

RIVER CITY CURRENTS

Carving Paris

INTERVIEW BY DOMINIQUE MANTELLI



Eddy Harris, born in Saint Louis, is the author of four critically acclaimed books. Best described as travel memoirs, these narratives account his various adventures and search for both the meaning of a place and the individual within it. His first published work, *Mississippi Solo* (1989), chronicles his visitor canoeing down the length of the Mississippi River (2,350 miles), an endeavor marked by intense physical and emotional struggle. In his subsequent quest, Harris tours Africa and relates his observations as a “BlackAmerican” visitor in *Native Stranger: A Black Man’s Journey into the Heart of Africa* (1992). When Harris returns to the American landscape in *South of Haunted Dreams: A Ride through Slavery’s Old Backyard* (1993), he takes readers on a sometimes harrowing motorcycle ride through the Deep South; and his latest work, *Still Life in Harlem* (1996), reveals the anguish and poignant realities of his two-year stay in Harlem, a fallen cultural capital in need of revival. He has just finished a new novel set in Paris.

In Dominique Mantelli’s interview, conducted in Paris in September 1998, Harris, who at the time was Writer in Residence at Washington University, discusses people and place and their influence in his writing. He notes some of the people who have shaped his life and have even inspired characters in his work. Most significant, he relates through his experiences as a traveler and observer how place can not only define but also overwhelm the individual.

About the author: Dominique Mantelli currently teaches French at the Roland Park Country School in Baltimore, Maryland. He conducted this interview as part of his master’s thesis on Eddy L. Harris and “Spiral Autotopography” and to prolong the late professor Harry J. Cargas’s tradition of humanistic dialogues with influential thinkers.

DM: *I would like to start this conversation with a dedication to Harry James Cargas, a friend and teacher we had in common; he is the one who introduced you to me in class and most importantly after class. Is there any particular thought, or ---*

[Eddy, L. Harris interjects]

ELH: No, I don't want to talk about Harry because if I think about Harry, it makes me cry. His death is still killing me.

DM: *My first question is about the notion of literary tradition. Do you find yourself working in a particular kind of tradition?*

ELH: I don't know because I don't know what that means. What do you mean?

DM: *Western tradition, eastern tradition? Do you believe in the notion of tradition as coming from a particular set of writers who were models to you?*

ELH: Well, I am sure writing traditions have some meaning, and I am sure I have stood on the foundation of other writers, but if I am coming from any tradition at all, I think it is an American tradition. You can say it is a black American tradition, because I am black. I am essentially my father's son, however, and he was my primary story teller when I was a kid. That's where I get my desire to be a story teller. Because I am not a story teller... the way he is. The only way I can tell a story is the way I was taught in High school; when I was in high school, which is to write stuff down. I could read them out loud and not get in trouble. But as far as coming out of an African or African-American tradition, eastern or western tradition, that I don't know because I don't know what that stuff means.

I think you try to tell a good story in as inventive and creative a way as possible. You try to take what you have read and push it a little bit farther. You try to do something different and interesting; after all you have seventy-five thousand books every year published. Multiply it by ten years, it's almost a million books. So how do you compete with that stuff? The only way to compete, to get some attention is to try to do something a little bit different, because every story has been told; the only way you can tell a new story is to tell an old story in a new

way. That's all I am trying to do--to take my reader either to some place he hasn't been before, or take him to the same place he's been but in a new way. I don't know what tradition that is except the storyteller tradition. It's no different than when Homer was alive and telling stories.

DM: *You mention your father, he is pervasive in almost all of your books from Mississippi Solo to Still Life in Harlem.*

ELH: Yeah, I am trying to kill him off. [Laughs]

DM: *So talking about trying to kill him off, he definitely has the amplitude of a character.*

ELH: He is a very much a character. In *Still Life* for instance, I think he drives that book. I was having the same struggle writing that book as I am about writing this one in Paris. Somehow he came into that story; he told that story forward. It is not that he is the main character, he is not even throughout the book. There is something about his essence in that story that keeps everything together. So, he is a character.

