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The Crisis, the Politics of Nature, and the Harlem Renaissance

Effie Lee Newsome's Eco-poetics

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 draws a line between Great Migration narrative tropes and Thoreau's critique of industrialization in *Walden* (1854). 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 creates a number of unusual associative links: the natural rights doctrine of the US Constitution, abolitionism, industrial capitalism and urbanization, the NAACP's civil rights crusade, and New England Transcendentalism.

The Crisis Thoreau cover reveals a great deal about the political agenda and strategy of Du Bois and editorship of the NAACP magazine. While Washington's *Working with the Hands* advanced an economic strategy of racial uplift via ecological agencies, Du Bois politicized representations of nature by extending double consciousness to his portrayal of natural environments in *The Souls of Black Folk*, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, and *Darkwater*. These thematic concerns with race and darknature 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. A perusal of issues from this period reveals the magazine's ongoing engagement with conservation, natural history, natural sciences (e.g., biology), pastoralism, and primitivism. In order to trace these themes 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.

Verbal and visual representations of nature in *The Crisis* expand Du Bois's vision of "Liberty for all men" and the "Training of Children, black even as white" espoused in his 1904 "Credo." For Du Bois, "liberty" means access to open spaces and physical mobility; voting rights and interracial friendship; and desegregated railroad cars and "sunshine" (1920: 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" (1920: 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; John Matheus's short stories such as "Fog" and "Swamp"; Yolande Du Bois's² nature meditations; prose sketches of black recreational spaces such as segregated beaches and city parks; and critical histories of natural disasters such as the 1927 Mississippi flood.

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 such as 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 the literary Left. 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, in short, a form of productive escapism. On one side, natural history and conservation become more overtly racialized and politicized when they resonate in the pages of *The Crisis*; on the obverse, this encourages racial readings of otherwise white-dominated scientific fields and political movements.

First, Newsome champions 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. But according to Spencer Schaffner, “popular and familiar forms of anthropomorphism, sentimentalism, taxonomic discourse, nationalism, racism, and taste were all mobilized” in the field guide genre, making it inherently political (2011:17). 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 demands a racial reading of Newsome's poems. Rather than verbal icons isolated on the page, Newsome's writings form composites with other, more race-centric texts that thread through *The Crisis*.

This chapter first considers the Harlem Renaissance concern with pedagogy, children, the role of black women, and the use of nature imagery and metaphors to advance a strategic black nationalism. It then examines the politics of the most predominant concern of Newsome's prose and poetry: birds. Through tropes of integrated nature, taxonomy, and disembodied voice,

Newsome's work critically signifies on discourses of bird conservation institutionalized and professionalized through such organizations as the Audubon societies in the late 1800s. The multi-generic forms of knowledge she produces—short essays, children's poems, her *Crisis* columns, and drawings—intervene in both the conservationist and the civil rights discourses by promoting the pedagogical and affective benefits of birding and nature study in general. The final section of this chapter focuses on Newsome's more political poems and prose, which often target both child and adult audiences with their focus on futurity. These writings conjure tropes that have as much to do with conservation as they do with strategies of racial advancement through cultural achievement.

Newsome, New Negro Poetics, and the Organic Trope

Born into Philadelphia's Talented Tenth in 1885, Newsome was heavily influenced by her father, who served as an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) bishop and president of the country's first all-black college—Wilberforce University in Ohio—from 1873 to 1881. For its day, the AME Church had a radical orientation, founded in 1787 through an act of social protest against the mainstream, white Methodist church. In her *Crisis* eulogy to her father, Newsome compares Bishop Lee's love for home and nature with the nineteenth-century nature writer John Burroughs (1926: 69).³ Newsome recalls his fondness for exploring "cranberry bogs" and listening to the "kill-dees" at his childhood home in New Jersey. 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*" (1926: 70). Between 1901 and 1914, Newsome studied art at a number of colleges, including Wilberforce University. Though she lived much of her life in Wilberforce, where she 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 AME church (K. C. Smith 2004: 46–7).⁴ 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* (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* (1920–22). 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 of these poems fall into two kinds of nature poetry: pastoral and more scientifically oriented poems about birds, insects, and other animals.

