

New Directions in African American Ecocriticism

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Sonya Posmentier, *Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 304pp.

Lindgren Johnson, *Race Matters, Animal Matters: Fugitive Humanism in African America, 1840–1930* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 212pp.

John Claborn, *Civil Rights and the Environment in African-American Literature, 1895–1941* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 216pp.

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The past two decades have seen an increasing ecocritical engagement with African American literature and culture, creating what some have called an “African American ecocriticism.” While this term seems problematic—it does not capture influences beyond African American studies and ecocriticism, e.g. from fields like postcolonial ecocriticism or Black Geographies, and appears to suggest a kind of ecocritical “subfield”—the body of scholarly work included under this label has grown considerably. Apart from a pioneering essay collection edited by Mayer (2003) and major studies, e.g. by Smith (2007), Outka (2008), or Ruffin (2010), an increasing number of scholarly articles has contributed to shaping a field that is marked by a set of characteristic ideas. There is, for example, the common assessment that the environmental dimensions of African American literature may only be addressed through broader definitions of what we mean by “environmental”; a shared perspective on intersections between environmental degradation, race, and other forms of oppression; or an often-found “tragic view” of African American relations to nature, which (over)emphasizes trauma and alienation (Claborn 7). The recent publication of the three monographs under review, by Sonya Posmentier, Lindgren Johnson, and John Claborn, gives an opportunity to reexamine some of those ideas and highlight current developments in the field. In diverse ways, the three studies provide new directions that substantially expand the scope of African American ecocriticism.

Sonya Posmentier’s *Cultivation and Catastrophe* (2017) continues the field’s tradition of employing broad terminology, stating the need to “think of ecology in a broader sense” (214) and work with a wide definition of “lyric.” Theorizing and tracing what Posmentier calls “lyric ecologies” in twentieth-century Caribbean and U.S. writing and music, the capacious study adds an important new perspective through its

theoretical framework, which draws on writers like Sylvia Wynter, Édouard Glissant, and Kamau Brathwaite, and through its transnational scope and postcolonial lens.

In two main parts, Posmentier uncovers an alternative lyric history through what she reads as two “intersecting frameworks for approaching black diasporic experiences” (5): cultivation and catastrophe. “Part 1: Cultivation” explores how the language and concepts of cultivation shaped diasporic experience, producing new subjectivities. While the first chapter turns to Claude McKay’s sonnets via the “provision ground,” the plot on the edge of the plantation, to suggest a diasporic consciousness in the New Negro movement, Chapter 2 juxtaposes the metaphoric negotiation of the provision ground in mid-century Caribbean magazines to developments in the U.S., where Posmentier sees a “reterritorialization” of “black writing in the city” (88). Chapter 3 continues the study’s detailed dissection of entangled yet distinct developments in U.S. and Caribbean writing by reading Derek Walcott’s “The Star-Apple Kingdom” as an imagination of the Caribbean as “a space of dwelling rather than ownership” that suggests the destructiveness of property relations (104).

“Part 2: Catastrophe” is devoted to musical and poetic responses to environmental catastrophe, stressing the temporal, sonic, and collective dimensions of such responses in creating diasporic “archive[s] of black culture” (223). In Chapter 4, Posmentier turns to the Mississippi River floods of 1927, arguing that responding through songs and poetry provided new ways of thinking time by portraying the flood’s “continuing catastrophe” (152). A related temporal dimension of catastrophe lies at the heart of her reading of the literary storm in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) in Chapter 5. Interpreting the novel in conjunction with sound recordings, Posmentier intriguingly argues that Hurston portrays the storm through a rhythmic shift to “lyric time” and “diasporic sound” to express a collective experience of disaster (178). Chapter 6 explores such expressions in the more recent past considering Jamaican artistic reactions to the 1988 Hurricane Gilbert. While demonstrating that Lloyd Lovindeer’s dancehall hit “Wild Gilbert” performed collective cultural work through a critique of Jamaican class structure, Posmentier views Brathwaite’s poetry as a “diary of water” that contextualizes the hurricane’s destruction within a larger diasporic history of migration and displacement.