DM: *What about the mother figure, who is present in some of your books, South of Haunted Dreams and Mississippi Solo, for example?*

ELH: But very lightly I think. Her presence becomes more important; my father's presence is diminishing, especially now that I am writing fiction. For some reason there is a flip, so he starts to shrink, not in the «Paris» book, but there is a book that is following the Paris book that has him in it, and, in my head anyway, he is a very central part to that book, but he is an old man in that story and he is on the point of dying . . . And my mother is now driving the softer side of Eddy Harris who is certainly characterized in the fictional part where she is getting a bigger role, or a bigger voice. It's intentional but it's not something I sat down one day to write about my father, then stop. And suddenly write about my mother. It is just something that seems to be drawing the characters out of these stories.

DM: *In Mississippi Solo you give the Mississippi River a gender, masculine.*

ELH: [Cutting me short] is it always masculine? [He laughs] never changes?

DM: *It does change, at some points it is even both feminine and masculine. In your various analogies, especially in Mississippi Solo where hardship pervades your adventure, you are quick to recognize and identify the softer side of your personality that is transferred into the being of the river. So you are, indeed, consistent with yourself and with gender. Can you relate it with the way you were raised?*

ELH: Absolutely! Absolutely! It's good cop and bad cop. My father was a terror. You didn't want to deal with him. And my mother was sweetness and lightness and it's still the same way. It's not just when I was raised. It's even now, so when I need money I don't call him, but I call her. I don't want to sound sexist, whatever that means, to say that men are one way and women another. In my family, that's the way it was. My mother was very soft, and my father pretended to be pretty hard, even though he is not hard in reality as he pretends to be.

And the same with me, the people who don't know me very well, they can think that I am a pretty tough character; so there is that side in me that is ostensibly hard--anyway-- but then, like that guy who stole my bicycle, I had the perfect opportunity to clobber him, but when I did, I stopped to let him go because there is this other side of me that says enough is enough. And in fact, that's when the switch comes in the new book; because it's the mother's voice. There is a person breaking into this guy's apartment, that he is about to kill and he's got this voice that is now telling him it's time to get a little softer, and that's his mother's voice.

It's a true story. As a matter of fact somebody broke into my apartment a couple of years ago; we slammed each other out a little bit, he broke up wine glasses, I

tried to stab him, I was about to pluck a piece of glass into his neck, ultimately I could not do it. So the story is based on a real event.

DM: *There are many dualities in human beings, whatever color they are, whatever gender they are. Do you find that where you grew up--your first few years in life in Saint Louis--affected you, as you hint at it in Native Stranger. How much it has affected you growing up in the "ghetto» referring to the Salon interview conducted by David Talbot (3)? Your father's decision to move from the inner city to the suburbs where you looked forward to a different kind of education, and it might lead to the next question about your fortunate education that you mention at some point in Native Stranger.*

ELH: I think it is certainly very important, and probably because they were the first ten years, they were so formative, so that's a part of me that could be a different character if I had not spent those first ten years. The roles could have been reversed, had I spent the first ten years in the "burbs» and then to the city. And I would not call it a ghetto because it has such a negative connotation attached to it. First, it was a mixed neighborhood, then it was a black neighborhood. It was never a run-down impoverished neighborhood. It was just black. But like the ghetto in Warsaw, I am sure the Jewish community wasn't just poverty stricken either; there was a class or a range of classes in the Warsaw Ghetto. So the term I suppose can mean any enclave where you are forced to hang out, but in my case, in this case because of racism in America it is forced ghettoization. So you can call it a ghetto, but it was not a place of deprivation or depravity. One of the reasons we moved out, it is because my father could see a few years ahead and wanted to relocate his kids out of there to a better environment. Now, looking back, I think it was a great decision. The neighborhood did change; it's changing back again, it's getting a little bit better; it went down and it's coming back up.

DM: *What's the name of it?*

ELH: North Saint Louis. North of Martin Luther King and south of Natural Bridge. And I still go down there, I still have friends. Sometimes I still even go to church down there.

So the neighborhood is making a comeback. Because we moved to the "burbs ", and I was into this ritzy high school, I have this huge spectrum of existence, from this totally black existence, to this mixed neighborhood, where we lived, to this almost exclusively white and privileged background where I went to school. And you put that all together; that's pretty much who I am. So I am not, I hope, focused on any one thing, but I still got a sensibility that says there are advantaged people contrasted with this exclusively black that I was privy to partake. So I am certainly happy for the range of experience, and I think I am also privileged to have that huge spectrum.

