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Reclaiming One's Place: Resurgence and Empowerment

Conference given by Eddy Harris at Université Grenoble Alpes — "Reclaiming One's Place: Resurgence and Empowerment" (21 November 2024)

Eddy L. Harris et Vincent Bucher

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PLAN

Collective exchange

TEXTE

Hello everybody.

And thanks for coming.

My name is Eddy Harris and I am here to…

Actually, I don’t know why I am here.

I don’t know what I am supposed to do.

No one gave me an instruction manual.

So what am I doing here?

It’s an existential question.

What if you, as an individual, had one day to save the world—what would you do?

I mean, what one thing would you focus on and do?

It’s not an apocalyptic question. I’m not asking you to save the world from a gigantic meteor strike or to avoid the next world war and bring about world peace or to save the planet from pollution or moral destruction…

Or am I?

I never thought of that before the other day. I got a message—out of the blue from someone I do not know—and he asked me: why do

you write?

It kind of goes along with the question why are you here? Why do you do what you do?

In short, you do what you do because it is who you are.

If in fact what you do is who you are, and if you flip that statement, then what you get is that who you are is what you do.

I like to fool myself into thinking I am a free man, that I can do what I want, that in fact I am the master of my fate. With that in mind, as a traveler with as much time on my hands as I need, I will never hesitate to help someone, woman or man, with heavy bags trying to make the stairs to the train platform. In fact, I seek them out. I am always on the lookout for someone who needs help. That, I continually tell myself, is who I am. And I constantly remind myself of it by always staying alert to someone in need. When I don't help, when I turn away, when I pretend not to see that old woman struggling with that heavy load, then I become someone else. Then I am not the person I profess to be and want to be.

Or am I?

What if my train is about to leave and I'm in a hurry? What if, at the end of that train ride, there is an important *rendez-vous* waiting?

In my heart, I tell myself that the me who is me and who is truly free, will allow himself to miss that train and be true to who he is, true to who I am.

But can we always be so authentic, so integral.

I think—at least I hope—that there is or can be a cleavage between who we are and at least some of the things we do.

Does telling a lie make me a liar?

There must be some leeway, some gap that allows for nuance.

And yet…

And yet…

If I were a Jew in Nazi Germany before the war or even after it and I got on a bus, how would I feel knowing that to my right and to my

left the persons sitting next to me likely were members of the Nazi party? How much nuance would I allow them? How much wiggle-room between them as persons and them as self-interested voters?

Does self-interest negate the bigger picture?

I think of this now as we are just off the elections in the USA and if I were there, how would I feel knowing that on a bus ride across Iowa or across Kansas or Wyoming or just about anywhere, the person to my right or the person to my left likely voted for a convicted felon, an adjudged rapist, a purported racist, an insurrectionist, a misogynist and an anti-American masquerading as a pro-American patriot hugging the American flag?

Can I as a Jew in Germany trust my Nazi neighbors to not live their politics? To not vote to send me to the extermination camp and the gas chamber? To be in the Nazi party, that was what you were voting for.

Pre-war? The answer is No.

During the war? Certainly not.

As a Jew in Germany after the war, how could I ever feel that I had or have a place in that place?

As an American who is black, given the history of injustice and discrimination and exclusion and terror and extermination perpetrated against minorities in the USA, and yet knowing no other place as home and having no other place to call my homeland, did I—do I—really have a place in that place? Can I feel like I belong there?

The election of Barack Obama gave us some hope that yes—yes, given the history of torture and tribulation, that yes we had made progress—much progress—and that yes, we had managed to carve out a place in that place which was our place as much as it was any other American’s place.

The election of Donald Trump threw cold water on the warm smoldering coals before they could catch fire and burst into a blaze.

With Obama on the way out and Trump on the horizon, I took my second canoe trip down the Mississippi River and one of the

questions I wanted to ask and have answered for me was: if we are what we do and do what we are, are we as well how we vote?

Can I vote with the Nazis and not want the extermination of the Jews, knowing full well that the extermination of Jews is part of the program?

Can I vote with the Nazis and not be one of them?

Can I join the Ku Klux Klan and know full-well what their programs and policies are and still claim that I am not a racist?