Both main parts of *Cultivation and Catastrophe* offer key insights: whereas Part 1 demonstrates how the geography of the plantation shaped modern lyric content and forms, Part 2 suggests that although environmental catastrophe has threatened black culture, it “also occasioned its production” (159). Although one might wonder how “intersecting” Posmentier’s two frameworks might truly be, and fear a loss of focus in a treatment of both African American and Caribbean traditions, it is precisely here that we may locate major strengths of *Cultivation and Catastrophe*, which speaks to the fields of eco-poetics, new lyric studies, and postcolonial ecocriticism, as well as to African American ecocriticism. By revealing connections between African Americans and Caribbean people as “common inhabitants of an heterogeneous zone” (5), and highlighting a longstanding diasporic lyric ecological presence, Posmentier’s study stresses a transnational dimension that needs to be more thoroughly taken into account

in African American ecocriticism. Additionally, the claims of the second part have broader implications as they emphasize the importance of turning more attention to alternative epistemologies and interconnected temporalities. It would be intriguing, for example, to read the discursive relations to “Catastrophe” Posmentier’s study traces in a wider context of other forms of temporality related to disaster, e.g. through notions of risk or speculation.

The distinctive feature of Lindgren Johnson’s well-researched *Race Matters, Animal Matters* (2018), which offers meticulously contextualized readings of nineteenth-century black autobiography and fiction and concentrates on institutions like slaughterhouses and discourses of hunting and lynching, is its focus on African Americans’ relations to non-human animals. Through his theory of “fugitive humanism,” which draws on insights from animal(ity) studies and posthumanism, Johnson spotlights places in the African American tradition where nineteenth-century blacks “rupture liberal humanist constructions of both animality and humanity” (10), and reveals how new slaughtering practices, sport hunting or animal welfare intersected with racial politics.

Chapter 1 traces a “fugitive humanism” in antebellum slave narratives by Moses Roper (1838, 1848) and Frederick Douglass (1845). Johnson notes that both work “out of an abolitionism grounded in exclusions of [...] the nonhuman animal world” (45), thus echoing earlier assessments of the slave narrative as “anti-nature writing” (Outka 172). Moving beyond this view, Johnson sees Roper’s narrative as an example that shows how non-human animals were harnessed by the peculiar institution, while his reading of Douglass’s narrative provocatively yet convincingly identifies an alternative abolitionist ethic that involves forms of resistance residing where humanity and animality intersect.

The subsequent chapters may be read in pairs, as two thematic clusters. In Chapter 2, Johnson revisits the *Slaughterhouse Cases* of 1873, the first Supreme Court interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment, to illustrate a broad shift that, in his view, was vital to reinterpreting and relocating both black and animal bodies. Chapter 3 offers a nuanced reading of three of Charles W. Chesnutt’s conjure stories as negotiating such relocations. Against a dominant view of “conjure” in Chesnutt as empowering “fluidity,” Johnson regards “failings” of conjure as a means to force readers to rethink relations between human and non-human animal bodies. Although more attention could have been paid to potential implications of the fact that one of the stories, “Dave’s Neckliss,” does *not* involve conjure, this chapter makes a crucial point by suggesting that Chesnutt creates a “fugitive humanist” position that confronts both white and human exceptionalism.

Chapter 4 revisits lynching history by examining animal killing and subjectivity. Johnson draws attention to sport hunting iconography’s significance to lynching photography and emphasizes the centrality of pseudo-scientific racist theories to the construction of a “black bestiality” that supposedly had to be “domesticated.” In this context, Chapter 5 discusses writings by anti-lynching activists of the turn of the century (Douglass, Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell) and the early decades of the twentieth century (NAACP leaders James Weldon Johnson and Walter White), who deployed

animal welfare ideology against lynching violence. Closing with a short Epilogue, *Race Matters* frames its findings within more recent contexts and highlights the potential of a “fugitive humanism” for African American ecocriticism, the fields of animal studies and posthumanism, and for contemporary activism. Johnson criticizes early twenty-first-century exhibitions of lynching photographs for replacing “past white aggression with current white ‘compassion’ for animals” (183), arguing instead for a perspective that recognizes the convergence of race matters with animal matters in African America that has become apparent through his highly original study.

