

ECOLOGY OF THE COLOR LINE: RACE AND NATURE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE,
1895-1941

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2012

Urbana, Illinois

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ABSTRACT

In the Forethought to *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois prophesied that the “problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line.” A hundred years later, ecological crises join racial crises as perhaps *the* emergent problems of the twenty-first century. In Du Boisian spirit, my project explores how the color line and what I call the ecological line—the line that runs between humans and their environment—intersect. “Race and Nature in American Literature, 1895-1941” reimagines many literary genres and critical disputes traditionally focalized through problematics of race and politics: the Washington—Du Bois debates on racial uplift, New Negro cultural nationalism, the Great Migration narrative, black Marxism, and ethnic proletarian literature. Employing methods of environmental historicism, archival research, and intersectional analysis, my project argues not only that intertwining racial and ecological problems erupted along the color line, but also that these problems form a constitutive element of our thinking about Race and politics in twentieth-century American literature.

“Race and Nature” begins by reframing the famous Washington—Du Bois rift within the contexts of environmental history and the conservation movement. Chapter one, “Up from Nature: Ecological Agency as Racial Uplift in *Working with the Hands*,” argues that just as Washington’s second autobiography, *Working with the Hands*, is double-voiced for both white and black readers, so too does it speak within the dual temporalities of the post-Reconstruction New South and the *longue durée* of southern environmental history. This historical parallax reveals the text’s promotion of ecological agency—akin to that of colonial-era maroon communities—as occurring off the public grid and within what Monique Allewaert calls the “plantation zone.” *Working with the Hands* narrates this ecological agency in two ways: first, by

scientifically detailing practices of soil conservation designed to restore sustainability (and profitability) to the soil; second, by representing the plantation zone as a black-nationalist space reconstructed through pastoral design and landscape architecture. This shift in reading Washington from social to environmental history—from racial uplift to ecological agency—makes him less accommodationist and more in line with the black radical tradition.

Chapter two, “Du Bois at the Grand Canyon: National Parks and Double Consciousness in *Darkwater*,” focuses on how Du Bois works with and against the emerging conservation and wilderness preservation movements of the early twentieth century. My reading of *Darkwater*’s chapter “Of Beauty and Death” examines Du Bois’s juxtaposition of visits to national parks such as the Grand Canyon with anecdotes about life under Jim Crow, bringing double consciousness to bear on the history of conservation. Through montage and surrealist formal techniques, he uses Colonel Charles Young—the highest-ranking black military officer at the time and acting superintendent of Sequoia National Park in 1903—as a figure who embodies the intertwined histories of Jim Crow and conservation. For Du Bois, the national parks become an environmental correlative for integration and democratic pluralism, shifting “culture” and “nature” from oppositional to differentiated modern spaces.

Moving beyond Du Bois and Washington to the cultural ingenuity of the Harlem Renaissance, chapter three, “The ‘Garden Queer’: Urban Nature and the Ghetto Pastoral in the Poetry of Anne Spencer and Claude McKay,” traces the garden-in-the-machine trope from Spencer’s poetry and McKay’s *Spring in New Hampshire* (the original version of *Harlem Shadows*) to the emergence of the multi-ethnic proletarian subgenre that Michael Denning identifies as the “ghetto pastoral.” This urban reversal of the antebellum trope that Leo Marx calls the “machine in the garden” gestures both towards a nostalgic past and a romantic

revolutionary future. The “garden queer” of McKay’s 1932 short story “The Truant” and the Bronx Park excursion in Michael Gold’s 1930 *Jews without Money* show the trope’s continuing political evolution across migration narratives, Harlem Renaissance poetry, and ethnic proletarian literature.

Connecting the Harlem Renaissance to natural history, chapter four, “*The Crisis*, Effie Lee Newsome, and the Politics of Nature,” focuses on Newsome, a Harlem Renaissance children’s poet who wrote scientifically about birds, in order to make a broader argument about the NAACP’s *The Crisis* and its 1920s engagement with conservation, natural sciences (e.g. biology), and other environmental themes. Newsome wrote on topics unusual—even *radical*—for African Americans at the time: birdwatching, entomology, ethology (animal psychology), and other forms of amateur nature study. What Barbara Foley would see as an “organic trope”—the yoking of nature imagery to black nationalism—I see as Newsome’s and *The Crisis*’ attempt both to refute eugenics as a pseudo-science and to substitute conservationist politics as a buoyant *alternative* to the burdens of the color-line problem.

“From Black Marxism to Industrial Ecosystem: Racial and Ecological Crisis in William Attaway’s *Blood on the Forge*,” the final chapter, helps re-imagine the relation of African-American and working-class fiction to ecology. Typically framed as a black Marxist allegory or a Great Migration novel, *Blood on the Forge* complicates and radicalizes both by focalizing them through 1930s ecological problematics. The chapter situates the novel alongside a materialist paradigm shift in scientific ecology marked by A. G. Tansley’s introduction of the “ecosystem” concept. Attaway refracts the polluted Pittsburgh of 1919 through this shift, in the process linking ecological degradation to racial conflict, sexual violence, and exploitive labor policies. Finally, I argue that the character Smothers anticipates conservationist Aldo Leopold’s “land

ethic,” though with a black Marxist twist, in ways that echo and signify on the ecological agency of Washington’s *Working with the Hands*.

The dissertation’s epilogue centers on J. A. Rogers’s *Nature Knows No Color-Line* (1952), a study about racial mixing in world history that expands themes of race and nature to a more global context. By opening avenues for thinking about the role of environmental history, conservation, and scientific ecology in African-American writing, my project builds on the recovery and historical work of Brent Hayes Edwards, Barbara Foley, William J. Maxwell, and Cary Nelson. Their work sutures 1920s-1930s African-American writing to concepts of diaspora, and to the Communist Party and other Leftist pre-war radicalisms. My dissertation continues this trend in understanding African-American writing as politically and aesthetically pluralist. More broadly, “Race and Nature” helps deepen our understanding of the literature and culture of the civil rights and environmental movements in twentieth-century America.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks go to my doctoral committee and especially my co-directors, William J. Maxwell and Michael Rothberg. “Race and Nature” is partly the product of Bill’s offhand remark in a graduate seminar almost five years ago that led me to explore the intersection (or lack of intersection in spring 2007) between ecocriticism and African American literature. Michael Rothberg has been generous with his counsel, friendship, and almost superhuman ability to provide timely feedback on all my writing. Both have been reliable and conscientious editors, mentors, and friends. Spencer Schaffner and Stephanie Foote offered invaluable advice and feedback during the process. I also want to thank former committee members Debra Hawhee and Mark C. Thompson for their crucial input at the beginning stages of this project.

I’ve also had many productive exchanges with faculty and graduate students outside of my committee. I want to thank Greg Garrard for bringing wider attention to my work in his *YWCC*T review of the *MFS* article version of chapter 5. He also provided thorough feedback on chapter 2 on Du Bois. Gillen Wood helped me conceptualize chapter 1 on Booker T. Washington. Anne Raine at the University of Ottawa has also offered a generous critique of chapter 5. I’m also grateful for the organizers and attendees of the Southern Nation Graduate Conference at Princeton for two days of presentations and discussion of “the South” that remain a shaping influence on this project.

The G.E.O. and its remarkable staff (current and former) – Amy Livingston, Aaron Johnson-Ortiz, and Douglas West, as well as the organization’s committed volunteers, also deserve thanks. Knowing that they were fighting indefatigably to improve working conditions for teachers and scholars in higher education kept my spirits alive for the duration of this project.

This couldn't have been done without the help of other friends and fellow travelers: Michael Simeone, Kathy Skwarczek, Ann Hubert, Dave Morris, Michael Burns, Christy Scheuer, Michael Verderame, Marilyn Holguin, Heather McCleer, Allan Borst, and Mia McIver. Special thanks goes to John Reuland, who has been an intellectual soulmate of sorts since we started a Derrida reading group together in 2005; and also, Christopher Simeone, who has played a vital role as friend, editor, and idea soundboard at just about every stage of this project.

Most importantly, I want to thank my parents and family for love and support. I dedicate this dissertation to my grandparents, Albert and Theresa Ferrero.

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Introduction

1. The 1927 Flood and *The Crisis*

After weeks of heavy rain in the Midwest and the South, the levees broke at Mounds Landing, Mississippi, on April 21, 1927, flooding tens of thousands of square feet and displacing over 300,000 people, the majority of whom were black sharecroppers (Barry 201). The Red Cross and the National Guard were sent into the region to impose order and bring relief to the population. In its triumphal narrative of this event, the official report filed by the Red Cross sidelines the problem of the color line, even though it reveals a startling statistic: 100,551 of the refugees were white, while 225,003 were black (40). But the only time race relations are mentioned in the 148-page document is to announce that a “Colored Advisory Commission” had been appointed to investigate and release a separate report. In this short, two-paragraph section, the language the report uses about abuses in the refugee camps is evasive, referring to “perplexities in which this race was particularly involved” (29). The words “this race” suggest the culpability of southern blacks, while the word “perplexities” mystifies the structural origins and agents of discrimination at the camps. Despite these problems, the report hastily points to the “very significant progress” in the “development of racial cooperation,” though it provides no evidence (29). In short, the Red Cross narrates the relief efforts as a resounding success, even to the point of painting the refugee camps as spaces for “wholesome recreation” and contentment (41). However, the NAACP, *The Crisis*, *The Chicago Defender*, and *The Baltimore Afro-American* all took great interest in the flood and its aftermath, raising questions about the way ecological catastrophe is rhetorically and politically framed.

In the Forethought to his ground-breaking work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois prophesied that the “problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line”

(3). A hundred years later, in the wake of such disasters as Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill, Du Bois might say that intertwined racial and ecological crises are *the* emergent problems of the twenty-first century. In Du Boisian spirit, this dissertation explores how the color line and the ecological line—the line that runs between humans and their environment—parallel, intersect, and veer apart by soldering African-American writing to the histories of the conservation movement and the rise of scientific ecology. “Race and Nature” ultimately contributes to our understanding of how the politics of civil rights and environmentalism converged in the black literary imagination. Du Bois’s and the NAACP’s response to the 1927 Mississippi Flood offers one such example of this convergence. In the event’s aftermath, what counts as “social” and what counts as “environmental” was debated in both black and “white” journals, newspapers, government documents, and memoirs.

While official reports would frame the flood as a *natural* disaster, Du Bois and the NAACP would offer a counter-narrative of the event as a *civil rights* catastrophe.¹ The NAACP and *The Crisis* worked against accounts that ignored racial violence, portrayed black refugees unfavorably, or attempted to naturalize racism. Du Bois fought back by publishing a fiery piece in the July 1927 issue of *The Crisis*, simply titled “Flood.” For Du Bois, this disaster becomes the occasion for a return to the repressed of slavery, where refugees are concentrated in “slave camps” overseen by the “big planters of Mississippi and Louisiana and the lynchers of Arkansas” (168). He advises refugees to flee north, to “leave this land of deviltry at the first opportunity” and go to Memphis and Chicago—cities of poverty, to be sure, but to Du Bois it is better to starve than to be a slave (168). “Flood” shifts its tone to sarcasm when Du Bois condemns the response to the disaster of the business-oriented President Calvin Coolidge and Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover. “Mr. Hoover is too busy having his picture taken,” Du Bois chides,

while “Mr. Coolidge tells the world of the privileges of American civilization” (168). Hoover played the disaster as a political card: he would tout his philanthropic efforts during the event in his 1928 presidential campaign, while also driving the Republican party further down the road of whiteness with his “southern strategy” (Lewis *Fight* 245). Coolidge and Hoover stand by while the “Arkansas mob” lynches a black man, blasphemously “feeding the bonfire with lumber torn from a Negro church” (“Flood” 168). Indeed, Coolidge even refused to visit flooded area, despite requests from numerous publications and organizations (Barry 286-7). Du Bois also points out how the relief effort reproduces economic inequality: seventy-five percent of the refugees are black, but “we doubt if they have received 25 percent of the relief funds” (168). For Du Bois, the event thus becomes not a natural disaster but an unnatural one dominated by enslavement, economic inequality, and racial violence.²

“Flood” sets the stage for a more in-depth 1928 NAACP report that appeared six months later in three installments in *The Crisis*. The NAACP calls its investigation of the 1927 flood “The Flood, the Red Cross, and the National Guard” in order to place the institutions responsible for relief in its critical crosshairs. It followed on the heels of a watered-down investigative report overseen by Robert Russa Moton, Booker T. Washington’s successor at the Tuskegee Institute. Moton’s investigation was more aggressive than Du Bois had expected, but it still gave the Red Cross and other relief organizations a pass, for the most part (Lewis *Fight* 244-5). The anonymous NAACP investigator reports the “utter dreariness and desolation” experienced by the black refugees in already bad situations made much worse by the flood. Among its catalog of destruction and injustices, the report describes a representative flood-damaged home—a scene of extreme poverty and environmental destruction. The two-room home, underwater for two months, still bears the traces of the “mud and filth” deposited by the flood (43). There are four

children living in the home and a week-old infant rests on an iron bed that had been rusted. Most of the furniture had been “swept away by the swift current” (43). One of the children has pellagra, a disease of malnutrition that causes severe fatigue and can lead to death.

In the midst of this destitute poverty and the abuses of the Red Cross and National Guard, black refugees did show resistance against the “united efforts of the Red Cross and plantation owners to hold the Negroes on the land by force” (43). In a wave of migration, Delta refugees followed the same northbound paths as southern blacks in the Great Migration years earlier—paths to cities like St. Louis, Chicago, and Detroit. The National Guard even tried to stop the migrants by positioning guards along the plantation roads. *The Crisis* also reprinted a photograph from the original Red Cross document, but with a starkly different caption. The photograph shows a barge full of refugees, with the tree trunks in the background completely submerged. The barge is packed with about two hundred black refugees, standing-room only, with a couple of tents for cover from the sun. The Red Cross caption innocuously reads: “Refugees towed in barges to camps” (36). *The Crisis* displays the same photograph prominently in the center of the page with a caption that reads “The Slave Ship, 1927” (41). Evoking the Middle Passage of the Atlantic slave trade, the caption offers a quite different interpretation of the photography by highlighting the uniformly black refugees. By drawing attention to the racist social conditions exposed and amplified by the flood, *The Crisis* offers a politicized counter-representation of the Red Cross relief efforts.

Representations of the 1927 flood in *The Crisis* show that natural disasters are civil rights tragedies that amplify and expose already-existing institutional, structural, and everyday economic and racial inequalities. The exception of natural catastrophe magnifies the rule of what environmental justice advocates call environmental racism. By narrating an archive of literary

and cultural representations, including Du Bois's "Flood" and the NAACP investigation, "Race and Nature" reimagines many literary genres and critical disputes traditionally focalized through problematics of race and politics: the Washington—Du Bois debates on racial uplift, New Negro aesthetics, the Great Migration narrative, and black political radicalism. It further challenges the tendency to treat immediate and long-term ecological crisis as an equitable and democratic force when, in fact, it is not. The work of black intellectuals like Booker T. Washington and Du Bois offers a way of understanding the role of *difference* in the experience of ecological degradation. "Race and Nature" hopes to intervene in both American and African-American literary criticism and the environmental criticism of the past two decades. It argues not only that intersecting racial and ecological problems erupted along the color line, as in the case of the 1927 flood, but also that these problems form a hitherto unrecognized and yet constitutive element of our thinking about race, culture, and politics in twentieth-century America. First, this introduction situates my project in relation to environmental justice, acknowledging its debt to this movement while also distinguishing itself as its own form of critical practice. The next two sections outline the two major methodologies of "Race and Nature": environmental historicism and then African-American ecocriticism. The introduction concludes by outlining the five chapters and conclusion of the dissertation.

2. Environmental Justice and the South

As is the case with the 1927 Flood, the South is important geographically to an ecology of the color line. Washington's 1895 Atlanta Exposition address (the "Atlanta Compromise," in Du Bois words), *Up from Slavery* (1901), and *Working with the Hands* (1904) display a regionalist's love for the southern environment, while also criticizing the cotton monocultures

and sharecropping economy that depleted the soil, caused epidemics such as the boll weevil in 1915, and deterred subsistence farming. It is also an important region for writers such as Effie Lee Newsome, who wrote much of her Harlem Renaissance poetry while living in Birmingham, and Anne Spencer, who wrote often about gardens and nature in Lynchburg, Virginia. William Attaway's 1941 Great Migration novel *Blood on the Forge* begins in Kentucky, before its main characters move to Pittsburgh and then find themselves traumatized by industrialization, capitalist exploitation, and ecological devastation. The South is a space of continual racial and ecological crisis in the late-nineteenth and first-half of the twentieth centuries.

It is no wonder, then, that the environmental justice movement, which has given ecocriticism and environmental thinkers race-conscious ways of reading environmental literature, originated in North Carolina in the 1980s. The environmental justice movement emerges out of the American South, the region where, according to sociologist and activist Robert D. Bullard, "marked ecological disparities exist between black and white communities" (14). Much of the race-attuned ecocritical work—and therefore my own—is inspired by the environmental justice movement. It has become a truism among environmental justice critics that early U. S. environmentalist movements—and even some of today's—have not always been friendly to non-whites. Some early-twentieth-century conservationists, even Progressives like Theodore Roosevelt, had ties to white supremacy and advocated scientific racism. When Yellowstone National Park was established in 1872, the region's Native American inhabitants were forcibly removed by the U. S. Army. Environmental justice grew out of protests organized by civil rights leaders against the dumping of toxic waste into traditionally low-income areas populated by people of color. The specific incident that catalyzed the movement occurred in Warren County, North Carolina, where toxic waste was dumped in a poor, black residential area.

The governments and industries responsible target disempowered communities in instances of what activists call “environmental racism” (McGurty 302). Environmental racism or “discrimination,” in Bullard’s words, refers to the “disparate treatment of a group or community based on race, class, or some other distinguishing characteristic” (7). Air pollution is another major concern of the movement, for it affects the health of urban blacks (Bullard 7). Moreover, as environmental historian Eileen Maura McGurty claims, the problems that environmental justice addresses overlap with issues of public health—issues that pose “threats to the places where people live, work, and play” (314). The environmental justice movement also accused such mainstream environmental organizations as the Sierra Club and Audubon Society of failing to pay attention to problems facing the urban poor, as well as focusing on the “elitist” concerns of wilderness preservation and the national parks—spaces difficult for inner-city, low-income African Americans even to access.

Arguably, the focus on environmental racism and distributive equity means that environmental justice runs the risk of being too localist to encompass the broader national and even global concerns of the civil rights and conservation movements. Works such as the Commission for Racial Justice’s study *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States* (1987), directed by Benjamin Chavis, and concepts such as N.I.M.B.Y. (“not in my backyard”) attest to this problem of localism with their focus on particular sites of toxicity (Bullard 14-15). Indeed, Bullard’s environmental justice classic *Dumping in Dixie* (1990) develops a “politics of place” that zooms in on specific sites: Houston’s Northwood Manor Neighborhood, West Dallas, the small town of Alsen Louisiana, and Emelle-Sumter County in Alabama. The virtue of a politics of place is its identification of specific sites of resistance, but at a more general level it misses how these sites are connected to the national and the global scales. However, more recently the

environmental justice movement has begun to address this problem. For instance, the essay collection *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy* (2002) begins to open up environmental justice geographically and conceptually beyond localized instances of environmental racism. The book's editors argue for the illumination of "crucial intersections between ecological and social justice concerns" (4). Also, postcolonial critic Rob Nixon holds that environmental justice has the "greatest potential for connecting outwards internationally" (5).

"Race and Nature" is *not* a genealogy of the environmental justice movement. Rather, it casts a much larger historical web over this problem of race and nature in order to avoid the presentism of environmental justice. History shows that concepts of civil rights, social justice, and environmentalism have been intertwined at least since Washington's autobiographies and even as far back as the abolition movement, as outlined in Ian Finseth's *Shades of Green: Visions of Nation in the Literature of American Slavery* (2010). While this dissertation takes inspiration from this movement, it also critiques "environmental justice" as a concept that risks reifying distinctions between the social and the environmental, when these concepts, in fact, reflect more fluid and pluralistic understandings of civil rights in African-American literary history. If conservation, scientific ecology, and a general politics of nature were already there in the work of Washington, Du Bois, and others, then race is "always already" interconnected with environmental politics.

3. Environmental Historicism and Marxian Ecology

There are two dominant methodologies at work in this dissertation: environmental historicism (or eco-historicism) and the comparative textual analysis of what I call African-

American ecocriticism. The first and last chapters bookend the dissertation with an environmental historicist approach that helps ground the overall project in the materialist, historical conditions of the period (1895-1941). Chapter one, on Washington's autobiographies *Up from Slavery* (1901) and *Working with the Hands* (1904), and Chapter five, on Attaway's proletarian novel *Blood on the Forge* (1941), adopt this environmental historicist approach. These texts are historicized not just according to social history but also to the slow time of environmental history, each treated as an outgrowth of these two intertwining histories.

A new conception of nature, environment, and materialism, I believe, needs to be theorized. Following work in philosophy and critical theory that analyzes and questions the concept of nature—Steven Vogel's *Against Nature* (1996), Bruno Latour's *The Politics of Nature* (2004), and Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature* (2007)—this project treats “nature” as a discursive category similar to the way that poststructuralists do. However, this focus on discourse does not mean that nature can be reduced to a mere signifier. Previous studies of African American literature often see “nature” or organic tropes as belonging to an insular tradition of black nationalism. In many cases, however, nature tropes shoot off into different discourses that may initially seem far afield from the concerns of African Americans, as in the case of Washington's concerns with soil conservation. Soil conservation, while arising here in the context of racial uplift, also speaks to Progressive-era scientific discourses that have little to do with black nationalism. Similar to my understanding of nature, I see ecology—and the sciences that lead to its formation—not as a transcendent worldview but rather an amorphous science with historical ties to specific institutions and the various forms of power they embody. Ecology, as Latour reminds us, is a scientific discourse that has “no direct access to nature as such; it is a ‘-logy’ like all scientific disciplines” (4). Ecology deals with problems of

representation: the science has developed an ever-shifting body of representational scientific concepts, including “community,” “succession,” “climax state,” “ecosystem,” and “ecotope.” Thus, “nature” and “ecology” both gesture at the boundaries of signification, but our understanding of the environment is mediated by representation and interpretation.

There is a need, then, to reconcile poststructuralism’s and African-American literary criticism’s focus on representation with the materialism of ecology and environment. This need also applies to concerns with race, which is culturally mediated and thus a step removed from material nature, ecology, and environment. Predating ecocriticism, Cedric J. Robinson’s *Black Marxism* (1983), discussed in more detail in chapter one, offers an alternative understanding of nature from a Marxist point of view—a view that does not automatically see mystification and ideology when the problem of “nature” arises. Robinson’s central concern is to outline a genealogy of twentieth-century black radicalism and a critique of an orthodox, Eurocentric Marxism that privileges class over race as an analytical category. He makes a number of gestures towards the role of nature in this history, though it does not become a category that receives rigorous scrutiny. Contra Marx, Robinson makes slavery central to the development of capitalism, arguing that it is not just a pre-capitalist stage of “primitive accumulation” (4). Nature, ecology, and the wilderness become relevant in Robinson’s accounts of black resistance to slavery in the forms of marronage and agrarian rebellions. “To reconstitute the community,” Robinson writes, “Black radicals took to the bush, to the mountains, to the interior” (310). Maroons in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries fled to the wilderness and formed their own communities, which sometimes became a significant threat to the white plantation system, as in the case of the Haitian Revolution (130). In the late-nineteenth century, southern black farmers and organized labor briefly allied to form the Populist movement, but the attempt to ground some

political agency in agriculture failed (194-5). Nonetheless, these are examples of how black Marxism can reanimate the importance of nature and ecology as sources of resistance and agency rather than false consciousness.

Taking a cue from Robinson's book and going beyond poststructuralism and poststructuralist varieties of Marxism, "Race and Nature" embraces the Marxian ecological critique of capitalism developed by such thinkers as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chris Williams, James O'Connor, and John Bellamy Foster. The Marxian critique sees the ecological crisis as a product of the capitalist mode of production and its constant need to expand. In this view, capitalism has a material limit, for all value ultimately derives from natural resources, including human labor power, which needs nutrients to fuel it and survive. Williams's 2010 *Ecology and Socialism* convincingly argues for the urgency and continued relevance of Marxist critique when capitalism's seemingly unstoppable ability to revolutionize itself batters against the material and thus *ecological* limits of the earth's resources. Williams portends a "global ecocide" for the twenty-first century, in which "thousands of species sit on Extinction Death Row" (1). The pro-business mentality maintains that sustainability is possible, that the profit-motive will triumph like the hero of a Hollywood blockbuster (6). As Williams argues, though, there must be a more radical change in the system and "environmental activism must be about socio-ecological justice the world over" (9).

A Marxian ecology places emphasis on the natural—the ecological and ontological—dimension of Marx's materialism, or what Kenneth Burke calls the "*total* economy of the planet" (*Attitudes* 157). An ecological rereading of Marx reveals that *Capital* volume one does not elaborate a labor theory of value, but rather critiques Adam Smith's and David Ricardo's labor theories of value for not being materialist *enough*. Though the terms were not readily available to

him, Marx hints at something like an ecological theory of value (“ecology” was coined by Ernst Haeckel in 1866). Speaking to the context of agriculture in the United States, Marx describes capitalist forms of ecological violence:

[Capitalist production] disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth, i.e. it prevents the return to the soil of its constituent elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; hence it hinders the operation of the eternal natural condition for the lasting fertility of the soil. [...] [A]ll progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility. The more a country proceeds from large-scale industry as the background of its development, as in the case of the United States, the more rapid is this process of destruction. Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker (*Capital* 637-8).

In formulating the dual capitalist exploitation of the worker and the earth, Marx reveals their solidarity as the “original sources of all wealth,” as productive forces stifled by a metabolic rift. This rift cuts off the circulation of regenerative material flows—the products of consumption—back into nature and relegates them to mere waste. In *Marx’s Ecology*, Foster recuperates Marx’s use of the concept of “metabolism” to express the material exchange between humans and nature. Foster claims that Marx understands labor metabolically, as, in Marx’s words, “a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature” (*Capital* 283). This Marxian sense of ecology has important implications for readings of African-American writing, and will be

developed later in chapter one's reevaluation of Washington and chapter five's analysis of *Blood on the Forge*.

While "Race and Nature" challenges the assumptions of poststructuralist and labor-centric Marxist critics, it generally seeks to restore "nature," "environment," and "ecology" as troubling cultural and political terms in African-American literary history. These concepts *matter* in this literary history. For example, Harold Cruse's account of Washington's influential "economic nationalism" in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* cannot be understood without reference to the Tuskegee Institute's concern with pastoral design and scientific advancements in soil conservation under the supervision of George Washington Carver (19). Du Bois's "integrationism," to use Cruse's terms, can be enriched with an understanding of his notion of "double environments," a sort of corollary to double consciousness that claims that African Americans inhabit an internal black environment surrounded by an external white environment that they must negotiate. Double environments are the *externalization* of double consciousness and vice versa. In *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, George Hutchinson analyzes the American "cultural nationalism" and, borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu, the "cultural field" of the Harlem Renaissance—its networks of authors, institutions, and publications that supported the creative work of black writers and artists in the 1920s. Like many literary historians and critics, Hutchinson discusses nature in the context of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century debates about the biological or cultural construction of race. For example, he narrates the influence of Franz Boas' anthropology on black intellectuals. Boasian anthropology combated the claims of scientific racism by arguing that biological traits were incidental to racial difference and that *cultural* difference is the true marker of "race" (64-65). The goal of my project is not to dispute these claims, but rather to show that "nature" and the "ecological" did exist as a category of

interest for African-American writers apart from the context of scientific racism. “Race and Nature” differs from previous ecocritical studies—and is closer to studies like Hutchinson’s—in its historicist or environmental historicist methodology.

4. African-American Ecocriticism

The middle three chapters of “Race and Nature” adopt a more comparative approach than chapters one and five, examining the intertextual dynamics of writings in their political and cultural context. They follow in the line of ecocritics Jeffrey Myers, Scott Hicks, and Paul Outka—a line of criticism that I call African-American ecocriticism. These middle chapters, therefore, are a sort of study of American environmental writing in black and white, in which African-American discourses on racial uplift and the color line are examined alongside white-dominated discourses on conservation, natural history, and scientific ecology. This involves a series of unexpected juxtapositions of exemplary figures in the African American and environmentalist traditions who are indirectly linked by the discursive context of their time. This comparative approach also means paying attention to a variety of literary genres and modes, including essays, poems, short stories, travel narratives, and mixed genres such as the ghetto pastoral. In so doing, I recognize and hope to draw out the specific forms of knowledge produced by generic variety.

In response to the domination of environmentalism by whites perceived by environmental justice critics (and some postcolonial theorists, too), a number of environmental historians and literary scholars have argued for the fundamental connection between race and nature. Some literary criticism of the 1980s and 1990s, whether ecocritical or not, forecast the later development of African-American ecocriticism in the 2000s. Vera Norwood’s ecofeminist *Made*

from This Earth: American Women and Nature (1993) is an early example of race-conscious ecocriticism that includes a chapter on women writers of color, particularly African American and American Indian authors. Writers such as Toni Morrison and Leslie Marmon Silko, Norwood argues, write against attempts to “other” women of color as wild or animal-like, while at the same time establishing a more inclusive tradition of nature writing (206-07). More recently, *Converging Stories: Race, Ecology, and Environmental Justice in American Literature* (2005), by Jeffrey Myers, is the first study to claim forcefully that black writers “drew strong connections between racial oppression and destructive attitudes toward the land” (4). Moving from Thomas Jefferson, to Henry David Thoreau, and then to Charles Chesnut, Myers covers a number of American writers who make connections between the physical environment and racial struggle.

Environmental historians such as Kimberly K. Smith, Albert Cowdrey, and Carolyn Merchant have contextualized African American history in the history of cotton, scientific agriculture, urbanization, and gardening. In her *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (2007), Smith sketches out a genealogy of the environmental justice movement. She tells the story of how black intellectuals and writers positioned themselves in relation to the environment, from southern black folk culture arising out of plantation life to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Throughout her book, Smith uncovers traditions of black agrarianism as well as African American challenges to scientific racism, environmental determinism, and primitivism. Broadly, she contends that to “black writers working in this tradition, America—not just the political community but the physical terrain—is a land cursed by injustice and in need of redemption” (8). At least at the rhetorical level, Smith sometimes backpedals into a normative white environmentalist position, claiming in her introduction that black writers’ experience of

racism has “distorted” their relation to the land (6). Political and economic oppression, she says, can “impair one’s capacity to interact appropriately with the natural world” (12). But in the end, Smith argues that there is a tradition of black environmental 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).

Outka’s *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (2008) brings together African-American literary studies, ecocriticism, and trauma studies. In his introduction, he formulates this interdisciplinary nexus in a colorful chiasmus: “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 similar to Smith’s, traversing the “colonial pastoral” in Crèvecoeur’s eighteenth-century travel writings and Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). While Myers and Smith introduce and outline the interconnection of race and nature, Outka theorizes it by arguing that the traumatic experiences of African Americans diverges from the sublime of conventional (white) nature writing. He covers a number of celebrated texts, including Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, Chesnut’s *The Conjure Tales*, John Muir’s *1,000 Mile Walk to the Gulf*, and two of Angelina Wald Grimké’s short stories, “Blackness” and “Goldie.” Outka’s white sublime / black trauma narrative, however, can be complicated with attention to cases where African-American writers do experience and represent the natural sublime. For example, this dissertation’s chapters on Washington’s *Working with the Hands* and Effie Lee Newsome’s poems published in *The Crisis* reveal more positive relations between African Americans and the natural environment.³

There is somewhat of a divide, however, between ecocritics and scholars of African American literature. African-Americanists seem reluctant to grapple with “nature,” perhaps due to fears of reverting back to an environmental determinism or tacit approval of “racial science.” Also, foundational texts in theory-savvy African American literary studies such as Henry Louis Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) maintain a poststructuralist distance from “nature” or “environment” as categories. Gates identifies and elaborates various patterns of “tropological revision” in the black vernacular tradition: the speakerly text, the talking book, and Signifyin(g) in general (xxv). Gates’s study reflects a concern with the world as text, with the intertextuality of all texts and an understanding of “reality” as a discursive construct. While Gates’s analysis of animal metaphors and swamp tropes do fall within the purview of ecocriticism, they are discussed purely as processes of signification. Symptomatic of poststructuralism, Melvin K. Dixon’s *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (1987) is significant for its examination of spatial and natural metaphors of mountaintop, wilderness, and underground. These metaphors shape a “topography” for an African-American quest for selfhood; they invent “alternative landscapes where black culture can flourish apart from any marginal, prescribed ‘place’” (2). From slave narratives to Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, Dixon argues that black writers performed a metaphorical inversion of space / place, so that African Americans no longer occupy the “low” place in the social hierarchy and acquire a sense of rootedness in the national imaginary (3). Dixon’s study has since been considered a precursor to ecocritical work on African American literature, yet it treats nature and environment as signifying processes without much material and historical substance of their own.

Likewise, Barbara Foley’s *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (2003) analyzes the prevalence of metaphors of rootedness, soil, and trees in the writing

of the Harlem Renaissance. Foley argues for the importance of 1919 as a year that marked turbulence in the United States and unleashed revolutionary energies. Much of this energy manifests itself in the many race riots that ripped apart the country's cities. As in Gates's *Signifying Monkey*, Foley is "centrally concerned with questions of discourse and trope"—questions that introduce a blindness to the significance, in turn, of environmental history for these tropes during this historical period. The various nature tropes in New Negro writing, or "organic tropes" as Foley calls them, buttress a strategy of "metonymic nationalism," in which black intellectuals and artists of the New Negro aesthetic sought to deploy their status as a "black nation" as representative of the *American* nation (160). This strategy failed, Foley argues, because these organic tropes ended up reinforcing the racial essentialism of white supremacy that African Americans tried to counteract (162). The "hyper-materiality of the organic trope," Foley argues, "functions metonymically to naturalize identity as a function of place, thereby largely occluding both historical and structural understandings of the 'roots' of racism" (237). By contrast, "Race and Nature" revalues the use of organic tropes in this period by looking at them not merely as tropes for a black nationalism, but as evidence of black writers engaging, critiquing, and appropriating the politics and rhetoric of the conservation movement and natural history.

The past of discreet domains of black and white experience, of civil rights and racial uplift, on the one side, and conservation and environmentalism on the other, needs to be rewritten and disrupted. Friedrich Nietzsche advanced a notion of an active, *critical* history that calls for the scholar to "break up and dissolve a part of the past" (76). Breaking up the past has a purpose for the *now*, for "acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come" (Nietzsche 60). This project seeks to break up the past by

exploring a theme that has been avoided in American and African-American literary studies: “nature”—in all that word’s complexities—and its implications for our understanding of racial uplift debates and the emergence of the civil rights movement. In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin asks, “how can the American Negro past be used?” (103). This project finds a usable past by assembling an archive of texts that engage, directly or indirectly, the rhetoric and politics of conservation, environmental history, and scientific ecology. Besides black authors like Washington, Du Bois, Effie Lee Newsome, and William Attaway, this dissertation emulates George Hutchinson’s model and places them in the context of white writers like John Muir, Mabel Osgood Wright, Theodore Roosevelt, and Aldo Leopold.

5. Chapter Outline

“Race and Nature” begins by reframing the famous Washington—Du Bois rift within the contexts of environmental history and the conservation movement. Chapter one, “Up from Nature: Ecological Agency as Racial Uplift in *Working with the Hands*,” argues that just as Washington’s second autobiography, *Working with the Hands*, is double-voiced for both white and black readers, so too does it speak within the dual temporalities of the post-Reconstruction New South and the *longue durée* of southern environmental history. This historical parallax reveals the text’s promotion of ecological agency—akin to that of colonial-era maroon communities—as occurring off the public grid and within what Monique Allewaert calls the “plantation zone.” *Working with the Hands* narrates this ecological agency in two ways: first, by scientifically detailing practices of soil conservation designed to restore sustainability (and profitability) to the soil; second, by representing the plantation zone as a black nationalist space reconstructed through pastoral design and landscape architecture. This shift in reading

Washington from social to environmental history—from racial uplift to ecological agency—makes him less accommodationist and more in line with the black radical tradition.

Chapter two, “Du Bois at the Grand Canyon: National Parks and Double Consciousness in *Darkwater*,” focuses on how Du Bois works with and against the emerging conservation and wilderness preservation movements of the early twentieth century. My reading of *Darkwater*’s chapter “Of Beauty and Death” examines Du Bois’s juxtaposition of visits to national parks such as the Grand Canyon with anecdotes about life under Jim Crow, bringing double consciousness to bear on the history of conservation. Through montage and surrealist formal techniques, he uses Colonel Charles Young—the highest-ranking black military officer at the time and acting superintendent of Sequoia National Park in 1903—as a figure who embodies the intertwined histories of Jim Crow and conservation. For Du Bois, the national parks become an environmental correlative for integration and democratic pluralism, shifting “culture” and “nature” from oppositional to differentiated modern spaces.

Moving beyond Du Bois and Washington to the cultural ingenuity of the Harlem Renaissance, chapter three, “The ‘Garden Queer’: Urban Nature and the Ghetto Pastoral in the Poetry of Anne Spencer and Claude McKay,” traces the garden-in-the-machine trope from Spencer’s poetry and McKay’s *Spring in New Hampshire* (the original version of *Harlem Shadows*) to the emergence of the multi-ethnic proletarian subgenre that Michael Denning identifies as the “ghetto pastoral.” This urban reversal of the antebellum trope that Leo Marx calls the “machine in the garden” gestures both towards a nostalgic past and a romantic revolutionary future. The “garden queer” of McKay’s 1932 short story “The Truant” and the Bronx Park excursion in Michael Gold’s 1930 *Jews without Money* show the trope’s continuing

political evolution across migration narratives, Harlem Renaissance poetry, and ethnic proletarian literature.

Connecting the Harlem Renaissance to natural history, chapter four, “*The Crisis*, Effie Lee Newsome, and the Politics of Nature,” focuses on Newsome, a Harlem Renaissance children’s poet who wrote scientifically about birds, in order to make a broader argument about the NAACP’s *The Crisis* and its 1920s engagement with conservation, natural sciences (e.g. biology), and other environmental themes. Newsome wrote on topics unusual—even *radical*—for African Americans at the time: birdwatching, entomology, ethology (animal psychology), and other forms of amateur nature study. What Barbara Foley would see as an “organic trope”—the yoking of nature imagery to black nationalism—I see as Newsome’s and *The Crisis*’ attempt both to refute eugenics as a pseudo-science and to substitute conservationist politics as a buoyant *alternative* to the burdens of the color-line problem.

“From Black Marxism to Industrial Ecosystem: Racial and Ecological Crisis in William Attaway’s *Blood on the Forge*,” the final chapter, helps re-imagine the relation of African-American and working-class fiction to ecology. Typically framed as a black Marxist allegory or a Great Migration novel, *Blood on the Forge* complicates and radicalizes both by focalizing them through 1930s ecological problematics. The chapter situates the novel alongside a materialist paradigm shift in scientific ecology marked by A. G. Tansley’s introduction of the “ecosystem” concept. Attaway refracts the polluted Pittsburgh of 1919 through this shift, in the process linking ecological degradation to racial conflict, sexual violence, and exploitive labor policies. Finally, I argue that the character Smothers anticipates conservationist Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic,” though with a black Marxist twist, in ways that echo and signify on the ecological agency of Washington’s *Working with the Hands*.

The dissertation's epilogue centers on J. A. Rogers's *Nature Knows No Color-Line* (1952), a study about racial mixing in world history that expands themes of race and nature to a more global context. By opening avenues for thinking about the role of environmental history, conservation, and scientific ecology in African-American writing, my project builds on the recovery and historical work of Brent Hayes Edwards, Barbara Foley, William J. Maxwell, and Cary Nelson. Their work sutures 1920s-1930s African-American writing to concepts of diaspora, and to the Communist Party and other Leftist pre-war radicalisms. My dissertation continues this trend in understanding African-American writing as politically and aesthetically pluralist. More broadly, "Race and Nature" helps deepen our understanding of the literature and culture of the civil rights and environmental movements in twentieth-century America.

¹ Besides *The Crisis*, the 1927 Mississippi flood was covered extensively in the *Chicago Defender* and *Baltimore Afro-American*, alongside cultural representations of the event in blues lyrics.

² At the same time, the head of the NAACP, Walter White, reinforced Du Bois's insights in an essay published in *The Nation* called "The Negro and the Flood." He takes the natural disaster, a "gigantic catastrophe," and reframes it as a civil rights issue, as "part of the normal picture of the industrial and race situation in certain parts of the South" (689). In a metaphor that evokes slavery and southern prisons, White states that, for the sharecroppers, the "flood situation has been used to strengthen their chains" (688). What most concerns White is the forced labor, where black refugees worked at the "point of guns on the levees long after it was certain the levees would break" (689). Black refugees performed "practically all of the hard and dangerous work in fighting the flood" (689). White's essay also contributed to the effort of black activists and intellectuals to wrest the event's narrative from racist hands.

³ Two more recent studies continue to develop threads initiated by Outka's work. Finseth's *Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770-1886* (2009), surveys a century of African-American nature-oriented literature, ranging from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Harriet Beecher Stowe to Martin Delaney and Frederick Douglass. He detects links between slavery and abolitionism and the advance of the natural sciences into mainstream discourse, contending that "nature" is an essential and evolving term in antebellum views of race and slavery. Antislavery philosophy and rhetoric, he argues, engaged natural science and developed "shifting imagistic patterns" that humanized African-descended peoples (5). This angle into discourses about nature both "liberated and constrained" antislavery thought and representation by associating non-whites positively with nature and yet naturalizing race at the same time (7). Ecocritic Kimberly N. Ruffin's *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (2010) weaves together a tradition of black environmental thought in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, focusing on mythic and spiritual understandings of nature. Like Smith, Ruffin argues that African Americans have been alienated from nature by racial oppression, and that they experience "environmental othering" when restricted from fully accessing nature (4). Ruffin identifies an "ecological paradox" for African Americans: they must shoulder the ecological "burden" of naturalized racism, while at the same time experiencing an "ecological beauty" that arises out of resistance to this burden (2-3).

Chapter 1

Up from Nature: Racial Uplift and Ecological Agency

in Booker T. Washington's Autobiographies

A splendid tower

Of strength, as would a gardener on the flower

Nursed tenderly, you gazed upon us all

Assembled there, a serried, sable wall

Fast mortared by your subtle tact and power.

- Claude McKay, "In Memoriam: Booker T. Washington" (1916)

1. Introduction

In 1902, Booker T. Washington delivered "Getting Down to Mother Earth," one of his weekly addresses to the Tuskegee Institute's students and faculty. When he sat down to write it, he may have had in mind his recent 1901 visit to the White House, where he became the first African American to dine with a U.S. president. Though relatively progressive in his views on race, President Theodore Roosevelt subscribed to fashionable social Darwinist and white supremacist ideologies that invoked nature to justify racism.¹ In his address, however, Washington turns white supremacy and social Darwinism on their heads, making what in 1902 would have been an outrageous assertion had there been southern whites present to hear it: "remember that when we get down to the fundamental principles of truth, nature draws no color line" ("Mother Earth" 343). With this rhetorical strategy, Washington asserts that not only does nature disdain to draw any color line, it also seems to be the magic key to lifting the race out of

poverty. In a compressed form, then, “Getting Down to Mother Earth” articulates nature’s role in Washington’s economic approach to racial uplift—a role more fully explored in the autobiographies, 1901’s *Up from Slavery* and 1904’s *Working with the Hands*. This chapter explores this thread in Washington’s work, situating his less widely available second autobiography within the *longue durée*—the decades and centuries of deep time—of southern environmental history.

Rethinking Washington’s politics from an ecological perspective conjures a figure more dynamic than the sycophantic bogy he became to W. E. B. Du Bois, his supposed radical foil. To place Washington’s rhetorical and political performance on the stage of southern environmental history forces us to think beyond the immediate historical context of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Monique Allewaert offers such a rethinking of black history with her argument about colonial and slave-era revolt in her article, “Swamp Sublime: Ecologies of Resistance in the American Plantation Zone.” By “plantation zone,” Allewaert means a type of space that is “tropical (or subtropical) and whose political structures are shaped by the plantation form” (341). She goes on to describe the specific *mode of being* of this space:

The entanglements that proliferated in the plantation zone disabled taxonomies distinguishing the human from the animal from the vegetable from the atmospheric, revealing an assemblage of interpenetrating forces that I call an ecology. [...] [A]t precisely the moment citizen-subjects were emerging in metropolitan centers, the plantation zone gave rise to an ecological practice closely linked to *marronage*, a process through which human agents found ways to interact with nonhuman forces and in so doing resisted the order of the plantation (341).