Can I turn a blind eye to the cross-burnings, to the lynchings, to the mistreatment and discrimination and profit from an unfair system and dismiss it as someone else's worry, when in fact what I'm subtly saying to those victims of that treatment is that I don't care, or less subtly I agree with them—whoever they are—you don't belong here? That is the message.

Can I vote for Trump based only on my own narrow concerns and not see the bigger picture?

You are what you eat, says the catchphrase. Are we, as well, how we vote?

Of course, there are nuances.

Voting for the candidate who promises lower taxes is one thing.

Voting for the proponent of separating families and putting people in holding camps is another.

Voting for a candidate who calls for exclusion or elimination or extermination or whose values go against the purported values of the society I want to create, is that not something else? Does it not make us an adherent to those policies if we vote for that candidate?

A candidate sets a tone.

A vote carries that tone into the atmosphere and into the ether and it infects the body politic.

With Obama in the rearview mirror and Trump on the horizon, I took my second canoe journey down the Mississippi River, right through the heart of Trump-country, to test whether we are how we vote or whether there is some separation between our public lives and our

private lives, how we vote and how we live. I wanted to see how the country would treat me—alone and vulnerable in a canoe.

I recently received another message from an anonymous someone who suggested—no, who demanded—that I stop talking about *Mississippi Solo*—Enough already with that book!—suggesting that I move along, get on with something else—as if I hadn't moved on, as if I hadn't written other books on other topics.

Well maybe I have and maybe I haven't.

I have written other books but I wonder if I've moved on to other topics.

Some critics—and readers too and bookstores—have classified me as a travel writer.

While it is true that in all but one of my books, place is central to the story, neither place nor movement is what the stories are about.

Some also say that I write about race and about identity—which is also true.

What I think I write about, and why I am not as appreciated in the US as I am in some other places, is that I write about the intersection of many simple things—like place, like identity, like thermo-nuclear physics and quantum mechanics and sp3 orbitals…

… —I just threw that in to see if you were paying attention—

… but if you put enough simple things inside a simple story, it makes for a denser kind of simplicity that Americans do not seem to appreciate.

Mississippi Solo is a very simple story.

It is the story of a young man at a particular point in his life, a kind of mid-point where decisions not only about the future have to be made, but about who the person in the canoe wants to be and ultimately is going to be.

It is about what one man can learn about himself when he is all alone and in unfamiliar territory and doing unfamiliar things like canoeing and camping and talking to strangers.

It is about whether a city-boy, surrounded by noise and activity all the time, can find a place in nature, in solitude, where he can be himself and more importantly, face adversity and face fear and find out who he is.

It is about solitude.

We live in society.

We are surrounded by noise and other people and all sorts of distractions. And sometimes the noise and the distractions keep us from living, keep us from experiencing and keep us, often, from interacting—and certainly from interacting with strangers.

But even as we are not interacting, we are not alone—not alone within an individual solitude.

Solitude was important to the *Mississippi Solo* journey. If any one thing was clear during that journey, it was that at the end of the journey I would either like or would not like—or even like to be—the person who was in that canoe with me, my constant companion with whom I would spend every second of every day of the rest of my life.

When you are alone, truly alone with nothing but your thoughts to distract you, you come to see yourself more clearly and recognize the things that need to be changed.

Or not.

That to me was the main aspect of the *Mississippi Solo* journey.

Solitude.

And yet…

We live in society. We are not solitary units, self-contained and self-sufficient.

The interactions, the encounters were just as important as the solitude. They create a secondary theme to the *Mississippi Solo* journey.

The lone individual in a modern society dealing with what we call the natural world and trying to take some lessons from it.

What lessons?

There are things you learn from being alone that you cannot learn on a crowded street while you try to dodge pedestrian traffic.

There are things you learn by being in the natural world.

The most important lesson, possibly, is the lesson of simplicity and cooperation.

The birds and the beasts and the trees don’t exalt themselves because they live in luxury apartments in Haussmanian buildings in Paris and work in super-structure skyscrapers in New York and fly from continent to continent in metal tubes with wings and communicate over long distances via cellphone and computer and have artificial intelligence do their thinking for them and robots doing the work for them, nor because they’ve conquered the seas and conquered the skies and space and all the species and put them all to work for us as food, as fodder, as cogs in a profit-making scheme.

What the birds and the trees and bees have learned and have to teach us—and what one man alone is his canoe can learn—is that each of us is small and each of us is big and each of us has a place.