DM : *As you said, the first ten years of your life were formative, when you say formative, I am feeling the word unconscious as when you talk about the " collective unconscious " in Native Stranger. Do you believe that those formative years emerge subconsciously in today's writing, and have been emerging in your various narratives?*

ELH: I think it emerges subconsciously but also consciously, because I am certainly aware of it; I am trying to impress on readers that there is a side of life that they don't see. Excuse me that most people don't see. So, when I am spending a year or two years living in Harlem and writing about it, it is not to just underscore the poverty of Harlem and the bad situation in Harlem, it is also to say " look, here is the life that you don't see. "And very often if you see it, you see what the television tells you it is. These people are human--these people even if they are living in a black neighborhood, whether they are in deprivation or in affluence, there is a human face to what they are going through. And If can do it somehow, I want you to jump on my shoulders as a reader, and walk through this neighborhood and see these people. Because I know that neighborhood, I am comfortable there. So I can walk around in my old neighborhood or in Harlem, in ways that somebody else who did not have those formative years in that particular kind of neighborhood may be would not be able to. Even somebody

who is black. Even my brother who is a tougher character than I am, when He would come to visit me in Harlem he was a little bit edgy, so he claimed.

DM: *He is the one who quits in Mississippi Solo, he is consistent with himself.*

ELH: [Bursts into laughter] But he is also lying, maybe it was true about the Mississippi bit, but Harlem he is very comfortable there. But I think he is saying he would not want to live there, and I can see it, I can see why he would say that. And he had the same formative years that I had. Take somebody else who grew up and stayed in Creve-Cœur, even though black, and you take him to Harlem, ah, he is completely out of his element; this judicious character would not know what to make of this situation.

DM: *At some points in Still Life in Harlem notably with your father, you are not quite sure why you are going there. I think you refer to it as a third logical place, after South of Haunted Dreams and Native Stranger. Did you see yourself reasoning outside of blackness?*

ELH: Well, I think I do see myself outside of blackness. I think outside of blackness; but in this situation it's funny because my father can identify more with that neighbourhood than I can. I am sort of a visitor there. There is this movie called "Breaking Away ", it made an impression on me, I saw it about now twenty years ago. It's about this family in Indiana, the father's kid who is a used car salesman, but he used to be a stone cutter in Bloomington, I think where the University of Indiana is. And town's people are looked down upon, they are called cutters, as in stone cutters. And one night the father and his son are having this conversation and the kid says "I am proud to be a cutter," and the father says «you are not a cutter, I [with emphasis] am a cutter, you are the son of a cutter, you never cut a stone in your life, "he said to him. So my father could almost say the same thing to me. This is my neighborhood, this is not your situation because you did not go through the same stuff that I had to go through, to get you where you are now. So I am an interloper in a way. I am a visitor in this neighborhood; still, I have a piece of that sensibility that I want people to be aware of.

DM: *And when you say people, you mean readers?*

ELH: Yes, my readers, I wish it would be a bigger readership. In general whether it is my stuff or not my stuff, I think people should be aware that there are neighborhoods like Harlem, extant, and we should have a certain compassion for what other people are going through and we tend not to. We don't have that same experience, we tend to say, well gee, "why can't they get out"--a lot of people have said that to me: "If they are having such a bad time in Harlem why don't they just move out?"

DM: *You ask yourself that question in Still Life in Harlem.*

ELH: Yes, and it is a question that is coming from other people's questions: «Why can't they just move?" What kind of stupid question is that? Of course they can't. And if you have any sort of formative years in this kind of situation you would know the people just can't pack up and move.

DM: *Same question with Africa, the condition of people in Africa.*

ELH: Yes, why can't they change the situation? Because you can't always change the situation.

