Claborn, John. "Up from NatureRacial Uplift and Ecological Agencies in Booker T. Washington's Autobiographies." *Civil Rights and the Environment in African-American Literature, 1895–1941*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 19–44. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350009455.ch-001>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 10:57 UTC.

Copyright © John Claborn 2018. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Up from Nature

Racial Uplift and Ecological Agencies in Booker T. Washington's Autobiographies

Nature Draws No Color Line

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 US president. Though a progressive, President Theodore Roosevelt subscribed to fashionable social Darwinist and white supremacist ideologies that invoked nature to justify racial hierarchies.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” (343). With this rhetorical strategy, not only does nature refuse to naturalize race, but it also acts as the fulcrum for lifting the second generation of southern ex-slaves out of poverty. In a compressed form, “Getting Down to Mother Earth” articulates nature’s role in Washington’s economic approach to racial uplift—a role more fully developed in two of his autobiographies, *Up from Slavery* (1901) and *Working with the Hands* (1904).

When we rethink Washington’s politics from an ecological perspective, we find a figure more dynamic than the sycophantic boogeyman he became to the radical Du Bois. Letting Washington’s rhetoric perform on the stage

of southern environmental history forces us to look 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-era slave rebellions in her book, *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics*. Allewaert elaborates the concept of the “plantation zone,” defined as a type of space that is “tropical (or subtropical) and whose political structures are shaped by the plantation form” (2013: 30). She goes on to describe the modes of being unique to 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 . . . At 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. (2013: 30–1)

This rethinking of personhood and ontology begins to map an alternate history of slave revolt that reimagines ecological forms of agency grounded in a space removed from the public sphere. Maroon settlements and their material culture anticipate twentieth-century forms of black radicalism.

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. On one level, Washington's work reproduces discourses of the capitalist and anthropocentric domination of nature. But it is also true that this discursive mode:

1. resonates within the deep temporal context of environmental history and thus can be interpreted as symptomatic of this history through a method of eco-historicism;
2. is complicated in Washington's case because of the ambiguity produced by his masking and equivocation; and
3. should be differentiated from Theodore Roosevelt's or Andrew Carnegie's white capitalist mode of domination and placed within the context of other minoritarian discourses of empowerment for marginalized groups.

His politics were at once 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. By Washington's death in 1915, it became clear that political change would not piggyback on economic change: while precarious livings were made, so was Jim Crow.

From an ecological angle, *Up from Slavery* and *Working with the Hands* gain a doubled perspective on the problem of racial uplift: consciously, a politics that prioritizes economic advancement over civil rights; unconsciously, a politics that evokes ecological agencies. The forms of ecological agency found in these texts consist of several qualities derived and modified from the radical tradition of marronage:

- a militarized, black-dominated space
- intimate knowledge of local ecologies (plants, soil chemistry, etc.)
- recognition of the role of “natural agencies” in farming (Washington 1904: 165)
- a focus on experimental farming that leads to what we today call sustainability
- a redemptive, georgic vision of self-determined black labor
- a materialist project of environmental (rather than political) reconstruction of plantation zones in response to the failure of post-Civil War Reconstruction.

The relation between these ecological agencies and marronage sometimes surfaces in the autobiographies, but more often it is only partly conscious or displaced, veiled in the text's eco-unconscious. By eco-unconscious, I mean both the historical-ecological subtext of the work, and the conditions of environmental history that make its production possible. Applied to *Working with the Hands*, this concept of the eco-unconscious opens the possibility for the text's descent from the tradition of marronage, while at the same time preserving the differences between that history and more conventional understandings of Washington's political and rhetorical strategies. This chapter first sketches out traditional and ecocritical critiques of Washington before reframing his literary production within the alternative history of colonial-era ecology, marronage, and slave rebellion. I then analyze *Working with the Hands* and its evocation of ecological agencies: soil conservation, experimental farming, environmental reconstruction, and the georgic mode.