This concept of ecology, then, suggests an alternative history of slave revolt—one that reimagines agency as *ecological*, as grounded in a space removed from the public sphere and (white) civilization. Allewaert’s alternative history overlaps roughly with Cedric Robinson’s genealogy of twentieth-century black radicalism in *Black Marxism*. In that classic study, Robinson identifies maroon settlements and their cultural-material practices as a preview of twentieth-century forms of black radicalism. These two alternative genealogies of black resistance and ecological agency structure this chapter’s reimagining of Washington.

To be sure, interpolating *Working with the Hands* into this radical tradition does *not* make Washington a black revolutionary akin to Gabriel Prosser or Denmark Vesey; indeed, his politics were ambiguously resistive and conformist: the purported successes of educated black laborers were also the economic successes of northern industrialists who financed Tuskegee and, indirectly, the political successes of white southerners. Also, by Washington’s death in 1915, it became clear that political change would not piggy-back on economic change: while precarious livings were made so was Jim Crow. Instead, I argue that *Up from Slavery* and *Working with the Hands* position *two* Booker T. Washingtons in relation to the problem of racial uplift: consciously, a politics of compromise and economic self-determination; unconsciously, a *politics of ecological agency*.

Recognizing some kind of doublespeak in Washington’s political rhetoric has become customary for civil rights advocates, historians, and literary critics to address. In *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), Houston A. Baker Jr. celebrates the double coding of Washington’s “mastery of form” and “deformation of mastery” in *Up from Slavery* (15). In that book, Baker argues, Washington dons the minstrel mask and masters its form in order to dupe a white audience into lending him financial and political support for his Tuskegee project.² For

example, in the opening passages of *Up from Slavery*, Washington casts his mother as a “chicken-stealing darky”—a “formidably familiar image of ‘Negro behavior,’” Baker says, that would have been “soothing and reassuring” to white readers (*Modernism* 27). Minstrel jokes such as these canvas the text, in effect encoding it for white and black readers: whites will see Washington’s pious mask, while blacks will be in on the game. For Baker, Washington’s appropriation of the minstrel mask and use of it, in a sense, to “steal” donations transforms him into a Promethean figure, a thief of finance capital who offers *Up from Slavery* as a “model for the mastery of form that serves as type and figuration for the Afro-American spokesperson” (Baker *Modernism* 36). Pull away this minstrel mask of political compromise and behind it lurks a long-term agenda to lift the black masses—and southern whites—out of poverty.

This minstrel game strategy was also not lost on Du Bois. When Andrew Carnegie donated \$600,000 in U.S. Steel bonds to Tuskegee’s endowment after reading *Up from Slavery*, Du Bois commented that Washington “had no faith in white people, not the slightest, and he was most popular among them, because if he was talking with a white man he sat there and found out what the white man wanted him to say, and then as soon as possible he said it” (qtd. in Harlan *Wizard* 134). Deception lies at the heart of the Washingtonian program, which is why it is so hard to pin down his “real” philosophy of race and views on the “Negro problem.”

Washington’s unconscious politics of ecological agency, I argue, consists of practices of *soil conservation* and *pastoral design* in order to reconstruct *ecologically* the plantation zone in response to the failure of post-Civil War Reconstruction in 1877. The relation between this ecological agency and the Allewaert-Robinson genealogy of black resistance is sometimes explicit in the autobiographies, but more often buried in what environmental critic Lawrence Buell would call a text’s “environmental unconscious” (*Endangered World* 18). By

environmental unconscious, Buell means something like Fredric Jameson's "political unconscious," in which literary texts are seen as "the rewriting or restructuring of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*" (Jameson 81). For Buell, texts are infused with their environmental *subtext*, regardless of whether or not they repress the historically-layered environment that mediates and conditions their production. The environmental unconscious, he elaborates, has to do "both with the 'thereness' of actual physical environments and with processes of emotion/mental orientation and expression that can happen anywhere along a continuum from desultory preconscious intimation to formal imaging" (Buell *Endangered World* 26). It is an encounter between a writer's *habitus* and (historical) environment that produces a text with a series of conscious and unconscious, acknowledged and repressed expressions of that encounter. The environmental unconscious permeates a text, especially in Washington's case, precisely because the text, whether explicitly or implicitly, is concerned with that environment. Applied to *Working with the Hands*, Buell's concept opens the possibility for the text's descent from the Allewaert-Robinson genealogy, while at the same time preserving the differences between that history and more conventional understandings of Washington's approach to racial uplift.

This chapter first sketches the racial uplift debates that have framed Washington's work by drawing on the criticisms of Du Bois, 1960s black historian Harold Cruse, and more recent ecocriticism on this topic. Second, I show how Washington employs other forms of ecological agency like pastoral design and mastery of environments through labor in order to reconstruct the plantation zone. In Washington's account of the school's rise, the traces of the Old South are not rendered invisible, but rather drawn over in the New South, as the old slave plantation haunts the school's environment. Third, I read the chapter "On the Experimental Farm" in *Working with the*

Hands as a plan for ecological agency by means of scientific farming practices, crop diversification, and crop rotation to conserve the soil and make it more profitable in the long term. This chapter concludes by tying this politics of ecological agency back to the Allewaert-Robinson genealogies of black resistance. For the environmental unconscious of Washington's autobiographies, ecological agency potentially scores economic points for the black masses, turning them away from plantation slavery and transforming them into an active, directed group of scientific and entrepreneurial property-owners. Shifting the focus from a restricted view of economic self-determination, this chapter moves ecological agency to the fore as an environmentally unconscious temporal strategy of the *longue durée* for gaining access to full U. S. citizenship for southern blacks.

2. The Washington—Du Bois Debates and Ecocriticism

A great deal of criticism has been leveled at the Washington's racial uplift strategy, but Du Bois's critique in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is still the most popular and enduring. In their backgrounds, Washington and Du Bois could not have been more different. The former grew up a slave, attended the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (where his later philosophy of education incubated), lived in the South, favored an economic approach to racial uplift, and was liked by influential whites. The latter was a Harvard-educated sociologist, formed the politically-oriented National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and favored a theory of the "Talented Tenth," or the idea of developing and bringing an educated black elite to political and economic power. Mutual sympathy between the two in the 1890s would give way to ever greater polarization in the early 1900s, as Jim Crow laws stifled hopes for African American advancement.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, the early chapter “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others” attacks Washington’s tacit support of African Americans’ status as a political and civil underclass. He first concedes that with the Tuskegee Institute, Washington has achieved the impossible, for the Tuskegee principal’s “very singleness of vision and thorough oneness with his age is a mark of the successful man” and “[i]t is as though Nature must needs make men narrow in order to give them force” (*Souls* 36). Indeed, that Tuskegee thrived in the heart of Alabama’s racially hostile, lynch-crazed Black Belt impressed Du Bois enough for him to teach there temporarily in 1903. What Du Bois opposes is Washington’s *de facto* position as national race leader—a position that came on the heels of what Du Bois pejoratively dubs the “Atlanta Compromise,” a speech Washington delivered to a mostly southern white audience at the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition in 1895. For Du Bois, the speech inaugurates the elevation of the limited Tuskegee worldview to a universal prescription for the Negro problem. He condemns the speech’s central metaphor for its preemptive affirmation of the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* “separate but equal” ruling: “[i]n all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress” (Washington *Up* 134). By stressing material gain over such issues as voting rights, equal access, and anti-lynching laws, Du Bois goes on, Washington’s Gilded Age “gospel of Work and Money” comes to “almost completely overshadow the higher aims of life” (*Souls* 41). Du Bois sees more a capitalist ideology than a black economic nationalism at work in Washington’s ideas.

In contrast to Du Bois, Harold Cruse, who writes in the context of the 1960s Black Arts Movement, reframes the debates and argues that many black intellectuals, including those in the militant Black Power movement, fail to give Washington due credit. In his 1967 seminal study *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, he casts Washington as an economic nationalist and Du Bois

as an integrationist, although he notes their philosophies were never as polarizing as they were later made out to be. Indeed, Cruse argues, starting around 1940 Du Bois gravitated towards Washington's position, as he began to focus on economic self-sufficiency as the road to full citizenship and racial integration (176). If Du Bois's long intellectual arc bent towards the Tuskegee philosophy, then he did so "[w]ithout ever admitting that Booker T. Washington had indeed been closer to the truth in 1900" (177). Washington's legacy, Cruse goes on to argue, lies in the various black nationalist philosophies of the twentieth century, most prominently Garveyism.³ As Cruse sees it, the "problem of Afro-American nationalism is as American as are its historical roots. Its origins are to be found in the nationalist vs. integrationist Frederick Douglass—Martin R. Delaney—Booker T. Washington—W. E. B. Du Bois conflicts down through the 1920s" (344). Ultimately, Cruse's terms avoid the reductive binary of compromise vs. self-assertion by adopting the more value-neutral terms of economic nationalism vs. integrationism.⁴

Since the late 1990s, environmental critics like Evora Jones, Kimberly K. Smith, and Scott Hicks have recognized the prominence of ecological themes in the work of Du Bois and Washington. In "Booker T. Washington as Pastoralist: Authenticating the Man at Century's End" (1999), Jones argues for the political and economic efficacy of Washington's valorization of pastoral life. Citing New Critic William Empson's and African-American critic Robert Bone's definitions of pastoralism, Jones sees Washington's pastoral politics as a strategy for reconciling social antagonism by championing simplicity over complexity, or rustic Southern life over Northern urban life. His pastoral politics led Washington to seek racial harmony over racial equality, as the Atlanta address sought to find peace between Southern whites and blacks (42). This pastoral ideal of harmony translates into a two-pronged approach to education that

integrates mind and body, “head” and “hand” (43). This positive assessment of the pastoral leads Jones to conclude that “[c]ontroversy need no longer exist over the validity of Washington’s ideas, over the value of his leadership, or over his educational policy as a point of departure after the Civil War” (52). If a bit hasty and hyperbolic, such a conclusion does, however, offer an early ecocritical example of how Washington’s value can be reassessed from a more ecological perspective.

In his 2006 *Callaloo* article, “W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Richard Wright: Towards an Ecocriticism of Color,” ecocritic Scott Hicks eloquently articulates the value of re-reading Washington ecologically, though mainly in terms of what such a re-reading contributes to the field of ecocriticism. An ecological or *ecocentric* analysis of Du Bois and Washington, he argues, “offers a means of deepening critical understanding of their relationship to environmental awareness, in that such consciousness participates in ecocritically reimagining subsequent African American texts” (203). Such an undertaking begins to construct a twentieth-century genealogy of what Hicks calls an “ecocriticism of color,” a type of ecocriticism that redefines what counts as nature writing. Similarly, Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace, in their Introduction to the anthology *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (2001), state more pointedly that

If ecocriticism limits itself to the study of one genre—the personal narratives of the Anglo-American nature writing tradition—or to one physical landscape—the ostensibly untrammelled American wilderness—it risks seriously misrepresenting the significance of multiple natural and built environments to writers with other ethnic, national, or racial affiliations (7).

Taking this cue, Hicks offers a provisional ecocritical reading of Washington, though his reading reproduces the reductive binary of Du Bois the radical and Washington the conservative:

Whereas Washington posits the land of the South as a space that predates historical inscription, repudiates racial categorization, and offers nothing but infinite potential, Du Bois denaturalizes and defamiliarizes such assumptions by seeking to speak for the mute subject. He engages a variety of tactics in speaking about the land, rejecting in full Washington's perspective. In the main, Du Bois resists ways of speaking about the land that subordinate it to human activities and epistemologies (209).

This conclusion, though nuanced, is hastily inferred from a few passages from the Atlanta address and *Up from Slavery*, and fails to take a broader, more contextualized look at Washington's literary output. However valuable such a reading may be for ecocritics, if it merely reproduces bygone reifications of much more nuanced positions, then it has little to contribute to the racial uplift debates and to scholars of African American literature. More productively, Hicks ends his article with a call for the examination of "the scientific history of farming in the postbellum South as a means to concretize further Du Bois's and Washington's ecocritical praxis" (218). Indeed, a more historical look at Washington's writings and the Tuskegee Institute actually discloses a more complex awareness and engagement with nature, southern environmental history, and the long shadow of slavery.

3. Pastoral Design and Environmental Reconstruction in *Working with the Hands*

Since *Working with the Hands* is unfamiliar to most literary critics (its last printing was in 1969), I offer a brief overview of the text and situate it in the context of Washington's other writings, particularly *Up from Slavery*.⁵ Washington only mentions the book once in the massive

collection of his correspondence, *The Booker T. Washington Papers*. In a letter to his secretary Emmett Jay Scott, Washington informs Scott that the publisher plans a subscription edition of *Working with the Hands*, and requests that he “put into it about a dozen additional cuts” and to add more photographs (10). It may have been ghost-written by the white journalist Max Bennett Thrasher, who wrote *Tuskegee: Its Story and Its Work* in 1900 and was employed regularly as Washington’s ghostwriter until his death in 1904 (Norrell 216; 273). If *Working with the Hands* was ghostwritten, this may seem to present a problem of authorship, but this fact would only make it more typical of Washington’s literary output. Indeed, *Up from Slavery* has problematic authorship as well, for it was a revised version of one ghostwriter’s revision of another ghostwriter’s work. The first autobiography, *The Story of My Life and Work* (1900), ghostwritten by the black journalist Edgar Webber, was so inadequate that Washington hired Thrasher to revise and re-publish it in 1901 (Norrell 216). The resulting *Up from Slavery*, then, became a revised version of Max Thrasher’s revision of Webber’s narrative (Norrell 217). Ghostwriting was typical of Washington’s later literary career too. For example, the travelogue *The Man Farthest Down* (1910) and the fourth autobiography *My Larger Education* (1911) were written in collaboration with Robert Ezra Park, who went on to head the Chicago School of sociology (Norrell 373).

Published in 1904, the book’s lengthy subtitle reads, “Being a Sequel to ‘Up from Slavery’ Covering the Author’s Experiences in Industrial Training at Tuskegee” (Cripps iii). Expanding on *Up from Slavery*, this autobiography acts as a sort of testimony to the success of the Tuskegee Institute and the value of educating a black citizenry in the trades. Indeed, it ends with the chapter “Negro Education Not a Failure,” a clear defense against Tuskegee’s vocal detractors like novelist and white supremacist Thomas Dixon, author of *The Leopard’s Spots*

(1902) and *The Clansman* (1905) (Norrell 5). Its topics ranging from welding to the “value of small things,” *Working with the Hands* is an assemblage of shorter pieces, intended for more transient consumption and less aesthetically enduring than the painstaking art that Du Bois put into *The Souls of Black Folk*. Perhaps *Working with the Hands* has largely been ignored because it repeats, as Thomas R. Cripps points out, “[a]ll of the ingredients of the old Washington stereotype,” namely the preaching of Tuskegee’s spirit of pragmatism and the capitalist ideal of the self-made man (xi).

Unlike *Up from Slavery*, which chronicles Washington’s ascension from slavery to principal of Alabama’s largest black college, *Working with the Hands* is non-linear and focuses more on Tuskegee the school than Washington the man. The chapter titles reflect a preoccupation with skilled trades, domestic work, and agriculture: “Welding Theory and Practice,” “Lessons in Home-Making” “Outdoor Work for Women,” “The Tillers of the Ground,” “Pleasure and Profit of Work in the Soil,” and “On the Experimental Farm” (vii). Interspersed with these chapters are philosophical musings on “Moral Values of Hand Work,” “Training for Conditions,” “Building Up a System,” “Head and Hands Together,” and “The Value of Small Things” (vii). Many of these may have started, like “Getting Down to Mother Earth,” as weekly addresses to Tuskegee students.

The book also contains a number of photographs of the Tuskegee campus: visual evidence of the school’s Carnegie Steel-like accumulation of capital. Michael Bieze points out that the book’s visual appeal made it more marketable to northern whites used to “highly romantic artistic representations of black life” (98). Most of these photographs show the campus at various stages of construction with students performing and learning “hand-work,” contributing to the work’s aestheticization of labor and the land. They consistently portray

abundance, action, and efficiency: students grinding sugar-cane, repairing furniture, building roads, woodworking, dressmaking, typesetting, and cultivating crops, to name a few examples. Intended for a predominantly white audience, *Working with the Hands* offers an idealized portrait of Tuskegee's everyday operations.

As this cursory description suggests, labor is a chief concern in *Working with the Hands*, but "nature" plays a central role as well. As James M. Cox insightfully remarks, the "earth" is an important motif to the first autobiography: "[i]t is the earth into which Booker T. Washington's life is driven and out of which it stands" (254). Washington so intertwines "nature" and "work" that they become central not only to the Tuskegee project, but also to his engagement with African-American autobiography, particularly slave narratives, and his vision of southern history. For him, like any philosophical materialist, nature is foremost an object to be worked on, the material substratum that enables "working with the hands" and offers the "bed-rock" foundation for a politics of racial uplift. Material nature, as will be shown, serves an important function as a rhetorical strategy in the discourse Washington builds around his Tuskegee project. The book's themes of "getting close to nature" continue those introduced in *Up from Slavery*.

Bound up in a master-slave, human-nature dialectic, *Working with the Hands* complements soil conservation with pastoral design and landscape architecture in order to aestheticize labor and militarize the plantation zone. In the first chapter "Moral Values of Hand Work," Washington recounts his tutelage as an adolescent working for Viola Ruffner, a strict, puritanical New England woman who valued "cleanliness" above all else. She assigns him various grounds-keeping tasks, the most strenuous of which involves evenly cutting the grass with a hand-scythe (*Working* 8). Not meeting her expectations at first, Washington persists:

But I kept at it, and after a few days, as the result of my efforts under the strict oversight of my mistress, we could take pleasure in looking upon a yard where the grass was green, and almost perfect in its smoothness, where the flower beds were trimly kept, the edges of the walks clean cut, and where there was nothing to mar the well-ordered appearance (*Working 9*).

Sounding as though it came from the pen of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead, this passage illustrates the dialectical relation between worker and the thing worked on, between the subject and object of work. Something transformative happens to the young man: “[w]hen I saw and realized that all this was a creation of my own hands, my whole nature began to change. I felt a self-respect, an encouragement, and a satisfaction that I had never before enjoyed”—hence the “moral value” not just of work in a general sense, but of pastoral design and manipulation of nature (*Working 9*). Design aims towards the aestheticization of the environment as well as a concomitant aestheticization of work itself.

Getting close to “nature” (that is, the privately-owned nature of Ruffner’s property) awakens a higher calling in Washington, for “this visible, tangible contact with nature gave me inspirations and ambitions which could not have come in any other way” (*Working 10*). These “inspirations and ambitions” include attending the citadel-like Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. In mythologizing pastoral design on the grounds of Ruffner’s home as the Edenic genesis of Tuskegee, Washington places a high value on intuition and experience: his program for racial uplift springs not from philosophy but from an intuitive, hands-on understanding of his environment.

If this story evokes Hegel’s lord-bondsman dialectic, in which the slave gains a sense of permanence and agency through work, then it also functions within the slave narrative tradition

to intertwine literacy *and* work as awakening events (Hegel 111). In *Up from Slavery*, while working in strenuous environmental conditions at a salt mine in West Virginia, Washington yearns to learn how to read: “I determined, when quite a small child, that, if I accomplished nothing else in life, I would in some way get enough education to enable me to read common books and newspapers” (*Up* 16). His mother acquires a spelling book for him and he begins to attend an all-black school. Ruffner encourages the boy’s reading and mental training, which Washington narrates in words that stress the physicality of literacy acquisition: “[i]t was while living with her that I began to get together my first library. I secured a dry-goods box, knocked out one side of it, put some shelves in it, and began putting into it every kind of book that I could get my hand upon” (*Up* 27). As in *Working with the Hands*, Washington acknowledges that “the lessons that I learned in the home of Mrs. Ruffner were as valuable to me as any education I have ever gotten anywhere since” (*Up* 26). These “lessons,” notably, occur outside the schoolroom and in everyday life.

Washington was acutely aware of his historical relation to Frederick Douglass and what it meant for his emphasis on laboring nature, which his critics argued was at the expense of academics and “mental training.” The militant ex-slave and abolitionist died in 1895, the year Washington delivered the Atlanta address and replaced Douglass as *de facto* leader of the race (Verney 21). Washington published a biography of Douglass in 1906, though it was mostly ghost-written by a black Chicago lawyer (Verney 24). In the preface, the authors split the slave’s struggle for freedom into two historical periods, before and after the Civil War, thereby establishing a clear break between the two race leaders. Douglass represents the first, the “period of revolution and liberation” (*Douglass* 5). Washington, by way of implication, represents the

second, the “period of construction and readjustment” (*Douglass* 5). When the Civil War ends, the authors claim, the problem moves from that of emancipation to labor (*Douglass* 248).

For Washington, then, literacy does not play the role of epiphany as it does for Douglass in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). The latter work, Douglass’s second and more detailed autobiography, tells at great length the story of how he learned to read. While working on the Auld plantation, he asks Mrs. Auld to teach him how to read, for her reading of the Bible “awakened [his] curiosity in respect to this *mystery* of reading, and roused in [him] the desire to learn” (117). The Bible merely facilitates reading, for the act of reading itself is a religious experience. Douglass’s master, however, forbids it. He describes with great *pathos* the ironic effect of this prohibition on him: “[h]is iron sentences—cold and harsh—sunk deep into my heart, and stirred up not only my feelings into a sort of rebellion, but awakened within me a slumbering train of vital thought. [...] from that moment I understood the direct pathway from slavery to freedom” (118). For Douglass, literacy is the hinge between slavery and freedom; the struggle to read is the struggle to be free. By contrast, making the case for the importance of free *labor* is Washington’s goal in *Working with the Hands*.

Despite this difference between labor and literacy, there was some philosophical continuity across the two leaders’ philosophies. Douglass advocated industrial education in an 1853 speech—forty years before Washington’s Atlanta Address (Verney 26-7). Norrell claims that Douglass shifted his emphasis in the 1880s, joining other race leaders in “reorient[ing] their strategies away from politics toward the economy” (85). This shift is particularly evident in his 1880 lecture, “Self-Made Men,” where he advised his followers to focus on building wealth and making a “respectable” living (85). Throughout the 1880s, Douglass came to think that the most

promising road for African-American achievement passed through agricultural employment in the South (Verney 26-7).

In *Working with the Hands*, when Washington is looking for an exemplary black figure from the slavery era, he draws on a “self-made,” illiterate man like James Hale instead of Douglass. As described in the chapter “Building Up a System,” Hale had no formal education except for the “school” of slavery:

He spent the greater part of his life as a slave. He left property valued at fifty thousand dollars, and bequeathed a generous sum to be used in providing for an infirmary for the benefit of his race. *James Hale could not read or write a line*, yet I do not believe that there is a white or black man in Montgomery who knew Mr. Hale who will not agree with me in saying that he was the first coloured *citizen* of Montgomery. [...] When Mr. Hale was a slave his master took great pains to have him well trained as a carpenter, contractor and builder. His master saw that the better the slave was trained in handicraft, the more dollars he was worth. In my opinion, it was this hand-training, despite the evil of slavery, that largely resulted in Mr. Hale’s fine development (59-60; my emphasis).

As Washington says, Hale fits a certain type of black figure who was indirectly educated by his experiences as a slave; his success consists of accumulating capital and circulating it within the black community without relying on the symbolic capital accrued through literacy. In this bifurcation of reading and writing, literacy is the pathway from slavery to freedom for Douglass, while mastery of a trade paves the path to citizenship for Washington.

Yet writing and working come together in an overarching design. Throughout *Working with the Hands*, Washington describes human interaction with nature as a matter of “system.” He complains that too many southern blacks are preoccupied with academics at the neglect of their

immediate environment, where they live “in houses where there was no sign of beauty or system” (*Working* 13). Here, he invokes his yardwork for Viola Ruffner and its reciprocal effect on his sense of his own nature; he does not so much advocate “mastery” of nature as a *systematic* approach to it. He uses gardening as one example of system, describing how much he could produce on a “little plot carefully laid out, thoroughly fertilized, and intelligently cultivated” (*Working* 153). Via “system,” contemplative and active relations to nature fit along a continuum: this continuity develops into a method of pastoral design in which nature is recognized as a product of systematic labor. Speaking of his garden again, Washington describes his feelings about seeing its progress every morning, which gives him a “sense of newness, of expectancy, [it] brings to me a daily inspiration whose sympathetic significance it is impossible to convey in words” (*Working* 153). Here, Washington relates to his pastorally-designed nature affectively: with a sense of newness, inspiration, and sympathy, that suggests gardening is an aesthetic experience itself.

In the chapter “Building Up a System,” Washington describes how he expanded this pragmatic idea of system and pastoral design to the Tuskegee Institute’s campus construction and environment. Student labor built most of the campus, doubling the value of all student labor projects: students learned their trades by doing, while also making real, material contributions to the campus (*Working* 56). Washington further describes the benefits of his system: “through this method a large proportion of the money given for the building passes into the hands of the students, to be used in gaining an education” (*Working* 56). At the time of the book’s writing, seventy-two buildings had been erected by students attending the school on Tuskegee’s work-study plan (*Working* 58). Not only does this method save money and teach construction skills, it is also a “more natural process of development” than hiring contractors (*Working* 90). In this

narrative, the students' educational development and the development of the Tuskegee environment are harmonious. A system of black labor brought into sync with natural forces and the post-plantation environment, then, replaces a previous system of exploitation that pitted black labor against the land. In this instance, *Working with the Hands* shows an acute awareness of Tuskegee as a former plantation, as a historical-environmental space layered with decades and even centuries of ad hoc practices and historical formations.

For Washington, pastoral design and “system” lead to the greater mastery of nature—a philosophy that makes him vulnerable to criticism from ecocritics such as Scott Hicks. For instance, in *Up from Slavery*, Washington plans to show Tuskegee students “how to make the forces of nature—air, water, steam, electricity, horse-power—assist them in their labor” (89). Following a line of thought similar to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, environmental historian Kimberly K. Smith, like Hicks, has criticized Washington's views on nature. In *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (2007), Smith concludes that Washington's “chief means of achieving individual autonomy is to impose one's will on the natural world, and most of the benefits of manual labor derive from the experience of successfully mastering nature” (96). She softens her language, however, when she adds that Washington “insisted that a proper relationship to nature—for men and women—involved physical labor but also engaged the moral, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions of one's personality” (97). More severely, Hicks protests Washington's attitudes toward nature, drawing on a few passages from *Up from Slavery* and the Atlanta address: “[i]n recreation and in industry, Washington posits nature as something that must be conquered and exploited” (205). Because he advocates the domination of nature for the sake of racial uplift by economic gain, Washington, Hicks concludes, “celebrates environmental degradation and exploitation past and

future” (205). One offending passage comes from the Atlanta address, which Hicks reads as an anthropocentric ideology, akin to white supremacy, that unabashedly elevates human above ecological interests:

Cast down your bucket among these people who have, without strikes and labour wars, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth, and helped make possible this magnificent representation of the progress of the South. Casting down your bucket among my people, helping and encouraging them as you are doing on these grounds, and to education of head, hand, and heart, you will find that they will buy your surplus land, make blossom the waste places in your fields, and run your factories (*Up* 133).

The passage clearly celebrates modern industry and economic growth, although cultivating “waste places” may be construed as a proto-environmentalist statement, insofar as it shows a form of environmental engagement with depleted soil. Yet it also seems clear that Washington is strategically adopting the capitalist rhetoric of the Gilded Age in order to turn black labor into a marketable commodity. Hicks’s criticism may seem decontextualized, an anachronistic projection of twenty-first century environmentalist values onto the past, but statements about the mastery of nature were not lost on Washington’s contemporaries. In a newspaper article on Washington’s 1895 lecture to Fisk University students, the reporter paraphrases Washington’s views on nature: the “richest rewards of intellectual effort go to those who know how to bring the forces of nature to aid the processes of production; in the natural era that is now upon us this will be especially true of the South” (*BTW Papers* 65). Furthermore, the “educated colored man must, more and more, go to the farms, into the trades, start brickyards, saw-mills, factories, open

coal mines; in short, apply their education to conquering the forces of nature” (*BTW Papers* 64). This rhetoric of mastering nature reflects New South ambitions towards modernization.

From within the African-American tradition of literary criticism, Houston A. Baker offers an analogous critique when he calls the Tuskegee Institute symptomatic of a “carceral society.” At the end of *Turning South Again*, he draws on Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* and sees Tuskegee as a direct descendent of the slave trade, a redeployment of its immobilizing technologies of power (97). As applied to the turn-of-the-century South, the carceral society designates a network designed to keep black bodies shackled and imprisoned: sharecropping, convict leasing, the prison-industrial complex, and, of course, the “prison farm” of the Tuskegee plantation (93). As prison warden, Baker argues, Washington promotes a form of anti-modernism and embraces an imperialist ideology opposed to the resistive mobility of the blues celebrated in Baker’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1987). Washington himself was “an imperialist educator without peer [...] among the ‘country districts’” (63), whose model of post-slavery labor was merely a “zealous aestheticization of slavery as ‘modernity’” (60). This critique is not quite as hyperbolic as it may at first seem. Du Bois used similar rhetoric, condemning Washington for his “acquiescence in semi-serfdom” in a letter to the *Boston Transcript*, going so far as to call his political power “a substitution of monarchy for democracy among a population twice as large as that of all New England” (qtd. in Harlan *Wizard* 363).

Given the context of Reconstruction and the larger environmental history of the South, Washington had racial uplift and environmental reasons for promoting this mastery of nature. In perhaps his second-most popular lecture, “Industrial Education for the Negro” (1903), he repeats his views of nature and labor from *Up from Slavery*: “[training] consists in teaching [the Negro]

how not to work, but how to make the forces of nature—air, steam, water, horse-power and electricity—work for him” (359). Under slavery, Washington asserts, “the Negro was worked; as a freeman he must learn to work. There is a vast difference between working and being worked” (*Working* 16). The slave is a victim of system rather than creator and applier of it. That work be voluntary and that the worker owns the final product are essential for deriving benefits from it; to be free is to own land. Washington reasons that because “the man who tilled the land did not own it, his main object was to get all he could out of the property and return to it as little as possible” (*Working* 34). As long as the farmer does not own his land, he will exploit it without concern for the long-term impact on the soil’s health. Under this sharecropping system, the “land, of course, was more impoverished each year” (*Working* 35). As suggested earlier, the then-current system establishes a causal connection between slavery (and sharecropping) and ecological degradation. Smith states:

Washington suggests that sharecropping and tenancy hurt agriculture for the same reason slavery did, by preventing the emergence of a truly free agricultural labor force—a labor force with the means, authority, and incentives for improving their economic condition by improving agriculture (82).

Only free, property-owning laborers can break this cycle. Black farmers, Washington asserted, needed to diversify their cultivation and to escape the socially and ecologically destructive cash crop system. This policy translates practically into subsistence farming and livestock raising, while also reducing cash crop cultivation (*Working* 33). Otherwise, black farmers would have to pay inflated rates for their food, thus cementing their entrapment in the tenant farming system (*Working* 34).

In the environmental unconscious of *Working with the Hands*, the Tuskegee project, geared towards cultivating free labor, was pushing back against decades of the plantation system and redesigning the Black Belt environment through ecological agency. What seems to offend Washington the most is the farm hand—a product of anti-science racism—and his contribution to what Washington sees as a lack of design in the southern environment. His type embodies the decay of the plantation, instead of its redesign, mastery, and overcoming: “most of the worn-out and wasted fields, the poor stock, the run-down fences, the lost and broken farm tools and machinery, as well as the poor crops, are chargeable to the ‘farm hand’” (*Working* 47). The farm hand haunts the plantation zone, threatening to return it to a pre-environmental reconstruction state.

Given the *longue durée* context of environmental history, the text’s environmental unconscious reveals this web of pastoral design, landscape architecture, and “system” as a covert form of black resistance. While white readers might read an innocuous narrative of an expanding college campus and free black labor force, in reality the Tuskegee campus became a militarized, black reconstruction of the plantation zone. In his article “Landscapes of Terror: A Reading of Tuskegee’s Historic Campus,” landscape architect historian Kendrick Grandison argues that the Institute’s campus environment developed dialectically with the rise of Jim Crow and southern white hostility. A bizarre incident illustrates the severity of the potential threat, as well as Washington’s diplomatic skill at negotiating it. One night, a local black man fleeing a lynch mob sought refuge at Washington’s home, the Oaks, across the street from the campus. Though Washington publicly stated he turned the fleeing man away (and was ridiculed as a coward by other black leaders), in reality Washington found the fleeing man a doctor and helped him secure refuge elsewhere. Washington feared that if he openly sheltered the man, he would incur the

wrath of the white mob on his entire campus. This incident and the campus layout show the presence of very real dangers—dangers that Washington always downplayed in his writings for fear of antagonizing the white enemy.

The very existence and proximity of a school focused on “the education of laboring masses,” Grandison claims, was a “threat to the viability of the Southern plantation economy” (336). Located one mile from the town of Tuskegee, physical distance and natural barriers offered the Institute greater autonomy and protection from a potential Ku Klux Klan attack (350-1). The school was built like a fortress, with “imposing classical architecture” facing inward and modest brownstone backs facing outward (365), limited entry points for vehicles (359), and the men’s dormitories positioned strategically at entrances to the campus while women’s were built in the interior (360). The men’s dorms line Montgomery Road, the main access to the campus, and “could potentially serve as a first line of defense in case of hostile intrusion” (362). Moreover, the campus entrance was gated and guarded by uniformed Tuskegee students working as a security force. Indeed, visitors in 2011 might attribute the inconvenient access to the campus to bad planning rather than a militarization of the plantation.

Working with the Hands equates “mastery” not with the exploitation of nature but with reconstructing the plantation zone and turning slave labor into aestheticized labor directed towards racial uplift. Labor itself becomes a form of aesthetic experience, where if proper training “has any value it is in lifting labor up out of toil and drudgery into the plane of the dignified and the beautiful” (“Industrial” 359). Aestheticizing labor requires the rational study of nature; it demands a methodical approach to the worker’s interaction with nature—an approach that will be examined in the next section as the second aspect of Washington’s politics of ecological agency.

4. Soil Conservation as Ecological Agency: “On the Experimental Farm”

The chapter “On the Experimental Farm” reveals that Washington’s strategy of ecological agency challenged centuries-long environmental practices and sought to replenish southern soils abused by the plantation economic form. Rhetorically, the soil plays a central role in his politics of racial uplift through ecological agency, as he expresses the blood-and-soil nationalist ideologies of the early twentieth century in an early instance of what Mark Thompson calls “black fascism,” one of the “negations of black Marxism” (21).⁶ In fact, according to Washington, Tuskegee’s history curriculum shows the “student how the American people, as is true of all great nations, began as cultivators of the soil” (*Working* 89). In *Up from Slavery*, he proclaims more boldly that the soil is the “solid and never deceptive foundation of Mother Nature where all nations and races that have ever succeeded have gotten their start” (54). He ends one of his most famous lectures, “Industrial Education for the Negro” (1903), with an ecstatic image of ascension that gains its initial foothold in the soil: “[o]ur pathway must be up through the soil, up through swamps, up through forests, up through the streams, the rocks, up through commerce, education and religion!” (360). Yet this blood-and-soil ideology also has a materialist, scientific orientation in *Working with the Hands*. In this section, I first offer an abbreviated account of southern environmental history as it pertains to the soil, beginning with the pre-colonial and colonial eras, and moving through antebellum nineteenth-century slavery. Then, I proceed to read Washington’s promotion of soil conservation via scientific innovation as a politics of ecological agency.

For decades leading up to the 1880s, the plantation economic form effectively dominated and exploited the South’s already poor-quality soil. In *This Land, This South: An Environmental History*, environmental historian Albert E. Cowdrey discusses the pre-colonial and colonial-era

southern environmental history that predated the plantation form. For Cowdrey, the strangest and most significant characteristic of southern soils is how “old” they are (2). Unlike soils north of the Ohio River, the South was not covered over by glaciers, consequently they lack the mineral-rich layer of topsoil that the North has. Tuskegee sits at the end of what geographers call the Atlantic Piedmont, which spans from mid-Virginia to eastern Alabama (Cowdrey 76). This sloping stretch of land is prone to erosion during periods of heavy precipitation—a regional peculiarity that turned into a major concern for later agrarian reformists such as Washington.

But human activity and environmental history cannot be clearly separated: “[i]ntriguing is the extent to which the natural environment of the South, including much that is usually termed primeval, is an artifact of sorts, shaped if not invented during the millennia of human occupation” (Cowdrey 5). Early colonial farming of tobacco began to exacerbate the exhaustion of the southern soil (Cowdrey 31). With continuing market demand for only a few cash crops, farmers cleared large areas of forest and confined their work to growing as much of one crop as possible. This system of monocultures and the resulting reduction in biodiversity contributed to the erosion and depletion of nutrients from the soil. Even as early as the 1700s, there were calls for agricultural reform, soil conservation, and crop diversification. Thomas Jefferson, for example, experimented with crop rotations and plowing, but these reform efforts did not catch on broadly (Cowdrey 58).

For over two centuries, slavery and the plantation system became a “human factor of incalculable importance to the southern environment” (Cowdrey 36). After the early colonial period, the plantation economic form calcified and became associated with large commercial farms of three hundred acres or more (Aiken 5-6). Emerging simultaneously with this form was the rapid expansion of slavery in the 1700s. Environmental historian Carolyn Merchant argues

that “[s]lavery and soil degradation are interlinked systems of exploitation, and deep-seated connections exist between the enslavement of human bodies and the enslavement of the land” (“Shades” 380). The demand for slave labor greatly increased when cotton boomed on the world market as a cash crop. Because slavery deprived the region of a local consumer base and therefore a local food market, agriculture was wholly geared towards profits and commercial exports (Cowdrey 78). The lack of markets for diverse crop commodities, in turn, stifled incentive to grow non-cotton and non-tobacco plants, leading to the further destruction of biodiversity (Hurt 222). With the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, the so-called “Cotton Kingdom,” which Cowdrey dubs the “row-crop empire” to emphasize the canal-like watercourses that formed when it rained, grew rapidly between 1790 and 1837, thus amplifying the human impact on the southern environment (71). The production of cotton bales rose from 3,135 in 1790 to 208,986 in 1815, and cotton became the country’s leading export (Cowdrey 72; Merchant 53). Moreover, monocultures tend to spawn soil toxins and parasites, as displayed in the boll weevil epidemic in the 1910s, one of the “push” factors that triggered the Great Migration (Cowdrey 79-80).

Washington saw the correlation between slavery and the environment geographically inscribed as the “Black Belt,” a strip of fertile soil stretching from Georgia westward to Mississippi. The Black Belt, Washington says, was “the part of the South where slaves were most profitable, and consequently they were taken there in the largest numbers” (*Working* 65). In essence, slavery was a form of mechanized labor that degraded the worker and the land, much like northern factory work in Washington’s eyes: “[t]he whole machinery of slavery was not apt to beget the spirit of love of labor” (*Working* 17). He echoes views expressed by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which Du Bois also establishes a direct causal connection between slave

labor and agricultural degradation: “[t]he harder the slaves were driven the more careless and fatal was their farming” (*Souls* 91). Thus, one can find a “geographical color-line” across the South, a physical inscription of race onto environment (*Souls* 119).

When Washington first arrived at the school grounds in 1881, the Tuskegee property reflected this environmental legacy of slavery. As Grandison points out, the school’s land “bore the scars of war and abandonment after years of abusive cotton cultivation” (344). It consisted of a mere three buildings (a stable, a chicken coop, and a kitchen) and one-hundred acres of eroded soil (Grandison 345-6). It was, in short, one of the “waste places” (*Up* 133) Washington spoke about in his Atlanta address—a waste place that Alabama funded at only \$2,000 per year to get the school going (Harlan 128). Most of the school’s budget went to acquiring land and expanding the agricultural program; by 1895, a large portion of the school’s 1,810 acres had been set aside for crop cultivation. But when Kelly Miller visited the campus in 1903, he recorded the spectacle of students struggling with the depleted soil:

The soil is generally thin and well exhausted. It almost makes the heart bleed to see those hard-working, honest, ignorant men wearing out soul and body upon a barren hill-side, which yielded up its virgin strength a half century ago, and whose top soil has been washed away, and can be restored only by another geologic epoch. A careful and dispassionate analysis of all the facts and factors leads plainly to two conclusions, (1) the Tuskegee idea alone cannot solve the race problem, and (2) the race problem cannot be solved without the Tuskegee idea (Miller 3-4).

To Miller, the students were fighting with superhuman patience and persistence against a monumental enemy: the *longue durée* of geologic time and the ecosystem’s slow healing

processes. Tuskegee's agricultural policy, then, was in a way *necessarily* geared towards subsistence and replenishing the soil rather than cash crops.

Washington, however, announces ambitions in "On the Experimental Farm" that far exceed necessity. Tuskegee's aim, under the direction of botanist George Washington Carver, is to invent "right methods" for teaching black farmers of Alabama how to make their land "yield unfailing profit" and "win in the fight against the deadly mortgage system" (*Working* 163). Here and throughout *Working with the Hands*, Washington expresses concern that the southern system of sharecropping and tenant farming stifles the development of new methods; this stifling helps to continue slavery by other means and thus has negative environmental consequences similar to those of slavery itself.

For instance, the "wrong," unscientific method can be embodied in the "farm hand" type. In the chapter "Making Education Pay Its Way," Washington advocates the use of improved farming technologies and discusses how white planters "refused to encourage the use of much agricultural machinery" for fear that it would "spoil the Negro 'farm hands'" (*Working* 46). Farm hands form a sort of rural southern, peasant lumpenproletariat who do not own land and are "ignorant and unskilled, with little conscience" (*Working* 47). This destitute laborer, utterly lacking in ecological agency, cares nothing for knowledge, for learning how to use "labor-saving machinery," and for the wider community of "progressive agriculture" (*Working* 47). Appealing to his white audience, Washington veils his criticism of white property owners with the farm-hand type. In reality, the farm hand shows how racism blocks advances in soil conservation. Scientific innovations, along with property acquisition, are the two key components to reconstructing the plantation environment.

Within its first few pages, “On the Experimental Farm” contains a staged photograph of Tuskegee student workers cultivating a patch of cassava on the school’s agricultural experiment plot. This photograph counters the image of the vagrant farm hand or slave laborer drudging away in the cotton field. Eight young black men are busy hoeing the plot, all with heads down intensely focused on work. These workers appear dapper in vests and dress pants; they look like a black bourgeoisie engaged in respectable, profitable, and intellectual (farm) labor. The caption clearly indicates that these men work on an “experiment plot,” intellectualizing their labor by suggesting that it is a form of scientific inquiry strongly tied to black masculinity. The page adjacent from the photograph proudly announces that “present experiments are in progress with ten varieties of corn, with vetch, clovers, cassava, sugar beet, Cuban sugar cane, eight kinds of millet, the Persian and Arabian beans, and many other food and forage plants” (164). The landscape behind them is bordered by a fence and displays the property’s pastoral design. More importantly, the background landscape shows that this patch of land is a small plot, not an extensive and ecologically-destructive cotton or tobacco monoculture. The multiple workers also indicate that this experimental plot requires coordinated group effort, a microcosm of racial solidarity and group economic action.

In addition to the photograph, key to this chapter’s narrative of scientific labor and environmental practice is the innovative botanist and director of Tuskegee’s Agricultural Experiment Station farms, George Washington Carver. Kimberly K. Smith observes that Washington became an “important voice for scientific agriculture in the South,” as he “supported the work of black scientists such as George Washington Carver, held agriculture conferences for local farmers, and employed extension agents to travel to black farmers demonstrating new tools and techniques” (76). Indeed, if *Working with the Hands* has a protagonist, a heroic figure other

than Washington himself, then it is Carver.⁷ Carver's scientific innovations, Washington says, culminate a progressive narrative of science that originates in ancient Egypt. The Egyptian farmer "knew that if he let his land lie idle—'rested,' as he termed it—he was able to produce a much better crop" (*Working* 165).