In this world. In this country. Along that river—my place as much as anyone else’s.

I invite you to seek out the photos of Kathryn Cooper, photos which are beautiful as art and simply stunning. But what is even more impressive than the images themselves is what’s on display: the magnificent miracle of nature and the natural world at work, huge flocks of starlings, all of them working together, all of them, I suppose, having a role, each with a place in their world.

Richard Buckminster Fuller once said that nature never fails. Nature complies with its own laws. Nature is the law.

Break the law, pay the penalty.

Which brings me back to the initial question: what am I doing here? What are we all doing here?

Collective exchange

Vincent BUCHER. — Okay, thank you very much for that and thank you for having accepted our invitation, despite what your friends said, to revisit well-trodden grounds and coming back to the Mississippi in a way, via the Alps which is kind of unsettling. I’ll bounce back on what you said but I just wanted to start with the fact that even though you’re coming back to familiar ground, hopefully we’ll make you discover new territories as well, but certainly for me that’s the case. I’m not used to talking to living authors, usually they’re dead, in the pages of the book.

Eddy L. HARRIS. — Give me time, give me time, I’ll get there.

Vincent BUCHER. — I know, but I’m very happy that I get this opportunity as well, given I’m not accustomed to this exercise, it’s a bit of an adventure for me for sure. We’ll see how that plays out.
I was worried in particular, preparing for this, when I came across a passage in chapter 11, when you arrive at Lake Bemidji and meet the character of Emily, who is a recurrent figure throughout the book, and you say p. 56: “Talking to strangers is funny. You want to get to know them, to hear what they have to say but [… you] don’t want to pull out a tape recorder and shove a microphone under somebody’s nose. (Besides, all that stuff was in the canoe.) The best you can hope for is a good memory and a feel for how the stranger talks. Cadence and word choice. You can jot down notes and recollections later.” So, I guess we have it all wrong: you have a microphone under your nose, you even have a camera in front of you, but I do hope that we’re going to rise to the occasion and manage to start a proper conversation. But more seriously I feel like this is a good place to start, because it intervenes on p. 56 at the moment when you say that your journey has begun, and for me, that’s the impression that I had also, because around this idea of conversation —the ambiguity of the term, the way you use it—I saw something of a principle for your book, or a rule of writing in the way in which you think of the literary, and particularly, I saw in it something like a paradigm which made your book closer to the Mississippi, mimetic almost in a way, and so far as you define it p. 90 in these terms as well, you tell us: “the river […] is a strange kind of cleft,

one that strangely unites instead of dividing. A river that unifies north and south the same as it connects east and west—rather than creating an impasse—even though this linking bridge is two thousand miles long and a great distance across. […] Different phases in a man's life which, because it touches the lives of so many others along the way, actually connects those lives. A great-grandfather, a church elder, an old man sitting day after day on the same bench in a small town. You might never have paid much attention to him. But he has his effect. The river can't help but connect, like the old man touching lives however subtly. Or like a national purpose. Like a favorite baseball team. Like poverty. Something shared. A common understanding. Different in intensity and meaning perhaps to each who share it, but a common language that holds together like a delicate infrastructure" and, thinking back to that, I wonder if you're not that old man; and particularly coming back to the conversation that you started having about the identity between what we do and what we are, and why you write, I wondered if your writing isn't a perpetual search for this art of conversation, particularly with people with whom, technically, you shouldn't have them. This is something that recurs throughout the book and that we're going to come back to, I would argue, particularly with these predecessors of the Trumpians of today that you encountered in the south, whether they have more to say, whether you can start a conversation despite how they vote and what they do and if there's not a possibility for something that could be shared despite these ideologies and obstructions.

Eddy L. HARRIS. — Well, certainly those conversations are necessary and part of the problem with not having those conversations is that it leads us to a definite separation between people who cannot come together; when you canoe down the Mississippi River, politics is not part of the conversation. The conversation revolves around: "who are you?", "what are you doing?" and "why are you doing it?" As I canoed through Trump country one of the things I noticed was the generosity of all the people, almost every person I met explored some aspect of generosity with me. Which is what evokes that question: are we how we vote? Clearly if I'm in this part of the country and these people are voting for Trump, they should not treat me as nicely, as gently as they did and yet they do. So how then can we have a

conversation that gets us beyond politics and just into the humanity of an encounter? Yes, I am that old man who is connecting lots of people who find in me, without knowing it, a kind of nexus, a place where … they're coming into me and coming out of me in my next encounter with someone else. I'm also on the search for who I am and who these other people are too. It is, I think, the journey that we're all on. We're all in some way nexuses for all these conversations that develop over time, things come in and things go right out, and we're merely reflections of those interactions.