Newsome’s work functions within the larger cultural field of the Harlem Renaissance, known more for its urbanism than its concern with nature.⁵ New Negro arbiter of literary taste, William Stanley Braithwaite, summarized the movement’s cultural nationalism with 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” (1919: 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 such as the blues and ragtime. A concomitant Apollonian “grounding in the technical elements of the science of versification” balances out these Dionysian elements (1919: 277). When characterizing black women poets such as 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” (1919: 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.⁶ 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 Barbara Foley, 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 (2003). 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 (2003: 6–7). For

example, Alain Locke drew on organic tropes to theorize the movement as distinctly cultural in his introduction to *The New Negro* anthology (1925). There, Locke brought together the Herderian keywords of nationalism: folk-spirit, self-determination, and group expression. This nationalism followed a cultural and spiritual, rather than economic, impulse. 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 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 1925: 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. Langston Hughes's "Earth Song," which appeared in *The New Negro* (1925), 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" (2003: 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" (2004: xiii). Examined in Chapter 2, Du Bois's "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926), for example, appears in *The Crisis*'s 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" (1920: 151). In broad, 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" (1920: 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" (1920: 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" (1920: 162).

Education fell mainly to African-American women in their roles not just as mothers, but also a prominent position in such feminized professions as teaching. Elise Johnson McDougald's typology of black women in *The New Negro* describes two categories that would apply to Newsome: the bourgeois woman of leisure and the teacher. Teachers, McDougald explains, who bring to the classroom "sympathy and judgment" form a "mighty force" in the struggle to uplift black youth (1925: 376). Newsome periodically worked as a librarian. 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's* annual Children's Number, the mostly Fauset-edited *The Brownies' Book* (1920–21), Newsome's "Little Page" column (appearing in *The Crisis* from 1925 to 1929), and the plethora of children's poetry, prose, and visual art published in various African-American periodicals.

Newsome often 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 2004: 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" (2004: 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" (1926c) 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 depoliticized, sentimentalized racial stereotypes of what Braithwaite calls the "happy, care-free, humorous Negro" (1925: 31). She avoids this problem by writing more about nature than humans and she does not condescend to her child (or adult) audience but rather seeks to prime their curiosity in nature, particularly birds. It is as though the future of the race were intertwined with nature itself and African-American attitudes toward nature. As the next section demonstrates, 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.

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 1999: 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. (1999: 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 2), women played a larger role in bird conservation due to the help of the "women's club" movement of the Progressive Era (Price 1999: 63). Price argues that this "bird-hat campaign marks an even earlier, essential shift into new ways of thinking about nature" (1999: 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 2007: 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 2007: 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" (1915) 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" (1915: 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 the trope of the talking book (Gates 1988: 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" (1915: 89). As she steps outside, she pauses to watch sparrows, for which she "even felt grateful" (1915: 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 such as 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" (1915: 90). Basking in this approval, Newsome realizes that her "best of friends were likely to prove nature and her birds" (1915: 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" (1915: 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 coauthored 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—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" (1897: 52).⁷ 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" (1897: 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, and the like. 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!" (1897: 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 1988: 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” (1897: 132). In describing the mockingbird’s mimetic qualities, Mammy uses the minstrel stereotype of the “stealing darcy” (a stereotype Washington also put to use in *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” (1901: 134). This anecdote refers to the feather trade, in which birds were hunted for bird-hats and entrapped as caged animals. As Jennifer Price has observed, it also points to the classism of the Audubon movement, which pitted bourgeois women against poor whites and people of color (1999: 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)” on—in Gates’s sense of “repetition with a signal difference”—texts of white women bird-watchers (1988: 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’” (1915: 90). This image displaces onto birds a trope found in 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 black residents: “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” (1991: 382). In *Citizen Bird*, Wright and Coues deem English sparrows “detestable” (1897: 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” (204).⁸ 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” (1915: 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” (1915: 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” (1915: 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” (1915: 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 (1993: 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 subtility [subtlety]” (Newsome 1915: 90).⁹ In this instance, 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

such as “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 taxonomy; their brevity is reminiscent of Imagism. Other bird poems include “Young Birds’ Mouths,” “Pigeons and People,” “Birds at My Door,” “The Peacock Feather,” and “The Wet Pigeon.” Appearing in April 1927, “Bluebird” stresses sound over sense, and is simple in its short length, use of alliteration, and the *a a b c c b* end-rhyme scheme:

I just heard your soft smothered voice today!
 I’m sure you’ll flit on in your light-winged way,
 Unmindful, undreaming of me,
 Who have not yet seen you in blue and brown,
 But just heard your lush notes drip down, drip down
 As showers from the black ash tree. (ll. 1–6)

