



Race and Nature in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: A Conversation¹ with Joshua Bennett, Brigitte Fielder, Ian Finseth, Jennifer James, and others

Lance Newman (Westminster College)² and James Finley (University of New Hampshire)³

Lance Newman, Westminster College

In *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance*, Paul Outka suggested that “the time for a critical dialogue between those interested in deconstructing nature and those engaged by deconstructing ‘race’ is long overdue” (4). Outka argues that the nineteenth-century discourses of nature and the sublime are premised on the exclusionary politics of race and that wilderness is “always already saturated with the authority of slavery and the possibility of violent punishment” (80). Jeffrey Myers makes a similar argument in *Converging Stories: Race, Ecology, and Environmental Justice in American Literature* and so does David Mazel in *American Literary Environmentalism*.

On the other hand, in *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions*, Kimberly Ruffin identifies what she calls the “ecological beauty and burden paradox” and argues that “an ecological burden is placed on those who are racialized negatively, and they therefore suffer economically and environmentally because of their degraded status. Simultaneously, however, the experience of ecological beauty results from individual and collective attitudes towards nature that undercut the experience of racism and its related evils” (2-3). Political scientist Kimberly Smith contributes to this alternative position in the book *African American Environmental Thought*, in which she describes “a tradition of black environment thought—a tradition deeply related to dominant traditions of environmental thought but characterized by a particular concern with how these traditions could be applied to problems generated by racial oppression” (5). The environmental historian Dianne Glave has done important work on what she calls the African American environmental heritage. Finally, Camille Dungy has done

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definitive and original curatorial work in her collection, *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*.

Also in the last few years, scholars in science studies, post-humanism, and new materialism have begun to explore the intersectionality of the raced body and the naturalized land. For instance in *Bodily Natures*, Stacy Alaimo writes, "Casting racism as environmental exposes how sociopolitical forces generate landscapes that infiltrate human bodies. . . . The penetrating physiological effects of class (and racial) oppression [demonstrate] that the biological and the social cannot be considered separate spheres" (28). On the basis of this insight, she remarks that it should be possible to "rewrite the entire expanse of the history of the United States from an environmental justice perspective" (29).

Our goal during today's roundtable is to enter into this ongoing interdisciplinary conversation between critical race studies and ecocriticism by focusing specifically on the textual ground of nineteenth-century American literature. And we hope to do so by considering questions such as the following: How have the discourses of race and nature co-evolved, coincided, or interacted? How do considerations of race complicate notions of post-humanism and animality? And what is the future of the critical conversation about the relationships between raced bodies and the naturalized land?

Two scholars who have begun this work, but who could not be here today, are Hsuan Hsu and Britt Rusert. Hsuan is the author of *Geography and the Production of Space in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. He is currently writing about literary naturalism as a precursor of contemporary representations of risk-labeled bodies and of class- and race-based environmental injustice. Britt is working on a book manuscript called "Radical Empiricism: Fugitive Science and the Struggle for Emancipation," which, among other things, demonstrates how recent debates about the new materialism find a fascinating precursor in the pages of antebellum African American newspapers and periodicals, especially in articles discussing what she calls the second scientific revolution.

Joshua Bennett, Princeton University

I want to open by thinking aloud for a bit about how we as teachers and learners might find more imaginative ways to employ nineteenth-century literary texts in order to address contemporary issues related to race, the environment, and disability. Outside of my life as a graduate student, I'm a full-time poet and teaching artist.

Until the last few months, I would not have considered my pedagogical work in the performing arts to be ecocritical in any meaningful sense. But as of late, the work of Charles Chesnutt has been a launch pad for my own thinking about how I can teach contemporary black nature writing as a means of collaborating with young people on a larger project of unmaking problematic ideas about what constitutes black writing in the first place, about who has the right to call what they create nature writing, and finally, about what it is about nature writing in the late nineteenth century that makes it an especially generative period for those of us committed to social justice in the present.

How can we use black nature writing to respond to pathologizing claims in the history of the social and life sciences, public policy, and elsewhere, about the nature of blackness and the

nature of black social life in particular? How do we assert, alongside Lucille Clifton and others, that the earth “is a black and living thing” (34), that there is a long tradition of African-American thinkers who have written extensively about their relationship to the natural world, and crafted narratives that account for its beauty, its chaos, and everything in between?

I’m trying to figure out how we can get our students and ourselves to be more thoughtful, to mirror the kind of thoughtfulness we see in these texts, which are always willing to allow nature to be capacious, to be more than a distant entity which needs to be mastered or possessed.

My interest in using black nature writing as a kind of counter-argument to prevailing discourses about black pathology began with my love of Charles Chesnutt’s first book, *The Conjure Woman*. Are folks familiar with the book? Okay, so a brief bit of background. There is a white couple from Ohio: John and Annie. Annie is unwell; she needs “a more suitable climate” to ameliorate some of the more difficult aspects of her unnamed ailment. They move to North Carolina by the McAdoo plantation. That’s Chesnutt in ten seconds.

Through the figure of Julius, a former slave hired by John as a coachman and also a kind of a second narrator for the *Conjure Tales*, Chesnutt gives us a vocabulary for thinking about the messy entanglements that were the guiding logic of the early relationship between African Americans and the natural world during what Chesnutt himself called the post-bellum, pre-Harlem era.

Chesnutt’s *Conjure Tales* often center around moments of ontological slippage, scenes where people use plants to transform other people into plants or animals, where animals communicate freely with people, and where the lines between these categories are blurred beyond recognition. What these moments of transformation foreground is not only the kind of violence that is done by the transatlantic slave trade, in which people were transmogrified into commodities along with plants and animals, but also moments of fugitivity and coalition across lines of species.

