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Reclaiming One's Place: Resurgence and Empowerment

Discussing Resilience, Resurgence and Reclaiming One's Place with Eddy L. Harris

Entretien avec Eddy L. Harris sur les questions de résilience, de résurgence et de place

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TEXTE

1 Eddy L. Harris is an American writer with a strong attachment to France. He was born in Indianapolis, then grew up in Saint Louis, Missouri, and has always been a traveller, to Europe, Africa and back home. He has chosen France as his adoptive country and has been living in Pranzac, a small village in Charente, for some twenty years now but also spent long periods in Paris before. When he accepted to answer our questions, we thought it would be very appropriate to discuss his latest release, a fine and thought-provoking essay written in English and then translated into French, *House of Lies*. *American Confessional* (*Confession américaine*). The volume deals with the *lies* which have accompanied the development and growth of the newly independent American nation which upheld the ideals of freedom and equality when the American founding fathers themselves kept their slaves and only emancipated very few of them. He gives Thomas Jefferson as a case in point who only set two of them free out of the 600 he owned and goes on to ponder:

They—the people who decide such things as who is and who is not venerable, who does and who does not belong, what is and what is not right—wanted and still want me to venerate this man and the others who founded the country [...] even though they clearly didn't see a place for me in this country, then or now, even as Jefferson made one of his slaves his concubine, creating children with her and contributing to the métissage of the nation—a métissage which too many, and the nation itself, do not seem to want to recognize. (*American Confessional*¹ 33)

2 The essay thus revolves around the difficulty of defining oneself as American when the nation considers that you do not belong, whether as black, native American, Latino, female or LGBTQ+, among other

marginalized and ostracized communities. When Eddy L. Harris started writing his first novel *Mississippi Solo* (1988), such preoccupations were already very much present but he felt that it was up to him to actually challenge such racialized assumptions. The narrative recounts his journey down the mythical river in a mode alternating picaresque episodes, moments of intense poetic contemplation and philosophical meditation and unforgettable conversations with the people he bumps into and provokes into a real encounter and sincere exchange. In his second novel *Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa* (1992) he explains his disappointment and sense of alienation when travelling in Africa and realizing he didn't have much in common with the people he was meeting and discussing with. His third novel *South of Haunted Dreams: A Ride Through Slavery's Old Back Yard* (1993) was inspired by yet another journey, down to the South again, but this time on a motorbike, in search again of his forebears and the roots of slavery-related racism. During the journey he finds the manumission papers of his great-great grandfather, a slave in Virginia. He then published *Still Life in Harlem* in 1996, with a focus on his family again, his father in particular, as well as black identity. His next three books have been published by the Liana Levi publishing house both in English and in French: *Jupiter et moi* (2005), *Paris en noir et black* (2009) and *Confession américaine* (2024). In this very last book Eddy L. Harris precisely confronts the idea of "reclaiming one's place", the central issue at the core of our conference and RMA issue. His books perfectly illustrate the paradox analyzed in French philosopher Claire Marin's essay on *place* and *being in one's place*.² She sheds light on the difference between the social injunction to remain "in one's place" and the intimate conviction such a place is not actually "your" place, but only a place that other people want you to keep. "Knowing one's place is about being silent, not talking about what one is not supposed to understand or feel concerned about even if it stares you in the eye", she says (Marin 33, my translation). Ironically enough, those who have been told to "know their place" like Eddy L. Harris or his father will precisely be the ones who know for a fact that they should not avert their gaze any longer nor keep silent: such issues do concern them and look them in the face, *ça les regarde*. Eddy L. Harris is precisely one of those restless travel writers who cannot stay put for long, whether literally or figuratively. But in the end, if he was to

follow another famous travel writer's aesthetic credo, which was "to make you hear, to make you feel"³ and above all "to make you see", he would no doubt choose to conclude on making people "feel" rather than "see". Eddy L. Harris, contrary to Joseph Conrad, would opt for Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's choice of feeling rather than seeing, or at least seeing with one's heart: "One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes" (Le Petit Prince⁴ 76, my translation).

Ines MAYOUD. — When Mississippi Solo was published, Library Journals described you as a "combination of Mark Twain's Huck and Jim", whether in personality or in appearance; you seem to oscillate between the identity other people attribute you and the one you feel. Is this something you feel profoundly, this attempt of people trying to determine your identity for you, or seeing you in a different way than you see yourself, is it omnipresent and how do you experience it?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I suppose I feel it—you can't help but notice it—but I don't really pay attention to it, neither in my professional life or in my personal life. I rarely read reviews of my books and even when I do I only skim; and I don't read interviews and articles written about me. It's too easy to let yourself be influenced by what other people think of you and call you. A travel writer? No, I'm not. But I do travel and sometimes my writing includes my travels. A memoirist? I use my memories as a source but that's not the only aspect. You have to be careful so that as a writer and as a person, you don't want other people to define you or you'll find yourself locked in a narrowing tunnel.