Vincent BUCHER. — In that sense, I would maybe bounce back on what you said and ask if the conversations that you had notably with the character of Don who you meet at the end of your journey, are still possible today. There is a passage that I find quite striking at the end, it's around p. 240 where you have this secret conversation that you do not transcribe in a way that's striking, and talks about interracial romances in a way that's slightly problematic, to say the least. Then you go on, on the following page, to say "he told me secrets as if I were an old friend. Or better, he talked with the freedom of speaking to a stranger he never expected to see again. When I traveled on my way, I would be taking his secrets with me. I would not be around to look at him and to judge him nor for him to feel the judging. And I would not be around to tell. He was safe. And yet he knew I was a writer and would be writing." At least the possibility for something existing beyond that divide that comes to the surface here. There is a mutual respect and the preservation of the intimacy of that moment. Do you believe that that kind of encounter and that kind of conversation is possible today?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I think those kinds of conversations happen all the time. What's interesting about Don, the most interesting thing about Don, is that he volunteered that he was a racist, he did not like black people, then in the course of our encounter he said something really stupid, in that, "you're different". I am not different, I am still black, and yet he dropped the curtain of his racism to have this encounter and again, open his doors to a certain kind of generosity, it was amazing. So, if we all had that kind of conversation, if we all recognized that yes, the man in front of us is racist but he doesn't see me as, in his particular version, "black", he just sees another person

who, in this case, needed something to eat, we could all get past these preconceptions that we hold. We need to have those conversations. The problem I think, one of the problems, is we don't have these face-to-face, one-to-one encounters and so we can live with these stereotypes like Don had before he met me. Now for some reason he thinks I'm different but maybe he thinks I'm different because he never talked to another black person. Not true, because he lives in Arkansas, and he's surrounded by black people, but he cut himself off from the black community, so he never had these kinds of conversations, and I forced him into an encounter, which changes his aspect at least vis-à-vis one person.

Vincent BUCHER. — In that sense, the possibility for change in your novel is always problematic or tempered, I would say. There's this moment where you come across pollution in the river and you say "I can't change it, I won't burden myself with these sorts of things" and similarly, on the question of race, you similarly point out that you can chip at it little by little but technically it won't change…

Eddy L. HARRIS. — But that's not true because it will change. It changes Don, it changes every individual. Every book that I write, every encounter that I have, changes the world in some small incremental way, it changes the world one reader at a time. It's not the broad change that's going to sweep pollution out of the Mississippi River, but it is one guy picking up a tin can that is floating on the water. And it is still an effort to clean up the river, it is still an effort to break down these barriers, and it happens all the time. One quick anecdote from the second journey: one night I arrived in some small town, and I didn't feel like pitching my tent. I walked up into town which was closed for the season, and I see a woman cooking in the kitchen through her window. And it's an old kind of Alfred Hitchcockian motel. And I knock on this woman's door, and when she opens it, the first thing out of my mouth was "what's for dinner?" and then we had a conversation that had nothing to do with anything except what she was cooking, the fact that I needed a room, she opened up this little hotel which was closed for the season, I had no idea how she votes, right in the middle of Iowa which is Republican red, definitely now Trump country, and yet she did not see a Democrat or a black person or anything else except a guy who's in a canoe who needed a place to stay. Whatever barriers or

preconceptions she may have had, and I don't know if she had any, disappeared and it was just her and me.