One of the most interesting examples can be found in “Po’ Sandy,” the second story in *The Conjure Woman*. Herein, a slave named Sandy, whose partner Tenny is herself a conjure woman, transforms him into a tree in order to keep him from being lent to another plantation. Usually, we think of fugitivity and escape as tethered or limited to physical movement; you’re not supposed to be able to be fugitive and hide in plain sight or remain completely motionless, the way a tree does. Yet somehow, at the end of the narrative, when a group of loggers comes to chop down the tree formerly known as Sandy, he resists. He turns and creaks and moans. Even at his most abject, there’s still a possibility of resistance that is made possible through this conjurer, through this transformation into a nonhuman actor. This scene is an enactment of what Fred Moten would call the freedom drive, an objection to objectification.

A similar theme appears in another story called “The Conjuror’s Revenge.” A slave named Primus, who already is not good at following plantation order, steals a pig from a conjure man. The conjure man, as an act of revenge, turns him into a mule. But while he’s a mule, he’s actually far more difficult to control than he ever was as a slave. He gets drunk, falls asleep, even damages plantation property in an effort to get revenge on his former wife’s new lover. These acts of revolt, all made possible through the animal body, were foreclosed for Primus before he was transformed.

The world that Chesnutt crafts for us is a space in which racial and ecological hegemony, to riff on Jeffrey Myers's term, never carry the day, even though these characters are made especially vulnerable to racial and ecological violence because of their position. They quite literally live out in the open. At the same time, within the anti-black social order, they always find a way to act out, to act up, to be difficult and to make things difficult for everyone else on the plantation. In this way, Chesnutt is helping us to think about quotidian forms of resistance that contrast sharply with the romance of the heroic, fugitive slave.

In that vein, I want us to consider the ways in which certain renderings of the fugitive slave can, if we are not careful, work as ableist constructions. Given certain physical impairments, one not might be able to get up and take flight in a traditional sense.

Disability is a critical term that is often elided in these conversations, even though when we talk about race and nature in the nineteenth-century, we're always already talking about the problematic language that is so often used around disability. We're talking about pathology, illness, injury, being unfit for citizenship. There are compelling disabled characters all over *The Conjure Woman*. Primus, when he's returned to human form is left with a foot that is effectively half-mule, half-human, and is eventually read by those around him as a club foot.

Primus' club foot allows him to control his own narrative. Though his slave master argues that he must have been injured when he tried to escape (he argues that Primus was bitten by a snake, or that his foot was actually smashed by a heavy object) every slave on the plantation asserts that it was indeed a conjure man who was responsible for this transformation, this act of revenge. What we see in these moments are the ways in which disability can allow for authorial autonomy.

Similarly, in Edward P. Jones's recent novel, *The Known World*, there is a slave named Alice Night whose performance of madness allows her a freedom that is unavailable to her fellow enslaved. She can mock slave patrollers, she can kick their horses and disobey their commands, all because people think of her as a figure that does not fit within the dominant logic of the plantation.

In closing, I'm wondering if what's waiting for us between these texts is a sort of black crip ecopoetics. At the intersections of disability theory and ecocriticism and black studies, do we find a nexus that can help us not only parse what's going on in Chesnutt, but also think about a larger group of bodies, even as the environment is rushing upon us at top speed? Is a black crip ecopoetics our thinking inclusively about the environment in ways that have largely been excluded up until this point?

Brigitte Fielder, University of Wisconsin-Madison

My own grounding is in race, gender and sexuality studies and my new project, "Animal Humanism: Species, Race, and Humanity in Nineteenth-Century American Literatures," deals with intersections between race and animal studies. I am invested in moving beyond nineteenth-century naturalizations of both race and racism and especially the prioritization of biological notions of kinship. In this project, the texts that I am most interested in exhibit a number of features:

- scientific racism's far-too-familiar and often inherently derogatory comparisons of animals and nonwhite people;
- the Great Chain of Being and other hierarchies of race and species;
- the relegation of nonwhite people to the category of nature, which conflates individual humans with their nonhuman environments;
- the similar relegation of animals to their environments;
- the homogenization of these categories, "human" and "animal";
- the naturalization of racism, (which is not just, I think, a nineteenth-century mode of thinking about how racism works);
- humanism's prioritization of human relationships over relationships between humans and other beings;
- and the prioritization of biological kinship over other forms of kinship and other affective relations.

My focus is on domesticated animals, especially cats and dogs. I focus on comparisons of race and species that don't follow the familiar (derogatory) patterns, in part because I am not talking about nonhuman primates, and in part because I am not talking about animals who are closely associated with work, like chattel. The literature I discuss deals with relations of affective kinship that travel in interracial and in interspecies ways. Today I will outline two parts of my project as it has come together so far.

In some abolitionist children's literature, domesticated animals are employed to mediate interracial sympathy for their assumedly white, middle-class child readers, producing sympathy for enslaved black people. For instance, *The Lamplighter Picture Book* is an adaptation of Maria Susanna Cummins's 1854 novel in which the young Gertie has been given a present, a kitten, by a kindly lamplighter. She cherishes this kitten and hides him from her guardian. This is the only creature with whom she has any kind of meaningful relationship. When her guardian, Nan, finds out that Gertie has this kitten, she flings him into a pot of boiling water where he writhes and dies in agony. Gertie immediately rebels. She physically strikes her guardian, and this prompts her getting ejected from the house into the cold and her ultimate adoption by the lamplighter.

