

*Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance.* By Paul Outka. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008. 266 pp. Hardcover \$90.

Book-length studies that bring African-American and other non-white perspectives to environmental issues are few and far between, though this void is rapidly being filled by a number of literary critics, eco-philosophers, and environmental historians, among others. Two notable books are Jeffrey Myers's *Converging Stories* (2005) and Kimberly K. Smith's *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (2007). Both are foundational and introductory, and like many such works they under-theorize the problematic of race and nature in order to throw this novel conjunction into sharper relief. Thanks to this prior work and that of the environmental justice movement, Paul Outka is free to flank the problematic—with theory-guns drawn—from all sides in his *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance*. This theoretically rigorous study brings together African-American literature, critical race studies, ecocriticism, and, somewhat unexpectedly, trauma studies. Because it links so many fields into a veritable interdisciplinary ecosystem, Outka's book won the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment's 2009 Biennial Prize for Ecocriticism. In a pithy and memorable chiasmus, Outka hopes that "by trying to see green in black and white, we might eventually come to see black and white in green" (9).

Outka's historical scope is ambitious: he begins by looking at the "colonial pastoral" in Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's eighteenth-century travel writings and ends with Tea Cake's devolution into rabid animality at the end of Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Along the way, he builds an impressive canon of American environmental writing in black and white: Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, the slave narratives of Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, and Mary Prince, Charles Chesnut's *The Conjure Tales*, John Muir's *1,000 Mile Walk to the Gulf*, and more. Throughout his exploration of these works, he traces how nature became aestheticized and racialized within an intertwining history of the "white" sublime of conventional nature writing and the "black" trauma of slavery. Instead of technology violently interrupting a sublime reverie (a common trope mapped out by Leo Marx in his classic study *The Machine in the Garden*), it is a brutal scene of slavery that turns natural beauty ugly, as when Crevecoeur comes across a slave suspended in a cage hanging from a tree: "I shudder when I recollect that the birds had already picked out his eyes, his cheek bones were bare; his arms had been attacked in several places, and his body seemed covered with a multitude of wounds" (38). In "Sandy's Story," one of Chesnut's *Conjure Tales*, race and nature conflate when Sandy, a slave, is turned into a tree so he can escape the exploitation of slavery. But to his despair, he is exploited in another way: his master cuts down the Sandy/tree to use as lumber to build a new kitchen. In the ecological equivalent of a lynching scene, Sandy's lover watches in horror as the log is chopped up in a saw (114-5).

In an especially insightful argument, Outka shows how the experience of the sublime often represses or displaces the trauma of slavery and Jim Crow in the national collective consciousness. For example, he argues that the frontier West after the Civil War offered a refuge from the traumatic racial and geographic divide of North and South. This led to a "white flight" into a mythical western wilderness, which was perceived as a space where white identity could develop without having to face the traumatic past of slavery and racism (154). Particularly fruitful moments occur when Outka uncovers white nature writers' inevitable encounters with the all-pervasive problem of the color line. Despite occasional lapses into a moralizing tone, Outka shows how John Muir, advocate for Yosemite National Park and founder of the Sierra Club, represents blacks in the rural South: "Muir's racism comes in the way he looks, in how his language and his eye collapses dark-skinned humans into the natural landscape" (160). As "natural" objects Muir encounters on his wilderness journeys, African Americans are sentimentalized from within an equally sentimental view of nature as a passive landscape painting

put there for the white gaze to behold. Like the naïve Captain Delano of Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, Muir cannot imagine black agency. But the value of Muir's work is that he recognizes race at all, that he brings it into view when it could so easily be erased, and thus he proves a rich resource for understanding the interlinking ideologies of racism, wilderness preservation, and the early roots of the mainstream environmental movement. In addition to these many insights, African Americanists, and Americanists in general, will find fresh perspectives on such critically saturated classics as Jean Toomer's *Cane*, as well as lesser-known works like Angelina Wald Grimke's short stories "Blackness" and "Goldie." Indeed, ecocritical re-imaginings press us to reconsider the historical and aesthetic significance of various, perhaps currently marginalized texts within this tradition.

Perhaps lacking most in Outka's study is more attention to the emergence of scientific ecology and the role of, say, botanist George Washington Carver in its formation. Indeed, it's somewhat surprising that in the book's two-hundred or so pages Carver's name is not mentioned, even though he wrote voluminous letters and published scientific pamphlets rife with his mystical views on nature. My point in drawing attention to Carver is not to tally the book's omissions, but rather to show that there are more positive relations to nature within the African-American literary tradition that complicate the white sublime/black trauma divide. Carver, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Du Bois are a few examples at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century, but there are earlier examples. In Monique Allewaert's reading of William Bartram's eighteenth-century *Travels*, she sees nature as the staging ground for an ecological resistance to the plantation order. Maroons (escaped African and American Indian slaves) found refuge in the southeast's swamps and unmapped territories, where they haunted the imagination of whites in power. The relation to nature here is not one of traumatic antagonism but of solidarity against the dominant (white) human regime. In another example, Du Bois's opening "Credo" to his semi-autobiographical essay collection, *Darkwater*, professes a belief in childhood education in nature: "the leading out of little souls into the green pastures and beside the still waters, not for pelf or peace, but for life lit by some large vision of beauty and goodness and truth" (2). Here, at the height of what *The Crisis* dubbed the "lynching industry," a pastoral vision of nature as refuge and educator occupies a place in Du Bois's thought. Nevertheless, Outka's book sets a new precedent for important work to be done in articulating ecocriticism with African-American literature and other related fields.

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#### Works Cited

- Allewaert, Monique. "Swamp Sublime: Ecologies of Resistance in the American Plantation Zone." *PMLA* 123.2 (March 2008): 340-357.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*. 1919. New York: Washington Square Press, 2004.