The Washington–Du Bois Debates and Ecocriticism

Since *Working with the Hands* is unfamiliar to most literary critics (its last printing prior to 2015 was in 1969), I offer a brief overview before giving an ecocritical account of the Washington–Du Bois debates. It may have been ghostwritten 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 2009: 273). If *Working with the Hands* was ghostwritten, this would only make it typical of Washington’s literary output (two ghostwriters helped with *Up from Slavery*).² Published in 1904, the lengthy subtitle of *Working with the Hands* is *Being a Sequel to “Up from Slavery” Covering the Author’s Experiences in Industrial Training at Tuskegee*. 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.

Working with the Hands is an assemblage of shorter pieces intended for more transient consumption and arguably less aesthetically enduring than the painstaking art that Du Bois put into *The Souls of Black Folk*. Unlike *Up from Slavery*, which chronicles Washington’s ascension from slavery to principal of Alabama’s largest black college, *Working with the Hands* is nonlinear 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,” and “The Tillers of the Ground.” Interspersed with these are more philosophical chapters: “Building up a System,” “Head and Hands Together,” and “The Value of Small Things.” The book ends with a defense of Tuskegee against vocal detractors such as novelist and white supremacist Thomas Dixon, author of *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905).

Recognizing some kind of doublespeak in Washington’s political rhetoric has become customary for civil rights advocates, historians, and literary critics. In *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Houston A. Baker Jr. celebrates the chiasmic coding of Washington’s “mastery of form” and “deformation of mastery” in *Up from Slavery* (1987: 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. 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 (1987: 27). Minstrel jokes such as these canvas the text, in effect encoding it for white and black readers: whites will see Washington’s deferential mask, while black readers will be in on the game. For Baker, Washington’s appropriation of the minstrel mask and use of it to bamboozle donations transforms him into a Promethean figure, a thief of finance capital who offers *Up from Slavery*. Pull away this minstrel mask of political compromise and behind it lurks a long-term agenda to lift the black masses and the South as a whole out of poverty.³ Deception lies at the heart of the Washingtonian program, which is why it is so hard to pin down his authentic views on racial politics.

Ascribing intentions to Washington’s writings, therefore, is a uniquely fallacious enterprise. Two more examples should suffice to highlight this gap between intention and equivocation, author and text, conscious and unconscious meanings. First, *Up from Slavery* was based on a previous pseudo-autobiography, *The Story of My Life and Work* (1900), ghostwritten by the black journalist Edgar Webber; however, that work proved so inadequate that Washington hired lawyer Max Thrasher to revise and republish it in 1901 (Norrell 2009: 216). The resulting *Up from Slavery* became a revised version of Thrasher’s revision of Webber’s narrative (Norrell 2009: 217). Second, Washington’s books were shrewd persuasive acts. Tuskegee rode a capitalist wave of philanthropy with thousands donated by Andrew Carnegie, J. D. Rockefeller, George Eastman, and Julius Rosenwald (Harlan 1983: 130). 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” (1920: 266).

Decades of criticism has been leveled at Washington’s racial uplift strategy, but Du Bois’s critique in *The Souls of Black Folk* is still the most popular and enduring. In the early chapter “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” Du Bois attacks Washington’s tacit support of African-Americans’ status as a political and civil underclass. He first concedes that the Tuskegee Institute

has achieved the impossible and its principal's "very singleness of vision and thorough oneness with his age is a mark of the successful man" (1903: 36). Tuskegee thrived in the heart of Alabama's racially hostile, lynch-crazed Black Belt, which impressed Du Bois enough for him to teach there in 1903. What Du Bois really 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 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 support for the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* "separate but equal" Supreme Court 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 1901: 134). Du Bois argues that by stressing economic gain over such issues as voting rights, desegregation, and anti-lynching laws, Washington's Gilded Age "gospel of Work and Money" comes to "almost completely overshadow the higher aims of life" ([1903] 2003: 41). Ultimately, Du Bois sees more of a reduction to mere labor than an exaltation of black citizenship in Washington's ideas.⁴

Ecocritics such as Carolyn Finney, Scott Hicks, Evora Jones, and Anne Raine have recognized the prominence of ecological themes in the work of Washington and Du Bois.⁵ Hicks makes a case for the value of rereading Washington ecocritically, though mainly in terms of what such a rereading contributes to the field of ecocriticism. 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 (Hicks 2006: 202). Hicks's interpretation reproduces the reductive binary of Du Bois the radical and Washington the conservative: "[w]hereas 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" (2006: 209). Hicks infers this conclusion 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 reproduces

conventional wisdom, then it contributes little to racial uplift debates and to African-American literary history in general. My reading of Washington is more symptomatic and focused on the texts rather than the views of the author himself. 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” (2006: 218). A more historical look at Washington’s writings and the Tuskegee Institute actually unmasks an added complex awareness and engagement with nature, southern environmental history, and the long shadow of slavery.

