubber looked down, he could see only blackness” (16). At the same time, this also hints at the possibility of freeing himself from the “pickaninny” label imposed upon him, suggesting the potential for both escape and liberation. On this level, the parallel between the raccoon (the “coon” as animal) and Bubber (the little “coon” as a young Black boy) can be interpreted, even though Bubber’s role in the raccoon’s pursuit may seem contradictory—for after all, he climbs out onto the branch in order to push it off (18). Yet for both Bubber and the raccoon, climbing onto the branch represents their only chance of escape, even if it carries the very real risk of falling. Through Bontemps’s narrative strategy—particularly his personification of the raccoon as “Mistah coon” (18), a name that closely aligns the animal with the trickster figures of Uncle Remus’s folktale world—Bubber’s role undergoes a transformation: from pursuer and hunter, he becomes a fellow sufferer, a kindred spirit to the raccoon. This transformation is further reinforced when Bubber steps into the raccoon’s physical space as he leaves the safe part of the tree, thereby facing the same danger as his counterpart. That danger materializes when the branch cracks, and thus the judgment Bubber pronounces—“Well, Mistah coon, I feel lak yo’ time ain’t long, suh” (18)—ultimately seals his own fate as well:

He took the stick firmly in his right hand, got on the limb with the coon and began inching his way out. Easily, slowly, bit by bit he moved. The coon whined. Then Bubber felt the tree sway, heard a cracking sound, and knew that the limb had broken with him and the coon. In the next instant he felt himself plunging downward, and everything got blacker than midnight. (18)

The dual interpretation of the fall—namely, that the breaking of the branch and Bubber’s simultaneous plunge may signify either escape or failure—cannot be overlooked. Falling from the branch can be seen, on the one hand, as the futility of the “attempt to reach the top,” marking both the end of the effort to break free, and its ultimate failure. This is reinforced by common

hunting practices, in which, after a raccoon was forced down from the tree, it was usually either caught by the dogs or shot by the hunters. In this sense, Bubber (the little “coon”)—falling back into reality—is once again forced to return to the same position of vulnerability he had tried to escape from.

On the other hand, Bubber's fall and the subsequent dream can also be interpreted as a form of vision quest—showing powerfully how “alienation could be turned into habitation” through the reinterpretation of the environment (Gaál-Szabó 2022: 63). Vision quest is a cultural rite of passage, a ritual in which the individual undergoes a transcendent experience and comes into contact with a “guardian spirit.” After his fall, Bubber is lifted up by angels: “We is God's big angels, and we's taking you to heaven, Bubber” (19). The significance of the vision quest lies in its identity-shaping power, as Robin Ridington points out—those who experienced such a rite in childhood often referred to it later in life as a foundational element of their identity (1982: 215). While the vision quest is most commonly associated with Indigenous tribes, it can also be interpreted within the African American community—not only because of the historical connections between the two groups (see, for example, intermarriage between Native and African Americans [Katz 1997]), but also because Bubber's vision parallels Zora Neale Hurston's concept of “coming through religion” (Hurston 1981: 87), an African American conversion ritual that functions as a liminal act at a “secluded place[] to obtain the vision [...] outside social space [where] he power mechanisms of social space do not bind” (Gaál-Szabó 2013: 103–104).¹

The connection between African Americans and Native Americans is affirmed through Bubber's Native costume in the heavenly vision, which consists of a brown outfit trimmed in red, a headdress adorned with numerous bright feathers, a bow, and an arrow (Bontemps 1998: 54). Yet it is his relationship with the little Zulu girl that takes precedence—serving, in a way, as Bontemps's critique of the period's occasional emphasis on Native American genealogical ties. When Bubber fails in his role as an “Indian” during the Children's Day program, which is intended to represent the participants' roots and cultural affiliations, it is the girl dressed as a Zulu who alone stands by him and turns toward him, while the others laugh. The Zulu girl's performance during the program emphasizes her African roots: “I am a little Zulu girl. Faraway was my home. I dwelt in lovely Africa” (59). This idealized reference to African ancestry can be interpreted through Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities, in that the Zulu girl's connection to Africa is constructed through imagined or reconstructed memories. This conceptual framework was a key element of the “New Black Movement,” which regarded such reconnections as affirmations of identity and roots

¹ The vision quest described by Hurston is likewise embedded in nature, where the individual receives visions (Hurston 1981: 87). This religious parallel is further reinforced by the aftermath of Bubber's fall—his encounter with the supernatural.