In his letters from this early period in Tuskegee's history, the mystical Carver seems to subscribe to the *longue durée* view of history as "geological." He claims to find God through geological inquiry into a mineral specimen: "I have dissolved it, purified it, made conditions favorable for the formation of crystals" (135). The resulting crystal formation reminds him of God's "omnipotence, majesty and power" for the immense stretch of time embodied in the crystal (135). He teaches the *Genesis* creation story to his students "in the light of natural and revealed religion and geological truths" (134). Carver, Washington summarizes, understands the "value of scientific cultivation," and finds ways to improve soil beyond merely resting it (*Working* 165). Beginning in 1898, Washington held Carver in such high regard that he publicized his methods and distributed his agricultural pamphlets across the South (Norrell 199). These pamphlets disseminated the school's scientific knowledge about crop rotation, fertilizers, replenishing the soil, and growing vegetable gardens (Norrell 199).

As evidence of this value of scientific labor, Washington cites Carver's development of new methods for growing that can increase the quantity and quality of the crop raised. On average, cotton-growing in the South only produces 190 pounds per acre, an "astonishingly low figure, and, except when high prices rule, below the paying point" (*Working* 164). On the experimental station, Carver has figured out a way to yield "nearly 500 pounds of cotton on one acre of poor Alabama land" (*Working* 165). Moreover, Carver has produced varieties of "hybrid cotton" that are "vastly superior" in quality to the cotton typically grown in Alabama. The ability

of crop rotation to restore nutrients to depleted soil is, according to Washington, Tuskegee's "special study" (*Working* 166). Rotation potentially solves problems like how to "build up the poor upland soils of Alabama," to mitigate erosion, to reduce the need for costly fertilizers, to determine how many years it would take to reverse the soil-depleting effects of monocultures, and to discover the "smallest amount of such [purchasable] land the farmer should buy expecting to make a living off it" (*Working* 166-7). An analysis of the existing soil reveals that it is "seriously deficient" of nitrogen, phosphoric acid, and potash nutrients (*Working* 168).

First, Carver, Washington, and the students worked to improve the physical condition of the soil by "deep plowing, rebuilding terraces and filling in washes" (*Working* 168). After this, they implemented a carefully planned system of crop rotation in order to improve the chemical condition of the soil. Washington breaks down the crop rotation plan for a farm of forty acres, as developed by Carver:

First year, sixteen acres of cowpease, eight acres of cotton, two acres of ribbon cane, three acres of corn, one acre of sorghum, one acre of peanuts, three acres of sweet potatoes, one acre of teosinte (a green fodder plant), one acre of pumpkins, cushaws, squash, etc. [...] The second year it will be observed that the pease change places with the cotton, corn, ribbon cane, sorghum, teosinte, pumpkins and sweet potatoes [...]. With few exceptions mentioned, the third year is identical with the first (*Working* 168-9).

Washington uses technical terms from soil chemistry to emphasize farming as an intellectual enterprise. In 1897, they planted cowpease, using kainite and acid phosphate as fertilizer, and sold the crop for a profit of \$2.40. In 1898, they planted sweet potatoes on the same acre as the cowpease, again using kainite and acid phosphate, and sold the crop for an increased profit of \$22. In 1899, they rotated the cowpease back in, using the same methods as in 1897, for a

substantial profit increase of \$19.25, nearly ten times the profit in 1897. In 1900, they planted sorghum cane with kainite and acid phosphate, naturally fertilized with “swamp muck” and “decayed forest leaves,” yielding a profit of \$22 (170). In 1901, cowpease were planted again for another profit gain of \$28.75. The next year they planted “garden truck” of cabbage, onions, beets, squash, tomatoes, melons, beans, turnips, mustard, and more, yielding a \$39 profit. In 1903, they planted the cowpease again for a profit of \$43.85 (171). For Washington, this drastic increase in profit shows that even a small two-acre farm can help black farmers (172). Within seven years, this crop rotation plan turned a profit of \$96.22 per acre on land that had previously lost \$2.40 per acre (170).

Washington discusses not just the production side of agriculture, but the consumption side as well. Early in *Working with the Hands*, he criticizes the southern black masses’ consumption of imported food, seeing the lack of a local food market, as many environmental historians would later, as an obstacle to crop diversification and black self-reliance. Seeing them as role models for the masses (and since they are the principal profession of Tuskegee graduates), Washington targets teachers in particular: “school teachers were eating salt pork from Chicago and canned chicken and tomatoes sent from Omaha. While the countryside abounded in all manner of beautiful shrubbery and fragrant flowers, few of these ever found their way into the houses or upon the dinner tables” (14). In Washington’s eyes, the South is a veritable Eden of abundant food, if it would only be recognized as such. He advocates subsistence gardening over cash crops, reflecting on how “[o]ne feels, when eating his own fresh vegetables, that he is getting near to the heart of nature; not a second-hand stale imitation, but the genuine thing” (156-7).

If conservation focuses on long-term profit over short-term gain, then *Working with the Hands* is a work of conservation as well as racial uplift. It prioritizes profit over twenty- to thirty-year span, where ecological agency and economic self-determination dovetail in scientific practices of soil conservation. If this conservationist approach had worked in its idealized form portrayed in *Working with the Hands*, black-owned farms *would* become significantly more profitable than white-owned farms. Soil conservation is a *type* of mastery of nature that dismantles the legacy of the white master's environmental practices.

5. The Plantation Zone and Black Resistance

Working with the Hands and its underlying politics of ecological agency—a composite of soil conservation and pastoral design—repeats with a difference colonial-era and antebellum maroon settlements. Baker claims that the Tuskegee project is an act of “radical marronage,” although marronage is more a specter that *haunts* Tuskegee than something embodied in Tuskegee itself. Indeed, the South emerges in Washington's prose as a gothic space haunted by the past and other places. In a humorous anecdote about a Georgia funeral, Washington points to the ironic inefficiencies of commodity production and long-distance trade. A man's grave, he recalls, was “dug in the midst of a pine forest, but the pine coffin that held the body was brought from Cincinnati” (*Working* 21). The coffin is transported on a wagon made in South Bend, Indiana; the wagon's mule is from Missouri. The shovels used to dig the grave were imported from Pittsburgh, and “their handles from Baltimore” (21). The deceased's shoes, coat, shirt, and tie come from Massachusetts, New York, and Philadelphia. In the end, the “only things supplied by the county, with its wealth of natural resources, was the corpse and the hole in the ground” (21). In capitalism's version of a Frankenstein monster slapped together from parts drawn from

all over the country, Washington suggests the unnaturalness of such a system. The choice of using a funeral as an example also evokes deadly destructive tendencies of this economic system on black labor and the environment. And as discussed earlier, he rails against the “deadly monocultures” that are suffocating the South, implying the darker, gothic aspects of the plantation system that haunt the South.

The past that haunts Tuskegee reaches back to the colonial era. In her analysis of William Bartram’s *Travels* (1791), Monique Allewaert argues that the English explorer’s account of the southeast U. S. region betrays a white colonial subject’s fear—both real and imagined—of a type of human agency and resistance that she defines as ecological. A historical narrative of these “agents who gained power by combining with ecological forces” challenges the “assumption that colonial and later national ventures were largely uncontested and hegemonic” (341). Such forms of primarily African and Native American resistance emerged as the dialectical negation of colonialism and the Atlantic Slave Trade, leading to what the ruling classes imagined as, in Peter Linebaugh’s and Marcus Rediker’s terms, a “many-headed hydra” that threatened their power. Named after a monster in Greek mythology, this metaphorical hydra described by Linebaugh and Rediker often found its material base on maroon settlements in the uncharted wilderness, existing off the grid of the plantation zone and white spheres of power (6). Without collapsing the differences between this history of resistance and Tuskegee’s, this chapter argues that *Working with the Hands* repeats with a difference the specifically *ecological* form of this resistance from *within* the plantation zone itself.

The English explorer Thomas Harriot’s 1590 *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* serves as an early example of settler anxiety about native knowledge of local ecologies that could threaten white hegemony. In his description of native fishing practices,

Harriot marvels: “[t]her was never seene amonge us soe cunninge a way to take fish withal” (56). He is puzzled by their motivations, which appear “free from all care of heaping opp Riches for their posteritie, content with their state” (56). The accompanying illustration shows the natives’ various methods of catching fish in a river: setting traps, using canoes, and spearing fish (57). The river is full of species: catfish, eel, turtles, crabs, rays, and other assorted water-dwellers. The illustration echoes Harriot’s earlier taxonomy of the commodities the new colony could yield: worm silk, hemp, turpentine, wine, cedar, furs, copper, iron, and dyes, to name a few (7-11). While to the European gaze this river landscape showcases the abundance of wildlife in the new colony, it also evinces the conflation of natives with local ecology and therefore disassembles “taxonomies distinguishing the human from the animal from the vegetable from the atmospheric” (Allewaert 341). The illustration, then, threatens such a disassembly by suggesting an alliance between natives and nature against the white colonial gaze.

Returning to Allewaert’s textual analysis, Bartram’s *Travels* reveals that African maroons and natives used their environments to gain a degree of agency that enacted a dialectical negation of the dominant, metropolitan print culture within which the Englishman writes. For Allewaert, Bartram’s travel account attempts to sell the Virginia region as a settler-friendly temperate zone. He carefully catalogues each plant or animal species he encounters, fitting them into taxonomies of nature (Allewaert 341). Yet, Allewaert argues, the “tropical, the useless, and the cataclysmic continually set [Bartram] off course” (341). The chaotic elements of the local ecology rendered the master-slave distinction ambiguous. Swamps, in particular, “sheltered diasporic Africans who, in refusing slave status, repudiated the prevailing organization of Virginia’s plantation economy” (343). Slaves had the opportunity to settle these “Africanized spaces” that rivaled the carceral pastoralism of the plantation zone (343).

The power of these spaces stems partly from the intimacy gained from the slaves' experience of laboring the land—an intimacy similar to that advocated by *Working with the Hands*. In one illustrative moment from *Travels*, Bartram rides his horse on the outskirts of a South Carolina plantation and he encounters a group of slaves. He immediately fears the group, realizing that he is “unarmed” while the laborers carry their tools, which double as potential weapons: “I mounted and rode briskly up; and though armed with clubs, axes and hoes, they opened to right and left and let me pass peaceably” (Bartram 379). He keeps a “sharp eye,” however, as he anticipates a sneak attack might “their intentions [be] to ambuscade and surround me” (Bartram 379). As Allewaert observes, Bartram is not sure whether to identify the Africans as slaves or maroons, for he “expects that both slaves and Maroons have a particularly proximate relation to tropical terrains, and he also expects that this proximity has military significance” (Allewaert 346). This ambiguity of slave-maroon identity would later play out in Washington's own writing and history of Tuskegee.

Allewaert's analysis can be tied to ecological agency in the larger history of marronage across the North and South American continents (341). In *Black Marxism*, Cedric J. Robinson uncovers a relation between the twentieth-century black radical tradition and the history of marronage. Though he does not articulate it in ecological terms, his account obliquely alludes to the type of ecological practices identified by Allewaert. From the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, slaves found ways to defy the plantation zone: “resistance among the enslaved Africans took the form of flight to native or ‘Indian’ settlements” (Robinson *Black Marxism* 130). Maroon settlements sprung up like mushrooms in colonies like Jamaica (135), Colombia (137), Venezuela (137), Guiana, and Suriname, to name a few (138-139). While Marx calls slavery a form of primitive accumulation wherein resources are forcibly extracted from humans and the

earth, maroons negated this violent expropriation by retaining their own ways of life and trying to reestablish them in new, non-plantation settlements (Robinson *Black Marxism* 121). For Robinson, the “transport of African labor to the mines and plantations of the Caribbean and subsequently to what would be known as the Americas meant also the transfer of African ontological and cosmological systems” (*Black Marxism* 122). This cultural transport offered a reserve of values for establishing and organizing maroon communities. The specter of these communities haunted white colonizers. One Virginia planter compared to maroons in the “Dismal Swamp” to Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome (Robinson *Black Movements* 14). Some communities even achieved official recognition, like the San Lorenzo de los Negros in Mexico (Robinson *Black Marxism* 132). All this happened inevitably, as the “slave system generated its own maelstrom” in a dialectical negation (Robinson *Black Marxism* 124).

In *The Black Jacobins*, C. L. R. James chronicles the Haitian Revolution, in which maroons and ecological agency played a key role, particularly in James’s account of the 1791 San Domingo uprisings that launched the revolution. The highly organized Dutty Boukman, a Voodoo priest, led this initial assault on white dominance of the plantation zone (87). The circumstances of the revolt seem as though they sprung from Bartram’s fearful imagination:

On the night of the 22nd a tropical storm raged, with lightning and gusts of wind and heavy showers of rain. Carrying torches to light their way, the leaders of the revolt met in an open space in the thick forests of the Morne Rouge, a mountain overlooking Le Cap. There Boukman gave the last instructions and, after Voodoo incantations and the sucking of the blood of a stuck pig, he stimulated his followers by a prayer spoken in creole, which, like so much spoken on such occasions, has remained. “The god who created the

sun which gives us light, who rouses the waves and rules the storm, though hidden in the clouds, he watches us” (87).

In James’s account, the leaders use the cover of nature—the tropical storm and the thick forests—to coordinate the mass uprising, impressive in its scale.⁸ From the mountain, they perform a Voodoo ritual that mixes the Catholic sky god with elements of earthly paganism. As the Creole prayer emphasizes, their god governs nature and passes a damning judgment on the whites—a judgment executed by the revolutionaries. Soon afterwards, the slaves across the plantations of San Domingo would revolt and burn down the plantations, with the goal of exterminating the whites (88). As in the Haitian Revolution, maroon settlements and flights into wilderness provided the staging ground for acts of rebellion across North and South America, as in the cases of Gabriel Prosser⁹ and Denmark Vesey in the colonies (Robinson *Black Marxism* 149).

While maroons sought self-determination *outside* the plantation system through ecological agency, Washington sought ecological agency *inside* the plantation system by imposing his own, *reconstructionist* system from within the plantation zone itself. Unlike colonial-era maroon settlements, the 1890s and early 1900s no longer offered a space outside of politics and the public sphere. Washington necessarily engages the public sphere, but in a masquerade that entails a close relationship between text and environmental action. Walter Benjamin’s statement on engaged literary activity works as a fitting description of Washington’s literary output:

Significant literary work can only come into being in a strict alternation between action and writing; it must nurture the inconspicuous forms that better fit its influence in active

communities than does the pretentious, universal gesture of the book—in leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards (61).

Insofar as Washington's writings are like extended fundraising letters, with the purpose of securing funds for the campus's construction from wealthy white donors, his writings are as much action as they are writing.¹⁰ Read through the lens of Benjamin's aphorism and Buell's environmental unconscious, Washington's writing has real material effects: the environment mediates the text just as the text mediates the environment, insofar as the text leads to the financing of that environment's transformation. The Tuskegee Institute, then, is an exemplary case of the reciprocal impact of representation and reality, of writing on the page and "writing" the environment by working with the hands. In short, framed in this *longue durée* of environmental history and black forms of ecological resistance to the plantation form in the United States and the Caribbean, Washington's *Working with the Hands* can be read as a repetition with a difference of these pasts.

6. Conclusion

Throughout his life, as his biographers have claimed, Washington was determined to stick to the South and to extend the Tuskegee model to the entire region. He was "always indelibly a southerner," Harlan says, who was "sentimentally fond of the southern physical environment" (*Wizard* 202-3). Indeed, he enjoyed southern forms of outdoor recreation: horseback riding, hunting, fishing, and gardening (Harlan *Wizard* 203). The Tuskegee "machine" also had a number of outreach and services that extended throughout the region. The Dizer Fund, for example, extended credit to farmers so they could secure private property and build homes (Norrell 108; 200). The Southern Improvement Company sold small farms to Tuskegee

graduates in the county (Norrell 200). Every year, starting in 1892, the school hosted the annual Negro Conference, where thousands of farmers from the area would congregate to exchange ideas and learn Tuskegee's scientific methods of farming (Norrell 106-7). Against bleak odds across the Black Belt, the Negro Conference "intended to help black farm families sustain good morale in the discouraging circumstances of the rural South by promoting a stronger communal sense and a belief that they were making progress" (Norrell 107).

Washington also narrates the colonization of other plantations in the Tuskegee area. In 1896, he began the "experiment of real settlement work" on a run-down, two-thousand acre plantation (*Working* 129). About seventy-five sharecropping families toiled on the property to pay their debts (*Working* 129-30). The plantation owner allowed a Tuskegee outreach "settlement" in an "unused one-room cabin in the quarters of the 'big house,' where resided the last scion of a family of slave-holders" (*Working* 129). A young woman Tuskegee graduate began holding classes there (*Working* 130). After a couple of years, Washington purchased ten acres of land to build a two-room cottage on and to clear for planting (*Working* 131-2). After eight years of work and teaching, Washington claims, there were "better built homes on the plantation" that "replaced one-room log cabins with two-room cottages" (*Working* 132).

In the "Getting Down to Mother Earth" address, with which I started this chapter, Washington charges future Tuskegee graduates with a task: "[o]ne of the highest ambitions of every man leaving Tuskegee Institute should be to help the people of his race find bottom—find bed-rock and then help them to stand upon that foundation" ("Mother Earth" 342). This metaphor of bed-rock bottom invokes both Washington's black economic nationalism (with its stress on capital accumulation) and a concept of nature as a race-less substratum of raw being that recognizes sweat instead of skin. He does not, as his contemporaries Roosevelt or Sierra

Club founder John Muir might, urge his graduates to escape the trappings of modernity and venture into the wilderness to find themselves. What he sees, instead, are the possibilities contained within the toolbox of nature to bring a generation reared by former slaves to economic prosperity and “manhood.”

In *Up from Slavery*, Washington posits a certain *type* of mastery that sees environmental reconstruction and agricultural advancement as coterminous with racial uplift. “Mastery” involves a sort of fluency with the “forces of nature,” leading towards the appropriation of those forces for the sake of ecological and economic self-determination. In *Working with the Hands*, Tuskegee emerges not as a machine but as local instance of a black southern nation-to-come grounded in overcoming the sediment of the plantation zone through the ecological agency of soil conservation, landscape architecture, and pastoral design. In his final autobiography, *My Larger Education* (1912), Washington continues to hold on to aestheticized portraits of labor and the laborer. Black farmers, in particular, appear as intuitive poets of the practical: “the Negro farmer has a rare gift of getting at the sense of things and of stating in picturesque language what he has learned” (155). They are naturalists, experts at learning by experience, studying the “soil, the development of plants and animals, the streams, the birds, and the changes of the seasons” (155). For Washington, Tuskegee’s construction and continued growth aimed at a southern environmental reconstruction of the plantation zone antithetical to the tenant and sharecropping systems. As the Washingtonian program attempts to alter, resist, and reconstruct the order of the plantation zone, it repeats with a difference what Allewaert identifies as a hidden African-American history of resistance. Placed in historical and environmental context, Washington’s version of “mastery” becomes not an exploitive dominance of nature, but rather black labor redefined against slave labor as a powerful form of ecological agency.

While this chapter has undertaken an against-the-grain reading of Washington's work, seeking out an environmental unconscious of the text when read against the background of environmental history, this politics of ecological agency remains *unconscious*. Even though it is unconscious, it is still distinctly *materialist* in its concern with soil conservation, pastoral design, labor, and the environmental reconstruction of the plantation. By the time of Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *Darkwater* (1920), we move to a more conscious, if less *material*, engagement with the conservation movement and its politics. For Du Bois, especially in *Darkwater*, conservation becomes the occasion for an aesthetic project of *conscious* figurations, metaphors, and objective correlatives put into the service of a critique of segregation and an affirmation of integration and democratic pluralism.

NOTES

¹ As Washington biographer Louis Harlan puts it, Roosevelt's "amalgam of Darwinism and traditional racism allowed him [...] to believe that racial inferiority rather than economics, technology, politics, and culture explained the difficulties of Haiti and Liberia" (312).

² However, Baker's recent writings on Washington dramatize the critic's own conflicted Oedipal relation to Washington, as he sometimes apologizes for or aggressively attacks the Tuskegee legacy. About two decades after *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, he makes an about-face in *Turning South Again: Re-Thinking Modernism/Re-Reading Booker T.* (2006), declaring Tuskegee an imperialist project modeled on General Samuel Armstrong's Hampton Institute: "[i]f Booker T. wishes successfully and publicly to don the weeds of Armstrong's power, sexual advantage, and missionary esteem, he must assume the role of black imperialist to the 'country districts'" (59). Baker's method is highly personal and psychoanalytic, which might explain the sudden change. He performs a love / hate relationship to the man, acknowledging that there are

equally strong arguments for and against Washington. As I will show later, this critique of Washington's imperialistic approach dovetails with environmental critics' reservations about his promotion of a mastery of nature.

³ Marcus Garvey thought of himself as the inheritor of Washington's project, which he refashioned as a form of international black capitalism. He even travelled to Tuskegee in 1916 to forge an alliance between his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the Tuskegee "Machine," but Washington had died before he arrived (330).

⁴ More recently, in his 2009 biography *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington*, Robert J. Norrell argues that Washington's diminished status as a heroic figure is the result of historical forgetting and "lost truths" (13). Those in the Civil Rights movement caricatured Washington as the anti-hero to Martin Luther King, Jr., saying he had "given away everything in a cowardly effort to get along with vicious whites" (14). Norrell criticizes Harlan's earlier two-volume biography for continuing this line of critique by comparing Washington "not just to Uncle Tom but also to a minotaur, an amoral and manipulative wizard, and a bargainer with the devil for momentary earthly power" (15). Focused too much on Washington's white sympathizers, critics forget just how violently southern whites were opposed to his tactics. To counter this anachronistic wisdom of hindsight, Norrell contends that Washington's "emphasis on educational, moral, and economic development became a lost artifact for most American thinking about how to integrate minorities and any other disadvantaged group in the modern world" (16). Norrell, like almost all apologists, relies on historicizing Washington in order to justify his philosophy and behind-the-scenes political maneuvering. But he adds that Washington's life and philosophy still speaks to ongoing racial and economic problems over one hundred years later. In the end, that the debate over Washington's legacy rages on almost a

century after his death shows the continued critical ambivalence towards his economic nationalism.

⁵ Harlan does not mention the book in his two-volume biography, nor does Robert Norrell in his 2009 revisionist biography.

⁶ Garvey is Thompson's prototype for black fascism.

⁷ Carver's own letters and scientific writings reveal a quasi-mystical attitude towards nature that contrasts with Washington's pragmatism. Carver's scientific mysticism shows a preference for an intuitive approach to producing ecological knowledge that is similar to Allewaert's claims about black maroons' resistance in the plantation zone. Though Carver was a professed Christian, many of his beliefs amount to a form of nature-worship. In one letter to a friend, Carver professes that the "greatest of all teachers" is "Mother Nature," for "nature in its varied forms are the little windows through which God permits me to commune with Him, and to see much of His glory, majesty, and power by simply lifting the curtain and looking in" (143). Many mainstream white scientists attempted to discredit Carver's studies because of this mysticism, to which he responded with a defense of intuitive scientific methods: the "master analyst needs no book; he is at liberty to take apart and put together substances, compatible or non-compatible to suit his own particular taste or fancy" (130).

⁸ Similarly, in Arna Bontemps's *Drums at Dusk* (1937), a work of historical fiction about the first rumblings of the Haitian Revolution, a maroon colony serves as the staging ground for organizing and launching the revolution. Reverberating from the distant wilderness, the war "drums" of the title continually haunt the white colonialists in the plantation zone: "Drums had commenced to rumble dimly among the hills, a dark legendary throb against a wall of night" (37). Nature and black resistance are conflated, as the drums are "throbbing like the heart-beat of

the earth” (118). Toussaint-L’Ouverture, the leader of the revolution, is portrayed as a kind of voodoo folk doctor, popular among the slaves of plantations for his knowledge of local ecology: “he really knows his herbs” (26).

⁹ Bontemps’s historical novel *Black Thunder* dramatizes the failed Gabriel Prosser slave revolt in Virginia in 1800. In this case, the swamp functions much as it does in Bartram’s *Travels*, as a space of resistance to the plantation zone. When the slaves launch an assault on Richmond, they do it from Brook Swamp during a thunderstorm, symbolizing an alliance with nature (84-5).

¹⁰ In the 1890s, Washington rode a capitalist wave of philanthropy, and thousands were sent by Andrew Carnegie, J. D. Rockefeller, George Eastman, Henry H. Rogers, Collis P. Huntington, and Julius Rosenwald (Harlan *Wizard* 130). Upon reading *Up from Slavery* in 1903, Carnegie donated six-hundred thousand dollars in U. S. Steel bonds to the Tuskegee endowment, thus securing the school’s financial future (Harlan *Wizard* 135). Carnegie saw in Washington’s program and writings a version of his own “Gospel of Wealth,” commenting in his autobiography that “[n]o truer, more self-sacrificing hero ever lived: a man compounded of all the virtues” (Carnegie 266). Within ten years after its founding, eighty percent of the Institute’s annual budget came from donations (Norrell 94). As elaborate fundraising letters, then, Washington’s books were persuasive acts of rhetorical art.

Chapter 2

W. E. B. Du Bois at the Grand Canyon:

Double Consciousness and National Parks in *Darkwater*

1. Introduction

While Booker T. Washington pursued a racial uplift agenda through an underlying politics of ecological agency, W. E. B. Du Bois would develop a consciously aesthetic and romantic project in his quest for integration through self-assertion. Du Bois's essay "Of Beauty and Death" appears as a culminating experimental effort near the end of *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920), his modernist text *par excellence*: a semi-autobiographical callaloo of poems, essays, and short stories. "Of Beauty and Death" contains much of the biting social critique one would expect from the then-editor of the NAACP's *The Crisis*: depictions of black life behind the Veil, double consciousness, and the injustice of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. What come as a surprise, however, are its Thoreauvian thick descriptions of the Grand Canyon, the Rocky Mountains, and Maine's Acadia National Park. Romantic and social realist modes occupy the same page: lyrical accounts revering the "glory of physical nature" and "all the colors of the sea" are interspersed with anecdotes about his journey to the national parks in a train's Jim Crow car (*DW* 174-5). Despite these themes, Kimberly K. Smith rightly observes that "we don't read this essay as an expression of progressive environmentalism at all; we read it as a discourse on social justice" (*AAET* 2). Why, then, does Du Bois mix environmental, racial, and existential themes in this often overlooked essay? How is it that natural beauty gives rise to this combination of strident anti-racist protest and imported German romanticism? This unusual essay can catalyze a more complex understanding of the intersection not only of race and nature but also romanticism and modernism in American literature.

Eclectic like its predecessor *The Souls of Black Folk*, *Darkwater* alternates between non-fictional and fictional or poetic pieces. Du Bois's method throughout the book is juxtaposition: he implicitly pushes the reader to make thematic and historical connections between the fictional and non-fictional pieces. For example, one of his most anthologized essays, "The Souls of White Folk," which rationally dissects the "discovery of personal whiteness among the world's peoples" as a "very modern thing" (*DW* 21), is followed by the poem "The Riddle of the Sphinx," which explodes with disgusted affect deploring the "white world's vermin and filth" (*DW* 39). Like *The Souls of Black Folk*, many of the essays in *Darkwater* are retooled versions of earlier publications, such as "The Souls of White Folk," originally published in a 1910 issue of *The Independent* (Lewis "Introduction" v). The juxtaposition of prose poems, dialogues, and anecdotes in "Of Beauty and Death" compresses Du Bois's overall method into microcosmic form.

This juxtaposition allows "Of Beauty and Death" to expose not merely what Jeffrey Romm calls a "coincidental order of environmental injustice" (117) but rather a stronger, non-coincidental order between Jim Crow and the national parks connected in what Robert P. Marzec identifies as an "age of the discourse of enclosure"—an enclosure that, I would add, includes segregation (Marzec 424). For Marzec, "discourse of enclosure" refers back to the British Empire and the enclosure of the commons in England and its colonies. Control and mastery shape discourse about the administered, global environment, in which the "reterritorialization of land is accomplished through increasing degrees of surveillance" (Marzec 423). Part of the aim of this chapter is to show that the national parks—enclosed spaces—are, in Du Bois's work, connected to a logic of segregation.

Du Bois brings to the parks a double consciousness, or the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (*Souls* 9). In *The Souls of Black Folk*, he claims that this double consciousness means that African Americans are “gifted with second-sight in this American world,” a way of seeing themselves and the country differently (*Souls* 9). Later, in his 1940 autobiography *Dusk of Dawn*, he speaks of a “double environment,” a concept that merges double consciousness with “environment” (understood in the widest sense of that term):

Not only do white men but also colored men forget the facts of the Negro’s *double environment*. The Negro American has not only the white *surrounding* world, but usually, and touching him much more nearly and compellingly, is the environment furnished by his own colored group (173; my emphasis).

African Americans, in other words, experience each environment doubly, as both white *and* black enfolded in one another. Du Bois’s exploration of the double environments of (black) Jim Crow and (white) national parks in *Darkwater* foreground, I argue, a logic of segregation across both “natural” and urban environments.

Du Bois’s modernist aesthetic attempts a sort of “cognitive mapping” of this double environment and, more generally, the disjunctive, heterogeneous culture / nature spaces of modernity. Following Jameson’s periodization of spatial logics shaped by the three stages of capitalism, the period of *Darkwater* would witness the “passage from market to monopoly capital,” or when capitalism becomes imperialist (349). The precision of this periodization is not as important as Jameson’s description of space in this era. Imperialistic capitalism leads to a “growing contradiction between lived experience and structure, or between phenomenological description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the conditions of

existence of that experience” (349). While the mode of nature writing characteristic of Sierra Club founder John Muir contains exhaustive phenomenological detail, Du Bois’s writing employs formal experimentation to gesture at some kind of cognitively-mapped, structural totality. For Du Bois, the sublimity of the Grand Canyon—what Richard Grusin calls the trope of its “cognitive inaccessibility”—becomes an analog for the inaccessibility of the social totality (103).

Du Bois maps these disjunctive spaces of modernity and the double environments of the color line by engaging the emerging environmentalist movements—a loose, conservationist-dominated coalition that Roderick Frazier Nash dubs the “wilderness cult”—at the turn of the twentieth century. Eclectic writers, naturalists, and politicians like Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and Roosevelt saw the federal government as protector of the nation’s resources from unchecked profiteering and they campaigned for and secured the first national parks. Works like Roosevelt’s *The Wilderness Hunter* (1893), Muir’s *Our National Parks* (1901), and Pinchot’s *The Fight for Conservation* (1910) came to embody an increasingly mainstream, white-dominated, and nationalistic environmentalist discourse. At the same time, many of these early environmentalists, particularly Roosevelt, deployed “nature” as an ideology meant to justify white supremacy, social Darwinism, and a cult of masculinity. Indeed, despite adopting some progressive racial policies and inviting Washington to dine with him at the White House in 1901, Roosevelt’s racist views were well known and he eventually alienated many African-American supporters by the time he left office in 1909. As in “The Conservation of Races,” Du Bois works with and against this combination of progressivism and racism in these discourses.

Perhaps more importantly for Du Bois than these discourses, though, are two pivotal, seemingly unrelated historical events that unfolded in the midst of *Darkwater*’s fruition and final

preparation for publication. The first occurred in 1916, when the U. S. Congress passed the National Parks Act (Merchant *AEH* 279). This landmark legislation created the National Park Service and maneuvered into place the state apparatus needed to administer the nation's designated wilderness spaces, including the Grand Canyon, which officially became a national park in 1919 (Merchant *AEH* 151). The 1916 Act seemed to have caught the eye of the increasingly socialist Du Bois, for the power to administer the parks involved the massive and unprecedented expropriation of land away from private enterprise (and, perhaps unknown to Du Bois at the time, Native Americans) and into public control. The second event is far more familiar to African-American history: the Red Summer of 1919, when bloody race riots, fuelled by urban segregation and the Great Migration, ravaged the country's cities from May to September. For Du Bois, the riots were stoked in part by the unjust treatment of black soldiers during the First World War—a subject he analyzes and condemns throughout *Darkwater*. In the essay “African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot,” environmental historian Colin Fisher has argued that the Chicago race riot, triggered by a drowning “accident” on a segregated Lake Michigan beach, reflected a longer struggle in the black community for access to public parks and other urban natural spaces. “Of Beauty and Death” and *Darkwater* as a whole bring these two seemingly unrelated events within the same discursive context and double environment.

The first section of this chapter explores the concept of wilderness in *The Souls of Black Folk* and Du Bois's 1904 “Credo,” a short prayer-like piece he later reprinted as the opening of *Darkwater*. These works express the ambivalence—typical of the African-American tradition up to that point—towards wilderness as a socially- and politically-mediated space. This ambivalence of African-American attitudes towards wilderness will later be enacted at the formal

level in “Of Beauty and Death.” Before turning to “Of Beauty and Death” itself, I contextualize my reading by examining the wilderness discourse of Muir, Roosevelt, and Pinchot, whose works came to dominate the conservationist movement that had arisen between Du Bois’s writing of *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Darkwater*.

My subsequent reading of “Of Beauty and Death” begins by examining Du Bois’s writing on the Grand Canyon and how it brings a double consciousness and second-sight to early-twentieth-century understandings of wilderness, throwing the culture vs. nature divide of romanticism into question (*Souls* 9). At the same time that he racializes the nature discourses of the conservationist movement, Du Bois also revises their tropes in his own *Crisis*-style critique of a discourse of enclosure and segregation. I then move on to consider Du Bois’s use of Colonel Charles Young as a figure who unites the spaces and histories of Jim Crow and conservation. Young was the highest-ranking black military officer at the time and served as acting superintendent of Sequoia National Park in 1903. Finally, Du Bois’s patchwork of nature writing ends with portraits of urban nature: “white cliffs of Manhattan,” Central Park, Brooklyn Bridge, and Harlem tenements rise “like magic from the earth” (*DW* 187-8). Here, Du Bois anticipates the Harlem Renaissance project of re-imagining an American cultural nationalism; he expresses that movement’s rejection of “the opposition between nature and culture” and substitutes a more differentiated, heterogeneous sense of modern space (Hutchinson 122).

2. Wilderness in *The Souls of Black Folk* and the 1904 “Credo”

The environmental themes in *Darkwater* appear less anomalous when placed in the context of Du Bois’s literary and sociological work at the dawn of his scholarly career in the late-nineteenth century. Much of his late-nineteenth-century work analyzed the economic plight

of southern blacks, most notably his 1893 University of Berlin doctoral thesis, “The Large and Small-Scale System of Agriculture in the Southern U. S., 1840-1890” (Lewis *Biography* 143).

Du Bois brings a scholar’s eye to the same region Booker T. Washington wrote about. While this early work shows a primary concern with race and economics, the material relations within and across environments—whether they be rural or urban, swamps or plantations, national or global—increasingly come to the fore.

The Souls of Black Folk combines historical, sociological, and economic insight with what Leo Marx would describe as a “complex pastoral” mode of representation. In contrast to the simple sentimentalization of nature unspoiled by human culture, the complex pastoral imagines a landscape inscribed with the traces of modernization and, in Du Bois’s case, the histories of slavery and Jim Crow (Marx 14-15). In the chapter “Of the Meaning of Progress,” for example, Du Bois recounts his two summers spent teaching in rural Tennessee, where he often “lingered to look at the blue and yellow mountains stretching toward the Carolinas” (*Souls* 49). This reverie is framed within a distinctly racial and social context: Du Bois was at the time a student at the all-black Fisk University and received his summer school training at a segregated teachers’ institute. He characterizes his journey to dine with the white school commissioner’s family as idyllic: the “sun laughed and the water jingled” as he walked through the woods. The idyll suddenly takes a wrong turn when he arrives and sits down to eat with the family: “even then fell the awful shadow of the Veil, for they ate first, then I—alone” (*Souls* 50). This complex-pastoral mode is mixed with the experience of double consciousness and double environment.

Environmental critics like Scott Hicks have already explored the numerous instances of the complex pastoral and other nature themes in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In an extension of the complex pastoral, Anne Raine reads the book’s environmental aesthetic as an “ambient

poetics”—or what Du Bois himself calls an “atmosphere of the land”—of the racialized southern landscape (*Souls* 129). Building on this prior work, my foremost concern here is to sketch Du Bois’s early, complex-pastoral figuration specifically of *wilderness* rather than a generalized environment in *The Souls of Black Folk*. This early figuration of wilderness previews the even more complex representation of race and nature in *Darkwater*.

To understand wilderness in *The Souls of Black Folk*, it is important to contextualize it with other, mostly romantic discourses circulating about wilderness at the time. Du Bois’s contemporary Roosevelt romanticized and politicized wilderness in his frontier memoir *The Wilderness Hunter*, published ten years before *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1893. Roosevelt is exemplary here because of his key role in the conservationist movement. Among his many accomplishments, he successfully lobbied for the Forest Reserve Act of 1891 and served as president of the Boone and Crockett Club, an influential conservation lobbying group, for six years (Cutright 182). As U. S. President, he worked closely with Pinchot to establish the national parks and federal bureaus that managed forests and game. His many writings about his frontier sojourns helped him fashion a self- and public-image as an amateur naturalist and “wilderness warrior,” in Douglas Brinkley’s words, which in turn motivated his conservationist policies. *The Wilderness Hunter* offers an account of the future President’s hunting and ranching experiences in the Dakota Badlands—a “devil’s wilderness”—during the last days of the Western frontier (71). Environmental critic Mei Mei Evans contends that there is a close relation between wilderness and American cultural identity in popular narratives like Roosevelt’s: the “conception of wilderness or Nature in U. S. American popular culture is the site *par excellence* for (re)invention of the self. Locating oneself, or being located, in Nature is a thoroughly cultural activity” (182). Roosevelt’s memoir, then, is an act of political self-invention, as he “finds” the

essence of that political identity in the Dakotas, far removed from his comfortable New York lifestyle.

In the *The Wilderness Hunter* Preface, Roosevelt begins by remarking that he spent much of his life “either in the wilderness or on the borders of the settled country” (xxi). He goes on to succinctly state his romanticized view of wilderness, linking it to nationalism, democracy, and masculinity:

In hunting, the finding and killing of the game is after all but a part of the whole. The free, self-reliant, adventurous life, with its rugged and stalwart democracy; the wild surroundings, the grand beauty of the scenery, the chance to study the ways and habits of the woodland creatures—all these unite to give to the career of the wilderness hunter its peculiar charm. The chase is among the best of all national pastimes; it cultivates that vigorous manliness for the lack of which in a nation, as in an individual, the possession of no other qualities can possibly atone (xxi).

For Roosevelt, wilderness is both “inside” and “outside” of civilization. On the one hand, removal from civilization forces him to cultivate the manly virtues of self-reliance and rugged individualism. On the other hand, this very removal “civilizes” or anthropomorphizes the wilderness as an ideal training ground for the hard-hitting political life that, in Roosevelt’s eyes, someone born into the comfortable and well-connected life of New York City’s elite would need (Dorman xiii-xiv).

The rest of Roosevelt’s memoir seldom refers back to civilized life, creating the effect of the solitary frontiersman in the Dakota territories and reflecting the disjunctive space of modern capitalism. Typifying the nature writing genre, he provides exhaustive phenomenological detail of the various species he encounters and hunts: blacktail and whitetail deer, prong-horn antelope,

mountain sheep, white goat, caribou, round-horned elk, and moose. Interspersed with thrills of the chase are contemplative, pastoral moments, as when Roosevelt stops to listen to a mockingbird sing: “theme followed theme, a torrent of music, a swelling tide of harmony, in which scarcely any two bars were alike” (47). Moments of rapture like this one reveal a romantic sensibility at work or, in Leo Marx’s lexicon, sentimental pastoralism. However, political life occasionally creeps back into the text through analogy. For example, Roosevelt likens the teamwork required of ranchers in order to round up cattle to a “real and healthy democracy” (69).

The memoir concludes with a form of politicized wilderness hero-worship akin to the romanticism of Thomas Carlyle. Life in the wild is a “rugged and stalwart democracy; there every man stands for what he actually is” (161). He then lists a number of exemplary American leaders who “sought strength and pleasure in the chase” and discovered their essence: George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Jackson, Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and Henry Cabot Lodge (164-7). Wilderness, he not-too-subtly implies, is at the core of American cultural identity and politics. For the romantic Roosevelt, wilderness discloses the essence of great men; it helps realize a highly masculinized democracy and American nationalism.

Du Boisian wilderness and Rooseveltian wilderness cannot be reduced to opposing viewpoints, especially given *The Souls of Black Folk*’s ready use of a German romantic aesthetic and Herderian philosophy of the *Volk* in order to promote a black nationalism. In her “Du Bois and the Production of the Racial Picturesque,” Sheila Lloyd argues that the author positions the reader as a “picturesque traveler,” taking her on a journey through a “textual environment” constructed from the “diverse tropes of the picturesque, specifically those remarking vistas, vantages, prospects, and other objects comprehended in spatial terms” (278). Kimberly K. Smith

argues that the book's "black environmental thought" and, I would add, its racial picturesque aesthetic, go hand in hand with a "Romantic conception of southern blacks as a peasant community with an organic connection to the land" (*AAET* 98). Just as a white American's strength is drawn from nature in *The Wilderness Hunter*, so too is an emergent black nationalism drawn from the black folk's connection to the southern soil in *The Souls of Black Folk*. To do this, Du Bois partly draws on the eighteenth-century *Sturm und Drang* rhetoric of early German romanticism, with a focus on the landscape as an objective correlative for the "storm and stress of human souls" (*Souls* 129). Similarly, Roosevelt valorizes frontier travel and hunting as correlatives of the human spirit, in which rugged conditions dish out chicken soup for the sportsman's soul: "[n]o man who, for his good fortune, has at times in his life endured trial and hardship, ever fails to appreciate the strong elemental pleasures of rest after labor, food after hunger, warmth and shelter after bitter cold" (57). Placed in its context, Roosevelt here plays the role of the white, European frontiersman "going native."

However, despite their shared romanticism, Du Bois and Roosevelt also work within divergent traditions of American and African-American wilderness thinking and imagery. Where Roosevelt sees the wilderness as a proving ground for a future great leader—for the political sovereign-to-be—Du Bois works within an African-American tradition that sees wilderness more ambivalently as both a refuge and a difficult spiritual trial for downtrodden black masses. In his study of metaphorical geography and identity, Melvin K. Dixon argues that spatial metaphors of mountaintops, wilderness, and the underground, structure a figural as well as often literal topography of an African-American quest for selfhood. Such metaphors create "alternative landscapes where black culture can flourish apart from any marginal, prescribed 'place'" (2). During slavery, wilderness takes on special symbolic status as a pathway to freedom and a space

of flight from the plantation zone, as dramatized in the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and Henry Bibb (26).

The slave song “Go in de Wilderness,” published in an 1867 collection, combines many of the themes seen in the various “Sorrow Songs” Du Bois analyzes towards the end of *The Souls of Black Folk*:

I found free grace in de wilderness,
 in de wilderness, in de wilderness,
 I found free grace in de wilderness
 For I’m a-going home (qtd. in Dixon 18).

The wilderness offers a spiritual and physical alternative to the plantation, an oppressive pastoralized space cultivated and “conquered” by slave labor. Du Bois generalizes that in slave songs the “‘Wilderness’ was the home of God” (*Souls* 82). The wilderness here, as in the trials of biblical figures, is also a space that both tests the individual and, through this test, offers the possibility of salvation and refuge.

For Du Bois, as with Washington’s emphasis on pastoral design, laboring and pastoralizing the American wilderness is one of the “gifts” of black folk to the country’s early formation. In the context of arguing for the integration of a black nation into the nation as a whole, Du Bois observes that slaves have, in an “ill-harmonized and unmelodious land,” given their “sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire” (*Souls* 187). In *The Gift of Black Folk*, he would later reiterate the role of black labor in taming the American wilderness and modernizing the “new world”: the “black man was the pioneer in the hard physical work which began the reduction of the American wilderness” (52-3). For Du Bois, conquering the wilderness becomes the occasion for

locating a black nationalism at the forefront of an American nationalism and expansionism. Much like it did for Washington, this black environmental reconstruction turns the alienated labor of slavery into a case for the kinship between African Americans and nature, and thus to the kind of American national identity advocated by Roosevelt.

While the “Forethought” of *The Souls of Black Folk* draws the bulk of critical attention for famously announcing the problem of the twentieth century as the “problem of the color-line” and for introducing the concept-metaphor of “the Veil,” the single-paragraph “Afterthought” employs a new concept-metaphor: the “world-wilderness” (189). Often overlooked in an African American Studies context, this metaphor becomes important from an ecological perspective and for understanding some of *Darkwater*’s environmental themes. Additionally, Du Bois thought the concept-metaphor important enough to decide to conclude the book with it. The concept also helps to frame the color and ecological lines as more than a national problem, as well as to preview the globalist turn of *Darkwater*, contra Roosevelt’s nationalism.