The poem’s mode of address suggests a double movement: on the one hand, the speaker anthropomorphizes the bird by speaking directly to it, as though it could understand and respond to her; on the other, the bird’s musical presence and physical absence asserts, simultaneously, its relation—its “soft smothered voice”—to the speaker and its alterity in its disembodied voice, “Unmindful, undreaming” of her (l. 3). Perhaps more perceptible to contemporaneous black readers than white, the “blue” of the bluebird creates an associative link to race. In his poem “Mulatto” (1927), Hughes refers to the blue-bruised black body. Popularized by Louis Armstrong, Andy Razaf’s song “What Did I Do (To Be So Black and Blue)?” was a jazz-blues staple with lyrics that pun on “blue” to connote both physical and emotional bruising (having “the blues”). Given this association, the bluebird’s music is described in words that could apply to a country blues singer: “your lush notes drip down, drip down” (l. 5).

The subtle racial associations internal to the poem become overdetermined by its context, not just as a poem printed in *The Crisis*, but also with its arrangement on the page. Under the heading “Poetry and Painting” and a photo portrait of Arna Bontemps (often considered the “father” of African-American children’s literature) followed by a biographical blurb, “Bluebird” is surrounded by other race-themed poems that employ organic tropes: John Strong’s “The True American,” Edward Silvera’s “Color,” Bontemps’s “Tree,”

Frank Marshall Davis's "Portrait of an Old Woman," and Sterling Brown's "After the Storm." These poems, especially "Tree" and "After the Storm," similarly adopt a pastoral mode, but their allegorical and political meaning is more explicit. "Tree" describes a nondescript tree that grows near the "river of life" and functions as "an healing / To the nations" (Bontemps 1927: 48). By the end of the poem the tree is revealed as a symbol of "Love," figuring nature as a site of fantasy for resolving social rifts rather than using nature to buttress racist discourse.

Newsome's "The Bluebirds Are Coming" (1927d) provides another example of how the publishing context of *The Crisis* advances a racial reading of a seemingly simple poem about a bird and seasonal change. It adopts a blues-style form of repetition:

The snow's on the bird house,
On gable and eaves,
The snow's on the bird house
On gable and eaves.
But still I feel merry, 5
For here's February,
And bluebirds are coming,
The whole world believes,
Yes, bluebirds will be here,
The whole world believes. 10

The first four lines follow a blues structure in their *a b a b* repetition, followed by lines that respond to the previous ones. The poem then ends with another blues verse that goes unresolved, suggesting an incomplete or open-ended future where the "bluebirds will be here" (l. 9).

The poem "The Satisfied Swifts" (April 1926d) goes into more descriptive detail of bird behavior, movement, and hunting than "Bluebird." Newsome renders field guide entries on the Chimney Swift, exemplified by Wright's *Birdcraft* (1897), into a poetic idiom:

Some chimney Swifts swirled overhead
One pleasant April day.
Their actions plainly said,
"We're here to build and stay.

"We cannot tramp like Redbreast there,
But, my! we're nimble in the air.
We don't dig food in Flicker style,
And yet we're feasting all the while. (ll. 1–8)

The first image of the swirling chimney swifts echoes Wright in *Birdcraft*: “[n]othing, however, is more picturesque than these Swifts as they circle above the wide stone chimney of some half-ruined house” (1897: 194). *Citizen Bird* repeats a similar image when describing the chimney swift: “blackish birds kept streaming from the top [of the chimney], circling high in the air and darting down again” (Wright and Coues 1897: 296). Ventriloquizing the swifts, the second stanza compares it with other bird species, so as to make them more distinguishable from each other. In *Birdcraft*, Wright emphasizes many of these same features: Swifts are “constantly on the wing, either darting through the air, dropping surely to its nest, or speeding from it like a rocket” (1897: 193). According to Wright and Coues in *Citizen Bird*, the swift’s wings are “very strong, and almost as long as all the rest of his body” (1897: 297). The next stanzas of Newsome’s “The Satisfied Swifts” continue with behavioral observations and comparisons to other bird species:

“Flying to catch the bugs that fly
And make our lunch here in the sky. 10
We don’t sing like the birds in trees,
But we can whistle, we can wheeze.

“Poor Meadow Lark warbles and sings,
But, my! He’s hardly any wings.
Though Thrasher’s coat is brilliant bay,
We’re glad to have our sooty gray.” (ll. 9–16)

“Lunch” and “coat” suggest artifacts of human culture, anthropomorphizing the birds in a way that serves as a mnemonic device for children to understand their behavior and appearance. The swift’s affirmation of its “sooty gray” color implicitly models race-pride for African-American readers. The poem’s final stanza directly appeals to the reader’s sense of nature appreciation:

“His yellow eyes look brass-like, cheap.
Our eyes are dark and rich and deep.