In between these narrative scenes of Gertie's life, we get poetry that is not in the original novel.⁴ The poetry is abolitionist, and it instructs readers how to read the story: "Ye who weep o'er little

⁴ Because the abolitionist poetry in *The Lamplighter Picture Book* does not appear in Cummins' original text, its author is unknown. Deborah C. DeRosa argues that Sarah Josepha Hale was possibly the author of this poetry, also revising Cummins's text for a younger audience (52–53).

Gerty,/Squalled, ragged, friendless, poor,/Weep the more for slave's now mourning,/Oft with tyrant's lashes sore" (4). We then go on to read the story of Gertie's sympathy for her kitten, and a poem that compares this sympathy and care to the act of harboring a fugitive slave: "Thus kind are some good persons, oft,/When slaves for aid are asking/Right deeds, they know, whate'er the law,/Will make God's favor lasting./And thus good people often give/The fugitive a lodging,/Ne'er fearing those, intent on gain,/About his pathway dodging" (10). Here Gertie becomes kind of a model for abolitionism. While we originally had sympathy for her in an abusive relationship, readers later see her as a model of abolitionist sympathy that we are supposed to emulate. The figure of the animal – here a pet kitten – is used to mediate interracial sympathy.

One of the most common critiques of abolitionist literature has focused on its use of mixed-race characters (and particularly mixed-raced heroines) to garner sympathy from assumedly white – and assumedly racist – readers who more easily find sympathy for a figure who is presented as somehow similar to or more closely resembling them, be it in physical appearance, in education, or in the way their speech is represented. Most people who have written about abolitionist literature have written about this problem in some way. I am interested in how the *Lamplighter Picture Book* and other texts like it use a different model for how sympathy might be conveyed. This sympathy, rather than being dependent upon notions of sameness or similarity, is mediated through acknowledged positions of difference. What the substitution of a cat does is gives us a figure with whom we can be sympathetic but who also fails to reproduce the assumptions that a lot of other abolitionist literature makes about how a white readership can convey sympathy or have feeling only through positions of similarity.

I am also interested in the way these kinds of texts figure the physical proximity of these animals in the domestic spaces of the home and the nation as triggering a familiar but also familial association with the characters in these texts. I argue that we must regard this kind of affective kinship relation as real, as valid as other kinship relations. Gertie does not have any biological kinship relationships that she knows of. Clearly her relations with most other people in the text are not represented as relations of kinship at this point in her story. This kitten therefore becomes a familial character in the text rather than just an object or a generic animal. I attempt to explore the ways this model of kinship becomes possible in both interspecies and interracial relationships in this and other texts.

This model of interspecies and interracial kinship emerges in another part of my project, in which I discuss racialized animals whose relationships with their human counterparts become possible despite that racialization and within seemingly incompatible structures of kinship. By virtue of being animals, even as racialized creatures, we read beings who are able to shift affiliations in ways that racialized human characters cannot. In this chapter I read Victor Hugo's 1826 novel about the Haitian Revolution, *Bug Jargal*. In this novel "an enormous mastiff" named Rask shows how relationships formed across lines of species have different potential than those forged across lines of race in Hugo's *Saint Domingue*. Rask's animality allows for his depoliticization in the text. As Rask's associations with the various people of the novel shift, he is able to be incorporated into the different societies of the text's human characters. Rask's incorporability is a feature Hugo's human characters do not always have, as their racial or national identities prevent them from so easily shifting positions within *Saint Domingue's* complex structures of affiliation.

Here, we see the incorporation of a dog into familiar – and familial – domestic spaces that reject the incorporation of the racial Other, while still racializing the nonhuman character. In effect, I explore what it means for a nonhuman figure to become racially- and nationally- affiliated, and what the translation of a nonhuman character across lines of racial and national affiliation means for rethinking those categories and the affective kinship relationships that are constituted within and between them.

This project was initially meant to be particularly emotionally fulfilling. Mostly, I was tired of reading about racism all the time. The nineteenth century was really terrible, as are many of the texts I tend to read for my writing and teaching. Reading and writing about the nineteenth century gets to be emotionally draining, as does teaching students to deal with the many problems of the nineteenth century without sounding problematic themselves. This was originally going to be my “kittens and rainbows” project, in which I got to write about something nice for a change. Of course, I ultimately ended up writing about racism anyway.

One of the things that I have found is that when scholars think of the convergence of race and species in the nineteenth century, we tend to think of the most terrible things that are happening. I have become familiar enough with scientific racism’s most terrible versions of this, which are dependent upon intertwined hierarchies of both race and species. But there are other texts that imagine comparisons between animals and people quite differently and in ways that are not necessarily derogatory. Paying more attention to these different conversations in nineteenth-century texts is one thing this project attempts to accomplish.

James Finley, University of New Hampshire

My dissertation, “‘Violence Done to Nature’: Free Soil and the Environment in Antebellum Antislavery Literature,” focuses on ecological critiques of the slave system in the 1840s and 50s. I draw upon the work of professors James and Finseth, so it’s a real pleasure to be here today. I’ll start by talking about four aspects of the argument that slavery was an ecologically destructive system of social production.

The first has to do with extraction, particularly how the economics of slavery encouraged extraction-heavy agriculture. A significant amount of abolitionist texts focus explicitly on the particular plants cultivated in monoculture on plantations: cotton and tobacco mostly, as well as rice and sugar. The argument goes that these plants are draining nutrients from the soil and that extraction-heavy agriculture has blighted one of the most productive regions in the world.

This emphasis on metabolism, in turn, gets globalized by talking about how the agricultural production of the U.S. is being essentially shipped to Liverpool and transformed into capital. This second type of argument mourns the fact that the United States has upset its own ecological balance and is losing its productivity because of its reliance on slave-based agriculture.