“World-wilderness” appears in the context of an apostrophe to the reader and a prayer to “God the Reader.” The whole “Afterthought” also employs an extended nature metaphor that invokes a somewhat menacing atmosphere indicative of a complex-pastoral aesthetic mode:

Hear my cry, O God the Reader; vouchsafe that this my book fall not still-born into the world-wilderness. Let there spring, Gentle One, from out its leaves vigor of thought and thoughtful deed to reap the harvest wonderful. (Let the ears of a guilty people tingle with truth, and seventy millions sigh for the righteousness which exalteth nations, in this drear day when human brotherhood is mockery and a snare.) Thus in Thy good time may infinite reason turn the tangle straight, and these crooked marks on a fragile leaf be not indeed (Souls 189).

In the context of the extended metaphor, “world-wilderness” refers to the world of print culture and an international readership. These “crooked marks” (writing) on a “fragile leaf” (the book’s pages) pun on the materiality of the book—it is as though the book starts to spring to life in the reader’s hands in an instance of the trope of the talking book. But the metaphor “leaf” suggests the material origin of books in wood pulp, in trees, and thus in nature and out of the soil. The wilderness here pointedly suggests hostility, for the book is like the infant Oedipus abandoned to the wild. But it also suggests the world-wilderness as a space of trial for the souls of black folk.

The year after publishing *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois’s “Credo,” a very short prayer-like work he would later choose and leave mostly unchanged for the opening of *Darkwater*, appeared on a single page in an October 1904 issue of the *Independent*. Though it does not mention “wilderness,” it includes pastoral and racial themes that help to bridge *The Souls of Black Folk* to *Darkwater*. The “Credo” professes a series of beliefs: in God, in the “Negro Race,” in “humble, reverent service,” in the “Prince of Peace,” and in the “Training of Children” (787). David Levering Lewis places it in the context of Washington’s popular *Up from Slavery*, arguing that Du Bois wanted to advance a pious public image similar to Washington’s and to show he was not a “rash and godless intellectual, but a committed exponent of Judeo-Christian harmony and justice” (*Biography* 312). Like so much of the work produced by African-American writers at the time, “Credo” appears doubly coded for white and black readers: whites would read expressions of Christian piety, whereas blacks would read a profession of racial pride and spiritual uplift. “Credo” enjoyed immense popularity, suggesting that its racial, religious, and pastoral themes must have touched the pulse of the country’s black masses. It was reprinted throughout the black press, and a member of Du Bois’s short-lived but significant Niagara Movement read it aloud at the group’s second meeting (*Lewis Biography*

312; 328-9). When it was published again in *Darkwater*, which sold well to working-class and Talented Tenth blacks alike, families across the nation hung it on their walls (Lewis *Biography* 312-3).

“Credo” strategically muddles black nationalism with a mainstream American nationalism. Echoing the religious and egalitarian sentiments expressed in the Preamble to the U. S. Constitution as well as the Catholic “Apostles’ Creed,” Du Bois begins: “I believe in God, who made of one blood all races that on earth do dwell” (787). He changes “races” to “nations” in the *Darkwater* version, reflecting again the book’s globalist turn. Indeed, about halfway through the Credo, Du Bois makes another global turn, openly condemning the “scramble for Africa”: “I believe that the wicked conquest of weaker and darker nations by nations whiter and stronger but foreshadows the death of that strength” (787). Careful to distinguish his more German-romantic religious vision from Washington’s pragmatism, Du Bois exhorts the races / nations to strive for the “possibility of infinite development” (787). Listing “black and brown and white” races, he singles out the exceptional potential of the “Negro Race”: he believes in the “beauty of its genius, the sweetness of its soul, and its strength in that meekness which shall yet inherit this turbulent earth” (787). In a preview of Du Bois’s later, more explicit black Marxism, labor serves as the great equalizer and builder of interracial solidarity, for there is “no distinction between the black, sweating cotton hands of Georgia and the first families of Virginia” (787).

Along with black nationalism and an expressed belief in a possibly Christian deity, free movement within national space is a central motif of the “Credo.” Du Bois believes that everyone should have the “space to stretch their arms and their souls; the right to breathe and the right to vote” and to “enjoy the sunshine and ride on the railroads”—freedoms that can only be fully realized through desegregation. Under the category of “Training of Children” in the

Credo's penultimate paragraph, Du Bois champions a pastoral pedagogy, advocating that "little souls" be lead out 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" (787). The distinction between venturing out into the wilderness not for "pelf or peace" but for "life lit" by the good, the true, and the beautiful challenges the popular, contemporaneous view of nature as a relaxing retreat for nerve-wracked, white bourgeois urbanites. This pastoral scene appears to reconcile racial conflict, as black and white children enjoy an idyll in the country. It also echoes the idea of nature as training ground in Washington's *Working with the Hands* and Roosevelt's *The Wilderness Hunter*. Nature for Du Bois is not an upper-class white playground but a space where sublime and existential truths are revealed. In Du Bois's early work, he sets up a discourse of nature and wilderness that parallels those of other writers like Roosevelt. For Roosevelt in *The Wilderness Hunter*, the wilderness is a proving ground where he shapes his political identity. For Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, wilderness is filtered through both his German-romantic sensibility and his invocation of wilderness tropes in Negro spirituals, or "Sorrow Songs." His writing is a version of complex pastoral: he frames nature and wilderness tropes within a larger social critique of racism and the experience of double environments. "Credo" extends this complex pastoral, linking travel and free movement to the experience of the overall national space. In this way, he sets up an African-American counter-discourse about wilderness that becomes more evident and fully developed in "Of Beauty and Death."

3. National Parks and Race: John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and the Grand Canyon

By the time Du Bois wrote *Darkwater*, the wilderness preservationists had been fighting for the establishment of national parks for decades. The recognition of the Grand

Canyon as a national park in 1919 marks a symbolic culmination of this history of the struggle to preserve supposedly pristine natural spaces. In the dominant reading of this history, preservationists like Sierra Club founder John Muir saw this push as a noble resistance to the expansion of eastern capital set on consuming the nation's natural resources. Against this reading of the history of the parks, Richard Grusin, borrowing a notion from nineteenth-century landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead, argues that the formation of the parks functioned as part of a national project of "postbellum reunification"—an attempt to unify the country geographically and culturally after the North / South division of the Civil War (23). Rather than being pristine natural spaces, the parks are a "product of a complex assemblage of heterogeneous technologies and social practices, the aim of which is the production or reproduction of a culturally and discursively defined and formed object called 'nature'" (Grusin 3). Thus, the way people experienced wilderness and the national parks at the time depended largely on the discursive frames of writers like Roosevelt, Muir, and Pinchot. Works such as Muir's *Our National Parks* and Pinchot's *The Fight for Conservation* helped shape the parks as aesthetic, political, and cultural constructions—constructions that Du Bois challenges with his own reconstruction. As the myth of the frontier ebbed, their rhetoric sought what Terry Gifford calls a "rediscovery" of the western frontier as an "essentially inner experience," though access to this "inner experience" would for a while only be available to wealthy white tourists (19). These works also codify and popularize the dominant environmentalist discourse that Du Bois critiques and reframes in *Darkwater*.

Conservationists like Pinchot advocated the "wise use" of natural resources, while preservationists such as Muir were more romantic in outlook, calling for large wilderness areas to be set aside, unused and uninhabited (Nash 129). Beginning in the 1870s, Muir began

publicizing the beauty of places such as Yosemite Valley in magazines like *Century Magazine* and *Harper's* and in a number of bestselling books (Gifford 29; 39). His *Our National Parks* celebrates and commodifies various national parks, emphasizing their aesthetic attraction to wealthy easterners and centering on Yosemite, Yellowstone, Sequoia, and General Grant National Parks. His passages celebrating the Grand Canyon (not yet a national park) helped sell the idea of the park to the federal government and to tourists: “so incomparably lovely and grand and supreme is it above all other cañons in our fire-moulded, earthquake-shaken, rain-washed, wave-washed, river and glacier sculptured world” (35-36). He repeatedly stresses the canyon’s transcendence and otherworldliness: “as unearthly in the color and grandeur and quantity of its architecture, as if you had found it after death, on some other star” (35). With the “you” directed at the tourist-reader, Muir functions as a sort of guide who will lead the visitor to the romantic sublime. *Our National Parks* is full of descriptions like these, framing these wilderness spaces as singular, sublime, sacred, and almost entirely devoid of any sign of civilization. There is also a sense of loss that permeates *Our National Parks*: “the continent’s outer beauty is fast passing away, especially the plant part of it, the most destructible and most universally charming of all” (5). Muir’s reverence for nature turns elegiac here as he laments a wilderness that still barely exists.

Though he does champion the public good over private profit, Muir’s writing also participates in a discourse of enclosure that assumes a division between culture and nature—a division that Du Bois implicitly challenges as racially codified. Paul Outka convincingly chronicles Muir’s latent racism, arguing that his account of the western frontier “traces the process of forgetting the explicitly racialized geography of the east and south” (156). Muir’s project continues the postbellum reunification that, Outka argues, sought to repress the national

trauma of slavery and the Civil War. Despite such repression and even as they espouse the interconnectedness of all things, Muir's writings reflect a Jim Crow mentality of segregation. Though not explicitly stated, Muir's target audience is clearly white, city-dwelling bourgeois easterners: "[a]wakening from the stupefying effects of the vice of over-industry and the deadly apathy of luxury, they as best they can to mix and enrich their own little ongoings with those of Nature, and to get rid of rust and disease" (1). This appeal is a strategic attempt to translate Muir's own values into the utilitarianism of the urban-dweller and to advertise the parks to potential tourists. This passage also reflects white male fears of, as Nash puts it, "over-civilization" that could lead to a national crisis of masculinity and the degeneration of the white race (Nash 152). Indeed, Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell, editor of *Forest and Stream*, would say in a co-authored 1893 publication laying out the principles of the Boone and Crockett Club that without the manly virtues cultivated in the wilderness "no race can do its life work well" (qtd. in Nash 152-3). The solution to the feminizing force of modernity would be a return to a primitive condition, in which the cure is, as Muir famously said, to "go home" to nature: "going to the mountains is going home."

Muir more directly manifests his racism in his attitude towards Native Americans. In *Our National Parks*, a racially-charged moment occurs when he describes his visit to Alaska. While studying the various Alaskan plant and animal species, he encounters a group of Inuit and proceeds to compare them to animals: "men, women, and children, loose and hairy like wild animals" (9). He objectifies them and places them in a picturesque landscape: a "lively picture they made, and a pleasant one" (10). Elsewhere, he describes Yosemite's Native Americans as "lazy" (193) and reassures those white tourists who might fear that the park harbors hostility: "As to Indians, most of them are dead or civilized into useless innocence" (28). Merchant also

charts examples of Muir's racism towards Native Americans, citing numerous cases where Muir characterizes Indians as "dark and dirty" ("Shades" 382) contaminants in his vision of an "untrodden wilderness" (Muir 22). These are not "gotcha" racist moments incidental to Muir's nature writing, but rather evidence of his participation in a discourse of enclosure and segregation between culture and nature that had larger material and historical effects.

Such a discourse of enclosure helped create the cultural environment that would validate the removal of Native Americans from these wilderness areas. In the case of the Grand Canyon, historian Karl Jacoby has chronicled the decades-long struggle between the Havasupai tribe and the federal government over the area. Jacoby shows that Native American experiences from Wisconsin and Michigan to Minnesota and Colorado reveal that "Indian peoples offered a powerful collective dissent from the official mores of conservation" (150-51). For the Havasupai, conservation merely continued a history of conquest, of a "larger conflict over land and resources that pre-dated conservation's rise" (151). In 1893, President Benjamin Harrison issued an executive order to create the Grand Canyon Forest Reserve, federalizing tribal hunting land and turning the Havasupai into, as Jacoby puts it, a "solitary island in a sea of conservation land" (165). Havasupai hunting now became criminalized as "poaching" (180). The final designation of the Grand Canyon as a national park led to the construction of ranger stations, warehouses, mess halls, administration buildings, roads, and trails along the canyon's rim (187). Ironically, many of the Havasupai were employed as wage laborers for these various construction projects (188). Paralleling and inverting Muir's elegiac sense of losing the wilderness, the Havasupai experienced the park's establishment as a "narrative of loss" rather than national gain (149).

While Native Americans make occasional appearances across Muir's oeuvre, African Americans appear mainly in the posthumously published *1,000 Mile Walk to the Gulf*. Merchant

argues that Muir's views are important because he wrote at a moment when "whiteness and blackness were redefined environmentally in ways that reinforced institutional racism" ("Shades" 381). Outka describes Muir's racist rhetoric in his encounter with an African-American woman and boy while hiking through the woods: "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 and cheery Captain Delano of Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, Muir cannot imagine black agency or culture. Stumbling across some playful black children in Florida, Muir concludes that they do not live "in harmony with Nature," for "[b]irds make nests and nearly all beasts make some kind of bed for their young; but these negroes allow their younglings to lie nestless and naked in the dirt" (*Thousand-Mile* 107). Paradoxically, African Americans are both discordant with nature and "beasts" segregated into it—they are *in* nature but not *of* it. "Harmony" with nature, it seems, is best achieved by a well-traveled, white naturalist like Muir himself. This culture / nature opposition clears the ground for a pernicious white supremacy that sees African Americans as less than animals, for at least birds know how to make shelter.

Muir's much-maligned contemporary Gifford Pinchot—disparaged by historian Craig W. Allin as a "bureaucratic imperialist"—held more controversial views about the relation between the social and natural worlds. His views build a sort of bridge between Muir and Du Bois. Much of Pinchot's negative reputation originates in the Hetch Hetchy Valley Dam controversy, when he approved the construction of a dam in Yosemite National Park (Nash 161). But Pinchot combined his national park and wise-use advocacy with a strong, progressive stance on issues of

social and economic justice—issues that merge in his nationalist rhetoric of domestication. His conservation manifesto *The Fight for Conservation* is strewn with metaphors of domesticating wilderness for the nation: the “nation that will lead the world will be a Nation of Homes. The object of the great Conservation movement is just this, to make our country a permanent and prosperous home for ourselves and for our children” (23). Functioning both as an agent of westward expansion and an idea to rally against, Pinchot argues that the profit-motive was also at work in this westward expansion and enclosure. He saw an opposition between narrowly-defined profit and the public good, seeing conservation as a way of protecting people (and nature) from the powerful interests of the captains of industry and their “great concentrations of capital” (Pinchot 26). Rather than repudiate the profit-motive altogether, he sought to redefine it in democratic and quasi-socialist terms: “natural resources must be developed and preserved for the benefit of the many, and not merely for the profit of a few” (46-50). Pinchot’s redefined notion of profit and attempt to synthesize conservation with cultural and economic demands offers a philosophical bridge between conservation and Du Bois.

4. Du Bois at the Grand Canyon: “Of Beauty and Death” and the Sublime

The Grand Canyon passage in “Of Beauty and Death” tropes the park as sublime, while at the same time drawing on the racialized, complex pastoralism and double environments found in *The Souls of Black Folk* and other parts of *Darkwater*. That Du Bois (or any black writer for that matter) writes about the parks at all is significant in 1920, given the perceived lack of African American interest in wilderness spaces. This passage also challenges Paul Outka’s white sublime / black trauma opposition, revealing a tradition of African-American writing on the natural sublime that will be further explored in later chapters. By representing the Grand Canyon,

Du Bois engages in the American cultural nationalism of representing the parks, but he rejects Olmsted's project of postbellum re-unification. Rather than conceal the trauma of civil war, Du Bois seeks to de-naturalize segregation and naturalize integration in defiance of Jim Crow and early environmentalist discourse. First, this section examines the Grand Canyon passage in the context of its abutting fragments—fragments that complicate the passage's status as “nature writing.” It then analyzes the specificity of Du Bois's aesthetics of the Kantian sublime, which both typifies nature writing and challenges it because of his position as an African-American tourist.

The Grand Canyon passage gains much of its implied meaning through the essay's overall context. The essay's experimental form redefines and widens the scope of conventional nature writing with a modernist aesthetic of juxtaposition. In the essay, Du Bois actually visits both the Grand Canyon National Park and Maine's Acadia National Park, where he marvels at the “glory of physical nature,” though he describes the canyon in fuller detail (*DW* 174). Beginning early on with the fourth fragment, the Acadia section previews what is to come and establishes the centrality of the national parks to the essay's themes. With careful attention to place names, Du Bois describes Bar Harbor, Mount Desert, and Frenchman's Bay off the coast of Maine, where he admires the variety of intermingling colors: “white, gray, and inken” clouds, a “shadowy velvet” that “veiled the mountain,” the sea's “gray and yellowing greens and doubtful blues, blacks not quite black, tinted silvers and golds and dreaming whites” (*DW* 174-5). The motif of integrated colors in nature will become even more evident in the later Grand Canyon section. Du Bois repeatedly puns on “veil,” for nature is continually veiling and unveiling itself: “[b]efore the unveiled face of nature as it lies naked on the Maine coast, rises a certain human awe” (*DW* 175). This unveiled space offers Du Bois a respite from the social

world, somewhere where he can rejuvenate and where, echoing John Muir, “in the tired days of life men should come and worship here and renew their spirit” (*DW* 175).

The Grand Canyon nature writing section is sandwiched between a tale of segregation in the military during the First World War and a number of fragments critiquing Jim Crow. Earlier in the essay, Du Bois explicitly characterizes his overall method as “juxtaposition” in order to “compare the least of the world’s beauty with the least of its ugliness—not murder, starvation, and rapine, with love and friendship and creation—but the glory of sea and sky and city, with the little hatefulneses and thoughtlessnesses of race prejudice” (*DW* 174). Juxtaposition shows that the “truth” of the ugliness of Jim Crow and the beauty of the national parks (or natural beauty in general) exist in the same world: “[t]here is not in the world a more disgraceful denial of human brotherhood than the ‘Jim-Crow’ car of the southern United States; but, too, just as true, there is nothing more beautiful in the universe than sunset and moonlight on Montego Bay in far Jamaica” (*DW* 177). Further juxtapositions of about twenty separate fragments make “Of Beauty and Death” into a sort of montage capable of producing unexpected connections and “third meanings” similar to the later dialectical montage of 1920s Soviet cinematic style of Sergei Eisenstein and the French surrealism of André Breton. It can produce meanings that would usually escape the intentional control of the author, allowing a textual unconscious to run wild. Rather than writing a philosophical tract, Du Bois hopes that “out of such juxtaposition we may, perhaps, deduce some rule of beauty and life—or death?” (*DW* 174). The logic of juxtaposition defies the Aristotelian syllogism, for it seeks to deduce underlying truths about the social totality by means of aesthetic accident instead of philosophical deliberation.

The Grand Canyon passage must be placed in the context of the passage immediately preceding it, where Du Bois describes a conversation with a multi-racial group of friends. He

draws an analogy to colors mingling in nature: “[a]round me sat color in human flesh—brown that crimsoned readily; dim soft-yellow that escaped description; cream-like duskiness that shadowed to rich tints of autumn leaves” (*DW* 176). A white companion suggests that the group travel for recreation, but the “thought of a journey seemed to depress” the others at the table (*DW* 176). An unnamed black friend (who could be Du Bois himself) then gives an account of the arduous process of traveling by train. Petty Jim Crow “thoughtlessnesses” harass the black passenger before she has even boarded the train: “to buy a ticket is torture; you stand and stand and wait and wait until every white person at the ‘other window’ is waited on” (*DW* 176). After dealing with the agent’s racially-motivated pestering, the black passenger must then ride in the segregated Jim Crow car:

Usually there is no step to help you climb on and often the car is a smoker cut in two and you must pass through the white smokers or else they pass through your part, with swagger and noise and stares. Your compartment is a half or a quarter or an eighth of the oldest car in service on the road. [...]. The white train crew from the baggage car uses the ‘Jim-Crow’ to lounge in and perform their toilet. The conductor appropriates two seats for himself and his papers and yells gruffly for your tickets before the train has scarcely started. [...] As for toilet rooms,—don’t! (*DW* 176-77).

National park enthusiasts extolled the virtues of visits to wilderness spaces as a rejuvenating escape from the claustrophobia of the cities, yet the punishing ride in a Jim Crow car clearly undermines this particular value of the parks—or specifically the *journey* to the parks—for successful blacks, the Talented Tenth. Du Bois exposes park tourism as not just bourgeois escape but also an activity of *white* privilege. Moreover, railroad companies themselves possessed a huge economic stake in establishing the parks for tourism, prospecting for new vistas as one

would for gold. Railroad companies like Northern Pacific, for example, lobbied for the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 (Nash 111). They and others in the tourism industry sought to make the national parks, in Grusin's words, an "idealized commodity" for tourists as well as armchair tourists eager to consume verbal and visual representations like those of Muir and landscape painter Thomas Moran (12). In helping to commodify and promote the parks, the railroad companies also succeeded in expanding their Jim Crow policies westward. To be sure, the reasons Du Bois gives for visiting the parks are similar to Muir's: bourgeois exhaustion with urban life and war. He affirms, too, that actually being in the national parks can offer blacks temporary respite from racism. But Du Bois asks a question about the infrequency of visitors to these places, which leads him directly to issues of race: "[w]hy do not those who are scarred in the world's battle and hurt by its hardness travel to these places of beauty and drown themselves in the utter joy of life?" (*DW* 176). Whatever their value as escape for Du Bois, getting to the parks requires the navigation of the Jim Crow gauntlet—petty, everyday intrusions when set next to the grandeur of the Grand Canyon.

The travel passage that follows this description of a Jim Crow car offers an unusual moment in Du Bois's prolific corpus. It begins by charting Du Bois's "great journey" that spans "over seven thousand mighty miles" across the United States (*DW* 182). Neither Du Bois's later autobiographies nor Lewis's biography mention such an actual trip, though it seems likely that Du Bois found time to visit these places in his life before 1919. He begins with the fairy tale opening "Once upon a time," which suggests this journey is somewhat imaginary—a fantasy confabulated to illustrate his form of social protest (*DW* 182). Traveling through deserts, mountains, and cities, he visits, among other places, the Rocky Mountains, "the empire of Texas," and finally the Grand Canyon (*DW* 182). He also intersperses visits to cities on this trip:

Seattle, Kansas City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Manhattan. The journey, then, is diverse and sweeping both in its geographical and environmental range, for Du Bois moves from the most natural spaces to the most built and human-centered environments. In its inventorial geography marked by the essay's fragmentary, elliptical prose, the journey also invokes the close relation between natural resources and nationalism in conservationist discourse. In *The Wilderness Hunter*, for example, Roosevelt performs a similar inventory of the country's earthly gifts, naming places, regions, and animal species: the Atlantic Coast, the Mississippi Valley, "magnificent hardwood forest[s]" (1), "fertile prairies," "tepid swamps" that "teem with reptile life," Texas, the Rocky Mountains, the "strangely shaped and colored Bad Lands" (11). Unlike Du Bois, Roosevelt does not list any cities, showing the latter's sense of a distinct separation between natural and built environments. By intertwining such seemingly disparate and opposed spaces Du Bois forces us to compare them according to the logic of double consciousness and double environments.

Unlike the more static natural beauty of Acadia, Du Bois represents the Grand Canyon as a sublime landscape that is animated, chaotic, and even somewhat menacing. This representation of the canyon as sublime follows in a long tradition of nature writing about the southwestern desert region. Grusin observes that from its initial exploration in 1869 to 1919, the Grand Canyon has been troped as "cognitively inaccessible" and, he argues, the "preservation of this inaccessibility is critical to the establishment and continued attraction" of the park (103). Here, Du Bois's writing typifies both representations of the canyon and the ambivalence towards wilderness found in African-American slave narratives and sorrow songs. As shown earlier, this tradition of black wilderness ambivalence that emerged throughout *The Souls of Black Folk*

seems to reach its apotheosis in *Darkwater*. The Grand Canyon, then, is the perfect landscape for a meeting between African-American ambivalence and sublime representations of nature.

Such ambivalence towards the canyon follows the same structural logic between the human observer and nature found in Kant's theory of the sublime. According to the *Critique of Judgment*, the sense of the sublime differs from beauty: the "beautiful in nature relates to the form of the object, and this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form" (306). For Kant, natural beauty "conveys a finality in its form" and suggests a systematic ordering even if the whole cannot be comprehended by the observer (307-8). Du Bois's visit to Acadia exemplifies the beauty both in Kant's sense and in the title "Of Beauty and Death." Du Bois claims, following Kant, that beauty has a certain completeness to it: "for beauty by its very being and definition has in each definition its ends and limits" (190). In contrast to beauty, the sublime provokes an "image of *limitlessness*, yet with a super-added thought of its totality" (Kant 306). The sublime is nature as excess, as a break from form and systematic ordering that produces a "negative pleasure" in the subject, who is, ambivalently, "alternately repelled" and attracted to the sublime object (307).

The ambivalence built into the experience of the sublime suggests that it has more to do with culture than with nature, with subjective feeling than the perceived thing-in-itself. In Spivak's reading of the Kantian sublime, the subject's "feeling for nature" operates according to a metalepsis, a substitution of effect for cause (in this case, of nature for culture) (11). For Kant, sublime feeling is the result of receptivity to aesthetic experience that must be cultivated, for it is the "attitude of mind that introduces sublimity into the image of nature" (Kant 308). Spivak argues that because the sublime depends on the subject's cultivated sensibility, it is a cultural aptitude belonging, by way of implication, to the enlightened, European subject. This aesthetic

capacity is important in the Kantian philosophical system because, in addition, it reveals the capacity for freedom, which for Kant is also the capacity to make ethical choices and to be fully human. Opposed to the cultured European, Spivak argues, is the “man in raw,” who corresponds to the “savage,” or, adjusted for the context of the Jim Crow era, African Americans. Indeed, pseudo-scientific studies such as Charles Carroll’s *The Mystery Solved: The Negro a Beast* (1900), novels like Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spots* (1908), and D. W. Griffith’s film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) consistently portray blacks as animalistic, uncultured raw men (Lewis *Biography* 276). As shown earlier, Muir portrays the black children in Florida as raw men, who seemed incapable of aesthetically (and spiritually) experiencing the nature around them. For Kant, Spivak goes on, the raw man experiences the sublime as “*Abgrund*-affect,” as terror before an abyss (26).

In contrast with these popular portrayals, Du Bois offers a decidedly “cultured” experience of the canyon. He begins his sublime portrait with a Miltonic trope of the wounded, feminized earth: “[i]t is a sudden void in the bosom of earth, down to its entrails—a wound where the dull titanic knife has turned and twisted in the hole” (*DW* 182-3). The “sudden” appearance of the “void” mimics or attempts to recover the affective response of the first discoverers of the Canyon. The sublime, expressed as an act of phallic violence inflicted on the earth, functions as a strategy to recuperate and represent an authentic encounter with nature. Given its context in the essay, the image also suggests the trauma of racial violence. Du Bois then moves on to describe the colors of the Canyon—a tactic he uses throughout the essay to contrast the fluid mingling of colors in nature with the social rigidity of the color-line problem. The Grand Canyon “hole” leftover from the knife leaves the anthropomorphized canyon’s “edges livid, scarred, jagged, and pulsing over the white, and red, and purple of its mighty flesh” (*DW*

183). The landscape of the canyon is likened to an inverted mountain, as it seems to draw its sublime power from the radical uniqueness, the seeming unnaturalness of the canyon itself. “It is awful,” writes Du Bois, and because it appears as nature violently attacking herself (in reality, the “slow violence” of the Colorado River), “[t]here can be nothing like it. It is the earth and sky gone stark and raving mad. The mountains up-twirled, disbodied and inverted, stand on their peaks and throw their bowels to the sky. Their earth is air; their ether blood-red rock engreened. You stand upon their roots and fall into their pinnacles, a mighty mile” (*DW* 183). Here, Du Bois moves toward something like an African-American sublime.

Du Bois goes on in a mode of fervent questioning and Old Testament bombast, adopting rhetoric similar John Muir’s almost twenty years before:

Behold this mauve and purple mocking of time and space! See yonder peak! No human foot has trod it. Into that blue shadow only the eye of God has looked. Listen to the accents of that gorge which mutters: “Before Abraham was, I am.” Is yonder wall a hedge of black or is it the rampart between heaven and hell? I see greens,—is it moss or giant pines? I see specks that may be boulders. Ever the winds sigh and drop into those sun-swept silences. Ever the gorge lies motionless, unmoved, until I fear. It is a grim thing, unholy, terrible! It is human—some mighty drama unseen, unheard, is playing there its tragedies or mocking comedy, and the laugh of endless years is shrieking onward from peak to peak, unheard, unechoed, and unknown (*DW* 183).

The repetition of “ever” and “mocking of time and space” suggests the canyon’s seeming eternity, created long before humans—before “Abraham”—ever existed. The sublime here comes close to what Kant calls the “horrible,” an ambiguous variant on the sublime that closely resembles his youthful definition of the “dynamic sublime” or “terrifying sublime” in

Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime (1764). Because, for example, a storm-racked sea can present imminent danger to the viewer, it is “horrible,” unless one has cultivated the subjective feelings capable of receiving it (Kant 308). The landscape gains some of its horror through the simultaneous absence of human presence—“No human foot has trod it”—and the canyon’s uncanny anthropomorphism. This simultaneity suggests that the canyon is a human-like alien, capable of the same or even greater monstrous acts of violence similar to those perpetrated by humans overseas in war-torn Europe or the race riots at home. By the measure of typical ecocritical litmus tests, such blatant anthropomorphism may undermine the possibility of a more ecocentric perspective in Du Bois’s work. In this case, anthropomorphism functions more as rhetorical strategy than evidence of insensitivity to the landscape’s alterity. Personifying the canyon as a “mighty drama” brings it closer to the social world, as well as the natural colors—“mauve,” “purple,” “blue shadow,” “greens”—to the problem of the color line. The gorge becomes a symbol of integration.

A series of short meditations on the African-American experience in Europe during the First World War immediately follows the Grand Canyon passage. Du Bois begins with an idyllic description of everyday race relations in Paris. Enjoying an evening out among “civilized folk,” Du Bois feels thankful for the absence of the “hateful, murderous, dirty Thing which in American we call ‘Nigger-hatred’” in the evening’s “community of kindred souls” (*DW* 184). The intellectual’s cultivated sensitivity to the natural sublime—expressed in the Grand Canyon reverie—manifests itself in a European social context as a “reverence for the Thought” that transcends the “commonplaces” of race (*DW* 184). Through juxtaposition, Du Bois suggests that the only escape from white America’s racism is either into the bourgeois playground of the national parks or Europe. Set against the spirit of Roosevelt’s nationalist “democracy” of

American wilderness is Du Bois's exhortation to African-Americans: "[f]ellow blacks, we must join the democracy of Europe" (*DW* 165).

Parisian intellectual life, however, is no paradise: the cityscape bears the traces of the war, itself a product of European colonialism turned against itself, as Du Bois argues in "The Souls of White Folk" and *The New Negro* piece, "Worlds of Color: The Negro Mind Reaches Out." The next fragment describes a haunting image of invasion: "[t]hrough [Paris's] streets—its narrow, winding streets, old and low and dark, carven and quaint,—poured thousands upon thousands of strange feet of khaki-clad foreigners" (*DW* 185). The sublime feelings induced by the Grand Canyon transform into the terror of the war-torn cityscape. The streets are "feverish, crowded, nervous, hurried; full of uniforms and mourning bands, with cafes closed at 9:30" (*DW* 186). In Du Bois's myth, France is saved by black American soldiers drawn from every part of the United States. Ironically for Du Bois, the war affords African Americans the opportunity to travel to Europe and witness its democracy. If Paris and the Grand Canyon can be seen as urban and natural democracies of color, then they are hard fought and hard won, for both mix "beauty and death." By juxtaposing this social expression of racial community in Paris with nature's mixing of colors at the Grand Canyon, Du Bois continues to naturalize desegregation and internationalize a vision of democracy across the color line.

Actually being in the national parks can only offer blacks temporary respite from racism. The reasons Du Bois gives for visiting the parks are similar to Muir's: bourgeois exhaustion with urban life and war. But he asks a question about the infrequency of visitors to these places, which leads him directly to issues of race: "[w]hy do not those who are scarred in the world's battle and hurt by its hardness travel to these places of beauty and drown themselves in the utter joy of life?" (*DW* 176). Whatever their value as escape for Du Bois, getting to the parks requires

the navigation of many obstacles set by Jim Crow—petty, everyday intrusions when set next to the grandeur of the Great War and black soldiers sacrificing their lives for France.

By intertwining the Grand Canyon with Jim Crow in these fragments, Du Bois strategically subverts the racialism of Kantian and conservationist discourses. He demonstrates not only an African-American aptitude for the aesthetic experience of nature, but also its superiority to a form of nature writing that erases signs of the social world. That Du Bois, or any African American, proves capable of writing about nature so eloquently makes his nature writing an act of social protest. Unexpectedly, it is the experience of racism, which would seem to (and indeed threaten to) foreclose this aptitude in the first place, that bestows the advantage of second-sight and a challenge to discourses of segregation. The black subject's second-sight saves her from the white bourgeois tourist's commodified experience of nature.

A few years later, in his Harlem Renaissance manifesto "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926), Du Bois shows his contempt for white American "excursionists," who interrupt his pastoral reverie at the Scottish lake of Sir Walter Scott's poem "Lady of the Lake." He sets the idyllic scene: "[i]t was quiet. You could glimpse the deer wandering in unbroken forests; you could hear the soft ripple of romance on the waters. Around me fell the cadence of that poetry of my youth. I fell asleep full of the enchantment of the Scottish border" ("Criteria" 778). Into this scene, much like Marx's machine in the garden, intrude the vulgar Americans:

They were mostly Americans and they were loud and strident. [...] They all tried to get everywhere first. They pushed other people out of the way. They made all sorts of incoherent noises and gestures [...]. They carried, perhaps, a sense of strength and accomplishment, but their hearts had no conception of the beauty which pervaded this holy place" ("Criteria" 778).

Here, it is the white American tourists who are the “men in the raw”; they are philistines without the capacity for aesthetic experience and they profane the “holy place.” Worse yet, they drag along the noisy, frenzied rush of the city into the pastoral idyll, turning it into another urban space. Furthermore, Du Bois inverts white supremacy and reduces them to creatures incapable of speech or the ability to communicate at all.

In contrast, African Americans, precisely *because* of their marginalization from this vulgar version of white American culture, have an escape hatch. Du Bois states: “pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world” (“Criteria” 778-9). Through this reversal, Du Bois transforms a perceived weakness into strength: African Americans become “co-worker[s] in the kingdom of culture” (*Souls* 9). The ironic gift of second-sight becomes another Kantian faculty, a unique capacity for experiencing natural beauty that not only grants African Americans access to the cultural nationalist project of the national parks but also reconfigures the opposition between culture and nature. Showing the influence of his study abroad in Germany, Du Bois even grants this African-American exceptionalism a flavor of German romanticism, seemingly to respond to Poundian exhortations to “make it new” with a “gift” of black folks’ “new appreciation of joy, of a new desire to create, of a new will to be” (“Criteria” 779). Continuing in this vein, he claims that the “bounden duty of black America” is to step forward as custodian of the beautiful, “to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty” (“Criteria” 782). Through participation in the cultural nationalist project of representing the sublimity of the canyon, Du Bois invokes an African-American exceptionalism that previews the Harlem Renaissance and the philosophy espoused in Alain Locke’s introduction to *The New Negro* anthology. For Du Bois,

Colonel Charles Young embodies this exceptionalism and plays a crucial role as device that connects the essay's themes of segregation, national parks, and the war.

5. Charles Young at Sequoia National Park



Fig. 1: The Booker T. Washington Tree

Appearing immediately before the Grand Canyon passage, the longest section of “Of Beauty and Death” narrates the segregation of black soldiers during the First World War. Du Bois argues that this ultimate outrage (depriving black soldiers of their rights even as they died for their country) set in motion the “extraordinary series of events” that pushed black anger to a “fever heat” and culminated with the 1919 race riots (*DW* 179). The historical and thematic links between this passage and the Grand Canyon seem unclear at first: what does anger about segregated soldiers have to do with national parks? Following the essay’s method of juxtaposition, segregation and the national parks seem to converge in the figure of Charles Young. A paragon of the Talented Tenth, Young was the third African American to graduate from West Point Academy and the highest-ranking black officer in the U. S. Army at the time.

Promoted to colonel by the time he died in 1923, Young served in the military for twenty-eight years, commanding the all-black Twenty-fifth U.S. Infantry and the Ninth U.S. Cavalry. Du Bois celebrates his friend's military accomplishments: "[i]n Haiti, in Liberia, in western camps, in the Sequoia Forests of California, and finally with Pershing in Mexico—in every case he triumphed" (*DW* 181). While Du Bois only makes a passing reference to Young's work at Sequoia, that work becomes significant to the essay because of its context amongst passages on Acadia and the Grand Canyon national parks.

Prior to the creation of the National Park Service, the caretaking duties fell to the U. S. Army. In summer 1903, while serving as captain of the Ninth Cavalry, Young was appointed to supervise the Sequoia and General Grant National Parks in the Sierra Nevada (Kilroy 60). Young himself helped literally and discursively to build the national parks as part of a larger project of American cultural nationalism, as well as perform his summer job as "custodian of the beautiful" (Du Bois "Criteria"). By focusing on the circumstances surrounding Young's discharge from the Army, Du Bois further connects segregation and the First World War to the cultural project of the national parks.

During the war, when many black leaders thought Young would have been promoted to general if he were white, he was unexpectedly forced to retire on the dubious grounds of high blood pressure (*DW* 181). Du Bois fought hard on Young's behalf during this time—a fight that, according to David Levering Lewis, would leave lingering scars of bitterness on Du Bois. Young's and Du Bois's friendship went back to their days teaching at Wilberforce College in Ohio from 1894 to 1896, where Du Bois taught classics and Young taught military science (Lewis 176; Kilroy 47). They would spend many evenings playing music together, occasionally accompanied by the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (Kilroy 33). In public speeches, Young, though

he admired and emulated the militaristic discipline at the heart of Booker T. Washington's philosophy, would advocate Du Bois's Talented Tenth theory of an aristocratic black leadership as the best path to full black citizenship (Kilroy 64). He campaigned on behalf of civil rights, contributing to and raising money for the NAACP's antilynching fund (Kilroy 110). Soon upon (what would prove to be) his temporary retirement, Young accepted a position on the NAACP board and toured the country speaking on behalf of civil rights (Kilroy 139). He even joked that he "fathered" *Darkwater*, because he saw so many of his conversations with Du Bois reiterated in that book. It is possible that one of those conversations revolved around Sequoia National Park, for which Young frequently waxed nostalgic later in life (O'Connell). Du Bois responded by sending Young an autographed copy of *Darkwater* when it was published (Kilroy 150).

When the Great War came, however, Du Bois's friendship and loyalty to Young embroiled him in political debates with other civil rights leaders. Risking charges of chauvinism from his Talented Tenth cohort, Du Bois supported the war in Europe. He reasoned that the sacrifice of African-American soldiers on European battlefields might, for all its necessary evil, become the road to integration and full citizenship (Lewis *Biography* 530). He thought (wrongly) that the gravitas of such large-scale war would squash the triviality of racism: "[w]hat were petty slights, silly insults, paltry problems, beside this call to do and dare and die?" (*DW* 178). To Du Bois's chagrin, however, the war calcified the color line in the military. First, the U. S. Army refused black volunteers, and then when a draft was instituted, black soldiers were segregated into separate regiments and used purely for labor purposes—a fate that befell eighty-nine percent of black soldiers (*DW* 179; Kilroy 119). Moreover, the black officers leading these soldiers would have to be trained at the segregated Camp Des Moines (Lewis *Biography* 530). This caused Du Bois to proclaim that possibly "never before in the history of the United States has a

portion of the citizens been so openly and crassly discriminated against by action of the general government” (*DW* 179). Deciding that African Americans had opportunistically to “take advantage of the disadvantage,” he reasoned that the officer training camp set up at Des Moines was better than nothing, and rallied wavering civil rights leaders to support it. Du Bois, working in an uncharacteristically pragmatic and compromising mode, successfully advocated that black officers lead black soldiers (*DW* 180). His support of the war and the camp stirred controversy among some of his closest allies, including Archibald Grimké of the Niagara Movement, *The Messenger* editors Asa Randolph and Chandler Owen, and William Monroe Trotter (Lewis *Biography* 531).

In the midst of this teeth-gritting but pragmatic compromise, the dismissal of Young in the summer of 1917 (the first year the U. S. entered the war) struck a significant blow to Du Bois’s morale and that of black masses in general (Kilroy 120). To Du Bois, it was a major personal and political affront. Perhaps he speaks especially of his own feelings about the bad news when he writes: “[t]o say that Negroes of the United States were disheartened at the retirement of Colonel Young is to put it mildly” (*DW* 181). There was no doubt surrounding Young’s fitness: in protest against his racist superiors, the colonel even rode five hundred miles on horseback from his home in Ohio to Washington, D. C. (Kilroy 120). Du Bois mobilized all the resources of the NAACP and *The Crisis* to lobby for the colonel’s reinstatement, but to no avail (Kilroy 130). Young even had the backing of former president Roosevelt, who fantasized about Young leading a black version of Roosevelt’s Spanish-American War “Rough Riders” into European battlefields (Kilroy 124-5).

Young’s forced retirement, Du Bois argues in “Of Beauty and Death,” was emblematic of what was happening within the military across the U.S. Everywhere, Du Bois protests, a black

soldier would be “separated like a pest” from his regiment (*DW* 181). He laments that “one poor fellow in Ohio solved the problem by cutting his throat” (*DW* 181). White paranoia conjured the specter of “German plots” seeded amongst a disgruntled black populace, making “Negroes too dangerous an element to trust with guns” (*DW* 179). *The Crisis* bore further witness to the poor treatment of black soldiers: the magazine reported on harassment of black soldiers by military police; the constant barrage of racial epithets from white soldiers and officers; the lack of U.S.O. facilities for blacks; and denials of recreations like going to the movies (*Lewis Biography* 135-6). A young George Schuyler, a sergeant, reported that black officers-in-training at Camp Des Moines received none of the study courses available to white officers (*Lewis Biography* 542). In a foreshadowing of the 1919 riots, in 1917 a resentful black regiment attacked a police station and shot sixteen whites in Houston (*Lewis Biography* 541). Du Bois compares the incongruous justice served against the perpetrators in Houston to those in the 1917 East St. Louis riots: “[a]t East St. Louis white strikers on war work killed and mobbed Negro working-men, and as a result 19 colored soldiers were hanged and 51 imprisoned for life for killing 17 whites at Houston, while for killing 125 Negroes in East St. Louis, 20 white men were imprisoned, none for more than 15 years, and 10 colored men with them” (*DW* 182). Still embittered about all these events years later, Du Bois gave a eulogy in 1923 at Young’s memorial service, taking advantage of the occasion to protest racism in the military and to pin the responsibility for Young’s early death to the despair brought on by his forced retirement (*Kilroy* 157).

As noted earlier, Du Bois begins the Grand Canyon passage, which follows this narrative of segregation and race rioting, with the words “once upon a time” (*DW* 182). This fairy tale opening has the effect of equating the national parks with nostalgia for a simpler, more “natural” time. Du Bois’s visit to the Grand Canyon recalls the moment fourteen years before the

calamitous events just recounted when captain Young served as acting superintendent for a summer in Sequoia National Park. Sequoia was the second national park designated by the federal government in 1890 in order to protect the heavily forested area from the lumber industry (Kilroy 60-61). The park is so named after the Sequoias or giant redwood trees, often referred to simply as the “Big Trees.” Muir writes about them in *Our National Parks*, stressing their enormous size and old age, calling them “Nature’s forest masterpiece” (268). Measuring approximately three hundred feet high and thirty feet in diameter (269), the trees are so big, Muir notes, that one could hollow them out and live in them—as some people actually did (306). He writes of the destructive threat of the lumber industry to the forest, noting the necessity for their supervision at the hands of the U. S. Army, though he does not mention much about the soldiers and Charles Young’s role (328).