(Hocker, n.d.). Bontemps's emphasis on the Zulu community aligns with this idea, as its vibrant and inspirational art had even reached Harlem (Hocker n.d.). Bubber's failure during the Children's Day program can be understood as a consequence of adopting an identity disconnected from his actual roots. Although the desired role of the Indian made Bubber proud and happy—"always wanted an Indian outfit, felt so proud his chest nearly popped" (Bontemps 1998: 54)—his forgetting of his part during the performance supports Bontemps's suggestion that Bubber has a deeper connection to the African heritage represented by the Zulu girl. Her compassionate encouragement ultimately inspires Bubber to put on his ceremonial outfit (62), symbolizing his decision to embrace his authentic self. In the vision, heaven appears as an allegory of the American Dream in Bontemps's novel—one that is deeply intertwined with, and nourished by, the classical ideal of the American Dream: that through hard work and individual effort, one can improve one's own life, and that America becomes a "melting pot" of diverse peoples and nations through peaceful coexistence. The former idea is reflected in the depiction of work as a guaranteed source of security: "Even the washerwomen had plenty of work and nothing to worry about" (41). The latter is confirmed by the prominent Children's Day event in Bubber's vision, in which various ethnic and racial groups (e.g., settlers, Native Americans, African Americans, Indians, Arabs, etc.) come together to form a multicultural community. Bubber's relationship to heaven is captured by Charles L. James in the novel's afterword, where he describes it as "the place of his deepest longings, the dream of a 'promised land'" (83). In Bontemps's imagined version of heaven, it is "where harmony prevails, where justice is secured, and where hard times are no longer among us" (83). This is further illustrated by Bubber's observation of "the square and the court house" in heaven (83), which serve as symbols of civic order and justice. The image of heaven also implies the disappearance of hardships associated with existential insecurity, most clearly exemplified in the life of Aunt Esther in the novel: "I have more washing than I can do all the time. That's one of the things what makes heaven so good. There ain't never no hard times here." It was no wonder, Bubber thought, "that people tried so hard to make heaven their home" (41).

The transcendent experience serves as the condition for Bubber's authentic coming of age. The vision takes place in the wilderness, a natural environment that signifies the intersection of spiritual, social, and cultural discourses. The spiritual dimension is especially emphasized by Bontemps through the presence of three trees in the wilderness, each laden with strong biblical associations—Adam, Eve, and Nebuchadnezzar: "It was just an ocean of dark green trees almost all of which looked alike. Three of them, however, were larger than the rest. Two of these stood side by side and were called Adam and Eve. The other, which was even taller, was just at the edge of the woods and was known as Nebuchadnezzar" (15). The trees named after

Adam and Eve—the archetypal figures marking the beginning of human-kind—suggest that the wilderness, as “typically meant the part of the landscape that is unaffected by human impacts” (Smith 2005: 279), symbolizes a realm in which Black identity and subjectivity are not formed in reaction to white societal expectations or oppressive systems, but instead constitute an ontological category in their own right.² By incorporating the creation narrative, Black identity is situated within a theological context, rendering it independent of social and human influences. This understanding aligns with a notion that emerged during the Harlem Renaissance, articulated by Hurston: “I remember the very day I became black” (1928: 215), which makes clear that the recognition of “blackness” only gains relevance within a social context. The Black theologian James H. Cone also emphasized the contextualized nature of Black existence when he stated, “Skin color has very little to do with being Black in America. To be Black means that your heart, soul, mind, and body are where the dispossessed are” (Cone 1969: 151). Thus, Cone identifies “blackness” less as skin color and more as a social construct. Interpreting “Black” as an ontological category signifies a departure from racial classification, strongly alluding to the paradisiacal state ordained by God, as represented by Adam and Eve before the Fall. In other words, the wilderness is an environment which, through its spiritual essence,³ a priori articulates the Black self, making the connection to nature inherently authenticating. The name of the third tree—Nebuchadnezzar—also carries biblical connotations referring to an ancient Babylonian king who had a vision of himself: “[...] There was a tree in the middle of the earth, and it was very tall. The tree grew large and strong; its top reached to the sky, and it was visible to the ends of the earth” (Daniel 4:7–8), which was later cut down. In the context of Bontemps’s religious thought, the description of the tree in the novel parallels the tree that appears as a vision in the biblical story, drawing a comparison between the Babylonian captivity of the Israelites and the African American memory of slavery. This parallel is reinforced by the name of one of the characters, Zeke, a nickname for Ezekiel—a prophet in Jewish tradition who proclaimed the story of liberation during the Babylonian captivity. In this sense, King Nebuchadnezzar can be seen as a symbol of the white social system—powerful and dominant—yet ultimately destined to end. The prophet Daniel conveyed God’s judgment over King Nebuchadnezzar: “[...] O king; this is the sentence which the Most High has passed

² The concept of “blackness as an ontological symbol” was popularized by James H. Cone (1970, 27)—one that in his early “theological anthropology of difference” (Gaál-Szabó 2018: 146) signals an “ideologically-informed theological position” (146) and one that, in his late theology, enables “his opening theologically towards reconciliation” (Gaál-Szabó 2025: 68).