The third aspect of the argument that slavery is ecological destructive can be found in portrayals of Southern landscape aesthetics. Many authors depict an Edenic landscape that has been destroyed, and the language is often quite Miltonic in underscoring the post-lapsarian environments of slave states. Free Labor advocates in the North will then say that the North is not as inherently beautiful, and it doesn’t have very good land comparatively, but the comparison is quite lopsided when juxtaposed with the South, since Free Labor made the North

beautiful while the South's thorough reliance on slave-based agriculture has turned a previously harmonious landscape into an abject and threatening space.

And then the fourth and the final aspect is the claim that slavery itself is a very environmentally unhealthy system, with regard to slaveholding ideology as pollutive, but also a more literal sense of the bodily damage caused by slave agriculture. The slave narrative of Charles Ball, for instance, goes into quite explicit detail about how being in the rice paddies is polluting his body (348-49).

My project focuses on two trends within the argument that slavery was an ecological problem, both of which emerge out of the antislavery third-party Free Soil movement with its attention to the extension of slavery into the territories. I see these two somewhat distinct responses as having to do with an understanding of the intersections of race and nature. The first one was articulated most famously by David Wilmot, architect of the Wilmot Proviso and a notorious white supremacist, whose vision of free labor and free men in the West was an explicitly white vision. Wilmot's racist argument gets deployed in very environmental ways, with talk about the pollution of slavery stemming from the presence of people of color in the West. African-descended slaves, not slavery, pollute this landscape that white settlers want to keep environmentally pristine. What Wilmot and others do in talking about slavery as an ecological problem is they critique the slave contract but they reaffirm the racial contract, to use Charles Mills's distinction. But I'm more interested in the other side of this argument, which looks at slavery as an ecological problem in explicitly anti-racist ways. This tradition recognizes that environmental problems are not only rooted in slavery but also in racist oppression. The slave system links environmental destruction with white supremacy. One cannot be addressed without the other.

I'll give a few examples of how some black abolitionists affiliated with the Free Soil movement resisted this white supremacist vision of the West. Henry Bibb, toward the end of his 1849 slave narrative, includes a letter from his former owner in Kentucky. The letter complains about how the fields are not productive and how it's really rough in Kentucky at that time. The owner asks about two other former slaves and Bibb mentions them in his reply, saying they are "well, and doing well. . . . They are now the owners of better farms than the men are who once owned them" (177). In so doing, Bibb is focusing explicitly on the productivity of free black farmers in the West, talking about how their work is ecologically harmonious and is agriculturally productive. By inscribing these men in the West, he's articulating a diverse and anti-racist alternative to the Wilmot vision.

In his autobiography from 1855, Samuel Ringgold Ward rejects the pollution trope that Wilmot and others were articulating. Ward says, "Our soil is polluted by the unholy tread of proslavery men" (142). He's flipping it back upon the white supremacists' vision, saying, in effect, no, this is what's ecologically damaging: racism and the practices of slaveholding.

My last example comes from James W. C. Pennington and his 1841 text book *The Origin and History of the Colored People*. He's quite explicit about the links between slavery and settler colonialism and explains how the very violent and traumatic expulsion of native peoples and the clearing of the West is directly connected to slaveholding hegemony and the extension of slavery into the territories. In so doing, he's essentially saying that the West is not untouched land, it is not pristine nature that is waiting for some Jeffersonian individual to come and

transform it. The normative Free Soil vision of the West is bound up in ecosocial processes and in this case has been shaped by racism and genocide.

It's my belief that focusing on ecological critiques of the slave system adds to our understanding of abolition but also has potential for reshaping our understanding of nineteenth-century nature writing, moving us away from exclusive focus on the Romantic and the Transcendentalist traditions.

Ian Finseth, University of North Texas

I'd like to begin by describing a couple of issues that I've been worrying away at over the years. One is a problem described by Dana Phillips in the current issue of *American Literary History*. He says, "Boiled down to its essentials, ecocriticism's hardest problem is this: at whatever scale you take them, natural phenomena and environments do not lend themselves very well to the kinds of representations of which literary texts are capable. For a variety of reasons, analogies, metaphors, thick descriptions, and narratives prove unsatisfactory" (463). Dating back to my first book, *Shades of Green*, I've been puzzling through exactly this problem of representation and whether it's possible to somehow get beyond representation or mediation – whether it's possible to explain or reconstruct or arrive at some account of a human being's experience of the natural world that is pre-thematic, pre-conscious, or not dependent upon this entire system of representation. Perhaps that's a fool's errand, but it is one of the issues that has always affected my imagination.

The second concerns the tension or dialectic between humanist and culturalist ways of knowing nature. To what extent is our knowledge of nature or our experience of nature rooted in our evolutionary history as a species? To what extent is it trans-historical and trans-cultural, embedded in the processes of the human brain and consciousness? And on the other hand, to what degree does our own particular cultural or racial or political situatedness affect our perceptions of and experience of the natural environment or the natural world or worlds around us?

So, out of these concerns has arisen a project with the working title, "The Nature of the Text: Toward a Theory of Environmental Knowledge." In this project, I think through and try to develop a paradigm for understanding the environmental epistemology of literary texts. How is environmental knowledge formed in the first place by some kind of "individual human subject" (a term I'm going to put in quote marks because it gets particularly complicated)? How is that environmental knowledge encoded in text, particularly in literary text? And finally, how is it unpacked by the reader who can enter into what might be called the ecosystem of the text (which is an entirely controversial term, I understand) in a way that's analogous to the original experience of the person who produced that text?