Though the park was thirteen years old when Young arrived on the scene, its infrastructure remained rudimentary. A workaholic like his hero Booker T. Washington, Young was one of the most industrious park supervisors up until that time. Historian David P. Kilroy summarizes the young officer’s industrious approach: “[w]here previous acting superintendents perhaps saw this assignment as a temporary summer sojourn, Charles Young committed himself body and soul to the parks” (61). In addition to having his troops clear and improve park trails, Young constructed more miles of road in one summer than previous supervisors did in three. He completed a wagon road that gave tourists access to the Giant Forest and Moro Rock, the park’s main attractions. They also built a road connecting the General Grant National Forest to the nearby town of Visalia. Young’s exemplary custodianship earned him unprecedented respect for an African American in the local community. Leaders of the local town of Vasalia publicly thanked him for his work as the town stood to benefit greatly from increased tourism to the parks

(Kilroy 61-62). The park's next superintendent lauded the improvement to the park's roads and trails, which he ascribed to the "strict personal supervision of the work given by Captain Young" (Young 3).

While Young's experiences in the park were not devoid of racial tensions, he did often succeed in smoothing over race relations while also facing the complicating factor of locals resenting any form of federal government intrusion, let alone an all-black cavalry. Generally, however, the west was friendlier than the Jim Crow south. Upon Young's arrival, the local newspaper, *The Tulare County Times*, printed a sympathetic press release. It reported that Young is a "man of brilliant parts. His career has been one of hard struggle against the prejudice of race. He has, however, risen above all these difficulties by force of character and inherent ability" (O'Connell). When Young completed the roads, he gave what the local newspaper called a "great feast" to a "hundred or so" of all those involved in the work and the elites of the area. The paper concludes that "Those from this city who sat about the festal board speak in glowing terms of the hospitality of Captain Young and his ability to entertain" (O'Connell). Anecdotal evidence reveals that there were some moments of racial tension: at least one Visalia restaurant owner refused to serve Young (Kilroy 62). In another incident, two white lieutenants once passed the African-American captain without salute, prompting Young to remove his uniform and hang it on a fence, proclaiming to the offenders that they did not have to salute him, but they did have to salute the uniform (O'Connell).

Young's final report to the Department of the Interior reads as though it spilled from the pen of John Muir. In words echoing the opening passages of *Our National Parks*, which Young may have read, he dreams of a future where "overworked and weary" Americans can escape the frenzy of urban life during the summers:

The trees of the park consist of pines and cedars and firs in general and of the giant redwoods, or sequoias, in particular, all of which are well worth protecting. It has been previously remarked that the Sequoia National Park is the Giant Forest, but it is believed by many that even without the grandeur of the Giant Forest, which is matchless anywhere else in the world, there are enough beautiful mountain views, delightful camping sites, and water courses stocked with fish to constitute a national park where the overworked and weary citizens of the country can find rest, coolness, and quiet for a few weeks during the hot summer months, and where both large and small game can have a refuge and be allowed to increase (6-7).

He goes on in this Muir-like mode to celebrate Sequoia and General Grant parks for their scenic beauty.

While Young waxes poetic about the forests, he also warns the Interior Secretary about the destruction of the Sequoia trees and the parks, and pushes the federal government to take more drastic steps to protect the forests against the exploitation of local interests and to promote their preservation. Thinking pragmatically and willing to do the groundwork necessary to facilitate his preservationist vision, Young urged the Interior to purchase 3,877 acres (O'Connell) of private property in the park at nineteen dollars an acre per request of the owners (Kilroy 62). Muir likewise advocated the purchase two years earlier: “[p]rivate claims cut and blotch” the park, “every one of which the government should gradually extinguish by purchase” (329). The Interior delayed this acquisition for about fifteen years, and the government ended up paying inflated prices for the land as a result (Kilroy 62).

Evoking the nationalist and conservationist spirit of Roosevelt's presidency, Young recommended to the Interior that the government adopt a tradition of christening the giant

redwoods with names “acceptable to the entire nation” (10). In an attempt to memorialize the Civil War in the West, Young named a tree for the Grand Army of the Republic, a Union army veterans’ organization (Young 10). To help preserve the memory of African-American labor in the parks (a memory quickly forgotten but recovered decades later), he named a tree after the “great and good American, Booker T. Washington” at a time when that name adorned innumerable black schools across the South (Young 10). Washington had spoken to Young’s soldiers while they were stationed in San Francisco prior to their work at Sequoia Park (Kilroy 54). Though locals insisted that the tree be named after Young himself, he stuck to the Washington name, perhaps realizing that his soldiers had performed the sort of physical laboring of the environment preached by Washington. Moreover, in this politics of tree naming, the size of the Sequoia would symbolize the stature of the man to hikers passing by: Washington was at his peak of power and fame in 1903.

Du Bois works within the tradition of this African-American discursive construction of the parks that emerged with Young in order to create a counter-narrative. Though Du Bois focuses on the First World War, Young’s biography also provides the staging ground for an African-American exceptionalism within the national parks and inclusion in an American cultural nationalism. As a figure, he helps Du Bois facilitate an integrationist vision of the parks as a cultural space that simultaneously transcends race and bears the marks of an ideology of segregation.

6. Urban Nature: Towards the Harlem Renaissance

Du Bois argues that stories like Charles Young's and other acts of discrimination against black soldiers during the war contributed to the 1919 race riots. But other factors were involved too. Because of the dense cityscape and influx of African Americans to the city in the Great Migration, opportunities for outdoor recreation in urban spaces became more and more vital by 1919. African Americans' limited access to formally or informally segregated parks, beaches, and other spaces of urban nature became a growing source of racial tension and violence.

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, historian Colin Fisher has argued that segregated parks and beaches played a determining factor in the Chicago riots. Prior to this tragic event, Fisher claims, urban nature spaces like Washington Park (75) or Cook County Forest Preserves (66) in Chicago were valued by African Americans as an escape from the claustrophobic South Side. In defiance of "forced exclusion from parks, playgrounds, and beaches, blacks struggled for access to open space" (Fisher 64). Many black children were left to play in marginal spaces of urban nature: open dumps, vacant lots, and roughshod playgrounds (67). Culminating a series of smaller skirmishes of racial violence, the riots started in July 1919 on the segregated beaches of Lake Michigan. The "black beach" was nicknamed "Hot and Cold" because it was near the industrial area of the shore (64). When fifteen-year-old South Side working-class resident Eugene Williams drifted into the "white" section of Lake Michigan beach, angry whites perceived this breach as "pollution" to their water (Fisher 68). They began throwing rocks at Williams, causing him to drown. The resulting outrage from both blacks and whites made for the worst rioting in Chicago's history, lasting four days and leaving thirty-eight dead, 537 injured, and about one thousand homeless (64). Though the end of "Of Beauty and

Death” does not represent race riots directly, it does draw attention to spaces of urban nature that set the preconditions for the riots.

As mentioned before, the essay refers to the East St. Louis riots in the fragment just prior to the travel account of the Grand Canyon, providing a direct link with the sociological study “Of Work and Wealth” in *Darkwater*. In that essay, Du Bois writes extensively about the 1917 East St. Louis riots. He frames the study as a lesson in sociology, taking the 1917 riots as a case study in urban race relations and interspersing it with the language of what ecocritic Lawrence Buell calls a “toxic discourse” (30). According to Buell, toxic discourse draws on the trope of “Gothicized environmental squalor” that dates back to early industrialization (43). Toxic discourse also previews the environmental justice movement of the 1980s. In sketching an “environmental justice ecocriticism,” T. V. Reed asks how “issues like toxic waste, incinerators, lead poisoning, uranium mining and tailings, and other environmental health issues, be brought forth more fully in literature and criticism?” (149). Using similar Gothicized rhetoric, Du Bois describes St. Louis as a place where “mighty rivers meet” (*DW* 64), but this convergence results in the opposite of a pastoral scene, for these “rivers are dirty with sweat and toil” (*DW* 69) and the “city overflows into the valleys of Illinois and lies there, writhing under its grimy cloud” (*DW* 64). He casts St. Louis proper as a “feverish Pittsburg [*sic*] in the Mississippi Valley” (*DW* 64) full of “Nature-defying cranes” (*DW* 70). If St. Louis is an industrial landscape comparable to Pittsburgh, then East St. Louis, across the river in Illinois, is a toxic one. It has “no restful green” and smells of “ill-tamed sewerage” (*DW* 65). The cityscape also shows the lingering traces of the 1917 race riots and is likened to “ruins” (*DW* 65).

The final fragments of “Of Beauty and Death” continue the urban nature thread begun in “Of Work and Wealth,” as Du Bois turns his eye towards the Manhattan cityscape. These

fragments paint the frenetic energy of city life through images of urban nature, eventually returning to the philosophical themes of beauty, death, ugliness, and their relation to the Veil. Formally, the fragments become increasingly shorter and disconnected. This movement from the national parks of the west to the east suggests a frontier reversal, an importation of wilderness into urban space. After describing the broken Paris of World War, Du Bois sketches New York in language that echoes his portrait of the Grand Canyon: “white cliffs of Manhattan, tier on tier, with a curving pinnacle, towers square and trim, a giant inkwell daintily stoppered, an ancient pyramid enthroned” (*DW* 187). By characterizing the cityscape in such terms, Du Bois makes it a part of nature, an example of what many ecocritics have called “urban nature writing” (Bennett and Teague 31). Du Bois also invokes the seasonal cycles: “[w]e would see spring, summer, and the red riot of autumn, and then in winter, beneath the soft white snow, sleep and dream of dreams” (*DW* 190). The “red riot” conflates two events, one social and the other natural: the Red Summer, which actually continued into late September, and the changing colors of leaves in the fall.

At the same time that it represents urban nature, the end of “Of Beauty and Death” also reflects the 1919 race riots. After the riots, Lewis says that Du Bois’s mood “verged on apocalyptic bitterness”—a mood clearly reflected in the sardonic humor of the apocalyptic short story “The Comet,” which follows “Of Beauty and Death” (*Fight* 13). Finalized for an early 1920 publication in the midst of the riots and at the close of the First World War, *Darkwater* is usually read within the context of these violent episodes in the long history of U. S. and global race relations. Though Du Bois claimed to have finished the manuscript in February 1918, he continued revising it until September 1919—before reverberations of the riots across the country had died down (Lewis *Fight* 11). Oswald Garrison Villard’s review of the book for *The Nation*

frames it in terms of the race riots, praising the artistry of “A Litany at Atlanta,” a poem about the Atlanta race riots (726). But, Villard continues, such proximity to the violent events produces excessive affect, for the book “carries with it a note of bitterness, tinctured with hate, and the teaching of violence which often defeats his own purpose” (727). Whites, but mostly blacks, were killed during the rioting. These riots were, in a sense, the First World War brought home from Europe.

These last fragments of the essay, then, are permeated with the tense urban atmosphere that sparked the riots. Punning on “riot,” Du Bois describes the Harlem streets as a dense space, a double environment segregated from the “white world” and full of “black eyes, black and brown, and frizzled hair curled and sleek, and skins that riot with luscious color and deep, burning blood” (*DW* 188). He invokes claustrophobic living conditions: “[h]umanity is packed dense in high piles of close-knit homes that lie in layers above gray shops of food and clothes and drink” (*DW* 188). Written in response to the riots, Harlem Renaissance prince Claude McKay’s “If We Must Die” likewise uses the trope of urban, claustrophobic conditions: “If we must die, let it not be like hogs / Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot” (177-78). Du Bois’s (and McKay’s) poeticizing and pastoralizing of urban nature would later permeate much of the work of the Harlem Renaissance, which will be detailed in the next two chapters.

By making nature part of the color-line problem, Du Bois maps double environments and disjunctive social and natural spaces. In his second-sight, the wilderness becomes simultaneously an ideal “integrationist” space of intermingling natural colors—an objective correlative for a desegregated society—and a compromised, fraught space mediated by the problems of the color line and modernity. This counter-narrative challenges not only the dominance of white supremacy and social Darwinism, but also an emergent environmentalism. Ultimately, for Du

Bois there is no “nature” without the baggage of the color line, no Grand Canyon without Jim Crow, and no wide-open landscapes without claustrophobic cityscapes. These concerns carried over to Du Bois’ editorship of *The Crisis* and throughout the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.

Chapter 3

The “Garden Queer”: Urban Nature and the Ghetto Pastoral in the Poetry of Anne Spencer and Claude McKay

1. Introduction

After examining W. E. B. Du Bois’s Jim Crow-haunted excursion to the Grand Canyon in *Darkwater*, the previous chapter of “Ecology of the Color Line” ends with an analysis of the concluding fragments of “Of Beauty and Death.” These modernist fragments dwell on the mixture of the pastoral and the city to develop an image of a troubled urban nature. Du Bois characterizes the city alternately as a site of immersive wonder and abjection: “[h]umanity is packed dense in high piles of close-knit homes that lie in layers above gray shops of food and clothes and drink” (*DW* 188). Yet within that ugliness, there is pastoral wonder: “New York and night from the Brooklyn Bridge: the bees and fireflies flit and twinkle in their vast hives; curved clouds like the breath of gods hover between the towers and the moon” (*DW* 187). In a similar vein, Claude McKay’s “If We Must Die” and its deployment of the hog trope evoke claustrophobia and overpopulated ghettos in an example of the ambivalent urban pastoral that dominates his work (Heglar 23). Like Du Bois and McKay, many black writers of the 1920s would in some way struggle with the line between country and city, between pastoralism and, in Chicago School sociologist Lewis Wirth’s words, “urbanism as a way of life.”

This chapter focuses on the pastoral mode of early-twentieth-century African-American writing, shifting away from a focus on conservation in the previous two chapters to a more thematic concern for the development of the “versions of pastoral,” in William Empson’s words, that are so crucial to the New Negro aesthetics of the 1920s. While the pastoral is not “ecological” in a historical, scientific sense—it is an aesthetic mode that goes back at least to

Virgil—this chapter does seek to develop more fully the role of the pastoral in this eco-historicist project. That is, the pastoral mode inevitably converges with black intellectuals’ historically-grounded concerns with conservation, natural history, and scientific ecology on the one hand, and race, migration, and urbanization on the other.

In his classic study, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in American Literature* (1964), Leo Marx identifies a literary mode of “complex pastoral” that attempts to reconcile a tension: the sudden intrusion of industrial-age technologies (e.g. trains, steamboats) upon an idyllic rural scene. For example, in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s notes about a 1844 sojourn at Sleepy Hollow, Marx recounts the pastoral scene’s interruption by the machine: “the writer sitting in his green retreat dutifully attaching words to natural facts, trying to tap the subterranean flow of thought and feeling and then, suddenly, the startling shriek of the train whistle bearing in upon him, forcing him to acknowledge the existence of a reality alien to the pastoral dream” (15). There is also a moment in Thoreau’s *Walden* when the author is “sitting rapt in a reverie and then, penetrating the woods like the scream of a hawk, the whistle of the locomotive is heard” (Marx 15). If we extend Marx’s master narrative into the twentieth century, we might just as often encounter its reversal: the garden interrupting the machine.

In an example of the garden in the machine, this chapter’s title, “The ‘Garden Queer’: Urban Nature and the Ghetto Pastoral in Anne Spencer and Claude McKay,” quotes McKay’s “The Truant,” an autobiographical short story about a restless Harlem family man who desires to leave the city and light out for the country. A “tree seemed absurd,” the he reflects, “and a garden queer in this iron-gray majesty of man’s imagination” (152-3). “The Truant,” which first appeared in the moderately-praised short story collection *Gingertown* (1932), will be discussed at the end of this chapter as a ghetto pastoral akin to Michael Gold’s *Jews without Money* (1930).

In another instance of the garden in the machine, Rudolph Fisher's comic, Great Migration short story "City of Refuge" describes how King Solomon Gillis, a black migrant just arrived in Manhattan from the South, experiences the city as a mix of pastoral—"clear air, blue sky, bright sunlight" (57)—and urban cacophony and decay: "waste noises, waste odors of a score of families, seeking issue through a common channel; pollution from bottom to top—a sewer of sounds and smells" (61). These examples show American writers' ambivalence towards the city as well as a desire to return to the pastoral.

Based on these garden-in-the-machine moments, the phrase the "garden queer" can work as shorthand for both the garden-in-the-machine trope and the general problem of the pastoral in Harlem Renaissance literature. The garden queer is related to, but not symmetrical with, Marx's machine-in-the-garden trope, reversed as the interruption of an urban landscape with natural spaces such as public parks, lakes, gardens, or even "ugly" natural spaces like unkempt vacant lots. It speaks to the patches of green within the city environs; it is a transitional space where the garden does not quite seem right anywhere. It assumes for the pastoral what ecocritic Timothy Morton claims a "queer theory of ecology" would assume: a "multiplication of differences at as many levels and on as many scales as possible" (275). While this chapter does not aspire to a queer theory of ecology, or argue for a rethinking of ontology, it does assume that the pastoral mode is perpetually unresolved in early-twentieth-century African-American writing. This chapter ties the complex pastoral to a New Negro aesthetic of the urban pastoral / "garden queer"—a phrase that in this context connotes the strangeness of finding a garden in the machine.

By examining some versions of New Negro pastoral, this chapter also seeks to challenge what some ecocritics have detected as an anti-pastoral strand in African American literature. In

his reading of Frederick Douglass's 1845 *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Michael Bennett argues that the anti-slavery narrative helps inaugurate an "anti-pastoral African American literary tradition" (195). While Bennett is right to say that the "mechanism of the pastoral in the antebellum South was anathema to efforts by Frederick Douglass, and other slave narrators, to be seen as more than part of an idealized scenery," the "anti-" should tip us off to an overgeneralization (199). In a more nuanced argument, Paul Outka shows how in African American literature pastoral spaces are associated with traumatic events such as lynching. For instance, Outka cites as evidence for a traumatic anti-pastoralism Charles W. Chesnutt's short story collection *The Conjure Tales*. In "Sandy's Story," a plantation slave is transformed into a tree, chopped down, taken to the saw mill, and used as lumber to remodel his white master's kitchen. This story, Outka argues, conflates the exploitation of slavery with ecological violence and shows how African Americans are denied the pastoral valorization of country life (114-5). Unlike this anti-pastoralism, the garden queer encompasses heterogeneous modern spaces in a sort of sliding scale that moves from the urban to the natural. The complex pastoralism of Spencer and McKay might serve as a stepping off point for further exploration of the politics of nature not just in *The Crisis* but as part of a New Negro aesthetic that variously racializes, proletarianizes, and urbanizes the pastoral mode in both poetry and fiction.

Bringing Spencer and McKay together is meant to produce a tension: McKay's pastoral is distinctly urban, whereas Spencer resided not in Harlem but the far less populated Lynchburg, Virginia. But both authors have an interest in producing various versions of the pastoral and the garden queer, as well as an interest in some form of material, pastoral practice. If McKay only dabbled in studying agriculture at Tuskegee and later at Kansas State, then Spencer actually *did* devote her life to cultivating her garden. This chapter, then, engages in a form of biographical

criticism. It begins with discussion of Spencer's poetry, in which the pastoral mode dominates, but this mode is also racialized and gendered. It situates her poetry within the context of the Harlem Renaissance and her own gardening practices. Moving from Spencer to the more recognizably urban atmosphere of McKay's poetry, the chapter then examines the significance of McKay's original publication of *Harlem Shadows*, the 1920 *Spring in New Hampshire*—a title that lends a more pastoral framing to poems that would later virtually inaugurate the Harlem Renaissance. After tracing the garden-in-the-machine trope from Spencer's poems to McKay's *Spring in New Hampshire*, the chapter concludes by examining the emergence in 1930 of the multi-ethnic proletarian subgenre that Michael Denning identifies as the “ghetto pastoral.”

2. Anne Spencer: Garden as Figure and Practice

While Spencer's use of pastoralism seems removed from the big city, it is symptomatic of the pressures of urbanism in the 1920s. She knew McKay only through written correspondence, but they mutually admired each others' poetry. Spencer lived most of her life in the mid-sized, unfortunately-named southern city of Lynchburg, where black intellectuals such as Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson would stopover to visit her on their way to Washington, D. C. (Greene 72-73). In the early twentieth century, Lynchburg, located near the middle of Virginia, tallied a population of approximately 40,000 in 1930, with about one-third of it African American. While not an economic powerhouse like Chicago or Pittsburgh, Lynchburg did have a manufacturing economy that earned it the nickname “Pittsburgh of the South” because of its cotton mills, tobacco plants, and shoe factories (Frischkorn and Rainey 13).

Though she wrote hundreds of poems, Spencer only published twenty during her lifetime, most of them during the Harlem Renaissance. She devoted most of her time to gardening and

working as a librarian at Lynchburg's only black school, Dunbar High School (Frischkorn and Rainey 16). The twenty published poems, however, were placed in some of the most prestigious and well-known periodicals of the day, among them the widely-read *The Crisis*, the National Urban League's *Opportunity*, and the sociological *Survey Graphic* (Greene 63). She also published in anthologies that came to define the Harlem Renaissance, most notably Johnson's 1922 *Book of American Negro Poetry*, Alain Locke's 1925 *The New Negro*, and Countee Cullen's 1927 *Caroling Dusk* (Clark 834; Greene 63). Her biographer, J. L. Greene, describes her poetry as "mystical, for the sophisticated manner in which she approached these familiar observations of her environment allowed her to explore their meanings in uncommon depth" (99). Her poetry could be seen as genteel and sentimental in a modernist era that rejected Victorianism and realism. But some of her poems, such as "White Things," are among the most modernist of Harlem Renaissance poets.

By the time Spencer started publishing her poems, gardening had emerged as a decidedly urban practice, where miniature "Central Parks" were cultivated in urban and suburban homes. Progressive reformists, particularly women, thought the garden counterpointed the grimy urban setting. Women writers and gardeners such as Celia Thaxter popularized the outdoors and the garden as an "outside room," a domestic space in which women labored as caretakers to "meld indoors and outdoors" (Norwood 110; 115). Like Washington, writer-gardeners such as Thaxter would celebrate the virtues of laboring in the garden--of laboring directly on nature—and the personal virtues of imposing a pastoral design on nature (Norwood 110). In Vera Norwood's account, gardening was distinctly a reaction to urbanization. Particularly those with a reformist attitude towards the vices of the city—a concern for "how the other half lives," in Jacob Riis's

words—women cultivated gardens in urban spaces to improve themselves and their community (130).

By the twentieth century, gardening was not unusual among African-American women, who often adopted the folk style of “ornamental gardening” (Norwood 136). Ornamental gardening refers to the practice of gardening for its aesthetic aspects, rather than for simply growing food. At the turn of the century, it was tradition for rural African-American women to “make their yards into outdoor spaces for carrying on family and community life” (Norwood 136-137). English horticulturalist Gertrude Jekyll, McKay mentor Walter Jekyll’s sister, renewed interest in vernacular forms of gardening that were less formal and employed available materials (Norwood 111). Spencer’s own garden could be considered a “vernacular” garden (Frischkorn and Rainey 30). Many parts of the garden which characterize the vernacular form include the use of recyclables like the wrought-iron fence, the use of bright and colorful flowers, and plants found in the wild (Frischkorn and Rainey 30). Such practices are consistent with the way Spencer developed her garden. Her husband, Edward Spencer, helped her decorate the garden with recycled materials and they would travel the region to acquire rare plants (Greene 45). Edward Spencer built his wife a small cottage in the garden, where she composed most of her poems. They named the cottage “Edankraal,” named for “Ed” and “Anne” (and possibly “Eden”), plus “kraal,” which means “dwelling” in Afrikaans (Salmon 13). After awhile, word about Spencer’s garden spread throughout Lynchburg and it became known for its variety of plants and impressive pastoral design (Greene 45).

Resembling a poem by Langston Hughes called “An Earth Song” (1925), Spencer’s “Earth, I thank you” is a seemingly pagan poem by a Christian poet, notable for its themes of

opening of the gospel of *John*, which describes the dialectic between the Word of God in the beginning and the creation of the material world itself. That is, just as the speaker analogizes words and materiality, so too does the book of *John* say that the two are of the same substance, but different modes of being. Ultimately, the speaker turns words into material things, collapsing the signifier with its referent, and pronouncing one of the major themes of Spencer's poetry: the close relation between the arts of gardening and poetry, between material practice and its representation.²

An untitled poem from 1925 has a garden theme that also invokes the biblical myth of Eden. Unlike "Earth, I thank you," this one is explicitly anti-urban:

God never planted a garden
 But He placed a keeper there
 And the keeper ever razed the ground
 And built a city where
 God cannot walk at the eve of day, 5
 Nor take the morning air.

In *Genesis* 3:8, God walks through the garden while Adam and Eve, having just eaten from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, hide from him in shame. That the keeper *ever* "razed the ground" suggests a continuing process over time, perhaps over generations, of destroying the ground and building cities. Read historically, this destruction could refer to the despoliation of the soil in the American South, as recounted in Washington's *Working with the Hands* and dramatized in Attaway's *Blood on the Forge*. The city is a built environment in which God is absent, while God seems to live *in* nature or perhaps *is* nature. But Spencer's poem also lacks a

Lady, Lady, I saw your heart,
 And altered there in its darksome place 10
 Were the tongues of flame the ancients knew,
 Where the good God sits to spangle through.

In the second stanza, the hands of the old African-American laundress promises a class-based critique of labor, even comparing the woman to the southern class of poor whites when her hands are “bleached poor white” (Foley 240). But Foley criticizes the poem’s religious theme when she says that Spencer “simply abandons the earth for the sky” (240). The last stanza, Foley says, abandons race and class for deliverance by the Western Christian God, with a glancing reference to “ancient” African gods (240). Ultimately, Foley argues that Spencer “assigns [the laundress] emancipation” to a “realm beyond history and structural class analysis altogether” (240). In this instance, Foley’s critique is right, but it does not apply to all of Spencer’s poetry, particularly “White Things.”³

While these poems focus on religious and pastoral themes, Spencer did write some more overtly political poetry. Around 1917-1918, local organizers in black neighborhoods began to institutionalize a local NAACP chapter, and Spencer, with the mentorship of James Weldon Johnson, helped lead the way (Greene 48). Though a NAACP activist, she was not as politically militant as some of her male contemporaries such as McKay and Hughes. After housing Johnson, who was then the NAACP field secretary, the Spencers hosted a number of black intellectual and Harlem Renaissance luminaries at 1313 Pierce Street home, using the Spencer home as a stopover from New York and Washington D.C. to southern cities such as Atlanta or Nashville

(Greene 66). The guest list included Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes, Walter White, Charles S. Johnson, George Washington Carver, Adam Clayton Powell, Du Bois, Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Georgia Douglas Johnson (Greene 68; Salmon 3; Frischkorn and Rainey 16). Greene downplays the role of the NAACP in Spencer's poetry and argues that her poetic themes were more universal than strictly African American: "few of Anne Spencer's poems are overtly about race. And those several poems which can be interpreted as such have a much larger range of meaning: the suffering of a generation, small group, or individual is expanded to include the suffering of a people" (121). Cary Nelson disputes this claim, however, when he concedes that although race was not a priority for her, she did take on a more "pointed politics" in the 1920s and addressed women's issues as well as writing anti-racist editorials for the NAACP (162).

Spencer's most well-known poem, "White Things" (1923), approaches nature more obliquely than "Earth, I thank you," "God Never Planted a Garden," and "Life-long, Poor Browning." The poem's controlled anger matches McKay's most militant sonnets of black rage. Apparently, Spencer was inspired to write the poem when she read the account of the ritual lynching of a pregnant black woman, Mary Turner, in Valdosta, Georgia in 1918 (Greene 130). She probably read Walter White's account in his *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States* (1919), where White reports how a black sharecropper killed a white farmer and sparked a week of white mob violence directed towards black men and women. By the end of the violence, an estimated ten people were lynched, spurring about five hundred black southerners to leave Valdosta (White 26-27). She may have also been influenced by Du Bois's "The Souls of White Folk" essay in *Darkwater*, where he associates whiteness with empire, writing sarcastically that "whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!" (22).

“White Things” compresses the histories of slavery, colonialism, and lynching into twenty lines. Its repetition of “white things” reinforces the reification of whiteness, its production and reproduction as an anonymous and vacuous, yet all-consuming thing.⁴ The insatiable white will to power is equated with a will to death throughout the poem:

Most things are colorful things—the sky, earth, and sea.

Black men are most men; but the white are free!

White things are rare things; so rare, so rare

They stole from out a silvered world—somewhere.

Finding earth-plains fair plains, save greenly grassed, 5

They strewed white feathers of cowardice, as they passed;

 The golden stars with lances fine,

 The hills all red and darkened pine,

They blanched with their wand of power;

And turned the blood in a ruby rose 10

To a poor white poppy-flower.

The first line identifies color with nature—the sky, earth, and sea—in order to naturalize color and, we anticipate, correlate the unnatural to whiteness. These opening lines also reveal a Du Boisian, Pan-Africanist sensibility, referring to people of color as—counter-intuitively from a white American perspective—the *majority* of the world’s population, while whites are the “so rare, so rare” minority. Rare suggests both the sense of rarity as in few *and* the sense of rarity as distilled, rarefied material that has lost all attributes. Descending from what is probably wintery northern Europe, a “silvered world,” they conquer the natural world of Africa and the Americas, “greenly grassed” (ll. 4-5). They scorch the earth, bleaching and blanching the color out of the

“ghoul” (l. 17). Turning the so-called Christian beliefs of the Ku Klux Klan on their heads, the speaker states that “hell” rather than heaven “sired” the white boy in a way that further suggests the animality of whiteness. In the poem’s Promethean final line, the white will to power becomes so consumed with hubris that it blasphemously barks orders at God—the “Man-maker”—to change the world white.

Spencer’s pastoral poems “Earth, I Thank You,” “[God never planted a garden],” “Life-long, Poor Browning,” and “Lady, Lady” complicate ecocritical views of an anti-pastoral tradition in African-American literature by being overtly anti-urban and anti-modern. They also point to a continuing tradition of the pastoral as a form of practice as well as writing in African American literature, for Spencer, like Washington in the nineteenth century, had taken up forms of gardening typical of women at the time. Ultimately, Spencer’s poems, intertwining in part with her NAACP and gardening praxis, racialize the pastoral and naturalize blackness in ways that McKay also developed at the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance.

3. Claude McKay and the Garden in the Machine

Summarizing Leo Marx, Charles Scruggs rightly characterizes the simple form of the pastoral as “apolitical” when he says that “when Americans are dissatisfied with things as they are, they retreat to Walden Pond instead of joining the Communist Party” (324). McKay presents a counter-example to such expectations of the pastoral, since he *did* join the Communist Party for a period and was a fellow traveler much of his life. Two years before it became *Harlem Shadows*, McKay’s *Spring in New Hampshire and Other Poems* was published in London in 1920. The book’s thirty-one poems did not find nearly as wide a readership as they would when they were reprinted in *Harlem Shadows*. In *A Long Way from Home*, McKay would describe

Spring in New Hampshire as a “little brown book of verse” that “appeared in the midst of the radical troubles of the fall of 1920” (*Long Way* 86). Unlike many of its individual poems and because it was quickly surpassed by the popularity and significance of *Harlem Shadows*, *Spring in New Hampshire* has received virtually no critical attention. Because of *Harlem Shadows*, William J. Maxwell cites the book’s debatable “lack of historical importance” in his introduction to the *Complete Poems*. Given the centrality of *Harlem Shadows* to the Harlem Renaissance, this judgment seems justified, especially since the planned American version of *Spring in New Hampshire* was, though published, never distributed (Maxwell 307). In the context of “Ecology of the Color Line,” however, the book does possess value for African American literary history.

Spring in New Hampshire and Other Poems raises questions about its pastoral title, which necessarily frames poems that would later be recast in an urban light. Most of the book’s poems fall within the conventions of the pastoral mode: the “spring” of the book’s title and poems such as “Winter in the Country” loosely impose a seasonal structure on the collection, and “New Hampshire” offers some specificity of place. The title is also a clear nod to the New England regionalist poet Robert Frost, who lived as a farmer in Derry, New Hampshire and he published a collection called *New Hampshire* in 1923. Perhaps in reaction against the “High” modernism of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Frost’s poems embody provincialism by representing country scenes and characters and by speaking simply and directly to the reader, as exemplified by “The Pasture” (1913), “Mowing” (1913), “The Road Not Taken” (1916), and “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (1923). Perhaps McKay admired Frost—and there is evidence of Frost’s influence on this volume of McKay’s poems—but there were probably commercial reasons too. Frost achieved sustained success with the publication of *North of Boston* in 1915, and from there forward he made ample money by continuing to publish, give lectures, and teach

classes at New England's top colleges. Though he says little about his motivations, McKay and his publisher may have wanted to capitalize on Frost's success. *Spring in New Hampshire* also attempts to establish the Jamaican firmly as an *American* poet, one who can write comfortably within the rich history of regionalist writing in the United States.

While *Spring in New Hampshire* does not include McKay's most militantly anti-racist sonnets (e.g. "If We Must Die," "To the White Fiends," and "America"), his race certainly played a factor. The preface by Cambridge critic I. A. Richards gives the Frostian pastoral a primitivist edge: McKay is a "pure blooded Negro" and exemplary figure of "African Art" (*Spring* 5). Richards also takes note of McKay's background in agriculture and English at Kansas State College (*Spring* 5). The audience attraction—that there is a *Negro* writing this poetry—is not very subtle: "this is the first instance of success in [Negro] poetry with which we in Europe at any rate have been brought into contact" (*Spring* 5). Indeed, perhaps McKay and the publishers, Grant Richards, hoped that the novelty would sell books. Whatever its commercialism, the fact that this pastoral framing can be easily switched to an urban one with *Harlem Shadows* speaks to the complex-pastoral mode of the poems—their mixture of rusticity and urbanism, of the garden and the machine.

As in the case of Spencer, McKay's pastoralism is informed to some degree by material practice and knowledge of natural science. McKay's naturalist sensibilities were shaped early on both by his upbringing in rural Jamaica and tutelage at the hands of Walter Jekyll, a wealthy and well-educated English gentleman.⁵ In *A Long Way From Home* (1937), McKay cursorily mentions that he read Benedict de Spinoza's *Ethics* at a young age and was attracted to the excommunicated, seventeenth-century Jewish philosopher's neo-Stoic pantheism: "Spinoza's *Ethics*, which I read, skipping the mathematical hypotheses, and for a time considered myself a

pantheist” (13-14). If one skips the “mathematical hypotheses” in Spinoza’s book, then one is indeed left with notions of pantheism and the central role of affects in that pantheism. Under the guidance of his older brother U. Theo, he also read and experienced the “romance of science” in Thomas Huxley’s *Man’s Place in Nature* (1863) and Ernst Haeckel’s *The Riddle of the Universe* (1895) (*A Long Way* 12). Haeckel was the German naturalist and biologist who coined the term “ecology” in 1866, borrowing from the Greek word for “home,” *oikos*. He eventually developed his contributions to zoology and biology into popular philosophical musings about the “world riddle.” Huxley’s book makes the Darwinian case that humans evolved from primates, arguing that humans are animals and that is their place in nature. Unlike Spencer, whose nature poems are often religious, McKay’s agnostic, quasi-pantheistic views seem to crystallize in this period with the help of Spinoza, Huxley, and Haeckel.

When McKay first emigrated from rural Jamaica to the United States, he did so to study agriculture at the Tuskegee Institute in 1912. Attracted to the scientific innovation of the school and dreaming of becoming a Promethean bringer of agricultural knowledge to Jamaican peasants, the restless McKay could not adapt to the regimented, military schedule (Maxwell xiv-xv). Nonetheless, he writes passionately about Washington in his 1916 elegy, “In Memoriam: Booker T. Washington.” There he figures Washington a gardener, “A splendid tower / Of strength, as would a gardener on the flower / Nursed tenderly, you gazed upon us all” (ll. 4-6). The gardener metaphor speaks not just to McKay’s pastoral impulse, but it also harkens back to Washington’s autobiographies where he narrates his gardening practices, as discussed in the first chapter. Impressed by Washington but not fit for Tuskegee, McKay went on to study agriculture at Kansas State College for two years. During this time, he decided to commit himself to a life of

letters but not without first absorbing some understanding of the emerging science of ecology in the form of agriculture.

Forms of hybridity and contradictory affective impulses lie at the heart of McKay's poetic project in *Spring in New Hampshire* and then *Harlem Shadows*. In the past, much of the secondary criticism—conforming to the dominant narrative of modernism as essentially formal experimentation—has faulted McKay's adherence to supposedly constrictive, “white” poetic forms. Writing in 1976, James R. Giles evaluates the sonnets according to a white form vs. black content binary: “[c]onflict between McKay's passionate resentment of racist oppression and his Victorianism in form and diction creates a unique kind of tension in many of his poems, which weakens their ultimate success” (42). He goes on to deride McKay's lack of experimentalism: “[F]or he never approached an innovative, intrinsically black style in his verse” (44). To the contrary, McKay was never a stranger to the possibilities of experimental poetics. While living as a successful young poet in Jamaica, he published two books of verse that played with local dialects, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* (both 1912). These poems anticipate Hughes's and Sterling Brown's own incorporation of dialect into their poetry. Since he abandoned this style, one must conclude that McKay must have found in traditional forms served his purposes better than dialect poetry. Maxwell has forcefully argued against this strand of criticism, arguing that McKay “found in the sonnet persona one model for the New Negro who accepts anger's formative power” (*New Negro* 67). Nelson likewise debunks misreadings performed by critics like Giles: “these criticisms generally miss the possibility that he was not only trying to demonstrate that black poets could master traditional forms but also, like other political poets, working to destabilize those forms from within” (*Repression and Recovery* 89).

poem begins by celebrating the morning with the repetition of “The Dawn!” in the first quatrain. The speaker, on his way to work, enjoys the moment prior to work while the city slowly arises. It is a space of silence without crowds: “No pushing crowd, no tramping, tramping feet” (l. 6). Lines juxtapose pastoral with urban images: “Out of the low still skies, over the hills, / New York’s fantastic spires and cheerless domes” (ll. 2-3). The speaker’s attitude towards the city is ambiguous: the fantastic spires are offset by cheerless domes, while the “mighty city” is undermined by the image of animal-like cars “groaning, creep / Along” (ll. 7-8). The sestet dwells on passersby, “strangely-ghostly,” returning from “garish nights” of debauchery (ll. 9-10). Their decadent, late-night “Jazz age” lifestyle contrasts with the early-bird speaker—a contrast reinforced by an image of the machine, the “strong electric lights” they move under, that interrupts the speaker’s urban pastoral idyll (l. 12). The revelation of the speaker as an urban worker in the final line probably reflects McKay’s Communist politics.

“Winter in the Country” is another urban pastoral poem, but unlike other poems in *Spring in New Hampshire*, this one’s structure of feeling is straightforwardly anti-urban. The first three stanzas clearly evoke Frost’s poems set in the New England winters, such as “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” producing a sort of dialogue between the Jamaican immigrant and the New England native. The speaker celebrates the sensory experience of the pastoral scene, where he feels the “soft sea-laden breeze” (l. 2), enjoys the spruce trees, listens to the “sparrow’s cheep,” and watches “his nimble flight / Above the short brown grass asleep” (ll. 5-7). The last line of the third stanza hints at the encroaching city with the verb “crowd,” where “thoughts of life serene” (l. 10) begin to “Crowd round this lifted heart of mine!” (l. 12). The speaker must migrate to the city and the poem makes a striking juxtaposition with its detailed description of the country contrasted with the urban setting. The speaker emotes: “But oh! to leave this paradise

for the city's dirty basement room" (l. 24). The shift is from openness to confinement. Harlem in the 1910s and 1920s was densely packed because of the Great Migration, with small rooms for rent that were poorly kept by greedy landlords. The speaker enumerates the items of an urban apartment: "A table, bed, bureau and broom" and "two crippled chairs / All covered up with dust and grim / With hideousness and scars of years" (ll. 16-19). The disgust for this grimy interior is accentuated by the specificity of its contents. The final stanza ends with the speaker longing for the country. He seems to be reaching for a retreating memory of when he was closer to nature: "And yet, and yet / the sea-wind here, the winter birds, / The glory of the soft sunset, / There come to me in words" (ll. 21-24). The speaker is left with the words—the mere representation—of the country, losing the immediacy of sensory experience. Yet the speaker indicates no privileging of sense over words, for it is as though the words have become the things themselves.

The poem "I Shall Return" straightforwardly expresses McKay's desire to return to pastoral, rustic living, probably in the Clarendon hills of Jamaica. Each quatrain and the final couplet repeat the promise, "I shall return." In the first quatrain, he describes colorful, burning forest fires, which he watches with "wonder-eyes" (l. 4). The second quatrain paints an image of mountain streams that "bathe" the "bending grasses," where the speaker idles away his days, free from the necessity of labor—the theme of so many other poems in the collection, such as "Spring in New Hampshire" and "To Work" (l. 6). The final quatrain brings more geographical specificity to the poem, establishing its setting in what is probably the Caribbean. The nature imagery gives way to the other side of the pastoral, valorizing communal, country living, the "village dances" and "dear delicious tunes / That stir the hidden depths of native life" (ll. 10-11). The final couplet depicts the speaker's wandering as pain and he faintly seems to long for death: "I shall return, I shall return again / To ease my mind of the long, long years of pain" (ll. 13-14).

It is not clear by the end of the poem whether this “return” means a physical return to Jamaica or to some kind of death, a womb state preexisting life.

Similar to “I Shall Return” with its nostalgic affect, “The Tropics in New York,” a Petrarchan sonnet, offers perhaps the most striking example of the garden in the machine in *Spring in New Hampshire*. The sonnet enfolds space and time into a single image of an urban marketplace. The affective impulse of exuberance in the first stanza will give way by the end of the sonnet to lament for the speaker’s tropical homeland:

Bananas ripe and green and ginger-root,
 Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
 And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
 Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,

Set in the window, bringing memories 5
 Of fruit trees laden by low-singing rills,
 And dewy dawns and mystical blue skies
 In benediction over nun-like hills.

Mine eyes grew dim and I could no more gaze,
 A wave of longing through my body swept, 10
 And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,
 I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

The first stanza displays the pastoral abundance of precisely named fruits that seems to multiply as much as the conjunction “and” will allow. We are dropped into the sonnet’s world of consonant fruits: bananas, ginger-root, cocoa, pears, tangerines, mangoes, and grapefruits. The reader would think this were a tropical scene. The line “Set in the window,” however, reveals the scene’s urban setting and human agency: the bringing together of these fruits from far-off into one place is a form of commodity fetishism, in which the wonders of global capitalism displayed by the storeowner for the strolling urbanite’s gaze. The conjured memories create an almost spiritual experience, where skies bend in benediction for the “nun-like” hills. In the end, the poem combines contradictory affective impulses as it collapses two geographical places, Clarendon and Manhattan.

Other poems in *Spring in New Hampshire* offer striking departures from the use of the pastoral mode with their various urban and country settings. One of McKay’s most militantly angry sonnets, “The Lynching,” is the collection’s third poem and it focuses on lynching as a spectacle. Richly allusive, this poem draws on biblical narratives and imagery in order to undermine the bogus religiosity of lynching rituals that are supposedly sanctioned by God in the eyes of white southerners. According to historian John F. Callahan, lynching possessed a pseudo-religious “ritual capacity to define and annihilate the humanity of the black victim and that of every last member of his or her race, symbolically or, if necessary, literally” (465). Reaching its peak in the South from about the 1890s to 1930s, lynching rituals often “employed burning, torture, and dismemberment to prolong suffering and excite a ‘festive atmosphere’ among the killers and onlookers” (Zangrando). Lynching, in other words, was just as much a planned spectacle as it was spontaneous mob violence. Given this historical framework, the first quatrain

of “The Lynching” challenges the lynchers’ self-appointed role as priestly overseers of divine justice by placing the victim in the role of Jesus crucified:

His Spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.
 His father, by the cruelest way of pain,
 Had bidden him to his bosom once again;
 The awful sin remained still unforgiven. (ll. 1-4)

Like Langston Hughes’s later “Christ in Alabama” (1931), in which a “*Nigger Christ*” is lynched “*On the cross of the South*,” McKay’s poem superimposes lynching onto crucifixion, as though to imply that every time a black man is lynched, so too is Jesus crucified again and again (ll. 12-13).⁶ The smoke of the burning body is transfigured into Christ’s spirit ascending into Heaven. The culminating line of the quatrain—and key line of the poem—invokes the angry, unforgiving Christ of justice that McKay embraces in other poems as well: “The awful sin remained still unforgiven” (l. 4). As Outka argues about Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Tales*, “The Lynching” figures pastoral space as traumatic, its images shaping a southern gothic spectacle:

All night a bright and solitary star 5
 (Perchance the one that ever guided him,
 Yet gave him up at last to Fate’s wild whim)
 Hung pitifully o’er the swinging char.
 Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view
 The ghastly body swaying in the sun: 10
 The women thronged to look, but never a one
 Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;
 And little lads, lynchers that were to be,

space seems to exist only in the speaker's head when he is shocked back into the realities of the city, where even the cars—the machines themselves—grow “tired” as they “go grumbling by” (l. 23). The final stanza repeats the second one, ending the poem with the image of pastoral-tropical retreat.