The Plantation Zone and Ecological Agencies

Working with the Hands and its underlying politics of ecological agencies repeats with a difference the practices of colonial-era and antebellum maroon settlements, although marronage is more a specter that haunts Tuskegee than something embodied in Tuskegee itself. 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” (1904: 21). The coffin was transported on a wagon made in South Bend, Indiana; the wagon’s mule was from Missouri; and the shovels used to dig the grave were imported from Pittsburgh (1904: 21). In a rare display of gallows humor, Washington concludes that the “only things supplied by the county, with its wealth of natural resources, was the corpse and the hole in the ground” (1904: 21). In capitalism’s version of a Frankenstein monster assembled from parts drawn from all over the country, the text critiques the unnaturalness of such geographical displacement. The choice of using a funeral as an example also evokes the destructive tendencies of this economic system on black labor and the environment.

The past that haunts Tuskegee originates in the colonial era. The English explorer Thomas Harriot’s *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1590) exemplifies settler anxiety about native knowledge of local ecologies that could threaten European conquest. In his description of native

fishing practices, Harriot marvels: “[t]her was never seene amonge us soe cunninge a way to take fish withal” ([1590] 1972: 56). He is puzzled by their motivations, which appear “free from all care of heaping opp Riches for their posteritie, content with their state” (Harriot [1590] 1972: 56). The accompanying illustration shows the natives’ various methods of catching fish in a river: setting traps, using canoes, and spearing fish ([1590] 1972: 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: silk worm, hemp, turpentine, wine, cedar, furs, copper, iron, and dyes, to name a few ([1590] 1972: 7–11). While to the European gaze this river landscape showcases the abundance of wildlife in the new colony, it also conflates the natives with local ecology and places them on an ontological continuum with animals and plants. The illustration threatens such a disassembly by suggesting an alliance between natives and nature against the white colonial gaze.

In her analysis of William Bartram’s *Travels* (1791), Allewaert argues that the English explorer’s account of the southeast US 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” (2013: 30). Such forms of African and Native American resistance emerged as the dialectical negation of colonialism and the Atlantic Slave Trade, leading to what the ruling classes imagined, in Peter Linebaugh’s and Marcus Rediker’s terms, as a “many-headed hydra” that threatened their power (2000). Named after the monster from Greek mythology, this metaphorical hydra often found its material base on maroon settlements in the uncharted wilderness, existing off the grid of the plantation zone and outside white spheres of power. Bartram’s *Travels* reveals that African maroons and natives used their environments to gain a degree of agency that negated the dominant, metropolitan print culture within which the Englishman writes. 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. Yet, Allewaert argues, the “tropical, the useless, and the cataclysmic continually set [Bartram] off course” (2013: 31). 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” (2013: 33). Slaves had the opportunity to settle these “Africanized spaces” that rivaled the carceral space of the plantation zone (2013: 33).

The power of these spaces stems partly from the intimacy with local ecologies that slaves gained from exploring and laboring the land. In one illustrative moment from *Travels*, Bartram is riding his horse on the outskirts of a South Carolina plantation when he encounters a group of slaves. He fears them, realizing that he is “unarmed” while the laborers carry their farm tools, which double as potential weapons in his imagination: “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 [1791] 1928: 379). He keeps a “sharp eye,” however, as he anticipates a sneak attack might “their intentions [be] to ambuscade and surround me” (Bartram [1791] 1928: 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” (2013: 38). This ambiguity of slave–maroon identity would later play out in the doubling and equivocations in Washington’s own writing. *Working with the Hands* would also go on to reinscribe the ecological forms of this resistance from within the plantation zone itself.