That's the general analytical problem I'm trying to work through, while the specific kinds of texts I'm interested in are those focused on a colonial encounter with an unfamiliar environment – an encounter in which a person representing a political or ideological position comes into contact with an environment that surpasses or challenges their understanding of the natural world in ways that they want to report back to their social or political group. These texts are particularly interesting because, first, they tend to reflect historical junctures in human experience where attention to environmental matters becomes especially important, and secondly, because it can

become difficult to separate our political judgment of these colonial actors from our understanding of the epistemological value of the text they have produced. In other words, these texts can seem epistemologically deficient precisely because of the rhetoric and the ideological position of the author, which distorts, vitiates, or otherwise corrupts the representation of the natural world that they are encountering. You have to go no further than Columbus for an iconic example of exactly this phenomenon.

The more interesting question, I believe, is: What comes into view if we try to inhabit, from within, the perspective of the human being as a perceiving organism in an unfamiliar environment? Can we burrow under all the political and ideological stuff that separates us from that individual, and that separates that individual from the natural world, and reconstruct what they're actually experiencing?

I've spent the most time thinking about Columbus and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in connection to this project. But when it comes to the nineteenth-century United States, there are any number of texts that can be illuminated by this perspective, from the journals of Lewis and Clark, to Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail*, to Martin Delany's official account of the Niger Valley expedition, to John Muir's travel narratives, to Richard Harding Davis's accounts of traveling in Africa and South America. These are all texts that can be considered, to one degree or another, as American imperialist or colonialist texts in which the same sorts of problematics arise and in which we can apply some of the methodologies developed in this project.

In order to accelerate things, I'll quickly describe the artificial but convenient organization of my analysis. I begin by looking at the experience of the perceiving colonial subject in the natural environment, and I draw on insights from dialectical biology and environmental philosophy to suggest that the knowledge of this person is gained by their embodied experience in an environment with which they are existentially codetermined.⁵ The organism (and in our case, consciousness itself), and the environment are co-constitutive and co-determinative phenomena.

From there, I move to particular strategies for embedding this person's gained knowledge in text and here the basic idea is that the text appears as a form of externalized memory that is available to those in the social group who have the code to decipher it. The text is evolutionarily adaptive, not simply, as we might imagine, by providing an opportunity for colonist expansion, but precisely to the extent that it challenges the cultural or ideological schemata of those who are reading it.

This brings me to the third section, which concerns how the reader actually enters into the world of the text and experiences the natural world described therein in a way that is analogous to the person who wrote the text. There has been a great deal of work done on the psychology of reading, the cognition of reading, and the neurophysiology of reading.⁶ As far as I can tell,

⁵ See Johnson; Varela, Thompson, and Rosch; Turner; Lakoff and Johnson; and Rowlands.

⁶ See, for example, Werth; Stockwell; Gavins; Ryan; Schnelle; Cornelissen, et al.; and Wolf.

however, nobody has really focused squarely on how the reading brain experiences the natural world as represented in text. So I puzzle through some of the issues involved with that question, and the basic conclusion I'm working toward is that when the reader returns to their home environment, rising up from a period of immersion in the text, they're always in some kind of changed relation to their former experience or to their home environment. The environmental knowledge that the text encodes is a specific type of information that can challenge, complicate, or reinforce existing memories and cognitive structures, in the case of the individual, or communication networks and collective wisdom, in the case of the social group. The "environmental report" is a useful textual model for me because it represents an adaptive response to moments of historical and epistemic rupture, intellectual exposure and possible transformation – as experienced by an individual.

Jennifer James, George Washington University

I'm going to begin by talking about the twenty-first century. Mass incarceration is the greatest public health crisis in the African-American community now. I am also interested in the impact of mass imprisoned black labor on environments outside of prison. State prisoners are hired out by corporations, and federal prisoners perform work benefiting the government, threatening jobs in surrounding local communities. One area of labor in which both federal and state prisoners are participating is the production of so-called "green products." If we take those three things together -- the mass incarceration of a marginalized people, the eroding effect on labor, and the manufacturing of disposable "green products" -- I think we have an interesting case study in how ostensibly sustainable enterprises can participate in the destruction of lives and communities.

There's a nineteenth-century analogue to this situation that I've written about in *American Literary History* and that is the topic of my next book. African-American men mining guano on a tiny U.S. island in the Caribbean, between Haiti and Jamaica, staged an uprising. They were imprisoned laborers, who couldn't see a way out of their situation, so they rebelled. There were about one hundred thirty-five of them, and most participated in a day long riot, where they killed four of their twelve white supervisors. A fifth supervisor died of his injuries.

I'm concerned with what this labor riot tells us about coerced labor and environmental destruction at the end of the nineteenth century. Convict lessees during this period helped accelerate the greatest period of environmental destruction in the nineteenth century. They worked in coal mines and steel mines, stripping lands. They worked on the railroads. In short, there's a relationship between labor and environmentalism that has yet to be fully fleshed out when it comes to race. Charles Chesnutt called it the survival of the spirit of slavery. I am tentatively calling it the environmental afterlives of slavery, and I think this afterlife can be interpreted ecocritically.

When we think of the environmental afterlives of slavery, we tend to focus on neo-plantationism, black displacement from the land, trauma and memory. But if we turn to political economy, labor, and globalization, then we might engender a different kind of conversation that better illuminates our current environmental plight.

Guano was the first globally marketed organic agricultural product. What was so interesting about guano was that it was a natural product; it was organic, and it was marketed as such, but

it was used to cover up the environmental devastation caused by rampant industrialism. It became a commodity carrying hidden history of violent production, through the use of coolie labor, as well as the use of black miners and convict lessees.

Because it hid environmental destruction, guano was fetishized as a source of renewal. The French socialists, including Victor Hugo, saw guano as a product that could end global hunger and could end the need for any kind of labor. What are the implications of placing such great faith in an agricultural product that has such a violent history in order to keep exploitation and capitalism growing?