The pastoralism of *Spring in New Hampshire* is complex and varied. It is neither anti-pastoral nor simply urban. This shows the ambivalent relation of black literary history to the pastoral tradition. Invoking Frost, *Spring in New Hampshire* oscillates between the New England countryside and New York City, between Jamaica and the tenements of lower Manhattan. Many of the poems, such as “To Work” and “When Dawn Comes to the City,” draw on the pastoral as a dream-like space for workers in transit between rest and work—an imperfect interlude in the capitalist rhythm of constant busy-ness. Occasionally McKay focuses explicitly on race and confirms the arguments of Bennet and Outka, as in “The Lynching,” where the pastoral is a scene of trauma. What is significant about this collection is the overarching pastoral framing of its title and how such framing foregrounds the pastoral element in poems that would later constitute *Harlem Shadows*. McKay's poems and experiments would contribute to pastoralism's continuing political evolution, which would lead to the ghetto pastoral mode in the 1930s.

4. Ghetto Pastorals: Michael Gold's *Jews without Money* and Claude McKay's “The Truant”

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, McKay's story “The Truant” is an early example of a multi-ethnic proletarian subgenre that Denning identifies as the “ghetto pastoral,” which came to fruition in the 1930s and 1940s. The ghetto pastoral mixes elements of naturalism and pastoralism but cannot be classified in either category. It is forged out of the historical mass

migrations of southern blacks and eastern-European immigrants to urban enclaves, and is a “yoking of naturalism and the pastoral, the slum and the shepherd, the gangster and Christ in concrete, Cesspool and Lawd Today” (Denning 231). Denning ties the ghetto pastoral to specific, geographical places: Little Italy, the Lower East Side, Harlem, Chicago’s Bronzeville, and Chinatown, for example (230). This proletarian pastoral forms a “subaltern modernism” that would, in the 1930s, become the “central literary form” of the anti-fascist Popular Front (Denning 231). It did not dissipate after the 1930s, but continued into the post-war years and American “golden age” of economic boom. Ghetto pastoral writers grew up in working-class families, benefiting in adulthood from the “expansion of public education and the proletarianization of writing itself in the culture industries” (Denning 239).

The Jewish-American writer Michael Gold, who edited *The Liberator* and was joined briefly by McKay as coeditor in 1922, published his proletarian novel *Jews without Money* in 1930. The action is set in Manhattan’s Lower East Side ghetto, where scenes of ethnic variety, destitute poverty, gruesome working conditions, and lurid descriptions of prostitution abound. One of its precursors is certainly Stephen Crane’s naturalist novel *Maggie* (1893). Referring to its episodic structure, Denning characterizes the novel as a “newsreel of memory” (233). It focuses on young Mikey, with the narrative focalized through the child’s “pre-political consciousness,” in Kenneth Burke’s words (Letter 21). It consists of proletarian vignettes, as it mixes the naturalistic and pastoral modes. Despite its bleak tone, it does depict some fleeting moments of interracial and class solidarity. In one naturalistic episode, Mikey’s sister Esther is killed while out one night gathering firewood, hit by a truck whose driver had been blinded by a snowstorm (280-82). It also has a pastoral seasonal structure, moving from spring to hot summers, to autumn (when Mikey’s father is injured), and finally to winters of despair (Esther’s

death). It unfolds in non-chronological order, with Esther's death occurring late in the novel but early in Mikey's life, and his father's injury occurring late in Mikey's life but halfway through the novel. Yet the novel is neither naturalist nor pastoralist, for it occupies a space between called ghetto pastoral.

Moments of urban nature and the urban pastoral thread their way through the novel, in many ways marking moments of a barely-emergent class consciousness and opening a space for ideology critique. The narrator at one point remarks about the absence of nature in the city: "[n]o grass is found in this petrified city, no big living trees" (40). A one-hour nature study each week in school results in tedious lectures, for there is no way for the class to study nature directly (41). As Mikey makes observations about the polluted East River, "a sun-spangled open sewer running with oily scum and garbage," he begins to develop a longing for the pastoral, a "hunger for country things" (39-40). In an instance of the garden-in-the-machine trope, Mikey and his friend Jake "discovered grass struggling between the sidewalk cracks near the livery stable. We were amazed by this miracle" (41).

The novel's proletarian impulse resides primarily in two characters, Mikey's friend Joey and his mother Katie, both of whom are also strongly associated with the pastoral and nature. Mikey's boyhood friend Joey Cohen has "queer" ideas about feeling empathy for animals, like when he shows remorse for killing a butterfly (49). He is killed early in the novel, however, by a horse car wheel that gruesomely decapitates him in the street (49-51). Mikey's mother serves as a living memory of rural scenes in Hungary, idealizing them as an alternative to claustrophobic ghetto life (153-54). She takes the family on a mushroom-hunting excursion to Bronx Park to give them an experience of nature and open spaces (149). At one point, Mikey observes that she possesses a "dark proletarian instinct" (214). In an instance of class consciousness, she resists the

landlord of the family's rundown tenement and threatens to organize the other tenants around a rent strike (248-50). When Mikey's father is incapacitated, she must go to work to support the family. The father works as a painter until he falls from a scaffold and acquires a crippling fear of heights; he is also bedridden from the toxicity of the paint and gradually sinks into a permanent depression (244-45). Katie secures a job in a cafeteria, where the black workers call her "Momma," showing a moment of interracial, working-class solidarity (246).

Written in a ghetto pastoral mode similar to *Jews without Money*, McKay's "The Truant" tells the story of a West Indian, Harlem family man, Barclay Oram, who works as a dining car waiter and enjoys his train travels, but feels caught in a rut, trapped in the "great tradition of black servitude" (145). He has a wife, Rhoda, and a four-year-old daughter, Betsy, to support. One day he purposely gets himself stranded in Washington, D.C. and gets drunk. He is suspended for ten days and, defying his wife, is happy with it. Throughout the story, Barclay frequently comments on the urban environment, usually in negative terms. He is disgusted by the "cattle-like" subway passengers and feels that "New York City is swarming like a beehive" (141). Yet his attitude towards the city is not without ambivalence, for a "part of him was in love with this piling grandeur. And that was why he was slave to it" (153). Like the speaker in many of McKay's *Spring in New Hampshire* poems, Barclay feels caught in the "huge granite-grey walls of New York City" and is nostalgic for the "green intimate life" (152-53). He longs for a return to the Caribbean: the "steel-framed poetry of cities did not crowd out but rather intensified in him the singing memories of his village life. He loved both, the one complementing the other" (159). By the end of the story, he leaves his wife and daughter his government bonds and savings, and sneaks out in the middle of the night, hitting the road to pursue a "true life" of "eternal inquietude" (162).

Far from being a reactionary impulse to return to the past, Spencer and McKay saw productive possibilities within the pastoral mode. Ultimately, the urban reversal of the Marx's antebellum "machine in the garden" trope gestures both towards a nostalgic past and a romantic revolutionary future. The "garden queer" of McKay's "The Truant" and the Bronx Park excursion in Gold's *Jews without Money* mark the garden-in-the-machine trope's continuing political evolution across Harlem Renaissance poetry and ethnic proletarian literature. In some ways, it provides continuity between the pastoral design of the Tuskegee Institute and the materialisms of New Negro aesthetics and Attaway's proletarian novel *Blood on the Forge*.

The next chapter examines a different kind of pastoral in the work of Harlem Renaissance children's poet Effie Lee Newsome. Her poetry focuses on birds and natural history without much regard for the city. In many ways, Spencer's interest in gardening and horticulture parallels Newsome's interest in birds. Indeed, Spencer was a fan of Newsome's nature poetry and the two were close friends (Greene 86). Newsome's record of extensive publication in *The Crisis*, which is comparable to that of Langston Hughes, makes for some striking juxtapositions with the supposedly more urban concerns of the NAACP and, more generally, the wider cultural field of New Negro aesthetics.

¹ This poem was unpublished during Spencer's lifetime and its date of composition is unknown.

² Notably, Spencer does not gender the earth, perhaps being cognizant of what Carolyn Merchant calls the "two-sided" aspects of nature and women in Western culture, the idea that the "earth mother" offered "nurture and fertility, but nature also brought plagues, famines, and tempests. Similarly, woman was both virgin and witch" (*Death of Nature* 127).

³ As the next chapter will show, in the case of Effie Lee Newsome, Foley's critique does not hold in all cases because of the pluralist politics of Newsome's project and its attempt to contribute not only to black nationalism, but also natural history and conservation.

⁴ Its use of imagery and symbolism to depict the horrors of whiteness echo "The Whiteness of the Whale" chapter in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*.

⁵ Jekyll's older sister, Gertrude, worked as a curator of the British botanical gardens. Jamaica Kincaid comments that the botanical gardens in Antigua, where she grew up, "reinforced for me how powerful were the people who had conquered me; they could bring to me the botany of the world they owned" (120). Such botanical gardens are an impressive display of British imperialism, since the gardens aggregated plant species from around the world.

⁶ Although in Hughes's poem, God is bitterly equated with the white master: "God's His Father— / *White Master above, / Grant us your love.*" (ll. 7-9).

Chapter 4

The Crisis, Effie Lee Newsome, and the Politics of Nature

*And then, behold! Kingfisher comes,
That great big royal bird!
To him what is the dragon fly
That kept the pool life stirred?
Or water-tigers terrible
That murder bugs all day?
Kingfisher comes, and each of these
Would hide itself away!*

—Newsome, “At the Pool” (1927)

1. Introduction

The cover of the February 1915 issue of *The Crisis*, the NAACP monthly edited by Du Bois, displays a Henry David Thoreau quote framed with prominent borders and flanked by sketches of factories with large smokestacks. The smoke, which rises to twice the size of the buildings themselves, wends its way up the sides of the page, tangling into the magazine’s large-font title at the top. This image of a northern industrial landscape not only draws on Great Migration narrative tropes, but it also evokes Thoreau’s critique of modernity in *Walden* (1854) and his other nature writings. The quote itself, however, comes from Thoreau the abolitionist rather than Thoreau the naturalist: “Do you call this the land of the free? What is it to be free from King George and continue the slaves of King Prejudice? What is it to be born free and not

to live free?”¹ This cover, then, creates a number of unusual associative links: the natural rights doctrine of the U. S. Constitution, abolitionism, industrial capitalism and urbanization, the NAACP’s civil rights crusade, and New England Transcendentalism.

This cover reveals a great deal about the political agenda and strategy of Du Bois and *The Crisis*. While Washington’s *Working with the Hands* advanced an economic strategy of racial uplift via ecological agency (pastoral design and soil conservation), Du Bois politicized representations of nature by extending double consciousness to his portrayal of natural environments in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) and *Darkwater* (1920). These thematic concerns with a politics of nature continued in his role as founder and editor of the NAACP’s *The Crisis*—which reached peak circulation in the early 1920s—from 1910 to 1935. In this context, the phrase “politics of nature” broadly gestures at the magazine’s ongoing engagement with conservation, natural history, natural sciences (e.g. biology), pastoralism, and primitivism.² In order to trace the role of the politics of nature in *The Crisis* during the 1910s and 1920s, this chapter focuses on the prolific writings of the now mostly forgotten poet, essayist, and amateur naturalist Effie Lee Newsome.

The politics of nature in *The Crisis* expands Du Bois’s vision of “Liberty for all men” and the “Training of Children, black even as white” espoused in his 1904 “Credo” (reprinted as the introduction to *Darkwater*) (*DW 2*). For Du Bois, “liberty” means access to open spaces and physical mobility; voting rights and interracial friendship; and desegregated railroad cars and “sunshine” (*DW 2*). “Training” requires that children venture out to natural spaces, to “green pastures” and “life lit by some large vision of beauty and goodness and truth” (*DW 2*). As editor, Du Bois fosters these varied connections among integration, mobility, pedagogy, and nature, and gives them further expression in a number of essays, fiction, poems, and short histories published

in *The Crisis* throughout the 1910s and 1920s. This body of environmental writing by African-American (and sometimes white) authors includes published excerpts from Jean Toomer's regionalist masterpiece *Cane* (1923); the urban-pastoralist poetry of Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay; Kelsey Percival Kitchel's "The Rains: a Story of Jamaica" (1926); John Matheus's short stories like "Fog" and "Swamp"; Yolande Du Bois's³ nature meditations; prose sketches of black recreational spaces like segregated beaches and city parks; and critical histories of natural disasters such as the 1927 Mississippi flood, discussed in the Introduction.

These trends found exemplary expression in Newsome's writings, many of which appeared in *The Crisis* between 1915 and the early 1930s as frequently as those of Harlem Renaissance luminaries like Hughes, McKay, and Countee Cullen. Scholars know Newsome more for her work as an early writer of African-American children's literature than for her role in the Harlem Renaissance and as *Crisis* contributor. Not yet compelling to scholars of the literary Left, Newsome's musings on nature and relatively conservative religious views seem to have more affinities with Washington than such radicals as Du Bois and McKay. But her writings are still *political*, even if they usually do not fit into the recognizable categories of black nationalism or Left radicalism. In the pages of *The Crisis*, Newsome wrote on topics and themes unusual—even *radical*—for African Americans at the time: birdwatching, entomology, ethology (animal psychology), and other forms of amateur nature study. Placed in their context in *The Crisis*, Newsome's writings perform a sort of double movement; they work at the levels of text and context, of verbal icon and print culture. At one level, Newsome's writings attempt to substitute the observational study of natural history and conservationist politics for the omnipresent burdens of the color-line problem seen on every page of *The Crisis*. They are a form of productive escapism. At another level, natural history and conservation become racialized and

politicized when they resonate in the pages of *The Crisis*, which strongly encourages racial readings of otherwise white-dominated scientific fields and political movements.

First, Newsome champions—directly and indirectly—conservationist policies, which gained major traction in the Progressive Era with the presidency of Roosevelt and the nationwide effort to establish national parks, forest reserves, game preserves, and policies to regulate and manage the country’s natural resources. Her concern with birds also typifies white middle-class women’s conservationist values and pedagogical aims—a concern that offers, especially for black children, a political *alternative* to and respite from the ubiquitous problem of the color line. With this alternative, black children as well as adults can enjoy nature and possibly become political advocates for conservation themselves. Second, Newsome’s writings also use nature to enact a subtle racial critique that the publishing context of *The Crisis* further amplifies. A nature poem about a bluebird, for example, might follow articles on the “lynching industry” or studies of black women factory workers. This proximity to articles about Jim Crow and black workers strongly demands a racial reading of Newsome’s poems. Rather than verbal icons isolated on the page, Newsome’s writings form composites of text and context that constitute a politics of nature threading through *The Crisis* and, by extension, the cultural nationalism of the Harlem Renaissance.

The first section of this chapter briefly sketches Newsome’s biographical background before turning to the Harlem Renaissance’s concern with pedagogy, children, the role of black women, and what Barbara Foley calls the “organic trope,” or the use of nature imagery and metaphors to advance a strategic black nationalism. Next, I examine the most predominant—and perhaps unusual in the context of *The Crisis*—concern of her prose and poetry: birds. As an amateur ornithologist, Newsome’s work critically signifies on—through tropes of integrated

nature, taxonomy, and the disembodied voice—discourses of bird conservation institutionalized and professionalized through such organizations as the Audubon societies that organized across the nation in the late-nineteenth century. The multi-generic forms of knowledge she produces, such as short essays, children’s poems, her *Crisis* columns, and drawings, conduct a double intervention in both white, mainstream conservation and the civil rights movement by promoting the pedagogical, affective, and civil rights value of birding and the study of natural history in general. The final section of this chapter focuses on Newsome’s more overtly political poems and prose, which often target both child and adult audiences with their focus on the race’s future. Poems like “Bird in the Cage,” “Morning-Light,” and “The Bronze Legacy” muster tropes that, in light of her other work, have as much to do with conservation as they do with a strategic black nationalism that sought “civil rights by copyright”—the strategy of advancing the race through cultural achievement and participation in American cultural nationalism (Lewis *Fight* 153).

2. Newsome, New Negro aesthetics, and the “organic trope”

Born into Philadelphia’s Talented Tenth in 1885, Newsome was heavily influenced by her father, Bishop Lee, who served as an African Methodist Episcopal (A. M. E.) clergyman and as president of the first all black college, Wilberforce University, from 1873 to 1881. For its day, the A. M. E. Church had a radical orientation, according to Rudine Sims Bishop: the church was “founded in 1787, not because of conflicting religious doctrines, but as a social protest when a group of Black worshippers, led by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, responded to racial discrimination by walking out of St. George’s Methodist Church in Philadelphia” (10). In her *Crisis* eulogy to her father, Newsome compares Bishop Lee’s love for home and nature to the nineteenth-century nature writer John Burroughs (“A Great Prelate” 69).⁴ Newsome recalls his

fondness for exploring “cranberry bogs” and listening to the “killdees” at his childhood home in New Jersey. This nostalgia for home probably stems from Lee’s near-constant movement around the country as a bishop and missionary; besides Ohio and Philadelphia, the family also lived in Texas (Zeigler 127). His love for the “boundless grandeur” of the West led him to help create the Methodist Puget Sound Conference in 1892 (“A Great Prelate” 70). She portrays him as an amateur naturalist who treated home as a veritable botanical garden: “[h]e studied the trees and knew them. The grand elms and oaks, the gracious beech trees—but he loved them *all*” (70). As the rest of this chapter will show, Lee’s quasi-mystical and sentimental love for nature seems to have impressed Newsome greatly.

Between 1901 and 1914, Newsome studied art at a number of colleges, including the University of Pennsylvania and Wilberforce University in rural southwestern Ohio. Though she lived much of her life in Wilberforce, where she seems to have enjoyed the rustic setting that allowed her to gain an immense knowledge of nature, Newsome spent most of the 1920s in Birmingham, where her husband served as pastor of an A. M. E. church (K. C. Smith *Children’s* 46-47).⁵ African-American children’s author and Birmingham-native Ellen Tarry describes Newsome as a “recluse” during this time, much like a Burroughs or Muir (K. C. Smith “Interview”).⁶ The bulk of Newsome’s poetry appeared between 1915 and 1940 in *The Crisis*, occasionally in the National Urban League’s *Opportunity*, and, later, in Atlanta University’s *Phylon* (also founded and edited by Du Bois). Her work also appeared in the short-lived, Du Bois- and Fauset-edited children’s periodical, *The Brownies’ Book* (1920-1922). Though her output was prolific, her only full-length poetry book, *Gladiola Garden*, appeared in 1940, collecting many poems written during the 1920s and 1930s. Most these poems fall into some

kind of nature poetry category: pastoralism, themes of seasonal change, and natural history poems about birds, insects, and other animals.⁷

Newsome's work functions within the larger cultural field of the Harlem Renaissance, known more for its cultural outpouring than its concern with nature. David Levering Lewis characterizes the dominant political strategy of this post-Booker T. Washington era as "civil rights by copyright" (*Fight* 153).⁸ New Negro arbiter of literary taste, William Stanley Braithwaite, summarized this cultural nationalism with strongly gendered terms in "Some Contemporary Poets of the Negro Race": the "present revival of poetry in America could scarcely advance without carrying in its wake the impulse and practice of a poetic consciousness in the Negro race" (275). This poetic consciousness, though in its nascent stage, contains "intense emotionalism," "folk-qualities," and "primal virtues" springing from spirituals and other folk-vernacular forms like the blues and ragtime. A concomitant Apollonian "grounding in the technical elements of the science of versification" balances out these Dionysian elements (277). When characterizing black women poets like Georgia Douglas Johnson, Braithwaite invokes Victorian assumptions about women's hyper-affective, sentimental, and "subjective lyric emotion": "[w]hether in religion or love, or in the descriptive rendering of nature, they always extracted the substance to which clung the mist of tears" (279). Johnson, as well as Newsome, Anne Spencer, and Angelina Grimké, to name a few, all performed such descriptive renderings of nature. That women would be expected—and often did fulfill this expectation—to write about nature repeats the centuries-long association of the feminine with the organic.⁹ Readers', editors', and publishers' expectations about black women's writing at the time would also tend to mitigate against militant forms of racial protest, such as those found in Du Bois's *Darkwater* or McKay's "If We Must Die."

For Marxist literary scholar Barbara Foley, who was discussed briefly in the previous chapter, poets especially relied on an “organic trope” that mediated between a place-based nationalism on the one hand and the essentialization of race on the other (162). Leftists and New Negro writers and artists turned the dominant racist ideology on its head by linking Harlem and the southern black folk to an emerging black nationalism. While Foley claims that this “welding of place to race” functions as the “distinctive contribution” of the movement, it also, ironically, succeeded in reaffirming racial essentialism (6-7). For example, Alain Locke drew on organic tropes to theorize the movement as distinctly culturalist in his introduction to the 1925 seminal anthology, *The New Negro*. There, Locke brought together the Herderian keywords of black nationalism: folk-spirit, self-determination, group expression, etc. This nationalism followed a cultural and spiritual, rather than economic, impulse. For Houston A. Baker Jr., Locke’s anthology was an act of “radical marronage,” in that it attempted a form of black cultural nation-building (75). One of the extended metaphors of Locke’s introduction is the impending “flood” of black mass migration and cultural production. The “tide” of the Great Migration is not, Locke argues, a haphazard “blind flood” breached by purely external forces (the Great War, the boll weevil, etc.), but rather “successive wave[s]” of a black folk-spirit propelling itself onto the “beach line” of northern cities (Locke 6). This ocean metaphor suggests a flowing unity between the rural South and the Harlem ghetto.

For Foley, the organic trope appears most pointedly in the poetry of the period. She discusses Spencer’s religious poem “Lady, Lady,” analyzed in the previous chapter, as a prime example of the organic trope (239-40). Langston Hughes’s “Earth Song,” which appeared in *The New Negro* anthology, also typifies this poetic-political strategy:

It’s an earth song—

And I've been waiting long

For an earth song.

It's a spring song!

I've been waiting long

5

For a spring song:

Strong as the bursting of young buds,

Strong as the shoots of a new plant,

Strong as the coming of the first child

From its mother's womb—

10

An earth song!

A body song!

A spring song!

And I've been waiting long

For an earth song.

15

The seasonal motif, quasi-Gaia hypothesis, and image-constellation—earth, spring, plants, childbirth, and body—act to make this poem an exemplar of the organic trope. Foley argues that the “hyper-materiality of the organic trope functions metonymically to naturalize identity as a function of place, thereby largely occluding both historical and structural understandings of the ‘roots’ of racism” (237). But Foley’s Marxian narrative of the New Negro organic trope overlooks certain material and discursive contexts of the complex and contradictory politics of the Progressive Era. What she sees as the organic trope’s ideological betrayal of the “good” nationalism espoused by the New Negro and black-belt-thesis Communists, I see as more an encroachment of early-twentieth-century conservation and environmentalism into black politics.

Harlem Renaissance concerns with organic tropes, a cultural black nationalism, and a black women's aesthetic dovetail with what Katherine Capshaw Smith characterizes as a deep investment in "building a black national identity through literary constructions of childhood" (*Children's* xiii). Examined in the chapter "W. E. B. Du Bois at the Grand Canyon," Du Bois's famous "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926), for example, appears in *The Crisis*' annual "Children's Number" alongside dozens of photographs of African-American infants submitted by readers. Extending statements made in the "Credo," Du Bois's *Darkwater* essay "The Immortal Child" makes the case for the central role black children play in future racial and democratic progress. In typical Du Boisian hyperbole, he starts the essay with the pronouncement: "our children's children live forever and grow and develop towards perfection as they are trained. All human problems, then, center in the Immortal Child and his education is the problem of problems" (*DW* 151). In broad, Nietzschean-vitalist strokes, Du Bois charges black parents—and, by implication, the Talented Tenth—with the duty "to accomplish the immortality of black blood, in order that the day may come in this dark world when poverty shall be abolished, privilege be based on individual desert, and the color of a man's skin be no bar to the outlook of his soul" (*DW* 158). He admits the difficulty of such a grandiose task: on the one hand, parents can shield their children from racism as much as possible, but this strategy makes the child vulnerable to the possibly avoidable *traumatic* coming to awareness of racism and double consciousness. On the other hand, parents can throw their children into the "sea of race prejudice," but such an approach, while beneficial to some stronger types, would be "brutal" to the majority of black children. Instead, Du Bois preaches moderation and care: with "every step of dawning intelligence, explanation—frank, free, guiding explanation—must come" (*DW* 159). A progressive education rooted in Platonic (and, later, pragmatist) values of the true, the good, and

the beautiful is the Du Boisian ideal. Du Bois also criticizes industrial capitalism and the reduction of public education to training workers in improving the “land’s industrial efficiency” (*DW* 162).

Education fell mainly to African-American women in their roles not just as mothers but also prominent position in such feminized professions as teaching. Elise Johnson McDougold’s typology of “Negro women” in *The New Negro* describes two types that would apply to Newsome: the bourgeois woman of leisure and the teacher. Teachers, McDougold explains, who bring to the “class room sympathy and judgment” form a “mighty force” in the struggle to uplift black youth (376). Women of leisure constitute a “very small” group of wives married to professional men, like Newsome’s husband, who can support them. Ultimately, literary constructions of black childhood found their vehicle in the more feminized publications of the Harlem Renaissance: *The Crisis*’ annual Children’s Number, the mostly Fauset-edited *The Brownies’ Book* (1920-21), Newsome’s “Little Page” column (*The Crisis* 1925-29), and the plethora of children’s poetry, prose, and art published in various African-American periodicals.

Newsome usually employs what children’s literature scholars call “cross writing,” a technique that double-voices a text for both child and adult audiences. The practice of cross-writing possesses elements of reformist education and even indoctrination in it: “the cross writing employed by southern reform movements uses children’s texts to instruct an adult reader, who is imagined as culturally and intellectually regressive, about health and labor modernizations; the child becomes primarily a conduit to reach the adult” (K. C. Smith *Children’s* xix). In the case of African-American readers in the 1920s and 1930s, the wildly disparate levels of literacy (often split along generational lines) meant that many children found *The Crisis* more accessible than their less educated elders. As Smith puts it, children’s literature

“became the means to breach the divide between the progressive black child and unschooled adults, offering interesting inversions and subversions of power and authority” (*Children’s* 274). Examples of such children’s writing include Newsome’s whimsical “March Hare” (1925), which uses simple rhymes and adopts the perspective of a rabbit in order to appeal to children:

It makes me feel so sad
 When people call me ‘mad,’
 Nor can I find out why,
 For I am very shy.
 I’d rather far take flight 5
 Than ever just make fight.
 But only let me run,
 And folks will yell in fun,
 “Why, there goes old March Hare,
 He’s mad yet, I declare!” 10

The March Hare is marginalized as “mad” for fulfilling his nature to run, offering the reader a modest form of subversive identification. Similarly, the speaker of “Mariposita” (1926) is a butterfly—“Born in Old Mexico”—who tells its story in rhyme (l. 2). Children’s literature also has an element of indoctrination to it, particularly work that instills younger readers with conservationist values or that portrays white children as superior to black children.

For Du Bois and *The Crisis*, the entire “future of the race” is at stake in black children’s literature because of its ideological effects on children. Always haunting Newsome’s work and any work written for black children is the potential regression into abolition- and Reconstruction-era, Uncle Tom caricatures and de-politicized, sentimentalized racial stereotypes of what

Braithwaite calls the “happy, care-free, humorous Negro” (“Negro” 31). She avoids this problem by writing more about nature than humans and, as will be shown in the next section, she does not condescend to her child (or adult) audience but rather seeks to build their intellect and to make them concerned with nature. It is as though the future of the race were intertwined with nature itself and African-American attitudes toward nature. As the next section will demonstrate, Newsome’s poetry supplements organic tropes with species-specific, scientific “studies” and a pedagogical approach that goes beyond black nationalism and shows the pluralist politics of the Harlem Renaissance.

3. Birds, Pedagogy, and *The Crisis*

Newsome’s prose and poems on birds engage the discourse of white, middle-class women’s natural history writing on birds as well as bird conservation. Newsome’s short photo essay, “Birds and Manuscripts,” appeared in the June 1915 issue of *The Crisis* after articles and editorials on the release of *The Birth of a Nation*, lynching, segregation, and the Great War. Appearing immediately before Newsome’s essay, “Fighting Race Calumny,” an article condemning D. W. Griffith’s pro-KKK film as libel and recounting nationwide protests against the film’s screening, jarringly contrasts with Newsome’s essay. Reading as though it could have appeared in *Bird-Lore*—the leading ornithology magazine at the time—“Birds and Manuscripts” speaks to the political context of the early-twentieth-century “plume wars.”

In the late 1800s, the feather trade exploded when bird-hats became fashionable among urban, bourgeois women. Species such as hummingbirds, sparrows, owls, egrets, warblers, and many others could be spotted on women’s heads as they walked down the street (Price 58-9). Historian Jennifer Price explains the obsession with women’s hats at the time:

[F]ew topics evoked the nether definitions of womanhood more effectively than hats: spring, summer, fall and winter hats, and morning, afternoon and evening hats. Walking and traveling hats. Church, garden, mourning, golf and carriage hats. Women's elite fashions—which achieved such byzantine dimensions in the late nineteenth century, when they became the stuff of Edith Wharton novels—mandated a devotion to hats that can now seem wondrous in a more hat-free age (75).

Partly motivated by late-Victorian ideals casting women in the role of society's moral legislators, state Audubon societies protested this fashion in the 1890s. Unlike the male-dominated campaign for national parks championed by Muir and Roosevelt (as well as the Du Boisian twist on this campaign, as shown in chapter two), women played a larger role in bird conservation due to the help of the "women's club" movement of the Progressive Era (Price 63). Price argues that this "bird-hat campaign marks an even earlier, essential shift into new ways of thinking about nature" (61). Audubon activists won a victory with the passage of the federal Lacey Act in 1900, which banned the interstate and international millinery trade (Merchant 277). Later, in 1918, the federal government passed the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, thus protecting birds from profit-hungry traders by banning the selling and shipping of migratory birds between the United States, Canada, and Mexico (Merchant 279). By the time Newsome began writing, the need for bird protection and sanctuaries still existed, however, and new laws needed enforcement.

Newsome's "Birds and Manuscripts" indirectly speaks to the politics of the plume wars. It begins not with birds but a demonstration of contrasting pedagogical methods, that is, the "manuscripts" part of the title. Set in a classroom, Newsome's composition instructor—metonymically identified as a "blue pencil"—criticizes her writing's disorganization and flowery stylistic flourishes. In a commanding Strunk-and-White tone, the instructor stresses the "orderly

and responsible” business of formal writing. Like a burgeoning nature writer on the verge of an epiphany, Newsome sighs at the constricting classroom atmosphere, with its indoor claustrophobia enhanced by the relentless criticism of the blue pencil: “[s]o, tireless devotion to composition for composition’s own dear sake had brought me to this, a realization that I was creator of pen chameleons, narrow, wriggling color studies that spent their time shifting shades. I felt wounded” (89). Newsome emphasizes the materiality of the manuscript as it seems to come alive, to become animated with the instructor’s marks on the page in an echo of what Henry Louis Gates calls the trope of the talking book (Gates 127). These authoritarian “color studies” will contrast with the more affirmative color studies of birds that Newsome will soon undertake. She asks the instructor if she can write on her own chosen theme, making her even more of a “peculiarity” in the class in the essay’s only explicit reference to race: the “fact that the one colored member of the class might hereby be further establishing herself as a peculiarity troubled me little then” (89). As she steps outside, she pauses to watch sparrows, for which she “even felt grateful” (89). The “even” probably refers to how sparrows were widely regarded at the time as pests.

The essay then proceeds in a vein of nature writing about birds that seems modeled after John Burroughs’s *Wake-Robin* (1871) and, later, the more scientific writing of white women like Mabel Osgood Wright. Newsome’s essay includes photographs of robins building nests, a birdhouse of a bluebird, and orioles perched in a tree. She decides to write about a “mocking bird in honeysuckles” and the once-stodgy instructor immediately praises her work, for it has the “naiveté of a folk-tale” (90). Basking in this approval, Newsome realizes that her “best of friends were likely to prove nature and her birds” (90). As she would later perform in her poetry, Newsome begins cataloguing bird families, placing them in the “scene” of their habitats and

geographical locations: “[f]rom the mocking birds in reeds by Florida lagoons; white herons on white oyster bars; cardinals swinging amidst scarlet cassesnas” (90). She continues to identify families throughout the rest of the essay: chickadee, titmouse, oriole, chewink, bluebirds, cow bird, catbird, and dove. The birds are mixed with scenes of seasonal change and motherhood: it is spring and there is a “wealth of bird-land incident,” especially birds laying eggs.

Newsome’s trope of taxonomy in “Birds and Manuscripts” borrows from the numerous field guides and manuals filling bookshelves at the turn of the century. Published in 1897, Wright co-authored with Elliot Coues the novelized field guide *Citizen Bird: Scenes from Bird-Life*, which, like Newsome’s work, targets mostly a child audience. Written in a narrative form, it follows Dr. Roy Hunter as he instructs four children (his daughter, nephew, niece, and Rap, a “country boy”) on how to study and identify various bird species around their orchard farm, including the Kingfisher bird—one of the species most prevalent in Newsome’s work. As the title suggests, Wright grants citizenship to birds and uses strategies of anthropomorphism to build the children’s identification with the birds. Dr. Hunter’s goal, he states, is to teach that “every bird you can find is such a citizen of this country” and to “show you why we should protect him” (52).¹⁰ The children, Dr. Hunter argues, belong to a world of urban “House People” who “grow selfish and cruel” unless they “visit the homes of the Beast and Bird Brotherhood, and see that these can also love and suffer and work like themselves” (12). Learning about nature also improves the humanity of the children. Dr. Hunter draws various analogies between birds and humans: nests are like homes where parent-birds take care of hatchlings, feathers are like clothes, etc. The book’s conservation politics, then, are clear: education of future generations in nature appreciation will lead to the expansion and institutionalization of bird protection.

Wright's book, however, targets *white* children, and like much of the children's literature at the time, it offers only racial stereotypes to black children. In *Citizen Bird*, Mammy Bun, an "old colored nurse," appears as a background figure used to punctuate various scenes. For example, after discussing their plans for the day's bird excursions, Mammy Bun appears with a "plate of steaming hot flannel cakes" at the end of one chapter, to which the Doctor proclaims "[n]ow let us eat to the health of Birdland and a happy season at Orchard Farm!" (86). The Mammy character is not invited to learn and explore, nor does she show an interest except for one scene where she describes the behavior of mockingbirds—long associated with African Americans, perhaps most notably in the characterization of all black poetry from Phyllis Wheatley to Dunbar as the "mockingbird school"—to the children (Gates 113). She speaks in the dialect style of Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus plantation tales or Jim in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). As the doctor's niece says, Mammy has a "sort of language all her own" (132). In describing the mockingbird's mimetic qualities, Mammy uses the minstrel stereotype of the "stealing darky"—a stereotype Washington put to use in his *Up from Slavery*: "[n]ow lots o' coon darkies dey uster steal de youn' Mockers jes' afore dey lef' de nest and sell 'em to white trash dat ud tote 'em down the ribber an' sell 'em agin in N'Orleans, to be fotched off in ships" (134). This anecdote refers to the feather trade, in which birds were hunted for bird-hats and entrapped as caged animals. It also points, as Jennifer Price has observed, to the classism of the Audubon movement that pitted bourgeois women against poor whites and blacks (97). Still, the use of dialect here draws on a white supremacist tradition of Jim Crow-era literature that Dunbar and other black authors tried, with controversial success, to appropriate in their own dialect fiction and poetry.

Writing against Wright's use of racial stereotypes, Newsome inflects her taxonomy with subtle racial critique, thereby "Signifyin(g)," in Gates's sense of "repetition with a signal difference," on texts of white women ornithologists (xxiv). Scenes of domesticity and motherhood in "Birds and Manuscripts" are not, as one might expect, marked by sentimental conventions, but rather a tragic revision of domestic tropes in nature writing: the "mourning dove's" home is a "pitiful nest of weeds" where she lays "colorless eggs" accompanied by her "plaint, 'Here's another new-u-u-found woe-o-o'" (90). This suggests, in some ways, the African-American literary tradition that associates childbirth with tragedy and despair because of the likelihood of a bleak future for the newborn, as in Georgia Douglass Johnson's "Motherhood," or later, much of Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry.

When Newsome speaks about enjoying the sparrow, she offers a positive valuation of a bird highly racialized at the time, for it was associated with "dirty" immigrants—a foreign nuisance according to nativist and segregationist discourses. During the late-nineteenth century Great English Sparrow War, which tried to eradicate the bird-pest, Elliott Coues performs what Fine and Christoforides call "metaphorical linkage," joining sparrows with urban blacks: "Washington harbors and encourages a select assortment of noise-nuisances—the black newspaper imps who screech every one deaf on Sunday morning; the fresh-fish fiends, the berry brutes [...]; but all these have their exits as well as their entrances; the Sparrows alone are tireless, ubiquitous, sempiternal" (382). In *Citizen Bird*, Wright and Coues deem English sparrows "detestable" (181), a "very bad" citizen who "ought to suffer the extreme penalty of the law" (182), "criminals" who are "condemned by everyone" (204), and a "disreputable tramp."¹¹ This rhetoric that denies citizenship to certain species follows an exclusionary logic of segregation that the civil rights movement sought to counter with a politics of inclusion.

In “Birds and Manuscripts,” Newsome also engages in a class critique of pastoral design involving access to “picturesque places” that “seemed only for the rich” (90). She sees “small sweet Sonora doves flitting from the Phoenix rich man’s olive groves to the pepper trees of my humble stopping-place” (90). A bird she pursues and observes on the wealthy property, however, is a class-blind “impartial friend” who “flutters reassurance” from “among the live-oak, maple or cotton-wood boughs” (90). She also refers, unexpectedly, to Native Americans—Apache and Hopi—as belonging to the spaces where sparrows and killdeer fly. Following on her own racial “peculiarity” in the classroom, as well as the class critique of the well-managed, pastoral estate, birdwatching becomes the occasion for solidarity among people of color, African and Native American: the impartial “birds befriend us all” (90). As Norwood argues, many writings by African-American and Native American women reflect a “shared tradition of organicism” and sense of solidarity cathected around nature (192). Eventually, for their “courage and care,” these birds play the role of teachers as well as friends: “I would have for teachers the robin and the oriole, symbols, respectively, of hardihood and subtilty [*sic*]” (“Birds and Manuscripts” 90).¹² Newsome portrays an inclusive community, where citizenship extends to all species, including sparrows.

Newsome persisted in writing light verse about birds, usually aimed at children, in *The Crisis* throughout the 1920s. While her black nationalist poems like “The Bronze Legacy” often use organic tropes, these poems simply describe the appearance and behavior of various bird species. “Pigeons,” “Chickadee,” “The Blue Jay,” “The Peacock Feather,” “Capriccio,” and “Bluebird” all center on birds—their brevity reminiscent of Imagism. Other bird poems include “Young Birds’ Mouths,” “Pigeons and People,” “Birds at My Door,” “The Peacock Feather,” and “The Wet Pigeon.”

First thank her, please, for making Swifts!” (ll. 17-20).

By appealing to the Swifts’ dark, rich, and deep eyes, which suggest the birds’ subjectivity or interiority, Newsome urges an affective, empathetic identification with the Swifts. In doing so, Newsome not only advances an appreciation for birds that may lead to activism in bird conservation, she also suggests that these concerns are intertwined with the racial politics of *The Crisis*.

Published in the February 1927 issue of *The Crisis*, Newsome’s “At the Pool” combines a pastoral idyll with a naturalist’s and entomologist’s eye for cataloguing insects. Consistent with many of her other poems, Newsome’s aims seem to be pedagogical: to teach nature appreciation from a poetic-scientific perspective. Her aims are also philosophical, for as Zeigler observes, “At the Pool” expresses the “world’s contradictions as well as its wondrous glories” (128). The first stanza, written in a conversational, almost defiantly prosaic style with a simple rhyme scheme, sets the pastoral scene and invites the child reader into its romantic vitalism:

I like to stand right still awhile

Beside some forest pool.

The reeds around it smell so fresh,

The waters look so cool!

Sometimes I just hop in and wade,

5

And have a lot of fun,

Playing with bugs that dart across

The water in the sun (ll. 1-8).

The speaker inserts herself into the landscape, modeling and encouraging fun interaction with the insects of the pool that also has educational benefits. In the second stanza, the pool becomes

and conservation that at first glance seem far adrift from the concerns of *The Crisis*. Such writings as “Birds and Manuscripts,” “The Satisfied Swifts,” and “At the Pool” indirectly engage the bird conservation ethos of the plume wars. They also critically signify on field guides like *Citizen Bird*, which contains racist stereotypes of African Americans and participates in a discourse of enclosure and segregation. Taken as a whole, these writings reveal the *pluralism* of New Negro politics and *The Crisis*, affirming the freedom of African-American readers to be concerned with something other than the “Negro problem.”

4. Conservation and Black Nationalism

Yet Newsome’s writings in the 1920s continually bear out a tension between explicitly promoting conservation and employing organic tropes in the service of black nationalism. Newsome’s June 1928 “Little Page” column, for example, draws on the machine-in-the-garden trope to condemn the pollution of paper mills in unusually direct and polemical rhetoric. She establishes a pastoral idyll by describing a bridge that crosses a creek, in which the leisurely stroller “look[s] out upon the silver and green waters” and “smell[s] the cool high waters in spring,” while cardinals are “flitting about the banks and haughty kingfishers enjoying their minnows” (“Little Page” 195). A paper mill interrupts this idyll: “[f]ish would perish in the stream of chocolate brown water with the white froth stirring dully on top, and people could be heard exclaiming, ‘That horrid paper mill!’” (195). The description suddenly turns to a toxic discourse, an aesthetic of pollution and ecological violence. When spring flowers tried to “perfume” the landscape, the “stealthy sickening smell would rise from the creek” (195). As though realizing her tone grows too angry for a child audience, she downshifts the pathos and describes the paper mill as, nonetheless, a deceptively “picturesque sight” that “sat so casually

upon the hillside with banks of trees that changed colors all year furnishing a rich background” (195).

Newsome’s poem “The Bird in the Cage,” which won honorable mention in *The Crisis* prize contest of 1926, returns to more recognizably Du Boisian political ground. This poem signifies on Dunbar’s “Sympathy” (1899) and seems cross-written for both child and adult audiences. Dunbar’s famous poem begins:

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!

When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;

When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,

And when the river flows like a stream of glass;

When the first bird sings and the first bud opes, 5

And the faint perfume from its chalice steals—

I know what the caged bird feels! (ll. 1-7)

The poem ends with the famous line, “I know why the caged bird sings!” (l. 21). As in much of Newsome’s poetry, Dunbar finds an objective correlative and allegorical figure for black suffering in the caged bird. The affect is, as the title declares, one of intense sympathy naturalized by the speaker’s spontaneous identification with the caged bird, which could symbolize slavery, Jim Crow, and the general carceral society of the South.

Another poem authored by an African American that uses the trope of the caged animal is Countee Cullen’s prize-winning “Thoughts in a Zoo” (1926), which appeared in *The Crisis* two issues prior to “The Bird in the Cage.”¹⁴ Cullen’s poem makes the analogy between imprisoned zoo animals and metaphorical human imprisonment explicit: “They in their cruel traps, and we in ours, / Survey each other’s rage, and pass the hours / Commiserating each the other’s woe” (ll. 1-

3). Yet the identification occurs between animals and humans *in general*, rather than specific minority groups: “That lion with his lordly, untamed heart / Has in some man his human counterpart” (ll. 7-8). The poem concludes with the question: “Who is most wretched, these caged ones, or we / Caught in a vastness beyond our sight to see?” (ll. 17-18). This couplet evokes the vertigo experienced by southern black migrants upon their arrival in northern cities, like King Solomon Gillis, the dazed protagonist of Rudolph Fisher’s “City of Refuge.” Humans’ metaphorical imprisonment is ironic: people are swallowed up in incomprehensibly vast space in what seems like a failed attempt to cognitively map the systemic processes of industrial capitalism in a sort of urban sublime.