Ines MAYOUD. — A lot of people today are looking for their identity. It has become a recurring question in our society. People on the search for a foreign heritage are mostly white people, glad to find another culture that they belong to according to a certain percentage of their blood and declare themselves of a dual identity and adding a hyphen to their nationality "Italian-American", "German-American"... But on the other hand, people of colour have always been attributed the hyphen without asking for it. They are

“Asian-American”, “African-American” and asked the same question on a regular basis: “Where are you actually from?” Where would you draw the line between those two groups of people? The ones looking for their heritage, and most of the time bragging about their heritage diversity, and the ones who are attributed a heritage who most of the time don’t even know about it and or don’t seem to really care that much. Am I wrong to assume that this is not so crucial for you? While it is important to know your heritage and be proud of your culture, is there a point where white people benefit from double standards in which being a mix of two white cultures is considered fashionable, while mixed-race people suffer from discrimination and racism?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I’m not sure I would draw a line between those groups—if I understand correctly and the two groups are those who seek to classify themselves as having hyphenated heritage and those whose hyphens are imposed. It is the hyphen itself that I find absurd. First of all, it seems that too many people embrace the hyphen—even when the hyphen is not explicitly there: I’m Irish, they’ll say, or Italian or German—whether they know it or not, and they stop where the hyphenation suits them. Otherwise, if they were to dig deep enough and go far back enough, they would find hyphens they never imagined and maybe never wanted. (That could be an argument for mandatory DNA testing: to dispel the notion of any kind of racial or ethnic purity—surprise surprise.)

The phenomenon continues with persons on whom the hyphen is imposed and sooner or later they too come to embrace the hyphen. Otherwise, they would resist.

In the end, it is either a way of offering or even suspecting a kind of double-allegiance, a subtle way of suggesting a way out if things go to hell, and a not-so-subtle way of suggesting that someone doesn’t really belong.

It is true that I place no importance on cultural heritage but I’d go even further by saying it’s all imaginary and useless. Except for maladies that might show up in some sort of hereditary testing, what real difference does it make if my ancestors recent or far back came from Slovenia or northern Italy or southern Spain or Morocco. First of all, I live where I live and no matter how much I might want to

carry on certain traditions, those traditions get watered down over time. Secondly, any study of history would show that cultures not only collide, they mingle and get shared, influence and alter the cultures they touch and are touched by. Hamburgers are so prevalent now in France, I can't get a decent hot-dog, which itself has origins not necessarily in France. And pizza is everywhere.

I'm still waiting for someone to give me a definition of culture better than the one I offered in, I think, *Still Life in Harlem: what we do as a people that tends to define us as a people*—or something like that. Like food traditions and like dance traditions and like language which affects but doesn't determine how we think and how we see the world. But what if I don't dance the Sardana *en frente de la catedral de Barcelona* on a Saturday evening or what if I do a little Irish folk dancing? What if you don't speak the language OR what if you do? What if you've been living out of your supposed culture almost as long as you were in it and are immersed in another culture, its food and its language? Should a parent who has adopted a Haitian infant try to keep that Haitian teenager in touch with his birth-culture even though knowing he will never return to Haiti, even though everything about him, except a few racial features (maybe!) says Brit? Or would it have been better not to have adopted at all?

Cultural identity is a way to cling to what was—however irrelevant—and to try to put up a barrier that separates and excludes and I prefer the freedom to choose.

It might be important to know where you came from. I prefer to worry about where I'm going.

Ines MAYOUD. — When your father voted for Reagan in 1980, he quickly regretted it when taxes were indeed lowered but only for rich people and he understood he was being lied to. You explain that he didn't vote for him again in 1984, but most of his electors did again, despite being equally lied to, electing him for a second term. Today, with Trump's second term, we can see a growing number of people regretting their votes. They were voting for harder conditions for people of color, for immigrants, for LGBTQ+ people, but are very early in the mandate realizing that this will apply to their lives as well. An increasing number of white women voting for Trump are now realizing that Trump sees them not as

white people, but as women only; not as part of a dominating group, but one of the minorities. To what extent do you think history repeats itself, does it take two terms to be able to see the true face of the person you elected? And how can marginalized groups vote for someone they know will restrict their rights?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — History doesn't repeat itself. It is simply that people make the same mistakes—which probably speaks more to the human condition and a certain kind of religiosity, maybe, or wishful thinking—a refusal to repent, a refusal to see, in fact, what's right in front of your eyes and falling for the myth and the make-believe. People are pretty gullible, it turns out. If we weren't, advertising wouldn't work and wouldn't even be necessary. It's a lot easier to believe the dressed-up lies than to confront what's real and what might be painful. There's always the hope that...