Vincent BUCHER. — I hear this, but I just wanted to bounce back on your point because I think it loops back to what you're saying about questions of abstraction and scale. So, if we remain at a great level of abstraction, the Mississippi is just a dot on the line and your novel shows that that's not the case; at a distance, all blacks are the same and all southern whites are the same just in the same way. And I think what exemplifies the ambivalent nature of your politics on this subject is that you temper the possibility of change by replacing it—in the novel at least—by the idea of making an impression. I think it goes both ways, there's receiving the impression of the encounter and making an impression. There's almost something physical and tactile to it. It's also connected to photography and I think your obsession with images kind of plays to that. But most of all I feel that making an impression entails a sort of change or transformation that will manifest itself down the line, that isn't fulfilled immediately, that resists abstraction. If you head to the south and want to make a change, you are not going to create the space for the encounter to happen, or allow for this reciprocal possibility of making an impression. This idea is present in that initial quote that I read about conversations. You say "you don't remember what people say, we remember the cadence of what they say and we get a sense for who they are". My idea is that at least part of what you do refrains from the political in that sense or is at the very least wary of the possibility for change and transformation understood in a sort of broad abstract sense. I was wondering if that goes back to the argument that you were making about how abstraction makes encounters impossible as well.

Eddy L. HARRIS. — It is not political what I do and at the same time it is very political, it passes beyond the non-political into the political in such a way that because of who I am and because of these interactions and the impressions that I make, a white person in Iowa or in Mississippi is bound to have a different impression that goes beyond whatever preconceptions he or she may have had before. It is not specifically political because I don't go in and say, "who do you vote for, and why did you vote for that guy?" It is just a simple conversation about having something to eat that transforms a

moment into something larger. There's no intention, it is just a conversation with anybody that transforms into something else.

Vincent BUCHER. — Yes, and the conversation often ends kind of abruptly and we never know how this impression travels or at least there's almost this sense that time has to do the work, kind of like the river itself, and this conversation with you leaves an impression as well. But what I find striking is this obsession with reciprocity. Your character—because it's no longer you, the young you—is constantly obsessed—to a point that can almost become annoying at times—of being seen, of being recognized as a hero, hiding when he is not. He is always obsessed by this idea of leaving a mark, of making an impression, and very often it's associated with photographs. At the other end of the spectrum, characters like Emily or Don, retrospectively leave an impression to the point where, despite them being identified as strangers and remaining strangers, are qualified as friends. And I think that what distinguishes that logic of conversation and how it replicates itself physically in the work, is precisely through the reciprocity of these minute non-abstract impressions that open the chink perhaps between who we are and what we do, that little space that you were mentioning. It doesn't redeem what people are, how they act, but it does represent a possibility. And going back to the beginning of our conversation, I was wondering if that space still exists precisely in a world of the internet, of non-physical interaction, where—and this is something that you resent perhaps—ideology prevails at the expense of conversation. Does it not curtail the possibility of making an impression in that sense? And that's kind of what we were saying, is it possible to still have these conversations, today?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — It is absolutely possible to have these conversations, and I think absolutely central to have these conversations. And yes, there is a reflective quality to them, I am as impressed as they are, I am as impressed of them as they are of me, I presume. And as forgetful of them, too, and I wonder if Don, if he's still alive, would have any recollection of my passing through his neighborhood, his section of the river. I have no idea, all I can do is do me, all I can do is what I do. Yesterday morning I blocked the sidewalk from some woman who was walking with a stroller, and I stopped, and I pushed myself against the wall so that she could pass.

And she recognized that I was doing this, that I was waiting for her to go by. If you ask her today if a big black man in a blue sweater stopped to let her pass, she would say no, but in that moment, the big smile she threw at me indicates that she recognized a moment of humanity, that I was doing something for her that I did not have to do. I could have forced her against the curb. She was as happy to be receiving as I was to be giving. These are the reflective quality of these kinds of interactions. They mean nothing in the grand scale of things but maybe they mean everything. And that's how I try to live my life, it's how I work, it's one of the things I take away from this journey down the Mississippi River, this river trip changed me. I'm very shy, I do not talk to strangers, or did not talk to strangers readily. But because there's a black man in a canoe, people come to me.

When I took my next, third big trip, which was a motorcycle journey into the American south, it was a beautiful motorcycle, a BMW which was rare in the States, people came to me to talk. I didn't have to go out of my way. And it was just brilliant. Whether it's the motorcycle or whether it's me alone traveling around this thing. These little interactions: some guy I'm talking to in a boat shop in North Carolina gives me the keys to his house, a white guy, gives me the keys to his house, and says "there's beer in the fridge, there's a hammock on the porch, knock yourself out, I'll be home at five o'clock". These things changed me. And now I am on the lookout for them all the time. And one of the reasons I stepped aside to let this woman and this "poussette" go by, is that I'm looking for them all the time. My interaction with the world is to step out of the way and let somebody go by, to help somebody with a heavy bag, it means nothing in the grand scheme of things, but I think it means everything.