Or scamper on the water top,
 As *water-striders* go,
 Or strange *back-swimmers* upside down, 15
 Using their legs to row,
 Or the stiff, flashing *dragon flies*,
 The gentle *damoiselle*,
 The clumsy, sturdy *water-bugs*,
 And *scorpions* as well, 20
 That come on top to get fresh air
 From homes beneath the pool,
 Where *water-boatmen* have their nooks,
 On pebbles, as a rule. (ll. 9–24)

The speaker seems wonderstruck particularly by the movement of these creatures, painting the vitalism of this small world with action verbs and adjectives such as “hop,” “scamper,” “row,” “strange,” and “flashing.” Interestingly, all these insects—water-striders, back-swimmers, dragonflies, damoiselles, water-bugs, scorpions, and water-boatmen—are predators.¹⁰

That the insects are predators becomes relevant in the third stanza, when the predators are outdone by the kingfisher, a small bird (more precisely, a group of related bird species) that dives for fish. In Zeigler’s reading of this poem, the kingfisher also brings “death” (1988: 129):

And then, behold! Kingfisher comes 25
 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? 30
 Kingfisher comes, and each of these
 Would hide itself away! (ll. 25–32)

The diction—“terrible” water-tigers that “murder” their prey—suggests some kind of social Darwinian justice to the natural order of the food chain. As described in *Citizen Bird*, the kingfisher dives into the water to hunt fish and its length is about thirteen inches, making the bird a giant when compared with the insects described in “At the Pool” (1927a: 318–19). In *Birdcraft*, the kingfisher is described with violent rhetoric as a hunter who “seizes his prey

by diving, and if it is small and pliable swallows it at once, but if it consists of the larger and more spinney fish they are beaten to pulp against a branch” (Wright 1897: 205). In *Birds through an Opera Glass*, Florence Merriam calls the species a fearless “woodsman” that will “teach you the secrets of the forest” (1889: 60). Celia Leighton Thaxter’s poem “The Kingfisher” portrays the bird with similar admiration and romanticization, though the presence of the speaker agitates the bird: “[h]e perched on the rock above me, and kept up such a din, / And looked so fine with his collar snow-white beneath his chin, / And his cap of velvet, black bright, and his jacket of lovely blue” (Thaxter 1894: ll. 5–7). Newsome’s scientific, rather than merely descriptive, rhetoric shows her sense of the child reader’s maturity and level of education.

Newsome turns the kingfisher into a German-romantic heroic figure that hunts for insects and brings death. The masculinized kingfisher terrorizes the pond’s inhabitants:

He swoops and swallows what he will,
 A *stone-fly* or a *frog*.
 Wing’d things rush frightened through the air 35
 Others to hole and log.
 The little pool that held them all
 I watch grow very bare,
 But fisher knows his hide and seek—
 He’ll find someone somewhere! (ll. 33–40) 40

While this poem seems to characterize a flight from history into nature, effectively ignoring race, the naming of species anchors it in the history of the entomological taxonomy of insects. The focus on the interaction of the species, showing deference to scientific accuracy, reflects the history of ecological science as well.

Because of their scientific specificity, Newsome’s writings on birds and natural history are irreducible to the notion of an organic trope that reinforces a New Negro black nationalism. Rather, she speaks to political and scientific discourses about birding 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” engage the bird conservation ethos of the plume wars. They also critically signify on field guides such as *Citizen Bird*, which contains racist stereotypes of African-Americans

and participates in a discourse environmental management and species 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.”

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” (1928: 195). A paper mill—the machine in the garden—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!’” (1928: 195). The description suddenly turns to a toxic discourse of pollution and ecological violence. When spring flowers tried to “perfume” the landscape, the “stealthy sickening smell would rise from the creek” (1928: 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” (1928: 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 echoes themes in Dunbar’s “Sympathy” (1899) and seems cross-written for 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,

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” suggest not only the violence of captivity, but also 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 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 (1926b). 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” (1926: 25). 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” (1926: 25). She directly addresses the reader in rhyme, saying “you read of his art,” but should also “think of his *heart*” (1926: 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 romantic) tropes suggest parallels between that movement and abolition: one day the (presumably white) owner of the caged bird will realize his wrongs and set the bird free.