Christine VANDAMME. — Would you consider that whereas the founding myths of the Frontier and the American West have tended to deprive first Nations of their rightful place on American territory on the one hand, while denying the enslaved part of its population any part in such a manifest destiny on the other, the Mississippi River on the contrary could act and did act as a unifying elemental force and symbolic feature connecting people to each other and reclaiming a place for each?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — Founding myths and modern realities have deprived many peoples and groups of their rightful place. That is essentially the promise and the failure of the United States. And the way politics works these days is to actively separate people instead of connecting them or allowing them to connect. The depriving of Indians and the denying of formerly enslaved populations is, in fact, part of the same mechanism and returns us to the question of who does and who doesn't belong. That denial is, in fact, a form of slavery-extended: limitations on movement and ownership and participation.

Christine VANDAMME. — You often present the Mississippi River as some sort of God: what difference would you make between that type of God and the type of God President Trump pays allegiance to? Is it the same God and if not, to what extent do they fundamentally differ?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I would not presume that Trump pays allegiance to any sort of god—except money and power. He pretends, but watching him answer questions about religion, about the Bible, about any sort of spirituality and it is quite clear he's just blowing smoke to fool his Bible-toting followers.

If the river is any sort of god at all, it represents to me, anyway, a kind of universality, the kind of Gichi Manidoo (as the Algonquins would call the Great Spirit) that joins mankind and nature—which was part of my experience on the river, both times. It was quite amazing to be so much a part of that natural world and at the same time to feel such a sense of communion with most of the people I met along the way. That was the god I encountered on the river—the Great Unifier—and exactly the opposite of the god that Trump and his followers seem to adhere to as they do all that they can to separate people and keep them at each other's throats. Divide and conquer!

Christine VANDAMME. — When you deliberately chose some thirty years ago to use the term “black American” or “BlackAmerican” (“Noiraméricain”) rather than African-American, you explain in *American Confessional* that it was misunderstood as if it was already impossible in the States at least to consider “nuance” (32). When you embarked on a canoe to face the great Mississippi River didn’t you consider it an essential part of your poetic and political project to precisely get rid of all that legacy of slavery, whether from Africa, the Caribbean or elsewhere, to simply introduce yourself as a black American deciding to go down to his birthplace in the South? Going down the mythical river from its own source to its successive human manifestations along the way might have been a way to explore other possibilities for the nation to develop. Didn’t you simply try to reclaim a place for black Americans like you, however humble that place might be, in the flow of American history? A place that would have been, or could still be, another than that of victimization, violence and racism but of exchange—the ebb and flow of conversation and mutual respect and shared intelligence. The place of a better future, the River as a social utopia or testing ground or an Imaginary that would replace or complement that of the Frontier.

Eddy L. HARRIS. — The only thing I claim deep down is to be an American carrying with him all this glorious, tragic and painful history. I don't see myself as a hyphenated American but a 100% American, and the idea is certainly not to obliterate the history of slavery but rather to express a concern and desire that all Americans should acknowledge and embrace it themselves. They should understand that we live within the shadow of such a past instead of trying to either turn their backs on it or deny it altogether. From this recognition, we should and could all build a new identity. The river is neither a utopia nor a place of amnesia but a place where people can meet, talk, get to know each other without the dangers of the Frontier and without any appetite for conquest.

Christine VANDAMME. — At one point in your essay *American Confessional* you ask yourself why your work did not get the acclaim and popularity that it obtained in other countries than your own, in France in particular and you wonder whether you might simply have been ahead of your time, a “prophet” of sorts (46), as you put it with your recognisable humour and subtle irony. When considering the ever increasing interest in blue humanities these days as a strong nexus of social and political rebirth and reconnection, one cannot help thinking indeed that your vision for the American nation, a river people which, like the Mississippi, has always crossed currents, cultures and ethnicities, been animated by a mysterious and throbbing heart possibly irrigating new avenues for a reunited and reconciled nation, could have been both prophetic and inspiring instead of ending up bogged down in the muddy swamps of ignorance, intolerance and indifference.

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I think that finally, the country as well as its people were not ready yet, and are not ready today either, to have this conversation—a conversation that would examine our history and debate who we are and how we came to the place we are now. This is not necessarily complicated in my opinion but one needs to be ready and open to new possibilities. The moment could have emerged during Barack Obama's first campaign but it was prevented by the Birther-movement launched by Trump which questioned Obama's nationality, repeating ad nauseam the second name of the president—Hussein. Trump also openly mocked another candidate's

lineage when he called Elizabeth Warren Pocahontas. In both cases it was implied none of them were truly Americans. With such a political approach it is impossible to shape a united country, a reunited and reconciled nation. Maybe people should have listened to me and I am not intending any irony here.