Member of the AUDIENCE. — Thank you for a fascinating talk and presentation, for those who haven't read the book, I'm sure they are struck by the gentleness and the human kindness you show in your speech, however I must say that as a European, I was struck at the beginning of the journey by the fact that you're very prepared, that you have a gun—

Eddy L. HARRIS. —very prepared? Yes, I had a gun, but I would not call anything I ever did prepared; if I were prepared, I would not have left from Northern Minnesota in October.

Member of the AUDIENCE. — But I was struck by the casual—to me it seemed almost casual—how can I say this—swerve into violence with the incidents of the feral dogs and the two deer hunters, and it seems that you were fully prepared and you were fully prepared to protect yourself and somehow it was very different from your usual trust in people and the fact that you are open to people, and I wondered at how quickly you could change and switch into defensive mode?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I took that gun, not for protection; my whole ethos of that journey was living the way someone in the nineteenth century would live and I was expecting to hunt and fish as I went down the river. Otherwise, if I were looking for protection, I would have carried a .357 magnum or a .44, I would not have carried a .22, that's a caliber you use for shooting rabbits. I just happened to have this gun when these guys basically attacked me. And yes, I was prepared, I am, even when I'm not preparing, I am sort of prepared because I am not small. My exterior carcass gives the impression that I am prepared, so I am not aggressed very often, that is a kind of protection. So, I'm allowed to go into these spaces in most cases because this exterior protects me from anybody else's aggression. That is a kind of preparation too, unintended, as unintended as the pistol I carried because I was not using that pistol for protection. Which explains partly as well why on the second journey I refused to carry a gun, I knew I wasn't going to be hunting, first of all, and secondly the question of how would I have gotten out of that situation if I didn't have a gun was always on my mind. It would've changed everything possibly. Maybe, they being who they were, would've been even more aggressive, maybe I wouldn't have gotten out as safely as I did, or maybe I would've had to find another way to defuse the situation, part of the problem in America today is too many people have guns, and they reach for the gun before they reach for the alternative. So, I don't need a gun in that same situation now because I know I can find another way to get out of this scrape.

Member of the AUDIENCE. — For me there is something interesting in what you're saying because in my opinion the roots of racism is that you have to prove something to others before interacting. If the first movement they have is a bit distant, you then have to be

smiling and gentle and kind, and it is like the first step, it is a bit sad somehow.

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I don't know if I have to be gentle and smiling, I think I just am pretty gentle and I smile a lot. And why not, if that's what is necessary to make that first step, why not do it? It costs me nothing. I'm happy to play, since we're all in this game together, why not do my part to defuse a situation before the situation becomes a situation? In my hotel where I'm staying now, yesterday afternoon it's just smiles and jokes and when I go into the place or go out, everybody is smiling because of something I did or said when I first checked into this place, why not? If you go to a hotel breakfast room in the morning, everybody walks in and says "bonjour", it's just something that you do, so why not say "bonjour" with a smile? A smile changes everything. And I'm not afraid of racism, racism is out there, why not do my part to try to un-racialize the world?

Member of the AUDIENCE. — Do you think, with the conversations that you're having and those interactions, that people who might have voted for Trump in the first place will now interact with minorities more as they realise they themselves are undergoing the same process of being more and more excluded? And will they decide not to vote for Trump this time?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I don't know why people vote for Trump, I cannot figure it out, but part of it, I think, is the media, a media bias, depending on what news you watch, you're watching MSNBC on the left and you're watching Fox News on the right and you're just getting constantly bombarded and re-bombarded by the same info-echo and you're not going outside your bubble to find something else, and once you're inside that bubble and you believe what's going on, then you're cooked. And somebody mentioned earlier today that Rupert Murdoch controls the news trade in Australia, he controls pretty much the news trade in America too. And social media is a damaging thing as well.