In the South, Southerners who were nationalists were interested in guano because they felt if they got enough of it they would be able to make up for the soil erosion and depletion that were products of slavery. Not only would they not have to change their agricultural practices, they wouldn't have to give up on slavery as a labor institution and they might be able to create an economy not interdependent with the North. They could then secede.

Partially to appease the Southerners, the United States started pursuing sources of guano around the world. They looked in Africa, they looked in the Pacific, and they came across a source in the Caribbean on this little island called Navassa. In 1856, the U.S. Congress passed a dramatic piece of legislation called the Guano Islands Act, that declared that any island, rock, or key not within the lawful jurisdiction of any other government and not occupied by the lawful citizens of any other government, on which United States citizens discovered guano deposits, would become the legal possession of the United States. And any private entity mining them would be forced to sell the guano to the United States. Any trading with foreign markets was expressly prohibited. The U.S. acquired some sixty islands in the Pacific and the Caribbean under the terms of this act, and Navassa had the largest deposits.

The corporation that set up shop there used convict labor at first, and then, after convict labor was prohibited, they used African Americans. Some of them had been slaves, but many of them were in their twenties in 1889, when this rebellion took place. Most were illiterate. They were bound by a fifteen-month contract, and there was no way that they could get off the island. They were subject to brutal punishments. Many of them were starved. They had been lured there by labor agents who promised them that they were going to pick fruit and the salaries were exorbitant. They were desperate. Most of them had shipped out of Baltimore and D.C. Many were also in debt, and it was stipulated in the contract that if you were indebted to the company store, you couldn't leave the island. That meant that virtually everyone was bound by that and couldn't leave.

These were men who had been exposed to the labor struggles that were happening across the United States, and they wanted better hours and better food. But they didn't want out of their contracts, amazingly. The men tried to negotiate, but of course, the supervisors were not going to concede, and so, the men rebelled. They rebelled with everything available. They fought with sticks, with stones, with pistols, with dynamite, and they ended up with five supervisors dead. The miners held the rest of the supervisors hostage, and they wrote a letter asking to be rescued from the island.

When they were returned to Baltimore, eighteen of the miners were tried in the U.S. district court. Four of them were found guilty of murder and sentenced to hang. African-American

organizations in the Baltimore area supported them, petitioned for them, and galvanized a ground swell of support for these men. The larger Baltimore community saw these men as laborers, rather than solely as black people. Labor organizations, like the Jewish Federation of Trade and the Working Man's Association, supported them. And African-American leaders delivered a petition to President Benjamin Harrison, who had someone look into the circumstances and granted the four men clemency.

By the time they were granted clemency, the story had been in the newspapers for two years. It was covered in Ireland. It was covered in England. It was covered in New Zealand. It was covered in the Caribbean, in South America. I've found articles about it in Portuguese, Spanish. The story captured the nation's attention; all of the major paper covered it: the *New York Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. Harrison used his 1891 State of the Union address to explain why he had granted them clemency. A *Washington Post* editor agreed that it was the right thing to do, reflecting national sentiment. The general public wanted these men to be saved.

In sum, in thinking about how we can theorize the relationship between race, coerced and captive labor, and environmental degradation in terms of the afterlives of slavery, I hope to expand the conversation beyond slavery proper, because I think that tends to be the place we go reflexively. After all, there's an abundance of literature about enslavement, even in the post-bellum era. But if we restrict our study of African-American environmental discourses to the literature of slavery exclusively, then we're going to have particular conversations again and again and again.

Lance Newman

I'm currently working on a project tentatively called "Landscapes of Resistance," about how nineteenth-century writers of color, women writers, and working-class writers reconfigure dominant landscape aesthetics and discourses for rhetorical purposes. One example of a landscape of resistance in nineteenth-century American literature is Frederick Douglass's forest of the antebellum South, which he recasts as a chapel of nature in which he comes to a political self-awareness and determines to fight back against slavery. Another is Lydia Maria Child's Manhattan in *Letters from New-York*.

I'm currently writing about William Apess and his autobiography, *A Son of the Forest*. Most of us know Apess through "An Indian's Look Glass for the White Man," the stirring conclusion to *The Experiences of Five Christian Indians of the Pequod Tribe*, in which he mounts a brilliantly sarcastic attack on early national racism and looks forward to the day when "this tree of distinction shall be leveled to the earth and the mantel of prejudice torn from every American heart" (60).

However, the rhetoric of race in Apess's other works is not so consonant with contemporary habits of liberal thinking about race. The title page of his conversion narrative insists twice that his identity is determined by his relationship to a particular symbolic landscape. The book is titled *A Son of the Forest* and subtitled *The Experience of William Apes, a Native of the Forest*. Initially, this may seem to be a familiar nineteenth-century *topos*, the home of the noble savage, who is the subject of romantic narratives of vanishing Indians. However, there is almost no landscape description in the book whatsoever, either in the expected vocabulary of the sublime or otherwise.

Instead, Apess materializes the raced landscape of early national discourse, reframing the forest as the physical environment his Pequot ancestors inhabited as common property before they were uprooted by racist settlers. By frustrating expectations of spectacular loco-description that would warrant or ground his identity as a noble savage, he insists instead on the forest's mundane materiality as the "goodly heritage" and "goodly inheritance" that supported his ancestors' bodily life (*Son of the Forest* 7, 123). By doing so, Apess gives the forest new symbolic meaning, transforming it from what, in *Of Plimoth Plantation*, William Bradford calls a "hideous and desolate wilderness full of wild beasts and wild men" into what Apess calls the "deep brown wilderness" (*On Our Own Ground* 111). Apess's forest becomes a homeland of what I call a republicanism of color that he articulates in the language of evangelical Methodism, which at the time was a forthrightly anti-racist working-class religious practice.