John Claborn’s *Civil Rights and the Environment in African-American Literature, 1895-1941* (2018) is in some ways the most traditional study, focusing primarily on African American prose literature’s environmental dimensions and modes of representation, and rereading canonical authors like Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, and William Attaway. Concentrating on a historical period that lies between the time frames treated by Posmentier and Johnson, its focus on civil rights and its methodology make Claborn’s contribution valuable to African American ecocriticism. By combining an eco-historical approach with Marxian and intersectional frameworks, Claborn revisits literary genres and spaces to explore, in his words, “how the color line and the ecological line [...] parallel, intersect, and veer apart” (11).

After an introduction that provides an accessible primer for readers unfamiliar with the field, Chapter 1 traces what Claborn sees as Washington’s “covert promotion of ecological agencies” (15). Turning to *Working With the Hands* (1904), he argues that Washington transplants a tradition of maroonage to the “inside” of the plantation system (29), developing alternative forms of black agriculture. Although readers might ask why this Georgic stance is not more thoroughly contextualized within Washington’s problematic social Darwinist ideology and why Claborn claims that Washington’s environmental ethos figures “covert” (15) and “unconsciously” (21)—since it seems to be very explicit in a book that reads like a farmer’s manual—his reading of *Working With the Hands* is important for drawing (eco)critical attention to a text that has often remained in the shadow of *Up From Slavery* (1901).

While Chapter 2 focuses on another canonical text, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920), to illustrate how Du Bois extends his famous idea of “double consciousness” to portrayals of non-human nature, Chapter 3 is, perhaps, the most innovative part of *Civil Rights* with respect to its choice of primary texts. Here, Claborn looks at Du Bois’ editorial work for the NAACP’s *The Crisis* and understudied bird-poems by amateur naturalist Effie Lee Newsome to demonstrate the magazine’s engagement with the “color line” as well as with conservation. Newsome’s writings do not simply engage in a “New Negro nationalism” (100), but gain a double meaning: as texts concerned with natural history and, within their editorial context, as contributing to civil rights advocacy.

The last two chapters of *Civil Rights* examine environmental dimensions of two central literary spaces of early-twentieth-century African America, the swamp and the industrialized urban landscape. In the context of African American literary representations of swamps and of developments in cultural ecology, Chapter 4 analyzes

the swamp as “a space for ecological community” in Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) (112). Chapter 5 focuses on anthropogenic crises of industrialized landscapes and pollution in Attaway’s *Blood on the Forge* (1941) to expose the text’s figuration of ecological degradation. Claborn views the novel through a paradigm shift in scientific ecology in the 1930s to demonstrate its interrogation of a black “subjective experience of this social and environmental history” and its anticipation of Aldo Leopold’s land ethic (145).

When Claborn concludes that his overall aim is to provide “a usable past” (170), the same holds true for Posmentier’s and Johnson’s studies, which share in a general mission to reveal that environmental aesthetics and ethics have a long and rich tradition in African America. Accordingly, all three books contribute to refuting a primarily “tragic view” of African American environmental relations (Claborn 7), for instance, by drawing attention to how environmental literary modes such as the sublime or the pastoral figure in alternative—but by no means “deficient”—ways in black literature. Although the studies intersect in treating writers like Hurston or Washington, and share certain themes through a focus on time, sound, and an environmental ethics rooted in working relationships to the land, their true potential shows in the specificity of their individual arguments and methodological lenses, which offer input beyond the field of African American ecocriticism. Johnson’s concept of “fugitive humanism,” for example, may prove productive not only for animal studies and posthumanism, but also for environmental justice activism or the black vegan movement that is currently gaining strength, while Posmentier’s study hints at the implications of research in African American ecocriticism for examining the role of race in the Anthropocene. In such ways, all three books attest to the ways in which African American ecocriticism has grown into more than a mere “subfield” of ecocriticism, and has the potential to interlink productively with a variety of environmentally interested fields and discourses.

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