Vincent BUCHER. — After talking about politics for a bit I wanted to come back to literature, being a literature aficionado or, rather, a professional of literature. Throughout your book there is this recurrent meditation about whether you have anything to say which I think is sort of key to your writing. This is very American,

very Emersonian in a way, in its emphasis on experience and a certain mistrust of the literary. I was wondering if your relationship to the literary is something you keep at bay; it's a conversation that you don't really want to have, or rather you seem to want to emancipate yourself from that conversation. I'll just explain what I mean. It's that in all the books that you write—and particularly *Mississippi Solo*—you choose eminently literary places to explore. We do get a hint of the literary when you mention figures like Hemingway or Twain. You even use the fact that T. S. Eliot was a native of St. Louis, which is always interesting given how different he is from the two other figures mentioned. But it's striking to see how precisely you refuse to engage with that corpus. I think it's fairly late in the novel that you start reading a book on the edge of the river. Out of curiosity I was wondering what that book was and if it has left an impression on you to this day, but it nevertheless remains striking that you never choose to name it. I was wondering if, more broadly, you were trying to unburden the river from its literariness. Because you mention that the river is burdened by history, it's burdened by legend, it's burdened by text, and if there's not an effort here to attain a sort of wilful innocence. Innocence would thus not be a state but something you strive to accomplish but that can never be fully achieved. Just like your text always struggles with these legendary texts and legends of the Mississippi, your interactions with the people you meet on the way are similarly fraught with preconceptions, texts, culture, legend. In a way, are you not trying to unburden the river of its literariness?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — It's something I never actually thought about, so whatever I do, it's not a conscious decision. And I have to make a huge confession here: once I finish writing a book, I no longer know what's in that book, I've forgotten it already. So, the other day I was on this TV program "La grande librairie" and this guy asks me a question about the interior and I don't know what he's talking about because I've forgotten the book, it is almost immediate, the moment I leave a book and start something else, I have forgotten the previous book. There are only certain sections of a particular text that strike me and mostly it is those parts of the text that people ask me about,

and I have to keep refreshing my memory about them. Otherwise, I don't know.

Vincent BUCHER. — So, you don't know what you were reading on the Mississippi River?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I have no idea; I couldn't even tell you that I was reading on the Mississippi.

Vincent BUCHER. — That is striking. So more broadly how do you choose the places that you explore in your books? Do you choose places that are so marked by text, literature, legends, that you need to overcome this burden to really engage with them? Is that something that you do deliberately? Is that part of a broader effort at the heart of your writing. and more specifically with regards to that idea that the Mississippi is burdened by history and burdened by everything it has to carry, and the way in which your text tries to unburden it—we'll see if we can come back to how your character in the book also tries to unburden himself of a number of things, in particular of identities, that's why when you said earlier that you work on identities I kind of disagree; I don't think that identity is central given how your character always evades the question—but I was wondering if that was a deliberate effort, why choose these spaces?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I choose them not because of their literariness, and not because of the burden of literary history but because of the burden of history. The Mississippi River, two times, Africa, one time, and maybe it's the burden that's on my shoulders and not the burden that's on anybody else. But the Mississippi is important in American history, I'm an American, it's the most important waterway, to me, in the world. Africa, as a black American living in America, coming from that ancestral home, Africa means something, but what? So let me go find out. Harlem, I could have picked any American city, Harlem means something, it certainly means something literarily, but it also means something culturally for black Americans. Paris, as well, when I write about Paris it's from a black American perspective. It all comes back to the me that's writing this book and encountering these places that have these burdens attached to them, but it is not necessarily a literary burden, it is a historical, cultural significance.

Vincent BUCHER. — Okay, in that sense, I'm going to reformulate my question though I hear what you are saying but, do texts make an impression on you? Are there texts that you could quote, and more specifically, I was curious of your relation to Eliot. What impression did he make on you?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — Yes, Eliot starts this book. Another writer, great writer. I'm not a great writer.

Vincent BUCHER. — But he's very literary and that's also striking in terms of contrast in particular when compared to Twain and Hemingway who are far more predictable references.

Eddy L. HARRIS. — Hemingway shows up in this book and in the next book as well and probably the next book. Hemingway is a ghost-like figure that hovers through my work because as a writer and an American writer living in Paris, of course Hemingway is in the forefront of my literary thinking, I want to be like Hemingway, I want to live this grandiose life and do these crazy things that Hemingway did.