Allewaert’s analysis can be tied to ecological agency in the larger history of marronage across the North America and the Caribbean. In *Black Marxism*, 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 [1983] 2000: 130). Maroon settlements sprung up in colonies such as Jamaica, Colombia, Venezuela, Guiana, and Suriname, to name a few (1983: 135–9). 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 African ways of life and trying to reestablish them in new, non-plantation settlements (1983: 121). According to Robinson, the “transport of African labor to the mines and plantations of the Caribbean” also meant the “transfer of African ontological and cosmological systems” (1983: 122). This cultural transport provided a deep well of values for establishing and organizing maroon communities. Some maroon communities even achieved official recognition such as the San Lorenzo de los Negros in Mexico (1983: 132). One Virginia planter compared maroons plotting in the Dismal Swamp with Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome (1983: 14). The specter of these communities haunted white colonizers.

In another account of this alternative history, C. L. R. James chronicles the Haitian Revolution. In *The Black Jacobins*, in which maroons and ecological agencies played a key role. James gives an 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 ([1938] 1963: 87). The circumstances of the revolt could have flowered 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.” ([1938] 1963: 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. From the mountain, they perform a Voodoo ritual that mixes Catholicism with elements of earthly paganism. As the Creole prayer emphasizes, their deity governs nature and passes a damning judgment on the whites—a judgment carried out by the revolutionaries themselves. Soon afterward, the slaves across the plantations of San Domingo would revolt and burn down the plantations, with the goal of exterminating the whites ([1938] 1963: 88). Similar to 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 Prosser and Denmark Vesey in the colonies (Robinson [1983] 2000: 149).⁶

While maroons developed autonomous social formations outside the plantation system through ecological agencies, *Working with the Hands* reflects ecological agencies working from inside the plantation system. Washington necessarily engages the public sphere, but in a masquerade that entails a close relationship between text and environmental action. 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 literary. In Laura R. Fisher's words, they bear an "instrumental relation to literary practice" that she calls "vocational realism" (2015: 711). New materialists such as Stacy Alaimo (2010) and Jane Bennett (2010) go further in their views on the interflow of bodies, environments and texts; they argue for an ontology that is a "complex intersection of bodies, natures, and political discourses—a being-in-the-world where embodiment and discursivity are co-extensive and mutually permeable" (Iovino 2012: 135).⁷ Read through the lenses of new materialism and the eco-unconscious, the environment affects Washington's writings and those writings in turn have real material effects: the environment mediates the text just as the text mediates our perception of the environment. The Tuskegee Institute 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. 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 the haunted reflection of these colonial pasts.

Experimental Farming as Ecological Agency

In *Working with the Hands*, the chapter "On the Experimental Farm" represents ecological agencies that challenge centuries of environmental practices by attempting to replenish southern soils and recognizing restorative "natural agencies" (1904: 165). Rhetorically, the soil plays a central role in the book's vision of racial uplift; in fact, Tuskegee's history curriculum shows

the “student how the American people, as is true of all great nations, began as cultivators of the soil” ([1904] 1969: 89). In *Up from Slavery*, Washington proclaims 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,” 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!” (1903: 360). Yet this rhetoric also has a materialist, scientific orientation in *Working with the Hands* that springs from the text’s eco-unconscious engagement with southern environmental history.⁸

In the decades preceding the 1880s, the plantation economic form dominated and exploited the South’s already poor-quality soil. In *This Land, This South: An Environmental History*, Albert E. Cowdrey discusses the precolonial and colonial-era southern environmental history that gave rise to the plantation form. For Cowdrey, the strangest and most significant characteristic of southern soils is how “old” they are (1996: 2). Unlike soils north of the Ohio River, the South was not covered by glaciers during the last Ice Age (c. 20000–10000 BCE), 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 1996: 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. For Cowdrey, human activity and environmental history cannot be 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” (1996: 5). Early colonial farming of tobacco began to exacerbate the exhaustion of the southern soil (1996: 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 1996: 58).