³ This spiritual environment is defined in certain West African cultures as the “bush,” referring to the dense forest beyond human settlements, which served as an important supernatural resource and the site of religious rituals and spiritual transformations (Creel 1988: 47–51).

upon my lord the king" (Daniel 4:21), which can thus be interpreted as a final judgment on slavery and the white-dominated system. The tree symbolizing Nebuchadnezzar represents, on the one hand, oppression, which in Bontemps's interpretation can be clearly understood as the oppression of the African American community by white people; on the other hand, the prophet Daniel's judgment appears as a divine promise, a hope that this oppression will come to an end. Nancy Kang draws a parallel between Bubber and Nebuchadnezzar from a different perspective, suggesting that surviving the fall makes Bubber unique, just as the king seemingly falls into oblivion through the loss of his reason, since "a fall from this high branch would kill almost anything" (Bontemps 1998, 18). It is this "unique" quality that enables the parallel, in which Bubber becomes the human equivalent of the tree named Nebuchadnezzar (Kang 2014: 132). Kang's interpretation, however, overlooks the allegorical representation of Israel's captivity—inscribed in African American cultural memory—as a Black American experience. Another aspect of Kang's argument, however, becomes interpretable along the lines of the previously outlined biblical reading: "just as the biblical king was stripped of his senses in order to be saved, so, too, [...] Bubber [is] struck down—literally and figuratively—in order to be lifted up" (Kang 2014: 132). This interpretation becomes more compelling when considered in light of the question posed by Uncle Demus, which supports this notion of elevation: "Was you having a vision when we picked you up for dead out there underneath that tree?" (Bontemps 1998: 70). Bubber's state between life and death—highlighted by Uncle Demus—can be identified with the concept of liminality, as the vision he experiences in the wilderness evokes a ritual that validates the use of van Gennep's terminology.

The liminal event—Bubber's fall—results in his return to his own environment, his own reality. His reentry into the natural world also raises the issue of duality. With the fall, the sense of the reality of heaven dissolves, a loss that profoundly affects Bubber: "'I forgot to flap my wings,' he sobbed. 'I forgot to flap my wings.' His face was buried in a pillow. He could not stop crying" (69). The allegory of the attempt to flap his wings becomes an almost desperate effort to resist cultural forgetting—what Aleida Assmann describes as "related to non-intentional acts" (2008: 98), such as leaving something behind. In Bubber's case, this is realized through his awakening from the dream that follows the fall. At the same time, his return fulfills his sense of mission: to implement the vision he received as a form of cultural heritage for his community. This is emphasized by Robin Ridington, who articulates the community-shaping power of the "vision quest": "transformation of personal experience into culturally recognized knowledge is a powerful medium for bonding people to one another" (1982: 215). Although Bubber shares his vision with his home community, the questionable reality of the heaven he experienced renders the previously stated purpose less clearly ful-

filled. This lack of certainty emerges through the realization prompted by Aunt Sarah's curiosity after Bubber's return: "'Well did you see the Lawd?' Aunt Sarah asked eagerly. Bubber thought a moment. It was funny that he had not seen the Lord in heaven. 'No' he said. [Bubber]. [...] – Shucks, – she said [Aunt Sarah]. 'You ain't seen heaven if you ain't seen the Lawd. You ain't had no vision neither. You is just had a nightmare.'" (Bontemps 1998: 70–72). However, for Bubber, the divine presence—essential to the reality of heaven—cannot be experienced in either visual or auditory form. The absence of a manifestation of God draws attention to Bontemps's multicultural endeavor, through which he seeks to deracialize the religious discourse.⁴ This kind of neutrality stands in sharp contrast to Langston Hughes's conception of God, who, in his short story *On the Road* (Hughes 1935), expresses God's affiliation with the Black community by representing His speech through African American vernacular—thus, in a Conean sense, appropriating God and positioning Him in opposition to white society. This aspect of the dream casts doubt in Bubber's mind regarding the location: "He was not sure now whether he had been to heaven or not" (72). Nevertheless, through his return to nature—and the spiritual atmosphere it provides—he receives a vision in which people from diverse cultural backgrounds live together in equality and justice. Bubber's connection to nature offers a space for the reconstruction of Black selfhood within a broader, yet distinctly African American, perspective—one that engages with social and cultural dimensions: "the space in which the story takes place becomes a realm soaked in folk religion, where oral traditions prevail, and where black cultural identity is deeply embedded in the natural world" (James 1998: 83). It is the site of a ritual "in which man and nature conspire" (82), and the one that "can therefore serve as a place of moral regeneration and spiritual renewal" (Smith 2005: 279). Encountering this ideal vision thus prompts Bubber's identification, emphasizing the importance of cultural memory, which includes "the dynamics of individual memory" (Assmann 2008: 97). This vision remains vividly present within his home environment, pushing forgetfulness—intertwined with memory—into the background: "he could still hear the youngsters and Sister Esther calling to him and saying, 'Keep a-flapping your wings, Bubber.' He could still see the little Zulu cherub sliding her face up the banister of the Sunday School stairs and saying, 'Good-night, Bubber. Good-night'" (Bontemps 1998: 72).

⁴ The articulation or representation of God through the author's chosen linguistic means may constrain the reader's perception of God within a racial category.

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