Vincent BUCHER. — The reference to Hemingway is interesting because even though you claim to emulate his style it is actually his character, his lifestyle, that actually interests you. The literary ends up being evacuated very quickly. Just to finish on that point—the fact that you describe him as a ghost—which echoes your book directly. Yet again, this is a ghost you quickly dispel, and that conversation never happens. There is this striking, surreal moment where he appears to you and you feel his breath on your ear as if he were about to impart something to you but it never materialises. The figure of Lincoln is used in a very similar way as well. The literary can never really resurface. In that sense, the references to Hemingway are perhaps somewhat misleading in the book but I'm much more intrigued by your reference to Eliot insofar as this is not expected. It's not a reference that is bound to your object but it's rather something that you bring to it. Yes, Eliot is a child of the Mississippi for sure, but he left there long ago and his relation to culture, literature and the text is, at least on the surface, very far from the writing of experience of Hemingway for example. On the surface he seems also very far from your own relation to writing and reading. Where's the real conversation going on? Could it

perhaps be more with Eliot than with Hemingway, isn't there something misleading about that, and more broadly are there other texts, other authors, with whom you're having a secret conversation that you're not telling us about, perhaps?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — Well, I'm having a conversation with Faulkner as I'm driving about in the south on my beautiful blue BMW motorcycle, I'm having a conversation with Hemingway on this river, with Mark Twain on this river, I'm having a conversation with all the literary influencers who are in me from my education. T. S. Eliot is not someone I would have a conversation with, but he is part of my youthful education because I was raised by British monks in St. Louis who for some reason thought Eliot was British because he lived in London for a long time and that is part of my literary education, as was Hemingway, as was Thornton, as was… you name it. But I'm not actively having conversations with them except to underscore that they are in me somehow and you cannot talk about the Mississippi River without talking about Mark Twain, you cannot talk about an American writer being an adventurer without having a conversation with Hemingway, but I think that's as far as it goes. I'm not interested in exploring Hemingway's work in my work, I have read enough Hemingway, it's good enough for me, I have read Eliot, I have read lots and lots of Faulkner, but I don't have to have a conversation with these ghosts.

RÉSUMÉS

English
This conversation is the result of the one-day conference organized by the LISCA research group at Université Grenoble Alpes in November 2024. The conference focused on the concept of resurgence as the artistic and hermeneutic phenomenon that enables texts to make certain forces and positions stand out or rise to the surface.

Français
Cette conversation est le fruit de la journée d'étude organisée par le LISCA à l'Université Grenoble Alpes en novembre 2024. La journée d'étude s'est concentrée sur le concept de résurgence en tant que phénomène artistique et herméneutique qui fait que certains textes font ressortir ou remonter à la surface des dynamiques et des positionnements qui étaient déjà là sous une

forme « dormante » et qui se voient réactivés à un moment donné dans une épistémè particulière.

INDEX

Mots-clés
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Eddy L. Harris is a critically acclaimed author, lecturer and filmmaker who loves traveling, meeting new people and sharing his experiences and adventures with his readers. He keeps challenging and interrogating the place each of us occupies in their respective communities and homelands. In his first novel *Mississippi Solo* (1988), he offers a wonderful account of his canoe journey down the Mississippi River as well as a reflection on what being American means, especially as a black American navigating on this most iconic river. The journey and the book give him the opportunity to explore American founding myths and core values as well as the deeply conflicted heritage of the Civil War and slavery. In his next three works alternating autobiographical details and a larger reflection on black American experience and identity in both the States (*South of Haunted Dreams* in 1993 and *Still Life in Harlem* in 1996) and in relation to Africa (*Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa*, 1992), he offers a poignant, sincere and often incisive analysis of all its complexity and richness. His next three books were published both in English and in French: *Jupiter et moi* (2005), *Paris en noir et black* (2009) and *Confession américaine* (2024), thus confirming his deep attachment to France. *American Confessional* is an essay offering a bitter-sweet account of the contradictions—and also the "lies" (the subtitle of the reflexive piece is *House of Lies*)—that have haunted the American nation from its birth to the present day.
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in modernist poetry with particular interest in the long poems by T.S. Eliot, Charles Olson, William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky. His questions to Eddy L. Harris discuss—and invite the author to recontextualise—his engagement with the notions of place, identity and history for black Americans as presented in his first novel *Mississippi Solo*. The page references are to the following edition: Eddy L. Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, London: John Murray, 2021.
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