After the early colonial period, the plantation economic form took hold and fostered large commercial farms of three hundred acres or more (Aiken 1998: 5–6). Emerging simultaneously with this form was the rapid expansion of slavery in the 1700s. For over two centuries, slavery and the plantation system became a “human factor of incalculable importance to the southern environment” (Cowdrey 1996: 36). Ecofeminist 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” 2003: 380). The demand for slave labor increased when cotton boomed on the world market as a cash crop. Because slavery deprived the region of a local consumer base and therefore of a local food market, agriculture was wholly geared toward profits and commercial exports (Cowdrey 1996: 78). The lack of markets for diverse crop commodities, in turn, stifled the incentive to grow non-cotton and non-tobacco plants, leading to the further destruction of biodiversity (Hurt 2003: 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 erosive, canal-like watercourses that formed when it rained—saw rapid growth between 1790 and 1837, thus amplifying the human impact on the southern environment (1996: 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 1996: 72). As a result, these cotton monocultures tended to spawn soil toxins and parasites, such as the boll weevil in the 1910s—one of the “push” factors that set the Great Migration in motion (Cowdrey 1996: 79–80).

Washington saw the correlation between slavery and the environment geographically inscribed in 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” ([1904] 1969: 65). In essence, slavery was a form of mechanized labor that degraded the worker and the land, much like northern factory work: the “whole machinery of slavery was not apt to beget the spirit of love of labor” ([1904] 1969: 17). Here, *Working with the Hands* echoes *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” (1903: 91). Thus, one can find a “geographical color-line” across the South, a physical connection between race and environment (Du Bois 1903: 119).

When Washington first arrived at the school grounds in 1881, the Tuskegee property reflected this environmental legacy of slavery. Landscape architect historian Kenrick Ian Grandison points out that the school’s land “bore the scars of war and abandonment after years of abusive cotton cultivation” (1996: 344). It consisted of a mere three buildings (a stable, a chicken coop, and a kitchen) and one-hundred acres of eroded soil (Grandison 1996: 345–6). It was, in short, one of the “waste places” (1901: 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 1983: 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. When NAACP activist 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. (1903: 3–4)

To Miller, the students were fighting with superhuman patience and persistence against centuries of entropy: the slow violence of antebellum agricultural practices and the ecosystem’s slow healing processes. Tuskegee’s agricultural policy was in a way necessarily geared toward subsistence and replenishing the soil rather than cash crops.

Working with the Hands, however, announces ambitions in “On the Experimental Farm” that far exceed necessity. The chapter “On the Experimental Farm” contains a staged photograph of Tuskegee student

workers cultivating a patch of cassava (a food staple grown in tropical areas) 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 intellectualized labor. The caption indicates that these men work on an "experiment plot," intellectualizing their labor by suggesting that it is a form of scientific inquiry 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" ([1904] 1969: 164). The landscape behind them is bordered by a fence and displays the property's managed environment. 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" (2007: 76). If *Working with the Hands* has a protagonist, a heroic figure other than Washington himself, then it is Carver. 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" (1904: 165). Carver's own letters and scientific writings reveal a quasi-mystical attitude toward nature that contrasts with Washington's pragmatism. Carver's scientific mysticism shows a preference for an intuitive approach to ecological investigation that

is similar to Allewaert's claims about black maroons' knowledge of local ecologies. Though Carver was a professed Christian, many of his beliefs amount to a form of nature-worship where nature as Gaia seems interchangeable with the Holy Spirit. 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" ([1930] 1987: 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" ([1924] 1987: 130).

In his letters from this early period in Tuskegee's history, the mystical Carver seems to subscribe to the *longue durée* view of history's geological time. 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" ([1927] 1987: 135). The resulting crystal formation reminds him of God's "omnipotence, majesty and power" for the immense stretch of time embodied in the crystal ([1927] 1987: 135). He teaches the *Genesis* creation story to his students "in the light of natural and revealed religion and geological truths" ([1907] 1987: 134). Carver, the text summarizes, understands the "value of scientific cultivation," and finds ways to improve soil beyond merely resting it ([1904] 1969: 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 2009: 199). These pamphlets disseminated the school's scientific knowledge about crop rotation, fertilizers, replenishing the soil, and growing vegetable gardens (Norrell 2009: 199).