DM: *Is there one category of people to blame, or is it more complex than that?*

ELH: It's hugely complex, and if we are blaming anybody, we are blaming the huge industrial-military-complex that runs the world, and the people who gain by pressing somebody else. There is something to be gained by racism; there is something to be gained by poverty, there is something to be gained by all sorts of negative energies that we put into the world. Somebody benefits from it all. I think what we have to do at some point, is to identify or ask that question: "Who gains by this? »If I am going to be a racist, I should ask myself, "what do I gain by doing this, by being this way?" If I can find out a reasonable answer and it's okay for me to pursue this way of being in the world, if I can't, then I think I should

change my behavior. So racism is stupid unless the racist can say this benefits me because.... I think people are so blind and mindless, they don't think about the way it affects them. Or who ultimately benefits from them? What happens in the cases of racism and poverty, there is some guy--I am going to name Bill Gates, even though I am not accusing Bill Gates of anything--on top who's got a whole bunch of money and he is wealthier because there is a bunch of little guys down there fighting for little pieces of crumbs. And I don't think people ask that question. Who is ultimately responsible for the way the world is? But somebody is responsible. ..It's not about a person, but as system. There is a class of people who benefit from the way the world deteriorates at the bottom of the pyramid.

DM: *Do you think it's a scary thing to notice that it's a human thing; that it has been happening for thousands of years. That is not a new topic unfortunately.*

ELH: Unfortunately, it's not a current thing and maybe it's part of the human nature and it's just the way we are. But because we are humans, I think what we have over the animals--the rest of the animals, I should say--is the capacity to change. So maybe human nature--We--can change it. We could have a much better world if we just sat down and ask ourselves the right questions. Nobody is, because we are so concerned, and rightly so, about putting bread on the table and a roof over the table. Those are our primary concerns, which is why the guys who have more leisure time can manipulate the strings more easily than we at the bottom can do because we are too concerned about the basic necessities.

DM: *In your grand scale design, do you think that each place that you visit as you said before about Harlem, brings a limited set of topics that are intentional before you visit them, and by that I mean that you are not a tourist but already a writer visiting the place that has a tradition, mostly literary, historical and national?*

ELH: Well, I think I am visiting a historical place; I don't think like a tourist who would research this thing and say I want to see this, I want to do that. Because I am not a tourist, I am trying hard not to be one. I am going blind and I know that there is a history in this place and I'm trying to touch as much of it as I can without having a preconceived history book to be my guide. So, I go to Harlem, I go to Africa, almost blind not knowing what the place really is or really means. I

know partly what it means to me I guess, but I am not taking a tourist trip to Africa. So I get criticism, "How come you didn't do this when you were there? How come you didn't do that? «Because I am sort of dropped off basically by parachute, then I see which way the wind is blowing, that's all I am doing, in one place or another. Then I manufacture the story out of that experience.

DM : *And, with Mississippi Solo, and Harlem and the South ; I thought interesting the fact there is a line which is the Mississippi in your stories, and it's going eastward instead of going westward, as in the westward expansion during the foundation of America. At the beginning of this conversation you characterized yourself as an American writer; how can you explain that kind of contradictory movement?*

ELH: Maybe because I am an American writer. Americans are tending to be peripatetic by nature I suppose, based on the American westward expansion. And since there is no more west to go to, the west is part of the country like the east is. Maybe I am forced to find my own new frontiers. So, it's funny when you say that. I start to think, you are right, because I started in one place, I bounced to a whole new continent, but then I bounced back, and then bounced off a little bit, but then I am bouncing to another continent for the next book. So maybe it's a back and forth thing. It's two feelings, two different places, in America, Africa on the one hand, and America and Europe on the other hand; north and south in America, on another level, but maybe because too I am black as an American, I have, I think a certain advantage by having cultural influences from every place; white Americans do too, but I don't think white Americans are so ready to admit it. So, I can say yeah I've got ancestors from wherever you need. I've got ancestors who are African, I've got ancestors who are Cuban, I have got ancestors who are European. I've all of these bloodlines anyway, even if they are not cultures, because I haven't all that contact with all the cultures, maybe my father claims there is some Asian blood. So I have got a piece of everything. I am at an extremely advantageous position, so I feel completely comfortable writing about Europe, writing about Africa, about America, writing about anything I want to. And maybe that's the advantage of being American, to belong sort of to all the earth, because we have come from every place.

DM: *Are you proud to be American from that particular perspective?*

ELH: Yeah, but the proud thing bothers me; I also figured that you should not be proud of anything you did not do. And I did not make myself American. That is an accident by birth! I am proud to be a writer and I am a fairly good writer because this is something I woke up one day [and said]; «I want to do this thing, I want really to get there. » To be proud to be an American is to say «I am proud of this thing and I didn't do it, so, I am happy to be American. "

DM: *When did you realize you were a writer?*

ELH: [Slow, progressive laugh...]