NOTES

1 The page references are from the Kindle edition of the book: Eddy L. Harris, *House of Lies. American Confessional*, translated by Grace Raushl, Paris: Liana Levi, 2024.

2 Claire Marin, *Être à sa place. Habiter sa vie, habiter son corps*, Paris: Éditions de l'Observatoire, 2022 (*Being in One's Place. Dwelling in One's Life and Body*, my translation).

3 “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything” (Joseph Conrad, preface to the *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*, Penguin, 1989, p. XLIX).

4 Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard/Folio, 1999.

RÉSUMÉS

English

The following exchange is the result of a series of questions that were asked to Eddy L. Harris in the wake of the conference by Christine Vandamme, associate professor, and Inès Mayoud, an MPhil student in English studies at the time. And the introductory part was written by Christine Vandamme.

Français

Cette section est le fruit d'une collaboration et d'un échange entre l'auteur Eddy L. Harris et Christine Vandamme, maîtresse de conférences à l'UGA ainsi qu'Inès Mayoud, alors mastérande en première année à l'UGA. La première partie d'introduction à l'entretien a été rédigée par Christine Vandamme. La série de questions auxquelles Eddy L. Harris a répondu tourne autour des sujets suivants : l'identité américaine, la difficulté à réconcilier promesses politiques et rêve américain d'une part avec, par ailleurs, une réalité basée sur l'exclusion, un déni de l'héritage historique ainsi qu'une manipulation systématique de l'électorat. Il voit dans la

difficulté, voire l'incapacité, de la nation américaine à garantir à chacun sa place légitime l'échec originel de sa promesse. Eddy L. Harris explique par ailleurs qu'il ne s'intéresse pas beaucoup à l'identité culturelle lorsqu'elle implique une fixation sur le passé plutôt qu'un élan vers le futur. Son désir de se voir désigné comme noir et américain ou noir-américain a souvent été mal compris, voire source de tensions avec la communauté dite « afro-américaine » alors qu'elle reflète son éthique de vie : vivre le présent sans oublier l'héritage historique mais en tentant de revitaliser ce présent, de le ré-enchanter afin de tracer d'autres perspectives d'avenir. Se faire le chantre et le « prophète » d'une Amérique qui saurait se réinventer à hauteur de ses idéaux. Il s'agit ainsi pour lui de favoriser la conversation, le débat, mais aussi de cultiver la communion et l'harmonie avec la nature. La métaphore du Mississippi devient emblématique d'un nouveau mythe fondateur basé sur le mouvement mais pas celui d'une conquête comme c'était le cas avec le mythe de la Frontière, mais une mise en branle qui soit celle de la participation de chaque citoyen, quelle que soit son identité culturelle singulière. Car, dit-il, les cultures ne font pas qu'entrer en collision, elles se mélagent, s'influencent mutuellement et finissent par transformer les cultures mêmes avec lesquelles elles entrent en contact.

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Mots-clés

identité, culture, mensonges nationaux, noir américain, appartenance, réconciliation, Confession américaine

Keywords

identity, culture, national lies, black American, belonging, reconciliation, American Confessional

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Eddy L. Harris

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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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Christine Vandamme is currently working as an Associate Professor at Université Grenoble Alpes in France. Her field of expertise is that of space, place and literature but also space, place and identity, both personal and national, with a particular interest in the ideological, political and ethical implications of such spatial representations. She has published extensively on colonial perceptions of space and place in Joseph Conrad's writings but has also further specialized in the study of spatial representations in Australia, a nation whose relatively condensed colonial history illustrates many colonial, post-colonial and even decolonial issues. She co-edited with Andre Dodeman a collective volume on place and national identity in 2021, *Space, Place and Hybridity in the National Imagination*, as well as a volume on *The Unbearable Precariousness of Place and Truth* in 2024.

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Inès Mayoud

Inès Mayoud is an MPhil student in English studies at Université Grenoble Alpes. She is now in her second year and works on the writings of Katherine Mansfield and the way she managed to transcend pain and turn it into a source of inspiration for her works. Being thus working on the related issues of trauma, illness and resurgence in writing, she offered to take part in the organisation of the conference and the ensuing interviewing process with Eddy L. Harris. She read *Mississippi Solo* and *American Confessional* as well as various interviews with the author and articles centred on his books. The idea was to select questions that would be most appropriate to further the reflexion on resurgence and empowerment in Eddy L. Harris's works.