As evidence for the value of experimental farming, Washington cites Carver's development of new methods for growing that can increase the quantity and quality of the crop. 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" ([1904] 1969: 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" (1904: 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 Tuskegee's "special study" (1904: 166). Rotation potentially solves problems such as 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" (1904: 166–7). An analysis of the existing soil reveals that it is "seriously deficient" of nitrogen, phosphoric acid (a mineral nutrient), and potash (a salt form of potassium) (1904: 168).

While these passages in "On the Experimental Farm" embody vocational realism with their detail and precision, they also show how experimental farming can undermine the human and ecological damage done by cotton monocultures. First, Carver, Washington, and the students worked to improve the physical condition of the soil by "deep plowing, rebuilding terraces and filling in washes" (1904: 168). The text breaks down the crop rotation plan for a farm of forty acres, as developed by Carver:

First year, sixteen acres of cowpease [a legume], eight acres of cotton, two acres of riboon cane [a form of sugarcane], three acres of corn, one acre of sorghum [a cereal grain], one acre of peanuts, three acres of sweet potatoes, one acre of teosinte (a green fodder plant), one acre of pumpkins, cushaws [a kind of squash], 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. (1904: 168–9)

Washington uses technical, soil chemistry terms 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 (1904: 170). In 1901, cowpease were planted again for another

profit gain of \$28.75. The next year they planted a “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 (1904: 171). For Washington, this drastic increase in profit shows that even a small two-acre farm can help black farmers (1904: 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 (1904: 170). Though framed in terms of the profit motive, this carefully planned system of crop rotation restores the metabolic cycle of the soil.

Working with the Hands discusses the consumption as well as the production side of agriculture. Early on, it criticizes the southern black masses’ consumption of imported food, seeing the lack of a local food market 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), the text 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” (1904: 14). Washington 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” (1904: 156–7). The South is a veritable Eden of abundant food, if it would only be recognized and cultivated as such.

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. Tuskegee’s aim, under the direction of 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” (1904: 163). Here and throughout, *Working with the Hands* 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’” (1904: 46). Farm hands form a sort of rural southern peasantry who do not own land and are “ignorant and unskilled, with little conscience” (1904: 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” (1904: 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. Though explicitly couched in the capitalist language of the profit motive, such innovations implicitly contribute to sustainable farming practices. The short-term view of capitalism prioritizes profit over a twenty- to thirty-year span, whereas the vision in *Working with the Hands* of ecological agencies and economic advancement 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 more profitable than white-owned farms. Soil conservation, then, is a form of ecological agency that dismantles the legacy of the white master’s environmental practices.

The Tuskegee Georgic and the Mastery of Nature

In *Working with the Hands*, Washington so intertwines “nature” and “work” that they become central to the Tuskegee project and his engagement with African-American autobiography, particularly slave narratives, and his vision of southern history. For Washington the philosophical materialist, nature is foremost an object to be worked on, the material substratum that enables “working with the hands” and offers the “bedrock” foundation for a politics of racial uplift. It is this working on nature and especially the emphasis on agricultural labor that puts Washington in the georgic tradition of other African-American writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar and Sterling Brown. The georgic mode differs from the pastoral in its emphasis on laboring the land, whether that labor is given a pessimistic or redemptive

framing. According to Timothy Sweet, this difference goes back to Virgil: “in the *Eclogues* Virgil understands the natural world primarily as a site of leisure, [but] in the *Georgics* he understands it primarily as a site of labor” (2). The georgic mode is also agrarian and tends to be didactic, using representations of agricultural labor to philosophize about larger questions of citizenship and government.

The Tuskegee variation on the georgic mode emphasizes the productive power of labor both as an end in itself and as a pathway to citizenship.⁹ As Janet Fiskio claims, “[c]ultivation of a sense of place through long-term inhabitation and labor is central to the American georgic and to its embrace by the field of American ecocriticism” (2012: 301). But labor as pathway to citizenship is first of all a pathway to personhood and agency. As explained earlier, manual labor has intellectual as well as practical dimensions. With this valorization of self-directed black labor, a form of colonial-era ecological agency meets the Tuskegee georgic and its environmental reconstruction of the plantation zone.