In the first chapter of *A Son of the Forest*, Apess casts the colonization of New England as a race war between red and white, but by doing so he simultaneously hardens racial categories and flattens racist hierarchies in a way that authorized native land claims in the 1830s.

At the same time, he complicates this typological narrative of racial conflict by frankly acknowledging the bodily realities of wartime captivity and sexual violence. He talks about the kidnapping, rape, and impregnation of Pequot women and represents this as a threat, a pollution of the tribal blood and body, that threatens the collective identity on which those land claims are based.

He introduces himself into this narrative as this sort of personal embodiment of the Pequot people's two hundred year history of bodily pollution by white blood and alcohol, and he uses the Methodist language of temperance and steadiness to narrate a story of overcoming the pollution of his own body as a representative Native American. He does so in the process of trying to create a pan-Indian consciousness, a red political consciousness, that is designed as a rhetorical standpoint from which to make land claims in the nineteenth century.

Apess introduces his father as a mixed-race man who engages in a process of bodily purification. He describes his father as neo-traditionalist who decisively avowed his native blood and took steps to reclaim it. When his father "attained the age to act for himself, he joined the tribe to which he was connected maternally, shortly after which he married a female of the tribe in whose veins not a single drop of the white man's blood has ever flowed" (8-9). After marrying a native woman whose blood remains pure, Apess's father removed to the back settlements where Apess himself was born. So, Apess himself is not only the sign and product of his people's history of abjection, but also a step in the direction of the reversal of that process.

I'm going to end with my favorite quote from the autobiography. There's a scene in which Apess's grandmother beats him when he's four years old. Apess writes, "I suppose that the reader will naturally say, 'What savage creatures my grandparents were to treat unoffending or helpless children in this manner'" (14). But he insists that her violence "was the effect of some cause," which he identifies clearly:

I attributed it in part to the whites, because they introduced among my countrymen ardent spirits, seduced them into a love for it, and when they were under its baleful influence, wronged them out of their lawful possessions--that land where reposed the ashes of their sires--and not only so, but they

committed violence of the most revolting and basest kind upon the persons of the female portion of the tribe who until the arts and vices, and debauchery of the whites were introduced among them were as happy, and peaceable, and cheerful as they roamed over their goodly possessions, as any people upon whom the sun of heaven hath ever shown. (14-15)

The consequence of this dispossession was “that they were scattered abroad. Now, many of them were seen reeling about intoxicated with liquor, neglecting to provide for themselves or families, who before were assiduously engaged in supplying the necessities of those depending upon them” (15).

In short, Apess represents the alienation from the land that was the material basis of his people’s well-being as the end product of a two-hundred year race war that began with the introduction of twin toxins, blood and alcohol, into native bodies. In telling this tale, he strategically redeploys the homogenizing racial categories of red and white in order to substantiate pan-Indian land claims at precisely the moment, 1829, when the Jackson administration was pursuing the final displacement of the native people east of the Mississippi. And he finally represents himself subjunctively as a purified red man who preaches an anti-racist liberation theology that will lead in the end to the millennial restoration of native control of the “deep brown wilderness” of America.

This is a very different William Apess than we’re used to reading in “An Indian’s Looking Glass for the White Man.” He’s engaged reworking the conventional wisdom about the relationship between racial categories and landscapes that were dominant in nineteenth-century discourses.

Karen Salt, University of Aberdeen

What a delightful conversation. A round of thanks to everyone for their papers. I have a number of comments and a few questions. First, to Jennifer: I am currently writing about Navassa, too, but my particular emphasis is on aspects of political ecology and black sovereignty. There is a link to be made between the diplomatic battles of the mid-nineteenth century and the contemporary ecological import of the island. After all, Navassa has been absorbed by the United States into the Caribbean Islands National Wildlife Refuge. Similar to the afterlives of slavery, I’m interested in the ecological chains of un-freedom that are permeating various part of the Caribbean.

Ian, I’m curious about the person who’s producing the text and where they fit. Also, how do we work with orality?

Bridget, the current edition of *Bug-Jargal* has Leah Gordon’s photography on the cover. It’s an image from her book about Haiti called *Kanaval* that has two men wearing these really interesting animalistic horns. I’d be really interested in what you think of religion in relation to your reading of animality and race in nineteenth-century fiction.

Joshua, trees. Doris Garraway has an edited collection called *Tree of Liberty: Cultural Legacies of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*. It riffs on what is supposedly Toussaint L’Ouverture’s last statement, which he makes in a letter to Napoleon, where he claims that in overthrowing him, Napoleon has done no more than merely struck down one trunk of the tree

of liberty. He warns that the fight for liberty will continue on in Haiti because its roots are plentiful. So this notion of trees being a place of resistance is actually quite strong, to the point where at the center of the flag of Haiti is the royal palm. Trees fit quite topologically within Creole religions. So, there is some important thinking to do about what trees represent, especially when you're thinking about able-ness or abled bodiedness, because immobility is a form of actual violence used for control during slavery, from the chains on the feet to the collars on the neck. But that's not the way that immobility works for trees which are rooted very powerfully. So there is this tension in what you're describing.

A book that I was thinking about when you were describing the twenty-first century is *The Book of Night Women* by Marlon James. I think there'd be some fascinating work to be done there about conjuring and resistance to power, especially if you are thinking about the conjure woman, since she contains a contemporary group of them, who have very complicated ideas about resistance, the body, and abled-bodiedness.