Newsome revises this caged animal trope in Dunbar’s and Cullen’s poems by turning the structure of identification into a triangular relation and focusing on the violence of the bird beating against the bars of the cage:

I am not better than my brother over the way,
 But he has a bird in the cage and I have not.
 It beats its little fretted green wings
 Against the wires of its prison all day long.
 Backward and forward it leaps, (ll. 1-5)

Instead of simply identifying with the bird or condemning her fellow human, the speaker first identifies with her “brother”—which suggests an intimate, familial link—who occupies the same ethical playing field as the speaker: “I am not better.” In this way, too, Newsome revises sentimental women’s abolitionist literature, which tends to invoke a clear distinction between good and evil and apostrophizes against the evils of slavery. The “brother,” it seems, can be good if he just sets the caged bird free. Verbs such as “beats” and phrases like “all day long”

suggest not only the violence of captivity, but the persistence of the bird's natural will to freedom. The next few lines of the poem paint in idealized, pastoral strokes the freedom for which the bird longs:

While summer air is tender and the shadows of leaves
 Rock on the ground,
 And the earth is cool and heated in spots,
 And the air from rich herbage rises teeming,
 And gold of suns spills all around, 10
 And birds within the maples
 And birds upon the oaks fly and sing and flutter (ll. 6-12).

The variations and contradictions of the outside world represent freedom as mobility: the cool and heated spots, the tender summer air and rock on the ground, the welcoming abundance of the “gold of suns.” The free birds offer a joyous, affective counterpoint to the caged bird's struggle. The speaker then turns the focus back to the caged bird: “And there is that little green prisoner, / Tossing its body forward and up, / Backward and forth mechanically!” (ll. 13-15). The word “little” implies the prisoner's child-like vulnerability, while its behavior becomes increasingly denaturalized and mechanized. The limited, rigid movements—“forward and up” and “Backward and forth”—along with the word “mechanically,” also evoke factory workers under the conditions of Fordist assembly-line production. The speaker then establishes her identification with and sympathy for the bird:

I listen for its hungry little song,
 Which comes unsatisfying,
 Like drops of dew dispelled by drought.

O, rose bud doomed to ripen in a bud vase!

O, bird of song within that binding cage! 20

Nay, I am not better than my brother over the way,

Only he has a bird in a cage and I have not (ll. 16-22).

Newsome returns to a sentimental mode with the apostrophes and exclamations, yet the sentimental affect is nuanced by the repetition of the poem's opening lines, which stress ethical identification—a recognition of the brother's flawed humanity—rather than opposition. The owner of the caged bird is not “evil” but ignorant of what he is doing.

A few months before “The Bird in a Cage” appeared, Newsome subtitled a column of “The Little Page” “Something about Birds,” in which she focused on the trope of the caged bird. Newsome reads Dunbar's “Sympathy” literally instead of allegorically. Dunbar's poem demonstrates an empathetic identification with animals: he “could imagine what must be the feeling of the caged bird as he listens to the free birds singing about him, taunting in their boundless liberty” (“Little Page” 1926). While this may be a purposive misreading urging her child audience to look beyond the poem's political allegory, she gets more mileage out of the poem as *both* a call for racial uplift *and* a conservationist statement. She then turns to Leonardo Da Vinci, who, she recounts, “used to buy caged birds whenever he was able and set them free, and watch them with great joy flying into the turquoise skies of Italy” (“Little Page” 1926). She directly addresses the reader in rhyme, saying “you read of his art,” but should also “think of his *heart*” (25). Da Vinci becomes a figure of compassion in Newsome's attempts to teach conservationist values to African-American children. She then goes on to discuss cardinals, which were “once commonly sold in this country for cage birds.” She urges empathetic identification with the bird through the rhetorical strategy of anthropomorphism: “imagine gay

Sir Cardinal in his grenadier's hat as a prisoner." In this light, a reading of "The Bird in the Cage" nuances the political allegory by urging a more literal interpretation of the caged bird trope. Its dovetailing of Progressive-era conservation politics with African-American (and romanticist) tropes suggest parallels between that movement and abolition: one day the (presumably white) owner of the caged bird will realize what he is doing, and set the bird free.

Further developing conservationist themes, Newsome's poem "Mattinata" laments the lack of access city children have to the countryside, employing images of wildlife absence that anticipate Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. The poem's title is Italian for morning and it meditates on the dawn:

When I think of the hosts of little ones
 Who wake to a birdless dawn,
 Who know of no meadow that waits for them,
 No pool with its dragon flies
 All bathed with the silver of morning light 5
 Like the lights that flash on the pool (ll. 1-6).

For Newsome, to lose contact with a rural setting is to be deprived of something essential. It bespeaks a sense of absence and loss. The poem concludes:

I fear that the dawn's too rich for my share.
 I fear I have robbed some child
 Of the fragrance of dew, 15
 Of the birds' first notes,
 Of the warm kind light from God—
 All sent in tints of nasturtium blooms—

For the little red hearts of childhood (ll. 13-19).

The speaker moves into an adult role, expressing culpability for the child's life—the next generation—experienced without nature. She seems to be lamenting her inability to represent nature's sights and sounds, to render into words the “too rich” dawn for the city-dwelling child (l. 13). Again, Newsome affirms the value of nature. Apart from the focus on children, this poem reflects the ambivalence towards the city expressed in McKay's “To Work” and “When Dawn Comes to the City.”

Newsome's explicitly race-themed poems are perhaps her most anthologized and critically examined ones. Published under the name Mary Effie Lee, “Morning Light (The Dew-drier)” first appeared in the November 1918 issue of *The Crisis* before it became anthologized in Countee Cullen's landmark 1927 collection of Harlem Renaissance-era poetry *Caroling Dusk* and, later, *The Poetry of the Negro, 1946-1949*, edited by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (1949). As children's literature scholar Donnarae MacCann observes, this poem “makes reference to some of Newsome's strongest interests: childhood, natural history, Christianity, and her African heritage” (64). A highly alliterative free verse poem, “Morning Light” employs an extended metaphor that likens an African boy leading a European traveler through the wilderness to a future generation of African-American race leaders. Set in an African jungle, it fits well into the Pan-Africanist sensibilities of *The Crisis* and reflects the (unfulfilled) hope for civil rights advancement after the Great War. Newsome prefaces the poem with an explanation of its inspiration:

It is a custom in some parts of Africa for travelers into the jungles to send before them in the early morning little African boys called ‘Dew-driers’ to brush with their bodies the dew from the high grasses—and be, perchance, the first to meet the leopard's or hyena's

boy's bravery. The "dank dews" that "bathed" the black boy suggest a sort of ritual purification or trial, especially as these dews become "dews of blood" in the poem's final line. The peculiar personified night's "pregnant tears" evoke themes of black motherhood tinged with tragedy. These lines also play on "morning" as mourning—perhaps for the slave trade or the late-nineteenth century scramble for Africa—through which the black boy makes a "morning path," finds a way past the mourning of black history and to a new dawn.

The second stanza shifts from this particular scene to broader claims about the black diaspora as a whole, envisioning the dew-drier as the leader who will lead his race to future uplift:

Bathed in the blood of battle,
 Treading toward a new morning,
 May not his race—its body long bared to the world's disdain,
 It's schooled to smile for a light to come— 15
 May not his race, even as the dew-boy leads,
 Bear onward the world toward a new day-dawn
 When tolerance, forgiveness,
 Such as reigned in the heart of One
 Whose heart was gold, 20
 Shall shape the earth for that fresh dawning
 After the dews of blood? (ll. 12-22)

The thumping, alliterative first line—"Bathed in the blood of battle"—suggests both black Buffalo soldiers in the Great War and the metaphorical battle against Jim Crow. If black soldiers help secure democracy abroad, as the poem suggests and as race leaders like Du Bois hoped,

then they would gain democracy at home. The “body” of the race, which has been “long bared to the world’s disdain,” bears the marks of a traumatic history. But the face—“schooled to smile for a light to come”—looks to the future with hope. That the smile is “schooled” suggests that Jim Crow can be unlearned through the pedagogical tasks taken on by Newsome and *The Crisis*. The “dew-boy leads” because the next generation of children are the future of the race, perhaps the first generation to reap the benefits of full rights as U. S. citizens. Not only will the race be uplifted, but the whole world will: “May not his race, even as the dew-boy leads, / Bear onward the world toward a new day-dawn” (ll. 16-17). By ending with a question, the poem’s final lines suggest a hesitant hope. This poem does provide an example of Foley’s black nationalist organic trope. However, placed in the context of Newsome’s oeuvre and *The Crisis*, it also fits into a pattern of nature appreciation, of developing positive valuations of blackness in association with nature and showing how the African-American future is intertwined with the natural environment.

Perhaps Newsome’s most well-known poem, “The Bronze Legacy (To a Brown Boy),” first appeared alongside Georgia Douglass Johnson’s “Motherhood” in the October 1922 issue of *The Crisis*. The poem appears in the annual “Children’s Number,” among pages full of pictures of African-American infants and toddlers sent in by readers; its subtitle—“to a brown boy”—invokes its pedagogical aims. These special issues devoted to children combined writing for child as well as adult audiences, and “The Bronze Legacy” is an expression of race-pride typical of the 1920s and similar to Hughes’s “Earth Song.” The optimism of “The Bronze Legacy,” however, is balanced out by its juxtaposition next to Georgia Douglass Johnson’s ironically titled “Motherhood.” As Katherine Capshaw Smith observes, “Newsome’s upbeat voice occupies the same space as does Johnson’s pessimistic argument, a linkage that reflects the period’s

and twelve may show the poet's Methodism, the religious outlook seems more akin to Emerson's *Nature* (1836) and quasi-pantheistic, nineteenth-century Transcendentalism, which locates transcendence in immanence. In Newsome's poem, God expresses himself through nature: "God builds His strength in bronze" (l. 7). The poem's final line, as in "Morning Light," points strongly toward the future fulfillment of promise: "Brown has mighty things to do" (l. 14). This charge to the race reflects Newsome's and *The Crisis*' emphasis on educating children for the future of the race.

From her Little Page columns to "At the Pool," Newsome's multi-generic writings engaged political issues of the historical period that have not traditionally been accounted for by literary critics and historians of African-American literature: the plume wars, the Great English Sparrow War, bird conservation, and natural history and race. At the same time, she puts these histories and discourses into the unlikely context of *The Crisis* and its civil rights agenda. Natural history and conservation, in this context, become linked to problems of segregation and the naturalizing of racial difference. Newsome's work challenges these problems with the pedagogical aims of her writings, her taxonomies of bird species, her tropes of integrated nature, and the black nationalism of "The Bronze Legacy (To a Brown Boy)" and "Morning Light (the Dew-drier)."

In the process, her writings, along with those of other *Crisis* contributors interested in environments, complicate the politics of *The Crisis* by expanding the range of its political concerns. While attacking Jim Crow and promoting a politics of inclusion, *The Crisis*, guided by its editor, sometimes offered a productive alternative to the color-line problem. Its politics of nature aimed to both denaturalize racial difference, to challenge a discourse of enclosure and segregation, and engage natural history and conservation. By 1941, William Attaway would

develop this concern with conservation and natural history, combined with the versions of pastoral of McKay and Spencer, into a black Marxist “land ethic” in his Great Migration proletarian novel *Blood on the Forge* (1941).

NOTES

¹ From “Life without Principle” (1863). Thoreau continues: “What is the value of any political freedom, but as a means to moral freedom? Is it a freedom to be slaves, or a freedom to be free, of which we boast?” (369). In context, Thoreau targets wage slavery more than the institution of slavery itself, though he would certainly include slavery as part of his critique of the busy-ness of “business” and its reductive work-ethic ideology.

² This is not the same as Bruno Latour’s prescriptive and polemical use of the phrase in *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (2004).

³ Yolande is Du Bois’s daughter, who was briefly married to Countee Cullen.

⁴ Throughout her work Newsome mentions three nature writers, all men: John Burroughs, Dallas Lore Sharp, and Walter Prichard Eaton.

⁵ As Harlem Renaissance scholars have observed over the years, many of the movement’s luminaries spent most of the 1920s away from Harlem: McKay split his time living in Harlem, London, Marseille, Tangiers and other cities; Georgia Douglas Johnson lived in Washington, D. C.; Toomer was a perpetual wanderer as a proselytizer for the Gurdjieff movement; Spencer lived in Lynchburg, VA; and Wallace Thurman did not move to Harlem until 1925.

⁶ Though she cites no sources, Mary B. Zeigler paints a quite different portrait of Newsome as a mover-and-shaker: children’s librarian, elementary teacher, and organizer of the Boys of Birmingham Club (128). Zeigler notes that not much can be determined about Newsome’s life because a tornado destroyed her estate in 1974 (129).

⁷ The collection groups her poems into the following sections (in order): birds, Christmas, at the Creek, flowers, insects and spiders, lights, puppets and cookies, the skies, snow rain and wind, squirrel folk and others, trees, vegetables and fruit, and “we, the children” (ix-xiii).

⁸ Scholars usually periodize the Harlem Renaissance into two distinct phases, of which Locke’s change to the title of McKay’s militant sonnet “The White House”—a title that could be construed as a direct threat against the President—to the less incendiary “White Houses.” For Foley, the militant, masculine, and radical New Negro forged out of the Red Summer of 1919 gave way to the feminized, sanitized, cultural nationalism of Locke’s *The New Negro* of 1925. Indeed, 1930s proletarian portrayals of the “failed” Harlem Renaissance depict an effete, bourgeois Talented Tenth blind to the concerns of black masses. However, Newsome’s work does not seem to reflect this periodization.

⁹ Merchant traces a genealogy of this association in her classic study *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980).

¹⁰ Osgood Wright divides bird citizens into three groups according to migration patterns: Summer Citizens, Winter Visitors, and Citizens who stay at home (69-70).

¹¹ “Negro Spirituals,” an undated poem removed from *Gladiola Garden*, compares the singing of sparrows to slave music:

A race was bound in chains as slaves.

With freedom gone, there seemed all night.

And yet it made a song and sang.

In spite of all, it gave earth LIGHT.

Who sang so sweetly in the night? (K. C. Smith *Children’s* 220).

Dunbar wrote a poem called “The Sparrow” that also offers a positive valuation of the maligned bird: “A little bird, with plumage brown, / Beside my window flutters down” (ll. 1-2), and “So birds of peace and hope and love / Come fluttering earthward from above” (ll. 9-10).

¹² Newsome captures the pedagogical “message” of her “springtime friends” in her “book on the out-of-doors” (90). At this time, I cannot find this book, if it even exists. Newsome’s “Bird Romance” continues many of the themes and style of “Birds and Manuscripts.”

¹³ By “damoiselles,” Newsome probably means damselflies, which are similar to dragonflies.

¹⁴ The caged animal trope is reminiscent of English and German romanticism. William Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence” (1803) contains the lines: “A robin redbreast in a cage / Puts all heaven in a rage. / A dove-house filled with doves and pigeons / Shudders hell through all its regions” (ll. 5-8). In the late German romanticism of Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Der Panther,” the speaker observes a panther trapped in a zoo with a “mighty Will” that “stands paralyzed” (l. 8).

Chapter 5

From Black Marxism to Industrial Ecosystem:

Racial and Ecological Crisis in William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge*¹

1. Introduction

Known for its tragic portrayal of the early-twentieth-century Great Migration, William Attaway's 1941 novel *Blood on the Forge* follows in the naturalist and black Marxist tradition of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). As critic Philip H. Vaughan rightly assesses, one of the novel's central conflicts is the "clash between pastoral and industrial-urban living" (424), as it "becomes an angry repudiation of industrial life as destructive to human values" (422).

Employing both naturalism and pastoralism to dramatize this clash, Attaway curiously breaks out of these two representational modes through his use of a relatively minor secondary character named Smothers, a prophetic spokesman for the earth's pain: "[o]ne of the men whispered that Smothers was off his nut. Yet they listened and heard a different sort of tale: 'It's wrong to tear up the ground and melt it up in the furnace. Ground don't like it. It's the hell-and-devil kind of work'" (52-3). His legs dismembered in a brutal steel mill accident, Smothers's shrill prophecies are the product of wisdom gained through suffering, of a heightened sense of what the "ground" feels as it is mined, smelted, and made into steel. Because he brings an ecological perspective to the ethical and ontological relations among worker, machine, and earth, this character appears on the literary scene as an enigma not only for the Great Migration narrative, but also, perhaps, all of early-twentieth-century African American literature. Building on previous themes of urban

¹ A version of this chapter was previously published in *Modern Fiction Studies* 55.3 (Fall 2009): 566-95.

nature in Du Bois's *Darkwater* and Claude McKay's ghetto pastoral story "The Truant," this chapter explores this strange anomaly of Smothers and the distinctly ecological themes of *Blood on the Forge*.

Literary critics have acknowledged the importance of Smothers for articulating the novel's twin themes of machinic violence performed on worker and land. Edward Margolies goes the furthest in this direction when he conflates Smothers's worldview with Attaway's, arguing that the novel condemns "a kind of greed that manifests itself as a violence to the land, a transgression of Nature" (xiv). As with most of the literary texts examined in this dissertation, no critic has fully explored the ecological themes in *Blood on the Forge*, nor asked why a novel published in 1941 and set in 1919 should so strongly anticipate the various environmentalist movements that hit mainstream American cultural and political discourse in the 1960s. Perhaps this marginalization is due partly to the novel's critical reception and classification as African-American fiction, a category typically perceived as tackling social injustices rather than environmental causes. Lawrence R. Rodgers, for example, categorizes *Blood on the Forge* as a "fugitive migrant novel," a special variant of the Great Migration novel that challenges narratives about black migrants' socio-economic ascent in northern cities (98). In "Work and Culture: The Evolution of Consciousness in Urban Industrial Society in the Fiction of William Attaway and Peter Abrahams," Cynthia Hamilton focuses on the novel's seeming anti-urbanism, but she is primarily concerned with its lament for the decaying cultural forms that once sustained black life in the South. In "Migration, Material Culture, and Identity in William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge*," Stacy I. Morgan works within a migration narrative frame when she argues that the novel shows us how "material culture serves not only to *reflect* but to *shape* the lives of poor and working-class Americans" (715). Alan Wald reads the novel within the political context of the

late 1930s, calling Attaway a black Marxist “whose exertions were aimed in part at educating the white labor movement about the corrosive costs of continued racial chauvinism” (282). Wald cites Attaway’s involvement with the Communist Party as evidence for his strong political commitments, though *Blood on the Forge* reveals more an analyst of race and capitalism than a propagandist supplying cultural weapons for an American October Revolution.

We never see in *Blood on the Forge* the triumph of racial accommodation and assimilation, or the awakening of class consciousness. Set in 1919, when the First World War had cut off migratory flows from Europe and thus depleted the pool of cheap immigrant labor in northern industrial cities, *Blood on the Forge* follows the three Moss brothers—Big Mat, Chinatown, and Melody—as they migrate from the Jim Crow South to the industrial wasteland of western Pennsylvania. As historian Carole Marks pinpoints in her analysis of the Great Migration, northern steel mill employers saw that if they could maintain the influx of racially diverse labor, then they could rely on perpetual conflict to undermine organized labor (15). The narrative ends tragically with one brother dead, another blinded by a mill explosion, and the third with an injured hand that prevents him from “slicking away” his blues on the guitar. The two surviving brothers catch a train ride farther north to Pittsburgh proper, each feeling uncertain about his future. Attaway’s protest is bleak, even nihilistic, but it does testify to the singular experience of workers who might otherwise be lost in a Chicago School sociologist’s or proletarian novelist’s progressive narrative of racial assimilation: the Moss brothers do not pass through stages on life’s way towards unionization.

Great Migration narrative, naturalism, ghetto pastoral, and black Marxism: all of these frames, of course, help to illuminate the novel, but they also tend to downplay its central figuration of ecological degradation—a degradation comparable to the representations in the

work of Booker T. Washington, whose writing is similar to Attaway's in its *scientific* orientation. Building on these critical frameworks, this chapter argues that *Blood on the Forge* both complicates and radicalizes the Great Migration narrative and black Marxism by engaging in the same problematic as 1930s ecological discourses. This 1930s problematic consists of questions concerning the short-term and long-term effects of human activity on local and global ecosystems; thus, it focuses on the interaction between social and environmental history. Such an analysis of the novel requires a historical method that folds together its setting—the Pittsburgh area during the Red Summer of 1919—with its late Great Depression publication in 1941. The first half of this article, then, situates *Blood on the Forge* alongside a paradigm shift within 1930s scientific ecology—a shift partly demanded by human-made ecological catastrophes like the Dust Bowl. In 1935, botanist Arthur Tansley defined the “ecosystem” concept, which signified ecology's turn away from an organismic model of environments and towards what historian Donald Worster calls a more materialist “energy-based economics of nature” (*Nature's Economy* 306). As I will show, the shared materialist ontology of Marx's philosophy and Tansley's ecosystem ecology enfolds *Blood on the Forge*'s black Marxist with its ecological vision; its ecology is internal to and inseparable from its radical politics.

My subsequent reading of the novel examines how it refracts the highly industrialized and polluted Pittsburgh of 1919 through this materialist ontology, in the process not only paralleling but also participating in 1930s ecological discourses by linking ecological degradation to racial conflict and exploitative labor policies. The last section of this chapter focuses on how *Blood on the Forge* develops an ecological ethic that anticipates conservationist Aldo Leopold's “land ethic.” For Leopold, the land ethic encapsulates conservationist values, for it “changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member

and citizen of it” (“The Land Ethic” 240). Attaway’s ecological ethic, on the other hand, focuses more on the intersection of race, labor, and industrial capitalism than conservation per se; his ethic comes packaged primarily in the form of Smothers, who gives voice to what he calls the earth’s “feelin’” (53).

2. 1930s Ecology: A. G. Tansley and the Ecosystem Concept

1930s natural disasters and large-scale industrial pollution conspired with urban infrastructural problems and economic inequality to amplify the havoc, prompting ecologists such as Arthur Tansley to consider the blurred distinctions between economics and ecology, between human-made and natural disaster. For instance, the Dust Bowl made the Great Depression as much an ecological as an economic catastrophe. Beginning on April 4th, 1934, a large cloud of dust—nicknamed the “black blizzard”—swarmed out of Texas and dumped millions of tons of dirt on major cities ranging from Chicago to Washington, D.C. (Worster *Dust Bowl* 221). Partly the product of drought, more the bad karma of decades of poor farming practices that depleted the soil, the Dust Bowl was, according to Worster, the “inevitable outcome of a [capitalist] culture that deliberately, self-consciously, set itself the task of dominating and exploiting the land for all it was worth” (4). Like the Joads in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), poor farmers’ families—Dust Bowl refugees—were forced to travel west for work (Merchant 106). The Dust Bowl’s impact, like its origins, was as social as it was environmental; some ecologists were inspired by this confluence. For example, Paul Sears, author of the Dust Bowl history *Deserts on the March* (1935), later wrote about the crucial social function of ecology as a method for shaping human and natural environments in his 1939 *Life and Environment* (129).

Closer to the setting of Attaway's novel, this social-environmental confluence also erupts in Pittsburgh's 1936 St. Patrick's Day Flood, which exposed the consequences of poor urban planning. Over the course of two days in March 1936, heavy downpours added to rapidly melting snow raised the city's water levels to forty-six feet: nearly twice the height of flood stage levels. Trolleys, cars, and many homes were completely submerged or uninhabitable; some 15,000 people were marooned throughout the city (Lorant 359). When the waters receded, approximately 135,000 people had lost their homes, sixty were dead, and hundreds injured; the city suffered \$150 to \$200 million in property damage (370). This disaster revealed how regional planning and natural forces are especially intertwined in the unique geography of the Pittsburgh region. Situated where the Allegheny River from the north and the Monongahela River from the south converge to form the Ohio River, Pittsburgh had always left itself exposed to flood dangers. In fact, the city saw eleven major floods between 1832 and 1907 (Smith 8). In 1908, the city's Chamber of Commerce appointed a Flood Commission to assess the danger and develop a mitigation plan that would call for multiple protective measures, most notably the construction of nine flood control dams north of the city in the Upper Ohio River Valley. But on attempting to implement the plan in 1912, a conflict arose between the United States Congress and the city's local Corps of Engineers, who were wary of federal involvement in regional affairs (Kleppner 171). In an unpublished 1928 report, the Corps of Engineers secretly concluded that it would be more profitable to sustain flood losses than to build the dams (Smith 17). Moreover, the U.S. Congress stated that it would provide federal funding for the dam project only if it aided river navigation (14). After thirty years of gridlock and cost-benefit analyses, the Congress passed the federal Flood Control Act of 1936 and finally approved the plan in June of that same year, three months after the disastrous Saint Patrick's Day flood (Lorant 370).

Disasters such as the Dust Bowl and the 1936 Pittsburgh Flood accelerated scientific ecology's rise to prominence in the popular mind throughout the 1930s. By the start of the 1930s, and spurred along partly by the Tuskegee Institute's innovations in agricultural science, ecology was already an established academic discipline in the United States, centered in Midwestern universities like Nebraska, Chicago, and Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where William Attaway studied creative writing and took his degree in 1936 (Wald 281). Most of these schools borrowed their vocabulary from Frederick Clements, whose ideas are significant because they represent the paradigm from which fellow ecologist Arthur Tansley broke in 1935. A botanist at the University of Nebraska, Clements published the highly influential study *Plant Succession: An Analysis of the Development of Vegetation* in 1916. As Worster summarizes, "[c]hange upon change became the inescapable principle of Clements's science. Yet he also insisted stubbornly and vigorously on the notion that the natural landscape must eventually reach a vaguely final climax stage" (*Nature's Economy* 210). Clementsian discourse reflected an ontology grounded in late-nineteenth-century philosophical holism and organicism; he conceived of plant formations as organs within a "super-organism," as productive citizens functioning on behalf of a "community." These communities follow developmental stages known as "successions," which move toward a "climax state" or a final point of balance and stability (209-20). All the individual members seem to work harmoniously for the community, ushering it towards its highest evolutionary stage.

In his pivotal 1935 essay, "The Use and Abuse of Vegetational Concepts and Terms," British botanist Arthur G. Tansley (1871-1955) directly challenged the ontological roots of this Clementsian paradigm. Published in *Ecology*, the leading American journal in the field, Tansley's essay sought to replace the organicist premises of Clementsian ecology with a more

rigorous scientific materialism that drew from thermodynamics and systems theory (Kingsland 184). After critiquing, fine-tuning, and cordially dismissing a number of Clementsian concepts (succession, climax, organism), Tansley goes on to attack the organicist philosophy of holism that underpins these concepts. He argues that holism implies a closed system, a unified whole—the community or the super-organism—that acts on the parts; it is at worst a non-scientific transcendent vital principle, at best an analytic category without real agency (Tansley 298-99). But Tansley's goal, as historian Sharon E. Kingsland claims, was not to discard a sense of the whole, but rather “to express the concept of wholeness without falling into the circumlocutions of organicism” (184). To do this, Tansley borrowed the term “systems” from physics and substituted it for “community” and “organism” in order to designate “highly integrated wholes” that, crucially, included inorganic factors (Tansley 297). In other words, he both expands and limits the “whole” of Clementsian holism: he expands it to include non-living factors, while limiting it to the purely material parts of the various micro- and macro-systems that produce it.

Tansley was implicitly replacing an organicist with a materialist ontology, for he extended the field of the living to the non-living while dropping the organicist principle. A fusion of ecology and physics, this materialist ontology led Tansley to a neologism, “ecosystem,” that did not assume ontological distinctions among the organic, inorganic, natural, and human components of a given region or formation (299). Ecosystems form the “basic units of nature on the face of the earth,” and include such factors within the physical environment as climate and soil. He asserts the reliance of organic life on inorganic factors: “there could be no systems without them, and there is constant interchange of the most various kinds within each system, not only between the organisms but between the organic and the inorganic” (299). Most importantly, Tansley recognized that nature could not be studied apart from human interference, particularly

with the advent of industrialization: “[i]t is obvious that modern civilised man upsets the ‘natural’ ecosystems or ‘biotic communities’ on a very large scale” (303). Perhaps while thinking of Depression-era, human-made ecological catastrophes, Tansley bluntly states: “[r]egarded as an exceptionally powerful biotic factor which increasingly upsets the equilibrium of preexisting ecosystems and eventually destroys them, at the same time forming new ones of very different nature, human activity finds its proper place in ecology” (303). Ecology, in short, must apply itself to environments produced or manipulated by human activity (304). Worster further explains the concept’s materialist edge: “all relations among organisms can be described in terms of the purely material exchange of energy and of such chemical substances as water, phosphorus, nitrogen, and other nutrients” (*Nature’s Economy* 302). This turn toward what Worster calls an “energy-based economics of nature” would eventually take hold as orthodox ecology by the 1940s (306).

Although Tansley was himself politically conservative and a supporter of Herbert Spencer’s social Darwinism early in his career, the ecosystem concept’s ontological presuppositions bear striking parallels to the Marxist politics that inform Attaway’s novel. To understand these political implications, one must consider how the Clementsian paradigm derives directly from Spencer’s philosophy. In a political reading, Worster locates the origins of Clements’s ontology in the Spenserian ideology of social Darwinism that naturalized the capitalist mode of production (*Nature’s Economy* 212). For Spencer, profit could be analogized to the healthy growth of the organism, driving the progress and evolution of society toward a “more perfect state of complex organismic interdependence” (213). This vision of progressive evolution, of course, justifies the capitalist exploitation of more “primitive” social formations; it provided a convenient ideology for Europe’s late-nineteenth-century Scramble for Africa. It also

underpins Clements's theory of developmental stages toward a climax community. Just as Clements and Spencer shared the same ontology, so did Tansley and Marx share the same materialist ontology. In the first volume of *Capital* (1867), Marx defines labor as the metabolic exchange between humans and nature, a "process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature." Just as the human laborer confronts the world as a resistant "force," so too must he mobilize the "natural forces" that belong to his body, through which he acts "upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature" (283). Humans are an active part of nature, continually shaping and being shaped by natural, material forces.

This connection between ecology and Marxism was not lost on Attaway's contemporary, Kenneth Burke, a leftist literary critic. In his 1937 *Attitudes toward History*, Burke saw a latent politics in 1930s scientific ecology that was more Tansleyian than Clementsian. He found there a concealed Marxist critique of profit and exploitation: "[ecology] teaches us that the *total* economy of this planet cannot be guided by an efficient rationale of exploitation alone, but that the exploiting part must itself eventually suffer if it too greatly disturbs the *balance* of the whole" (192). While the notion of "balance" evokes Clementsian ecology, "total economy" suggests the human-nature material exchange found in Tansley and Marx. Speaking of 1930s ecological catastrophes specifically, Burke continues in a more distinctly Tansleyian vein: "laws of ecology have begun avenging themselves against restricted human concepts of profit by countering deforestation and deep plowing with floods, droughts, dust storms, and aggravated soil erosion" (192). Rather than encouraging natural growth, profit destroys the ecosystem, which then avenges itself on humans. The Tansley-Burke parallelism forms a sort of discursive chiasmus: Burke saw the need to bring ecology into historical materialism, while Tansley saw the need to

bring human (and by extension, social and economic) history into ecology. Attaway's novel is a narrative and theoretical extension of this chiasmus: it conceives of the relation between human and natural history, and pushes this relation through the Tansley-Burke crucible.

3. Carnegie Steel, Labor Policy, and Ecological Degradation

This section explains the economic, political, and racial factors that produced the Pittsburgh region's two main sources of pollution: industrial wastes and slum living conditions. Because of the sometimes decades-long temporal lag in environmental history (i.e. long-term ecological effects), this section, much like the *longue durée* framework of chapter one, covers much of Pittsburgh's "Steel Age," roughly the 1880s through the 1930s, providing some of the background for understanding *Blood on the Forge*'s historical specificity.

By the twentieth century, Allegheny County, or the Pittsburgh region, had grown into the world's leading iron and steel producer, owing much of its rise to Andrew Carnegie's entrepreneurial skill and the ready abundance of coke—fuel used for smelting iron and steel—in nearby Connellsville (Lubove 4). It also became a leading polluter. As Pittsburgh historian Roy Lubove says of the early-twentieth-century city, "[f]ew communities were so frequently compared to hell" (1). With its air pollution, disease-ridden slums, and rivers full of sewage and industrial waste, the region lived perpetually on the cusp of ecological catastrophe, turning extreme environmental conditions into an everyday way of life for its poorer black migrant and immigrant citizens.

The destructive and racist labor policies of Carnegie Steel (later U. S. Steel under J. P. Morgan), the leading steel manufacturer of the Industrial Era, typifies Pittsburgh-area business practices. Andrew Carnegie was the most well known of Pittsburgh's entrepreneurs and a figure

difficult to caricature as a one-dimensional, top-hat-wearing capitalist. His intuition for business put him in the vanguard of the industry shift from iron to steel manufacturing in the 1870s. He made millions from his Carnegie Steel, and by the time he sold it to J. P. Morgan in 1901, he was possibly the richest man in the world (Nasaw xii). According to his biographer David Nasaw, Carnegie's love for philanthropy and profit made him a paradoxical figure: the more he gave to the public the more he took from his workers. In order to finance his philanthropic enterprises, Carnegie "pushed his partners and his employees relentlessly forward in the pursuit of larger and larger profits, crushed the workingmen's unions he had once praised, increased the steelworkers' workday from eight to twelve hours, and drove down wages" (xi). Publicly, Carnegie cultivated the image of a reconciler between the contradictory demands of Capital and Labor; privately, he implemented anti-labor policies and delegated their execution to his subordinates. These anti-labor policies were most notoriously represented in his handling of the 1892 Homestead Strike, which resulted in the long-term dissolution of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers (Rees 518). Facing increased competition from rival companies, Carnegie decided to destroy the union at Homestead, hiring Pinkertons and entrusting union-buster Henry Clay Frick with the task. Frick refused to recognize the union, locked out the workers, and brought in scabs, which led to a violent clash between Pinkertons and strikers that left ten dead (526-7). After Homestead, the steelworkers' union took decades to re-emerge.

Carnegie's attitudes toward race followed a similar tension between philosophy and policy, between public statements and private contempt. His racism took the indirect form of white paternalism, sins of omission, and condescension towards workers. To be sure, Carnegie donated money to the Tuskegee Institute and publicly praised Booker T. Washington; yet he exemplifies the same white paternalism lampooned by Ralph Ellison in the figure of Mr. Norton

in *Invisible Man*. He reserves his prejudices mainly for immigrants rather than African Americans. In his *Autobiography*, Carnegie extols the manliness of the native-born “working man,” while brushing off the “queer” and effeminate “foreigner”: “[t]here is one great difference between the American working-man and the foreigner. The American is a man” (237). Presumably these foreigners are European immigrants originating from Slavic countries such as the Czechoslovakia, Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine. He conceives of American racial identity as primarily a mix of British and German ancestry—a notion, of course, with no basis in reality. Carnegie himself was Scottish and an avid Scottish cultural nationalist: he idolized and frequently quoted poet Robert Burns. But Carnegie failed to see a connection between his exploitative labor policies and his racial views. The industry shift from iron to steel allowed him to hire cheaper, lesser-skilled laborers, namely immigrants and, later, black migrants: “[w]hile iron had to be puddled by hand, technological innovations in steel mills made it increasingly easy to train immigrants and other less-skilled workers to replace skilled union men” (Rees 520). Inevitably, his contempt for labor unions would go hand-in-hand with his contempt for the lesser-skilled immigrant workforce.

Typified by Carnegie, the racial contempt of local elites for “foreign” laborers buffered the progress of urban planning, resulting in the formation of chaotic communities that resembled mycelia. First-generation European immigrants and black migrants made up a combined seventy-one percent of the workforce in 1910 (Dickerson 25); this number dropped to sixty percent overall by 1920, though with a ten percent increase in black workers (98). Because zoning laws were not passed until 1923, working-class communities were somewhat of a macabre experiment in “natural” living as they were left to sprout “organically,” free from the human intervention of rational planning. In his contemporaneous 1928 sociological study of northern city slums, T. J.

Woofter Jr. posits the formula “death by density” to characterize the proportion of death rate to population density (78). He blames land-exploitation and the profit motive for these death-by-density conditions:

Spaces that should have been occupied by single-family houses have been built up thickly with flats. In other places single-family houses have been built with a common wall, the effect of which is to eliminate side yards and to reduce the amount of light and of air-space to less than is necessary for health. Front yards have been eliminated by building flush on the sidewalk, and the rear yards have then been cut in two by alleys and secondary streets on which rows of houses have been built (88).

In Pittsburgh, a combination of hilly topography and greedy slumlords looking to reap high profits from small plots of land led to the construction of sardine-packed, vertical housing that allowed for little sunlight or open space (Lorant 369). Overcrowding was so rampant in many mill towns that workers often shared the same bunks, alternating according to shifts (Dickerson 56). Because they typically lived in areas four times denser than whites (Woofter 78), blacks were more adversely affected by slum conditions, enduring death rates almost twice as high as whites between 1915 and 1930 (Dickerson 58). Most homes lacked running water and sewage systems. In one neighborhood, Skunk Hollow, steel employees lived in dilapidated shacks built on steep slopes; inadequate toilet facilities sent human waste flowing downhill into the valley below (Lubove 14). Diseases thrived under these conditions, with frequent outbreaks of tuberculosis, typhoid, influenza, pneumonia, syphilis, and gonorrhea (Dickerson 59).

Companies such as Carnegie Steel treated the region’s air, rivers, and land as a dumping ground for industrial wastes, further contributing to this slum-generated ecological degradation. Pittsburgh’s transformation from a primarily iron-producing to steel-producing hub led to an

increase in coal burning, reinforcing the Steel City's second nickname: the Smoky City. Locals grew accustomed to blackened skies, even going so far as to equate Pittsburgh's high smoke levels with thriving industry, the visual measure of economic prosperity: a "smoky Pittsburgh is a healthy Pittsburgh," many would say (Lorant 364). In a 1912 article, "The Smoky City," John T. Holdsworth attributed the "smoke nuisance" to the profit motive and the low cost of coal, the burning of which was a "scourge to vegetation, a defilement of buildings and merchandise, and a positive check upon civic and industrial progress—all because it is cheap!" (86). Historian Dennis C. Dickerson describes western Pennsylvanian mill towns as so polluted that "street lamps glowed in midafternoon to chase away the darkness created by the smoke-filled skies" (55). A 1936 photograph for *Life* magazine, taken by Margaret Bourke-White, shows a sweeping bird's-eye-view of the city: murky and smoke-choked, more an industrial trash heap than a human dwelling, the city resembles a modern Gehenna (Lorant 364-5). The need for smoke control had been a long-debated urban planning and public health issue since the early nineteenth century, but the city government and local elites avoided action for decades; it finally passed the Smoke Control Ordinance in 1941, although demands for increased wartime production would delay its enforcement (Lorant 370).

These same factories that pumped smoke into the air dumped waste into the Ohio, Allegheny, and Monongahela rivers (Lubove 15). The process of mining the coal necessary to produce steel released a steady stream of sulfuric acid into the rivers; in 1920, 2.5 million tons of acid flowed into the Ohio River, destroying riverbanks and causing massive fish kills (Casner 89-92). The impact of acid drainage was extra-regional too, extending as far as 170 miles downriver (93). Company towns like Homestead beaded the three rivers as far as thirty miles from Pittsburgh's downtown; residents relied on the rivers for their water supply (Muller 54).

This dependence on polluted water won the region the dubious distinction for the highest mortality rate in the nation for waterborne diseases (Casner 93). Because of the lack of water treatment facilities, frequent typhoid outbreaks in the early 1900s killed working-class immigrant and black migrants at nearly twice the rate of native whites (Tarr and Yosie 70). These, in short, are the environmental conditions, produced by and intertwined with labor and regional planning policies, that form the historical backdrop to *Blood on the Forge*.

4. South to North: Soil Depletion to Industrial Pollution in *Blood on the Forge*

Attaway represents the subjective experience of this social and environmental history, forming an integrated vision of the Great Migration, industrial landscapes, slum life, and labor struggle. As I will show, in its scope and concern with ecological degradation, this integrated vision engages, on the aesthetic level, the same problematic as Tansley's ecosystem concept. The novel follows the four stages of the Great Migration narrative as schematized by Farah Jasmine Griffin in *Who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative*: migration out of the South, initial contact with the northern urban environment, an attempt to adjust to northern life, and finally a "vision of the possibilities or limitations of the Northern, Western, or Midwestern city and the South" (3). Each of these stages, which center on the migrants' changing consciousness, is given a particular ecological inflection in the novel, thus expanding the purview of both the migration narrative and the ecosystem concept. *Blood on the Forge* also contributes to black Marxism in its emphasis on steel production's intertwined, ecosystemic byproducts: a wounded earth, injured workers, and slum living conditions.

In the novel's opening section, Attaway emphasizes the slow, "natural" tempo of southern life, which later serves as a striking contrast with the jarring industrial rapidity of

northern life. Unlike the later parts of the novel, the opening section follows a dream-like flashback structure, as narrative form imitates the natural cycles of the Moss brothers' environment: the changing seasons, weather cycles, harvest time, and birth and death for both humans and nature. This pre-migration scene is set in 1919 Kentucky as the Moss family struggles to survive as sharecroppers. Richard Wright describes the sharecropping system's injustice in his 1941 photographic essay, *Twelve Million Black Voices*: “[t]he Lords of the Land [white landowners] assign us ten or fifteen acres of soil already bled of its fertility through generations of abuse. They advance us one mule, one plow, seed, tools, fertilizer, clothing and food” (38). Black sharecroppers, Wright explains, are forced into debt peonage, always bound more to their white creditors than to the land.

Racial and economic oppression in the South follows a predictable, though tragic, routine that allows the Moss family to cope by means of a blues stylization of life—one that “slicks away” hardship and cauterizes emotional wounds. Melody, the emotional glue that holds the family together, embodies this blues ethos in the novel's opening sentences: “[h]e never had a craving in him that he couldn't slick away on his guitar. You have to be native to the red-clay hills of Kentucky to understand that” (Attaway 1). Melody laments the family's wretched condition in a song called “Hungry Blues”:

Done scratched at the hills,

But the 'taters refuse to grow....

Done scratched at the hills,

But the 'taters refuse to grow....

Mister Bossman, Mister Bossman,

Lemme mark in the book once mo' (3).

The first four lines characterize failed agricultural labor as futile “scratching,” a practice that becomes even more futile in the final lines when the black sharecroppers fall into deeper debt to the white “bossman.” The hint of sarcasm in the final lines reveals Melody’s awareness of the white creditor and black debtor economic relation that determines the farmer’s relation to the land. Two forms of inscription—scratching the land and marking the book—also racialize the land as white, shaping the ecosystem into an extension of a hostile creditor.

Despite this failure at laboring the land, the blues offer a form of resistance—if only at an intuitive, sensory level—to the endless white creditor-black debtor cycle that dominates the family’s relation to the land. Through Melody, the blues are articulated to the land, offering a black vernacular counter-racialization of a land systematically racialized by white property owners. Melody cuts through this property relation and holds onto an affective bond to the earth: “[r]ight then Melody was feeling the earth like a good thing in his heart” (22). This affective bond suggests an immediate link between laboring the earth—between the black sharecropper’s literal propinquity to the soil—and the vernacular tradition of country blues that Melody embodies. Seemingly because of his blues sensibility, Melody intuits that no one owns the earth: “I got a big feelin’ like the ground don’t belong to the white boss—not to nobody,” he proclaims to Big Mat (22). This sublime moment even escapes the codifying force of the blues: “[e]very once in a while he would get filled up like this with a feeling that was too big to turn into any kind of music” (23). He says this while trekking across Vagermound Common, which borders the Moss farm plot, representing for the brothers a geographic and metaphoric horizon that offers a model and promise of common land. Unlike Booker T. Washington’s emphasis on private property acquisition, Attaway places value on common ownership and the subjective experience of the land. These two factors—Melody’s blues and close proximity to unenclosed,

public land—allow the brothers access to some sense of nature unmediated by racism and capitalism.

Attaway further racializes the land through a counter-pastoralist mode of representation. The Kentucky landscape is neither wholly a pastoral ideal nor an anti-pastoral reality; it is marked by both natural beauty and racial violence, doubling as safe haven and potential lynching site. Crab-apple trees are analogous to African-Americans; they populate and racialize the landscape: “[m]ost of the country beyond Vagermound Common was bunched with crab-apple trees, posing crookedly, like tired old Negroes against the sky” (7-8). They seem to follow Big Mat like ancestral guardians: “[a]gainst the dark sky the darker crab-apple trees kept pace with him as he walked” (16). The nighttime landscape resembles a color-blind society, an insight suggested by Melody: “[a]t night the hills ain’t red no more. There ain’t no crab-apple trees squat in the hills, no more land to hoe in the red-hot sun—white the same as black” (11). That in daytime the crab-apple trees “squat in the hills” is significant: it suggests that they are hiding from a lynch mob: “[h]iding in the red-clay hills was something always in the backs of their heads. It was something to be thought of along with bloodhound dogs and lynching” (35). Nature at night offers refuge and cover from racial antagonisms that appear naturally embedded in the daytime landscape. This scene, then, reveals the brothers’—and by extension, all black sharecroppers’—contradictory relation to nature and the pastoral.