DM: When did you tell yourself?

ELH: Ha, ...When I told myself...

DM: When did you tell yourself, not to anybody, but in your head: «Eddy you are a writer. «Not I want to be a writer. But "I am a writer."»

ELH: I think I told to myself the first time, somewhere around the time I graduated from college.

DM: *1977?*

ELH: I knew this was what I was going to do, and when people would ask me after college, "what do you do? » I am a writer. It was that simple right from the beginning. Even unpublished.

DM: *That's right, that's where I was getting at... And there is proof of that. You are very consistent with yourself, because in Mississippi Solo again, you're traveling, so officially from the reader's point of view you are not published yet, because you are taking the trip.*

ELH: Right.

DM: *And in your narrative where you describe and recount your traveling experiences, your journey, when you encounter people going down the Mississippi,*

you are asked «where are you headed at? "" What are you doing? "And so on...You say well, «I am a writer. " Now, not everyone knows that you were a writer before. You are consistent with yourself because you did write five novels before that, according to a certain interview by a certain person.

ELH: Laughs ...

DM: *I don't want to make you cry again ...So do you think that those first five novels, and you correct if I am not right, were seminal in a sense, or rather detrimental?*

ELH: Detrimental, not a bit! Certainly practice.

DM : *Cahier de brouillon en français. (Practice notebook in French.)*

ELH: Yes! Yes! You have to learn at some place, and I don't believe, even though I teach in a writing program, I don't believe you can learn to write in a writing program.

DM: *I'll send this interview at Wash U ... [Washington University]*

ELH: I tell this to my students too. You learn to write in a small unheated apartment in Paris on the seventh floor; and you have got to walk up--and that seventh floor is European, so it's eight floors in America. No heat, no elevator, no electricity, you have got to learn to write on that manual type writer, sitting down every day, type, type, type, type, type. That's where I learned to write. Those five novels I don't think were wasted. I can burn them. Nothing could ever happen to them. Still was worthwhile. So I was a writer long before I was published. So when people asked me what do you do? "I am a writer! I am just not a published writer. I may not be a paid for writer. But I am a writer, because this is what I do."

And you have to define yourself by what's happening on the inside of your existence, not by what is happening on the outside, not on how other people see it.

"So, what have you published?"

"Well, nothing!"

"So what makes you think you are a writer?"

"Because I write!" [He says louder].

That's enough for me. And that should be enough for anybody to say "this is what I am, because this is what I feel I am."

DM: *Do you find the terms writer, écrivain, escritor limiting?*

ELH: No, in what way?

DM: *All the ways you can think of. ..*

ELH: No, I think I would limit myself if I said I was a novelist, or a poet, but to be a writer, you can be anything you want.

DM: *A journalist is a writer. So in that sense, do you find it descriptive, is that good enough?*

ELH: It's good enough for me because I am capable of writing anything. I maybe a journalist [feels] as I feel writing a novel so he calls himself a journalist; or a poet can't write a novel so he calls himself a poet or a novelist can't write a poem so he decides "I am a novelist." But I think I can write anything. Not very well, I tried to write some poetry, it was pretty bad, [laughs generously], but because I am a writer, I know what words are for and I know how to use them. It's like being a carpenter but I can't make furniture, but I know what to do with wood. I think it's the same thing.

DM : *A person that you knew, contended the word "play " in terms of sports, [ELH: Harry]--yes, he said that professional players do not "play" American football; today with computers emerging and being widespread as they are, do you write or do you type?*

ELH: Well, Jack Kerouac wrote this book *On the Road* in three weeks; Truman Capote said «That's not writing that's typing. » I write, I've got a pen, a fountain pen in my pocket, always notebooks for the junk over there, I try to write by hand and then I put[it] on the computer. Sometimes I write on the computer too. But it's not the same thing as just typing, there are a lot of people who type and then edit, right by just spewing stuff all over the place, because it's so easy. But I think I am a real writer because I am so--whether it works or not--I think I am very cautious very craftsman like, because I am carving everything almost like a woodworker who's only got one piece of wood, or Michael Angelo with one piece of stone--if he makes a mistake, he's got to start all over. So, I can't turn this woman into a man, now, because I chopped off this piece. What am I going to do? So, I have to throw this piece away and start brand new. GH

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