Lauren LaFauci, University of Tulsa

Like a lot of people in this room I work on the intersection of race and nature as well, so it's wonderful to be able to listen to this conversations and be part of a community rather than working in isolation.

Lance, I'm glad that you finished with Apess, because often when we talk about race and nature, we mean black life, we mean slavery, for very good reasons, but I wonder about how nativeness complicates our work in the nineteenth century. James, perhaps you can speak to this, because when you remove Indians to the West, it's no longer "pure space." To white minds, it's already been "polluted" in some ways, so are Indians being made white in the 1840s, after the Mexican War, because they're not Mexican and they're not black? How, for all of you, how does nativeness complicate these conversations?

James Finley

I'm thinking about the problematic valuation of the Jeffersonian farmer. We see that with the Cherokee, but it just did not work, because Jackson and "border ruffians" in Georgia were not interested in recognizing the productivity of native farmers.

Jennifer James

I actually have an 1862 homesteading document where one of my great-great-grandfathers got his forty acres in Mississippi. This is land that was, of course, native at one point. In the afterlives of slavery, these land claims that African Americans are participating in are reenacting displacement. We tend to say, "Okay, they worked the land; therefore, they own it. It's theirs. Those forty acres are a sort of restitution--the mythical that actually is real." I cried when I saw this document, but what does it mean? Complicity, rather than simple victimization by slavery, has led African Americans to have a complicated relationship to the environment. But what else are they doing where they are agents.

Lance Newman

The particular context of Methodism in the 1820s and 1830s is really interesting. If you think about a Methodist camp meeting, it's a multiracial grouping of mainly working-class people engaging in a highly politicized form of religious practice in the woods. The native villages of New England, at the time, were similar kinds of spaces, especially in their multiracial character. Frequently there were African American residents in these villages, which adds a new layer of complexity and irony to the way that Apess constructs for himself the identity of a reconstructed red prophet.

Bridget Fielder

I disagree with the idea that race constitutes blackness in the nineteenth century, because one of the most interesting things about scientific racism is that nobody can agree how many races of people there are. It gets ridiculously complicated with biblical genealogies and ideas about certain races being amalgamated races and whether that's good or bad or maybe both. There's no single trajectory along which this body of thought progresses, so I think we do have to think in much more complicated ways when responding to the utter chaos of nineteenth-century theorizations of race.

Joshua Bennett

Think, too, about the way that possession and mastery travel in these moments. For one, I'm thinking about *Beloved* and other narratives of slaves escaping through the wilderness and being taken up as part of Native American tribes.

James Finley

The Seminole Wars...

Joshua Bennett

Right. And Henry Bibb was owned by a Cherokee...

Bridget Fielder

...and his Cherokee master is preferred to the white master because he's kinder...

James Finley

...and does the work along with him...

Joshua Bennett

...which is a fascinating moment of fraught collaboration. Oden Peoples, in Edward P. Jones's narrative, *The Known World*, is a slave catcher who is also caught in this very liminal space, because it's understood that whiteness is something that is fugitive itself. There are moments when Oden Peoples participates in whiteness, and there are moments when he's prevented from participating in white exercises of power over black bodies. So, I think native-ness really complicates the way we think about whiteness and blackness as stable categories that are always in a set hierarchical correlation.

David Anderson, University of Louisville

James, you described James Pennington's location of pastoral space on land prior to American settlement. That convention informs much later Congregationalist writing. For instance, George Marion McClellan, the major black nature poet of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, writes about Southern landscapes in this way. When he attended Hartford Seminary in the 1880s, he was likely a member of Pennington's former congregation, Talcott Street Congregational Church.

I also see a connection between Joshua's presentation and Ian's research on writers who train readers by providing them with needed conventions. Chesnut does that a lot in his texts. Similarly, Sterling Brown draws on the blues and on vernacular traditions to challenge pastoral. He informs readers about the ways landscape has been interpreted, and when those interpretations must be resisted. He also offers his audiences alternative ways of writing African American poetry and drama about the land.

Ian Finseth

I'd like to link back to Karen's question about orality. I was just thinking, what is it about printed texts that is particularly relevant here? And it's that they can travel through time and space in way that oral culture doesn't, allowing the organization and the formation of political consciousness and political communities in much more dramatic and potent ways. The idea that you are raising here, about the writers directing readers towards certain interpretive positions, is absolutely right to the extent that they're in control of their own rhetoric and to the extent that the reader is positioned semantically by the logic of text to arrive at certain understandings of the natural word. Those are contingent and very problematic processes.

Stephanie LeMenager, University of Oregon

Lance, you introduced this roundtable by making reference to new materialism. I was curious to know if some of you, or all of you, see yourselves as involved in a convergence of new materialist modes of analysis and a revitalization of the cultural studies of labor. To me, that convergence grounded at least three of the presentations and really helped to take apart the time worn and much-abused nature concept and break it into something much more interesting. Is there a movement afoot that has to do with the relationship of coercion to the

rhetoric of sustainability that Jennifer brought up? Do you consider yourselves some way a part of that?

Lance Newman

I hope so. My feeling about the new materialism is that it has a great deal of potential, and whether it engages with questions like labor that direct it away from the individual body immersed in the natural world to human beings as social organisms who use labor collectively and hierarchically to transform matter into useable forms in order to sustain their bodies, whether new materialism shifts focus in this way will determine whether it fulfills its potential.

Stephanie LeMenager

I agree, and I see a germ of that in some of your concepts, Joshua, of fugitivity and coalitional relations in the context of what James was talking about and what Jennifer realizes with her wonderful archival work. It seems to me that there's a lot of potential that sprang forth brilliantly in this discussion. It shows one way to direct some of the energies of new materialism.

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