For Washington, his pragmatic and georgic approach to reconstructing the plantation also leads to a philosophy that promotes the hard-won mastery of nature—a philosophy that makes him vulnerable to criticism from ecocritics and environmental historians. 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” (1901: 89). Following a line of thought similar to the Frankfurt School, Kimberly K. Smith has criticized Washington’s views on nature. 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).¹⁰ One can read Washington’s Atlanta address for its promotion of an anthropocentrism that elevates human interests above environmental stewardship:

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. (1901: 133)

Cultivating “waste places” may be construed as a pro-environmentalist statement, insofar as it shows a form of reparative engagement with nutrient-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.

Given the context of Reconstruction and the larger environmental history of the South, Washington had his reasons for promoting this mastery of nature—reasons that bear an unconscious relation to ecological agencies and the history of resistance to colonialism and slavery. 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” (1904: 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” (1904: 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” (1904: 35). As suggested earlier, the then-current system establishes a causal connection between slavery (and sharecropping) and ecological degradation. 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 (1904: 33). Otherwise, black farmers would have to pay inflated rates for their food, thus cementing their entrapment in the tenant farming system (1904: 34).

The Tuskegee project, geared toward cultivating free labor, was pushing back against decades of the plantation system and redesigning the Black Belt environment through cultivation of ecological agencies. In the chapter “Building up a System,” Washington describes how he expanded this pragmatism 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 (1904: 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 (1904: 58). This method saves money and teaches construction skills, while also providing a “more natural process of development” than hiring contractors (1904: 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 economies.

Working with the Hands contains a number of photographs of the Tuskegee campus that provide visual evidence for the Tuskegee georgic mode. 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” (2008: 98). Most of these photographs show the campus at various stages of construction with students performing and learning “handwork,” contributing to the work’s georgic celebration of labor and the land. They consistently portray abundance, action, and efficiency: students grinding sugarcane, 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.

While white readers might read an innocuous narrative of an expanding college campus and free black labor force, the Tuskegee campus also became a militarized, black reconstruction of the plantation zone. Landscape architecture 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 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” (1996: 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 lined Montgomery Road, the main access road to the campus, and “could potentially serve as a first line of defense in case of hostile intrusion” (362). The campus entrance was gated and guarded by uniformed Tuskegee students working as a security force.

Working with the Hands equates “mastery” not with the exploitation of nature but with reconstructing the plantation zone and turning slave labor into a form of ecological agency and long-term sustainability. Labor itself becomes a form of aesthetic experience. The text's georgic vision requires the pragmatism of an experience-based study of nature; it demands a methodical approach to the worker's interaction with nature. Given the *longue durée* context of environmental history, the eco-unconscious of *Working with the Hands* reveals this web of landscape architecture and sustainability—that is, environmental reconstruction—as a form of ecological agency and thus a covert form of black resistance.

Conclusion

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” ([1902] 2008: 342). Invoking a focus on economic nationalism and capital accumulation, this address does not—as Washington’s 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. From an ecological perspective, this metaphor also evokes an ontology of nature as a race-less substratum of being that recognizes the quantity of sweat instead of the quality of skin.

In *Working with the Hands*, Tuskegee emerges not as a machine but as a local instance of a black southern nation-to-come grounded in overcoming the historical sediment of the plantation zone through soil conservation, scientific farming, and a georgic vision of redemptive labor. In his final autobiography, *My Larger Education* (1912), Washington continues to hold on to georgic portraits of agricultural labor. 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, a hidden African-American history of resistance. Placed in a historical and environmental context, Washington’s version of “mastery” becomes not an exploitive dominance of nature, but rather black labor and land redefined as powerful forms of ecological agency.

While this chapter has undertaken an against-the-grain reading of Washington's work, revealing the textual eco-unconscious by reading it in the context of environmental history, this politics of ecological agencies remains unconscious and historically displaced. Even though it is unconscious, it is still materialist in its concern with ecological agencies and the environmental reconstruction of the plantation. By the time of Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Darkwater*, 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.