This ambiguous pastoral scene is disrupted by a series of traumas that eventually render the pastoral condition unlivable for African Americans. For example, Big Mat’s wife Hattie, a human analog to the barren and eroded land, has miscarried six children six springs in a row, leaving the couple childless. While Hattie’s miscarriages appear “natural,” Attaway hints that they most likely have an economic origin: the constant references to the family’s chronic hunger

and diet of white pork, molasses, and saltwater cornbread imply that Hattie suffers from malnutrition. This suggests an ontological link between human and non-human forms of failed reproduction: childbirth and land cultivation. Also, the novel ties infertility to a naturalized masculine as well as feminine identity, portraying Big Mat as a Job-like figure suffering from a double “castration”: his simultaneous inability to escape an emasculating economic system and to “harvest” children. When Big Mat travels north, Hattie stays behind with the land, as though she were permanently rooted to it, forgotten by the brothers as they struggle to adjust to northern life.

Through a flashback, the narrative recounts the novel’s primal, traumatic scene: the mother’s death at the plow:

She had dropped dead between the gaping handles of the plow. The lines had been double looped under her arms, so she was dragged through the damp, rocky clay by a mule trained never to balk in the middle of a row. The mule dragged her in. The rocks in the red hills are sharp. She didn’t look like their maw anymore (7).

The sharecropping system, which forces the mother to help labor the fields, and soil erosion, which leaves the ground hard and rocky, conspire to amplify the trauma of her death. Dragged across this eroded, rocky terrain, her body is mutilated beyond recognition.

Although the mother’s bodily mutilation may seem an unfortunate “natural” accident, soil erosion itself is a byproduct of an economy that exploits and destroys the ecosystem. In *Twelve Million Black Voices*, Wright attributes soil erosion to rampant deforestation:

We [...] watch the men with axes come through [...] and whack down the pine, oak, ash, elm, and hickory trees, leaving the land denuded as far as the eye can see. And then rain comes in leaden sheets to slat and sour at the earth until it washes away rich layers of top

soil, until it leaves the land defenseless, until all vegetation is gone and nothing remains to absorb the moisture and hinder the violent spreading floods of early spring (78).

Poor farming methods were also a culprit in soil erosion; the widely practiced one-crop (usually cotton or tobacco) system, as opposed to the crop rotation system advocated by agricultural scientist George Washington Carver at the Tuskegee Institute (discussed in chapter one), quickly depleted soil nutrients. Environmental historian Albert E. Cowdrey states: “any system which covers too many fields with the same plant falls afoul of the ecological principle which states that the simplest systems are apt to be the most unstable” (79). Big Mat complains about this erosion to Mr. Johnston, the white landlord: “[w]ind and rain comin’ outen the heavens ever’ season, takin’ the good dirt down to the bottoms. Last season over the big hill the plow don’t go six inches in the dirt afore it strike hard rock” (14). Johnston faults nature rather than the system from which he profits, but, fearing his tenants will migrate north for better work, he decides to replace the mule Mat killed in an angry outburst after his mother’s death (15). When he goes to retrieve the promised mule, Big Mat lashes out at Johnston’s “poor white” riding boss for insulting his dead mother. A recruiting agent or “jackleg” from the north offers the Moss brothers a convenient escape from the lynch mob that will inevitably come after Big Mat; the jackleg arranges for them a free train ride to the steel mills of western Pennsylvania (31). Originating in racism and poor environmental conditions, trauma and its aftermath catalyzes the brothers’ move to the north.

Attaway focalizes the subsequent descriptions of Allegheny County’s polluted industrial landscape—everywhere marked by human traces—through the agrarian eyes of the Moss brothers. It is in these northern scenes that parallels to Tansley’s ecosystem concept become more apparent. Immediately upon their arrival, the brothers wander about their new home, an

unnamed steel mill town along the Monongahela River that reminds them of an “*ugly, smoking hell out of a backwoods preacher’s sermon*” (45). They see the land as the victim of a giant agricultural machine:

A giant might have planted his foot on the heel of a great shovel and split the bare hills. Half buried in the earth where the great shovel had trenched were the mills. The mills were as big as creation when the new men had ridden by on the freight. From the bunkhouse they were just so much scrap iron, scattered carelessly, smoking lazily. [...] None of this was good to the eyes of men accustomed to the pattern of fields (43).

Mixing shock and awe, the lyrically beautiful and the industrially damned, this passage draws parallels and differences between micro-agricultural and macro-industrial modes of production. The image of the giant’s “great shovel” conflates a farming tool that would be familiar to the Moss brothers with the awesome power of dynamite to “split” the hills as a farmer would furrow a field. When seen from up close, the mills appear to be steel-producing monsters; from a distance, they shrink to mere bits of litter or “scrap iron,” suggesting that their power and size are not so great compared to the vaster landscape. This image of a wounded earth also echoes a poetic conceit used by John Milton in his description of Pandemonium in *Paradise Lost*: “Soon had his [Mammon’s] crew / Opened into the hill a spacious wound / And digged out ribs of gold” (1833). By linking the industrial environment with the Christian hell, Attaway suggests that tormenting the material landscape also torments human spirituality or subjectivity. This objective-subjective, material-spiritual dialectic is mediated by aesthetics: the eyesore landscape assaults the brothers’ sense of what nature is, and thus disturbs their own inner nature or *habitus*. Veteran steelworkers use the slang term “green men” to designate these fresh-eyed proletarians-

in-the-making, easily spotted because they are not yet habituated to their surroundings; their inner nature is not accustomed to the outer.

Not only the land but also the rivers are polluted. Attaway describes the Monongahela River where it converges with the Allegheny River to form the Ohio: “[i]n back of [the Moss brothers] ran a dirty-as-a-catfish-hole river with a beautiful name: the Monongahela. Its banks were lined with mountains of red ore, yellow limestone and black coke” (43). Echoing T.S. Eliot’s lament for the trashy Thames River in *The Waste Land*, Attaway envisions the Monongahela under the strain of industrial waste; its beautiful, iambic Native American name serves as a distant reminder of its pre-industrial past. Ore, limestone, and coke are the raw materials needed to manufacture steel, the sediment of an industrial era.

To amplify and anthropomorphize the river’s horrors, Attaway sets the riverbank as the scene of a violent sexual assault. A gang of boys, as if playing a game, rape a ten-year-old girl they call “ol’ Betty”: “[t]wisting and turning, a furious little figure [Betty] was dragged away to the tall weeds up the riverbank. The weeds tossed violently and then trembled for a little time” (99). While this scene typifies the naturalist novel (people reduced to animal-like behavior by their brutal environment), it also connects ecological damage to sexual violence. Like most of the working class immigrants in the area, Betty is probably Slavic. Her image condenses the simultaneous exploitation of a feminized immigrant workforce and a feminized nature. It also places her on a sort of sexual assembly line that mechanizes the sexual act itself.

Just as steel production requires violence to the landscape and rivers, so too does it maim and terrorize the steelworkers. Even though the workers operate the machines, they are still, like the land, tormented by their violence. After the brothers’ initial contact with the landscape, Attaway proceeds to connect their aesthetic experience with the labor experience. Still absorbing

their new environment, the brothers listen to the testimony of mill workers. Attaway structures these accounts according to the verse-chorus pattern of a work song, as the workers' attitudes collectively speak in a refrain: "[w]hat men in their right minds would leave off tending green growing things to tend iron monsters?" (44). Individual accounts of violence on the job separate these refrains. A worker recounts how one non-English-speaking Slavic immigrant could not understand shouted warnings of an impending accident, leaving him with a "chest like a scrambled egg" (44). Another calls one machine a "skull buster," because it involves dropping an eight-ton steel ball on scrap metal, sending shrapnel flying everywhere and often wounding or even killing workers unfortunate enough to stand in its deadly path (45). One black worker, Bo, warns the brothers to be careful because the employers like to put green men on the "hot jobs before they know enough to keep alive" (52). "Hot jobs" refers to those working the Bessemer furnaces, the most dangerous jobs in the mill. These tales of machinic violence and terror reinforce the literal meaning of the novel's title: steel cannot be made without the crucial ingredient of human blood.

For the brothers, life off the job proves as potentially violent and disabling as life on the job. The division between work and home is blurred, not just because of the close proximity between housing and the mills, but also because of the seepage of industrial pollutants into the living space that this proximity enables. The accounts of polluted slums imply the interconnectedness of ecosystemic processes. The air is heavily polluted by the massive amounts of burning coal; Chinatown complains, "[a]ll this smoke and stuff in the air! How a man gonna breathe?" (46). The workers do not care whether they work the night or day shift, for the dense smoke blocks the sunlight: "[t]hey did not like the taste of sooty air. They missed the sun" (54). The town's infrastructure is almost non-existent: in one enclave there is only one water pump for

fifty families (47); people urinate in the streets because the outhouses smell too bad (51); feral dogs and rats scurry around “Mex Town” (69); and kids toss around “kerosene-soaked balls of waste” for sport (152).

Garbage heaps are one of the novel’s strongest ecological motifs: they block the makeshift dirt roads, forcing pedestrians to scramble over them; they segregate Slavic from black enclaves, acting as eco-racial barriers. There is no system for domestic waste removal. The brothers have two significant encounters with a garbage heap, notable especially for their place in the narrative. The first encounter occurs when Chinatown and Melody get lost while exploring their new neighborhood. Hoping to pinpoint their position, Chinatown climbs the heap and attracts the attention of some Slavs: an “old Slav bent like a burned weed out of the window. [...] With eyes a snow-washed blue, he looked contempt at Chinatown. Then he wrinkled his nose and spat” (49). This contempt turns to hatred near the end of the novel when the all-white union prepares to combat black strikebreakers. As Melody passes from an increasingly hostile Slavic enclave to his home, he encounters the heap again:

He had known that the big pile of ashes and garbage would be in his path, but now it seemed to hop suddenly in front of him. He was too tired to change direction and walk around it. [...] He stepped into the soft stuff around the edges of the mound and struggled to the top. The brittle ashes broke under his feet. [...] A tin can left a burning streak across one of his ankles (211-12).

Melody climbs this heap under the gaze of the Slavs. It is as though the boiling racial hostility is embodied in the uncanny agency of the trash heap as it “hops” in his path; the tin can that cuts his ankle appears as a weapon-like extension of the Slavic gaze. If the heap symbolizes the

“waste” that Melody’s life is becoming, it is a symbol that also literally embodies the racial barriers that prevent the brothers from assimilating to the union and joining the strikers.

As suggested in the Mosses’ initial encounter with the industrial landscape, each brother’s response to his new environment dramatizes the lived subjectivity of the steel mill ecosystem. Sickened and tormented by the relentless heat on the “hot jobs,” Melody no longer feels the strength, let alone the inspiration, to play the blues: he is worn down by the strange new “rhythms of the machinery play[ing] through his body” (80). When he does have the time and energy to play, he strums “quick chords” and adopts a “strange kind of playing for him, but it was right for that new place” (62). While he does occasionally succeed in translating the rhythms of his new environment into music, this “new music” is “nothing like the blues that spread fanwise from the banks of the Mississippi” (63). While the rhythms of the steel mill work to undermine the slower tempo of country blues, twelve-hour shifts eventually leave him too tired to even play; thus Melody loses his ability to emotionally heal himself and those around him with music. Out of a subconscious impulse, Melody smashes his right hand, his “‘picking’ hand,” in one of the machines (127). Attaway suggests that this “accident” is intentional, as Melody is tormented by his failing blues: “[h]e had been thinking of the guitar, knowing it could never pluck away the craving that was in him. [...] The last three days of picking at his guitar had wearied him. Yet he knew he would not be able to let the music box alone” (128). Melody’s brother Chinatown is similarly affected by work in the mills. After he is blinded by a major blast furnace explosion, Chinatown is, like Melody, emotionally defeated. Reduced to a state of helplessness, he depends on Melody and a Mexican prostitute, Anna, for constant emotional and physical consolation.

While Melody and Chinatown are physically and emotionally destroyed by their encounter with the machines, Big Mat thrives in his new environment. The classic Marxist contest of worker versus machine runs aground in Mat's perfect functioning as a steel worker. The other workers' attitudes towards the Bessemers reflect Marx's dictum about mechanized labor: "the instrument of labor, when it takes the form of a machine, immediately becomes a competitor of the worker himself" (*Capital* 557). When the typical new migrant first encounters the large-scale machines, his attitude is one of despair at the impossibility of his ever matching the labor-power of the machines. By contrast, Big Mat identifies more with the machines than with his fellow white workers, for they allow him to flourish in a way denied him by Jim Crow: "[i]n competition with white men, he would prove himself." While many workers faint from the heat, Big Mat "proved to be a natural hot-job man," finding his "natural" rhythm in a world of machines and performing at twice the speed of any other worker (Attaway 78). In direct contrast to Melody, Big Mat's muscles and body achieve a rhythmic coordination with the machines, expressed in metaphors of musical and natural growth: "[h]is muscles were glad to feel the growing weight of the steel. The work was nothing. Without labor his body would shrivel and be a weed. His body was happy. This was a good place for a big black man to be. [...] Mat's muscles sang" (80). This musical metaphor, which indicates Mat's success—expressing the harmony with machines—inverts the parallel narrative of Melody's failed blues. This inversion sets the destructive potential contained within Mat's identification with the machines against the creative potential of the blues in Melody's identification with the southern soil. On this level, one can read Attaway's novel as a *bildungsroman* of a mechanized subject, of a man becoming machine and thus becoming a destroyer of the ecosystem and, eventually, himself.

As embodied in Big Mat, this link between machinic and racial violence becomes more pronounced in the novel's climactic strike scene. As the all-white union plans to strike and picket against the mill owners' brutal policies, Big Mat is deputized and hired to help suppress the white workers. In the historical 1919 strike, black deputies served a particularly useful function for the mill owners as strikebreakers and promoters of racial discord. According to the testimony of an organizer for United Mine Workers, black deputies "started a reign of terror in the town [...]. Men were jostled along the street at the points of pistols, and men were struck down and shot down" (qtd. in Dickerson 91). Through Big Mat and free indirect discourse, Attaway imagines the subjective state of these black deputies. While assisting some other deputies to corner a group of strikers, Big Mat relishes the terror he inspires: "[t]he absolute terror in these people made him feel like flinging himself on their backs and dragging them to the ground with his teeth" (Attaway 215). The authority that comes with being a deputy heals Big Mat's "ruptured ego," for it gives him a "sense of becoming whole again" and completes the self-realization that began with his superior performance on the hot-jobs (212). The thought of being an authority figure also fuels Big Mat's fantasies of avenging himself on whites: "[a]ll of his old hatreds came back and added flame to his feeling. [...] He was the law. After all, what did right or wrong matter in the case? [...]. He was a boss, a boss over whites" (196-97). With scathing irony, Big Mat's anger and resentment towards whites makes him the perfect instrument of terror, played by the very powers that oppress him. Once the strike begins and the furnaces start to cool down because there are not enough workers to keep them burning, Big Mat single-handedly tries to keep the machines functioning, as he "rush[es] madly about the yards, knowing that only his will would keep a fatal crack from their big, brittle insides" (213). This impossible effort shows the extent to which Big Mat has himself become a machine. Only as he dies, after a

Slavic striker delivers a blow to his head with a pickax, does Big Mat glimpse the reality that in siding with the mill owners and in becoming a machine, he has become an agent of oppression.

5. Smothers and Aldo Leopold: Towards an Ecological Ethic

While Big Mat lacks the critical awareness to evaluate and challenge his immediate environment, Smothers, a relatively minor character, opens a space for ecological and ideological critique. Because of Smothers, *Blood on the Forge* in many ways exceeds the scope of essayist and environmentalist Aldo Leopold's more well-known articulation of a land ethic. The main tenets of Leopold's land ethic evolved throughout the course of the 1930s, particularly in three key published lectures, "The Conservation Ethic" (1933), "Land Pathology" (1935), and "A Biotic View of the Land" (1939). These lectures were substantially revised and sutured into "The Land Ethic," his most influential work and the final essay of his 1949 book *A Sand County Almanac*. Indeed, Donald Worster claims that the book's famous concluding essay would become "the single most concise expression of the new environmental philosophy" that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s (*Nature's Economy* 284). Ultimately, Smothers is a sort of "crazy" black environmentalist who anticipates the trajectory of Leopold's thought by arguing for the ethical relation between human and non-human. But they differ in two crucial ways. First, Attaway approaches such an ethic from the perspective of anti-capitalist critique rather than conservationism, which leads to a more human-centered focus that strongly correlates worker and public health with land health. Second, the novel criticizes an entire network of productive relations that are more global in scope than is Leopold's preoccupation with certain regions in the United States.

Along with Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) occupies a central place in ecocriticism's canon of American environmentalist writers. He worked as a forester for the United States Forest Service in New Mexico from 1909 to 1928, founded the preservationist Wilderness Society in 1924, and developed the game management profession, for which he received its first professorship at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1933. A theory wrung from practical experience, Leopold's land ethic received its first test run over a decade earlier in "The Conservation Ethic," a lecture delivered in 1933 and later published in the *Journal of Forestry* (Meine 302). As biographer Curt Meine argues, Leopold's purpose was to seize the vanguard of the conservation movement and add philosophical teeth to its calls for land-use reform measures (303). Drawing attention to the interdependency of human and environmental history, Leopold finds it strange that "[t]here is yet no ethic dealing with man's relationships to land and to the non-human animals and plants which grow upon it. Land, like Odysseus' slave-girls, is still property" ("Conservation" 182). He cites numerous inefficient uses of land across the American Midwest and Southwest, all showing how "unforeseen ecological reactions" can "condition, circumscribe, delimit, and warp all enterprises, both economic and cultural, that pertain to land" (185). The ethic he then proposes amounts to the extension of rational planning to nature in order to realize a vision of "controlled wild culture" (190-1). Using musical metaphors later echoed by Attaway, he calls for the "harmonious integration" of economics and aesthetics, business and culture, in a new orientation towards land that treats it as "not only a food-factory but an instrument for self-expression, on which each can play music of his own choosing" (191). By advocating a conservation ethic, Leopold aims to change minds first; politics and economics will follow.

Leopold's 1935 lecture "Land Pathology" again argues for an integrated economic-aesthetic land-use facilitated by public-private partnerships, with higher education serving as intermediary ("Land Pathology" 213). Though in this essay he uses the phrase "land ethic" for the first time, "land pathology" is the central concept: "[r]egarding society and land collectively as an organism, that organism has suddenly developed pathological symptoms, i.e. self-accelerating rather than self-compensating departures from normal functioning" (217). The "machine age" is to blame for launching the "self-accelerating" destruction of the land—accelerating because temporality of the ecosystem's self-replenishing cycles is thrown out of joint. A later address delivered in 1939, "A Biotic View of the Land" shows Leopold taking up Tansley's ecosystem concept for the first time (Flader and Calicott 7). He considers organic and inorganic parts of an environment systemically organized into a "biotic pyramid" or food chain that facilitates the flow and conversion of energy. The biotic pyramid is a visualization of the ecosystem's metabolism, a structure in which land is "not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals" (Leopold "Biotic" 268). Leopold characterizes the technological interruption of this flow as "biotic violence," against which conservationists must promote a "nonviolent land use" (271). In a parallel to Woofter's death-by-density formula, Leopold correlates human population density with biotic violence: "a dense population requires a more violent conversion of land" (270).

In his final mature formulation of the land ethic in 1948, Leopold challenges profit-driven conservation, the kind promoted in Washington's *Working with the Hands* which advocates conservation on economic rather than ethical grounds. Leopold's argument depends on the premise that "the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts" that must cooperate in order to survive (239). Human beings must participate in the "biotic community" as

citizens rather than conquerors, and take individual responsibility for the “health” of the land (240). Reflecting scientific ecology’s 1930s and 1940s turn towards systems theory, thermodynamics, and physics, Leopold argues that the biotic community forms an intricate and delicate “energy circuit,” and human violence to this circuit has “effects more comprehensive than is intended or foreseen” (255). Though not a philosopher, Leopold basically extends a Kantian ethic to the entire field of the living, arguing that the “land”—soil, water, plants, and animals—should be treated as an end-in-itself. In ecocritical parlance, the land ethic is now understood as a form of ecocentric rather than anthropocentric thinking, one that places environmental concerns on par with human ones.

As articulated via Smothers, the ecological worldview of *Blood on the Forge* anticipates and further develops Leopold’s ethical vision. Smothers gives voice to the earth’s suffering, speaking as though the earth were itself an organic, living entity:

‘It’s wrong to tear up the ground and melt it up in the furnace. Ground don’t like it. It’s the hell-and-devil kind of work. Guy ain’t satisfied with usin’ the stuff that was put here for him to use—stuff of top of the earth. Now he got to git busy and melt up the ground itself. Ground don’t like it, I tells you. Now they’ll be folks laugh when I say the ground got feelin’. But I knows what it is I’m talkin’ about’ (53-4).

Sounding like a fire-and-brimstone preacher, Smothers ascribes a kind of uncanny agency and affectivity to the “ground,” suggesting that it will eventually avenge itself against humans. His protest registers a radical shift in intensity from agricultural cultivation of the earth to the outright violence of industrial exploitation. Margolies ties this view to an early-nineteenth-century romanticism, one that condemns the capitalist “greed that manifests itself as a violence to the land, a transgression of Nature” (xiv). He goes on to caution that “[f]rom one point of view

[Attaway's] feelings about the sanctity of nature now seem almost quaint in an age of cybernetics," though, he adds, this critique does not devalue the novel's relevance to the global environmental crisis (xviii). Smother's poetic raptures about nature could also be an instance of the organic trope, described by Foley, but in this case the trope serves a purpose beyond asserting black nationalist identity.

Part prophecies, part philosophical meditations, Smothers's rants are, however, neither simply romantic nor pastoral anachronisms. Smothers's reference to the earth's "feeling" actually adds to the novel's overall, distinctly materialist understanding of the relations among worker, earth, and machine. "Feeling" in this context cannot simply be explained as an anthropomorphism, for Smothers refrains from projecting distinctly human emotions onto the earth. Rather, Smothers's use of the word in this context resembles Brian Massumi's notion of "affect" as defined in his book, *Parables for the Virtual* (2002). Massumi draws a distinction between emotion and affect, defining the former as a reification and humanization of the later. "Emotions," such as anger or jealousy, can be named and brought within the bounds of language and human experience (28); they are, as he says, a "subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal" (28). By contrast, "affect" refers to a pre-personal intensity, felt but never entering consciousness or getting caught in linguistic shackles (36). This means that affect as intensity exceeds the domain of strictly human experience and arises out of the interface between bodies, human or non-human (25). Because "affect" applies to all beings, it forces us to reconceptualize the categories of the human and the non-human as forming an ontological continuum, much like Tansley's ecosystem concept.

Smothers's sense for the earth's feeling reveals his heightened, almost scientific sensitivity to the material process of steel production, a multi-step process of mining, melting, and manipulating iron to produce an alloy. When asked how he knows what the ground feels, Smothers responds: "[s]ame way I hears bridges talk in the wind" (64). Attuned to the slightest changes in the affectivity of steel-making, Smothers repeatedly warns his co-workers about the destructive power of the machines and is able to anticipate a blast furnace explosion. Though his co-workers think that Smothers's prophecies are only half-mad, shrill rants, Attaway goes out of his way to invest him with a "strange dignity" and characterize him as a Tiresian speaker of truth. For example, one morning Smothers warns a group of Irish and Italian workers before they start the day's work on the blast furnaces: "[e]ver'body better be on the lookout. Steel liable to git somebody today. I got a deep feelin' in my bones" (145). Initially, the workers tease Smothers, but when he recounts his own tale of getting struck by a hot steel bar, leaving him permanently disabled, laughter fades to shocked silence. Smothers's prophecy does prove true when the blast furnace explodes, leaving fourteen men dead, including himself, and Chinatown blind. His feelings prove superior to the mill's "experts," none of whom could predict the accident. As the narrator comments: "[b]ut steel workers also felt the truth of Smothers' last words: steel just had to get somebody that day. There was no conflict between what Smothers had said and the facts" (160). By granting agency to the ground, Smothers sees that biotic violence leads to violence against the worker: ecological degradation can lead to industrial accidents, understood as the land avenging itself against humans.

This ethic differs from Leopold's in that it also serves as a form of ideology critique. In Louis Althusser's classic definition, "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (109). In the world of *Blood on the Forge*, these

“real conditions” can be understood as the interdependent relations within the ecosystem itself. Above all, Smothers’s insight into these real conditions grows out of a change in his material relation to his physical environment: the steel plant where he suffered a crippling injury years before. Through the enhanced perception acquired with his disabled body, Smothers unveils the dependence of all human bodies on the external, inorganic environment—an axiom of both Marx’s materialist ontology and ecosystem ecology. The disabled body, in other words, shows forth the *real* relation of all human bodies to what Marx calls the “second body” of nature: “[n]ature is man’s *inorganic* body—nature, that is, in so far as it is not itself the human body. Man *lives* on nature—means that nature is his *body*, with which he must remain in continuous intercourse if he is not to die” (*Manuscripts of 1844* 74). Smothers is able to reveal the layers of mediation that conceal the real conditions of the steel worker’s existence. To suggest this mediation, he uses the terms “ground” and “steel” interchangeably, which not only establish the material consistency between the two substances but also suggest that a land ethic is inseparable from the circulation of commodities made from the land. Steel is the ground given commodity form: mined iron is melted in the Bessemer converters, and then shaped for (in most cases) railroad tracks or structural components for skyscrapers or bridges. Stripped of mediation, steel—and the living the workers make from its manufacture—is intimately bound to the “heart of the earth”: “[a]ll the time I listen real hard and git scared when the iron blast holler to git loose, an’ them big redhead blooms screamin’ like the very heart o’ the earth caught between them rollers. It jest ain’t right” (53). Smothers’s intuitive “rightness,” then, condemns this particularly violent disruption of the material relations among interdependent parts of the ecosystem on which the capitalist mode of production, in reality, depends.

As suggested above, the novel's ecological ethic also takes the problem of commodity fetishism in an ecological direction. Again substituting spiritual metaphors for a material process, Smothers speaks of a "cuss 'o steel" or cursed steel (64). This "curse" suggests the material consistency obscured by the ground's transformation into the commodity form: the steel is haunted by and infused with the ground, its true origin, which now appears to take on its own agency. This agency or curse is distinct from the imaginary agency that commodities in the marketplace seem to have; it is literally the volatility introduced by the ground's chemical alteration, its being-towards-commodity. It refers to the ground's surplus yet substantive counter-agency produced simultaneously alongside steel's illusory agency as an exchangeable commodity used for railroad tracks, structural components, armaments, etc. It is as though the commodity form is haunted by an earthly residue that makes itself felt unpredictably and in the future: the earth threatens to blast apart the commodity at any moment. Indeed, the blast furnace explosion is itself caused by a surplus byproduct, a residue left over from the production process: "[a] shelf of hot metal had built itself high up in the faulty furnace. When that shelf had broken the force of its fall had been explosive" (160). Just as the worker's blood goes into the forge, so too does the earth's: an industrial accident is here reframed as an ecological one. More precisely, the industrial accident is an unpredictable future event that has its origin in the past violence done to the land. To memorialize Smothers, his co-workers ritually turn the steel scraps from the accident into watch fobs, which they wear around their necks for luck (168). In so doing, the workers give the steel a ritual value that escapes the logic of exchange value; these scraps open up a space for resistance, insofar as they signify the workers' communal bonding.

After the accident and Smothers's death, this critique of steel-making is extended to a critique of biotic and racial violence on a more global scale. Perhaps so as to register a shift in

the workers' consciousness—with the watch fobs serving as material signifiers of that shift—the narration itself seems to gain a heightened awareness of the connection between steel and the ground. On the narrative level, it seems that Smothers is ritually sacrificed for the sake of more direct commentary on steel production as a globally interdependent process:

The nearness of a farmer to his farm was easily understood. But no man was close to steel. It was shipped across endless tracks to all the world. On the consignment slips were Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, rails for South America, tin for Africa, tool steel for Europe. This hard metal held up the new world. [...] Steel is born in the flames and sent out to live and grow old. It comes back to the flames and has a new birth. But no one man could calculate its beginning or end. It was old as the earth. It would end when the earth ended. It seemed deathless (179-180).

This passage places steel within both the global economy and the global ecosystem. As an export, it moves from national—the three major U. S. cities—to intercontinental distribution. Used primarily for railroad tracks and large buildings, steel literally serves as the material base for the “new” modern world. The apparent contradiction between steel’s “birth” in flames and its immortality is reconciled through its analogy to the earth. Insofar as steel is converted earth, the two substances are coterminous but not the same. Steel appears to the workers as part of the earth’s natural cycles, although it is the product of a historically-situated mode of production. That steel only “seemed deathless” becomes clear when the strike proves effective at halting production (213).

While steel goes out into the world, the world migrates to Allegheny Valley: European immigrants and Southern black migrants turn the steel mills into a miniaturized global space, a space that combines moments of misrecognition and mutual recognition. Labor flows where raw

materials are extracted from the earth, producing rifts among the various races and nationalities that make workers' lives as volatile as the hot Bessemer furnaces. Indeed, the collision of cultures, races, and subjectivities lead to violence analogous to biotic violence. Big Mat's slaying of a Ukrainian immigrant during the labor strike is framed as a tragically ironic, global event: "[h]e had never been in the South. He was from across the sea. His village was in the Ukraine, nestling the Carpathian mountains. From that great distance he had come to be crushed by hands that had learned hate in a place that did not exist in his experience" (231). This discontinuity between the origin of anger and its release is contrasted by the novel's final scene of mutual recognition between a blind Chinatown and a blind World War I veteran. Aboard a Pittsburgh-bound train, Melody and Chinatown sit across from the veteran: "Melody looked from the soldier to Chinatown. Two blind men facing one another, not knowing" (235). After bumming a cigarette from Chinatown, the veteran informs the brothers that before the war he was a steel worker. He claims to hear guns in the distance, "'maybe a hundred miles'" away, "'cannon guns, bigger 'n a smokestack'" (237). Whether or not the sound is actually real, to the soldier "it was like a big drum somewhere in the valley" (236). The imaginary sound seems to originate from both the steel mills and the distant European battlefields of World War I. Again, steel manufactured for war armaments places it in a global context that also suggests a link between armed soldier and steel worker, between casualties of war and casualties of industrial accidents.

6. Conclusion

Attaway's narrative ultimately suggests that, under industrial capitalism, the biotic violence done to the earth is reproduced at the ideological level as racial discord, with labor serving as the mediating factor. Whether performed by animals, humans, or machines, labor is a

material process that, in *Blood on the Forge*, divides the earth through the appropriation of natural resources; likewise, race divides labor through management's (e.g. Carnegie Steel's) divide-and-conquer policies of exploiting racial differences and resentments. In one of Smothers's speeches, steel appears to have the ability to affect worker subjectivity and amplify interracial conflict:

Steel want to git you. Onliest thing—it ain't gittin' you fast enough. So there trouble in the mills. Guys wants to fight each other—callin' folks scabs and wants to knock somebody in the head. Don't no body know why. I knows why. It's 'cause steel got to git more men than it been gittin' ... (53).

On one level, this passage mystifies the true causes behind worker conflict. The violence Smothers speaks of is racial violence, not the mystical power of steel on workers' emotions. Scabs are black migrants shipped in by management to break strikes, for management's policy preys on white animosity towards blacks. On another level, however, it suggests that biotic and racial violence are linked through acceleration—"gittin' you fast enough." If negligence contributes to the blast furnace explosion, it is a negligence that accelerates production levels at the expense of worker safety. The more production accelerates the more resources must be extracted from the ecosystem, interrupting its self-replenishing cycles, and thus contributing to the destabilization of the system. The destructive logic of the profit motive eventually unhinges the whole production process, including its material substratum (the earth).

Despite the ubiquity of ecological crisis in American history, Americanist scholars of the 1930s literary Left and African American literature, with few exceptions, have often sidelined scientific ecology's relevance to a Marxist and Marxian narratives of American literary history. Of all the African American environmental writing examined in this dissertation, Attaway's

novel is by some measure the darkest and most despairing in its depiction of how overwhelming systemic forces crush the worker and the land. Yet unlike Washington in *Up from Slavery* and *Working with the Hands* who champions a model of profit-driven conservation for the sake of racial uplift, Attaway advances an ethical orientation towards the earth, not so much for its own sake, but as a glimpse of an alternative to capitalism. Like the 1927 Mississippi Flood, *Blood on the Forge* shows that ecological crisis, taking an industrial capitalist form, has already occurred along the color line in places such as Allegheny County.

Conclusion:

African-American Ecocriticism and the Global:

J. A. Rogers's *Nature Knows No Color-Line*

Invoking Booker T. Washington's 1902 Tuskegee address, "Getting Down to Mother Earth" (discussed in the first chapter), the title of Joel Augustus Rogers's 1952 book about the history of racial mixing is *Nature Knows No Color-Line*. In much the same spirit Washington writes, "nature draws no color line" ("Mother Earth" 343). A Jamaican-American, Rogers was an influential Harlem Renaissance journalist, self-trained historian (he never attended college), and contributor to *The Messenger*, *The Crisis*, and *The New Negro* anthology. He spent his life exploring the meanings of the concepts "race" and "nature," culminating with his ambitious, evolutionary argument for racial mixing in world history advanced in his later works. In addition to its wide-ranging influence, Rogers's oeuvre also serves as a watershed for early-twentieth-century debates about nature and race—debates that tended either to naturalize or de-naturalize racial categories. Beginning with his Boasian critique of scientific racism in *As Nature Leads* (1919), Rogers continues to develop his thesis in *The New Negro* anthology piece "Jazz at Home" (1925), in which he argues that jazz erupted out of a distinctly modern American environment, and the Schopenhaurian, three-volume *Sex and Race* (1941-44). This body of work contains a problematic that ranges from the emerging science of ecology, to racist discourse, to the ideology of nature. Despite these achievements, Rogers's contributions evaded many contemporaneous scholars, perhaps due to his controversial claims and eccentric methods. Thabiti Asulkile calls Rogers's work a "type of controversial, frenetic research" (35) that became required reading at the University of Chicago—a school that refused his admittance as a student

(49). Nevertheless, Du Bois gave Rogers his blessing: “no man living has revealed so many important facts about the Negro race as has Rogers. His mistakes are many and his background narrow, but he is a true historical student” (Du Bois *World and Africa* xi). Rogers may not be as polished as formally-trained historians, but that should not diminish the value of his insights into race.

The title of *Nature Knows No Color-Line* might seem blasé to ecocritics and critical theorists in general today, either a product of an era that overused “nature” or a pernicious ideology. “Nature,” after all, is a term that Raymond Williams, in his *Keywords*, deems “perhaps the most complex word in the [English] language” (219). From all corners of critical theory, there is the call to make nature as a concept disappear, from Slavoj Žižek’s assertions that there is no nature, to Timothy Morton’s “ecology without nature,” “dark ecology,” and “queer ecology,” to Steven Vogel’s *Against Nature*, the concept of nature has been thoroughly debunked as mere ideology. Their arguments are right philosophically, but sometimes black intellectuals, writers, and leaders *are* actually talking about and invested in nature, as this dissertation has shown. This debunking does not change the fact that, historically, many writers and intellectuals themselves *believed* in nature, including Booker T. Washington, Du Bois, Newsome, and J. A. Rogers.

An expansive, almost manically grandiose inquiry into “Negro ancestry in the white race,” *Nature Knows No Color-Line* seeks not just to de-naturalize racial difference but to affirm the naturalness of racial mixing. It seems at first that Rogers makes the same tired arguments about racial mixing that anti-racists had been making for decades. However, as a work emerging in the aftermath of World War II, they are just as prescient in 1952 as they ever were. The Nazi obsession with racial “purity,” it seems, would make attacking various American fascisms urgent

in the aftermath of the Holocaust and on the eve of the Civil Rights movement. Rogers even points out the irony of “Negroid” features and genetics in the Nazi German population, along with the relatively decent treatment of German Negroes allowed to remain in the country, not out of racial tolerance, but because they taught African languages to Hitler’s military officers (132). Rogers establishes a strong link between Africans and Jews. It was the Jews who “brought in much Negro strain” into the white race (63). Through intermarriage, most of the “Negro strain in Northern Europe and Russia was taken in by the Jews” (122). Karl Marx, who, according to Rogers, physically resembles Frederick Douglass, “undoubtedly” came from “Negroid stock” (130). The examples go on and on. The sheer accumulation of anecdotal and scientific evidence about racial mixing give the book the aura of authority of one who wants to quash the ideology of racial purity once and for all.

Nature Knows No Color-Line, then, is a work firmly rooted in its time, if not a bit behind 1952. Rogers advances a form of environmental determinism when he claims that “[e]xterior differences as color, hair, facial form are adaptations to climate, which, in turn, is determined by the amount of sunlight” (3). But he does not extend climate to character, as most environmental determinists do. These external differences are mere secondary features that say nothing about the development of a race’s intellect and culture. Rogers goes beyond merely asserting the thousands-year history of racial intermixture and advances a radical racial pluralism—a sort of chaos theory of race and nature in which the “evident truth is that each human being is a ‘race,’ a variety in himself—a variety through which runs fundamental unity” (3). Another one of Rogers’s targets is the pseudoscience of physiognomy, which interprets a person’s character by her external, physical traits, especially the face (17). Originating centuries ago in India (according to Rogers), this practice took hold in the American South and it proved the perfect

ideology for establishing “Negro inferiority” in order to justify the slave labor needed for the production of tobacco, cotton, and sugar (Rogers 20).

Nature Knows No Color-Line places the problem of race and nature squarely in a world-historical and global context. It concerns itself with the African Diaspora and not just African Americans, though there is a sort of African-American exceptionalism that influences Rogers’s thinking. Rogers traverses global space: Spain and Portugal, Greece and Turkey, Italy and Germany, France and England, America south and north. He traverses time: ancient Greece and Rome, medieval Europe, the Renaissance, and the Jim Crow South. He discusses cultural artifacts from Shakespeare’s *Othello* to coins from ancient Greece (108; 33). In a chapter on intermixture of whites and blacks in ancient Rome, he claims that “Rome was a melting pot second in variety only to the United States and Brazil” (43). Racial mixture is as ancient as it is modern. In Roman literature, he says, Negroes were attacked for their race far less often than Greeks, Syrians, and Jews, showing that the antipathy towards Negroes is a product of capitalism and whiteness a modern invention, as Du Bois also argued in “The Souls of White Folk” (48). In this critique of race as a capitalist construct, *Nature Knows No Color-Line* anticipates aspects of Robinson’s argument in *Black Marxism*. In the book’s conclusion, Rogers employs an organic trope to characterize the mixing of black and white: the “two may be pictured as streams which flow one into the other, blending little by little until the color of the smaller yields to that of the larger” (212). Whiteness is merely the predominance of the white “stream,” which also carries with it the smaller stream of blackness. This stream, we assume, does not care for national borders.

The world-historical approach of Rogers reinforces the need for an African-American ecocriticism to think beyond the nation-state. If nature knows no color line, then it knows no

borders either. The call for a transnational “turn” in ecocriticism has been going out since the first decade of the twenty-first century and has continued into the next decade. Like the Americanist field before it, ecocriticism has arguably been transnationalized. “Ecology of the Color Line,” however, realizes that national borders actually do matter, at least in an American context, for differing economic practices and governmental policies will, over time, produce starkly different landscapes. What if, for instance, the sharecropping economy and Jim Crow practices were not allowed to continue in the South? The southern landscape of overworked soil and cotton monocultures, which led to the Dust Bowl storms of the 1930s, might have looked very different had the North not lost Reconstruction. But the global and the local interpenetrate, and the nation cannot police its borders against the global, as ecocritics like Buell and Ursula K. Heise argue. As Buell puts it, “[s]pecies have been migrating ever since life on earth began. Individual states have never effectively legislated against disease, toxic fallout, plant and animal invasions” (“Ecoglobalist Affects” 227). For Heise, the difference between the local and national, the national and global, is a problem of scale. In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, she claims that “climate change poses a challenge for narrative and lyrical forms that have conventionally focused above all on individuals, families, or nations, since it requires the articulations of connections between events at vastly different scales” (205). This same problem of scale can apply to the difference between African-American writing and the literature of the African Diaspora in relation to the global ecological crisis.

If the United States is ironically both the world’s leading exporter of carbon emissions and environmentalism (at least in its preservationist form), then resolving this paradox might also involve examining African American literature and culture. Buell succinctly states the negative exceptionalism of American-led globalization: “U.S. eco-globalist consciousness emerges in

symbiotic tension with, first, the rise of imperial commerce and then of entrepreneurial capitalism, both perceived in succession as world orders in which the nation is destined to play a central if not *the* central role” (“Ecoglobalist Affects” 238). For such an exceptionalism, one must ask what is global about African-American literature and exceptionalism, or African-American ecocriticism. Postcolonial ecocritic Rob Nixon contends that the U.S. environmental justice movement contains the “greatest potential for connecting outwards internationally—to issues of slow violence, the environmentalism of the poor, race, and empire” (5). Crucially, however, an environmental justice criticism applied to the Global South must learn that “the *correlation* between oppressive racism and environmental contamination does not of itself clarify their interconnection” (Garrard 11).

Many of the textual analyses in “Ecology of the Color Line” seek to go beyond mere correlations and the texts themselves can be revisited as global / local intersections. Claude McKay’s “Tropics in New York,” analyzed in depth in chapter 3, can be considered an ecoglobalist text. The poem superimposes two geographical places: tropical Jamaica and a Manhattan market. McKay’s “Cities” sequence, composed in the 1930s, is ecoglobalist for its place-specific descriptions of various cities in America, Europe, North Africa, and Russia in what I call McKay’s transnational localism. Du Bois’s “Of Beauty and Death” shifts between the American West and Paris during the First World War. Washington’s black environmental reconstruction and politics of ecological agency can find a more global form in his collaborative work with Robert Park on European working-class living conditions in *The Man Farthest Down* (1921) or in his deal with the German empire to export the Tuskegee curriculum to African colonies such as Togo, which Andrew Zimmerman describes in *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the South* (2010). Park’s later

sociological essays such as “The City,” “Human Ecology,” and “The City as a Natural Phenomenon,” studied human interaction with and within natural and built environments, adapting the methods of ecology to sociology. Before Chicago and Tuskegee, Park condemned the Belgian atrocities in the Congo while working for the Congo Reform Association from 1904 to 1915. Park’s life work, intersecting with Washington’s, traversed the American South and the Global South.

Another example of an ecoglobalist text, Richard Wright’s 1954 travelogue, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*, documents the decolonization of the British Gold Coast, the newly independent Ghana under the rule of Kwame Nkrumah. It is a narrative haunted by the labor and ecological turmoil not only of colonialism but the subsequent phases of decolonization and rapid industrialization. Wright describes sewage problems in the capital city of Accra, poverty in the former colony’s many slums, and Nkrumah’s Akosombo Hydroelectric dam project on the Volta River. Wright’s highly nuanced accounts, both celebratory and critical, portray not only a colony but an ecology in transition. What happens in Ghana is a combination of Soviet-style rapid industrialization (though on a micro-scale) and what Nixon calls “slow violence,” which is “neither spectacular nor instantaneous but instead incremental, whose calamitous repercussions are postponed for years or decades or centuries” (1). The ecological degradation that Washington combated in the post-Reconstruction South resulted from the slow violence of slavery and sharecropping. Continued exploration of African-American writing and ecoglobalist texts needs to be done.

“Ecology of the Color Line” has argued that problems of ecology, of nature, of “double environments” play a significant role in the development of early-twentieth-century African-American writing, including the racial uplift debates, black periodicals such as *The Crisis*, New

Negro poetics, and the Great Migration narrative. Ecology, nature, and conservation were appropriated and refashioned for the political aims of civil rights, black nationalism, and black Marxism. But sometimes, too, they were interested in natural history or conservation for their own sake. This interest in nature also shows that African-American writers are more pluralist, aesthetically and politically, than most scholars indicate. “Ecology of the Color Line” helps deepen our understanding of the culture of the civil rights and environmental movements in twentieth-century America. Ultimately, this project has tried to make some historical sense of how the color line—the “problem of the twentieth century”—gets drawn to what Du Bois might today call *the* problem of the twenty-first century: the ecological catastrophes that already do the most violence to the poor and people of color in the United States and beyond.

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