Further developing conservationist themes, Newsome’s poem “Mattinata” (1927f) laments the lack of access city children have to the countryside,

employing images of wildlife absence that anticipate Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). 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.

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 Donnaræ MacCann observes, this poem “makes reference to some of Newsome's strongest interests: childhood, natural history, Christianity, and her African heritage” (1988: 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 challenge—and so open the road. “Human brooms,” Dan Crawford calls them. (1918: 17)

Having set the scene, the first stanza describes the tropical African setting and the second stanza envisions the dew-drier black boy as a symbolic agent of racial uplift:

Brother to the firefly—
 For as the firefly lights the night
 So lights he the morning—
 Bathed in the dank dews as he goes forth
 Through heavy menace and mystery 5
 Of half-waking tropic dawns,
 Behold a little black boy, a naked black boy,
 Sweeping aside with his slight frame
 Night’s pregnant tears,
 And making a morning path to the light 10
 For the tropic traveler! (ll. 1–11)

Though set in Africa, the more inclusive and African diasporic designation “black boy” is used to name the dew-drier instead of “African.” Just as the assonant long “o” of Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” resonates throughout that poem, so too does the consonant “black boy” form a veritable echo chamber of “b”-sounds here: brother, bathed, behold, blood, battle, body, bared, and bear. In the first line, the child bears a familial relation to nature, specifically an insect—the “firefly” that performs an analogous task to the child clearing a path. Despite the familial link to the firefly, to nature, the jungle is described as hostile, a “heavy menace and mystery” that places the vulnerable “naked” and “slight” black boy in peril. This hostility only enhances the black boy’s bravery.

The “dank dew” that “bathed” the black boy suggest a sort of ritual purification or trial, especially as these dew” 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 dew” 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 US citizens. The race as well as the whole world will be uplifted: “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 notion of the 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 interpellative subtitle—"to a brown boy"—announces 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 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 competing ideas about black childhood" (2004: 23). In Johnson's poem, the mother-speaker addresses a child waiting to be born, warning that the "world is cruel, cruel, child, / I cannot let you through" (ll. 7–8). Newsome's poem is more optimistic:

'Tis a noble gift to be brown, all brown,
 Like the strongest things that make up this earth,
 Like the mountains grave and grand,
 Even like the very land,
 Even like the trunks of trees— 5
 Even oaks, to be like these!
 God builds His strength in bronze.

To be brown like thrush and lark!
 Like the subtle wren so dark!
 Nay, the king of beasts wears brown; 10
 Eagles are of this same hue.
 I thank God, then, I am brown.
 Brown has mighty things to do.

The lyric naturalizes race in such a way that inverts white supremacist and social Darwinist ideologies by valorizing brownness over whiteness. To be “brown” is to be related to the material foundation of the earth—what Washington calls the “bed-rock bottom”—expressed affectively through a series of amplifying similes: mountains “grave and grand,” tortured into existence over long centuries, and the “very land” on which the southern economy depends (ll. 3–4).

The first stanza’s comparisons of the brown boy to “trunks of trees” and, more specifically “oaks,” anticipates the tree imagery of Angelina Wald Grimké’s “The Black Finger” (1923), another poem about race-pride:

I have just seen a most beautiful thing:
 Slim and still,
 Against a gold, gold sky,
 A straight, black cypress
 Sensitive 5
 Exquisite
 A black finger
 Pointing upwards.
 Why, beautiful still finger, are you black?
 And why are you pointing upwards? 10

The species-specific “oaks” in Newsome’s poem and “cypress” in Grimké’s suggest ecological knowledge as well as symbolism. Oak wood is ideal for housing construction and is not coincidentally the name of Washington’s home, the “Oaks,” as well as Dunbar’s “The Haunted Oak,” in which a speaking oak tree bears witness to the traumas of lynching.

While the first stanza of “The Bronze Legacy” deploys images of immanence, the second stanza, with the exception of the lion, deploys images of transcendence that reflect the poet’s interest in bird families: thrush, lark, wren, and eagle. The bird reference speaks back to Newsome’s interest in birding and natural history. Though the references to “God” in lines seven 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

toward the future fulfillment of promise: “Brown has mighty things to do” (l. 14). This black nationalist charge to the race reflects Newsome’s and *The Crisis*’s emphasis on educating children for the future of the race.

Conclusion

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 interlinks between natural history and race. At the same time, she (and Du Bois in his editorial role) 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 aims to denaturalize racial difference, to challenge a discourse of enclosure and segregation, and engage natural history and conservation.