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Conclusion

Lynched Earth: Resilience, Solidarity, and the Uses of Eco-historicism

Near the end of *Between the World and Me* (2015), Ta-Nehisi Coates links the problem of climate change to the problem of the color line. The technological revolutions of white Europeans—those whom Coates calls with cynical irony “Dreamers”—has “freed the Dreamers to plunder not just the bodies of humans but the body of the Earth itself” (2015: 150). Echoing the prophetic mode of Smothers in *Blood on the Forge*, Coates incants:

The Earth is not our creation. It has no respect for us. It has no use for us. And its vengeance is not the fire in the cities but the fire in the sky. Something more fierce than Marcus Garvey is riding on the whirlwind. Something more awful than all our African Ancestors is rising with the seas. The two phenomena are known to each other. It was the cotton that passed through our chained hands that inaugurated this age. It is the flight from us that sent them sprawling into subdivided woods. And the methods of transport through these new subdivisions, across the sprawl, is the automobile, the noose around the neck of the earth, and ultimately, the Dreamers themselves. (2015: 150–1)

The Atlantic slave trade, cotton monocultures, the sharecropping economy, the lynching industry, and white flight from the cities to the suburbs: this history of the color line is also the history of global warming and planetary crisis. The ancient dead Africans haunt the present; it is as though the dead give rise to sea levels, returning the dredged and developed wetlands of Florida and Louisiana to the wild swamps they once were.

Coates reminds us that we cannot escape from seeing the past as a history of the present, from the perspective of our own time and place. The eco-historical vantage forces us to also consider our embeddedness in the geologic time of environmental history. The scholar cannot escape from seeing the past filtered through her own historical moment, her situatedness in time and place, geology and geography. History has utility, whether the scholar accepts this or not. We always live “in” history—history is immanent and existential, *a posteriori* and not *a priori*—and the concerns of the “now” condition the possible interpretations of the past.

In *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Nietzsche advances a notion of an active, critical history that calls for the scholar to “break up and dissolve a part of the past” ([1874] 1997: 76). Such a critical history is needed only by she who is “oppressed by a present need, and who wants to throw off this burden at any cost” (72). Critical history is a history for the oppressed. In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin discusses the acceptance paradox of African- American history: to “accept one’s past—one’s history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it” (1963: 103). In a Nietzschean spirit, the paradox here is that the act of accepting the past—of affirming it and taking possession of it—is, in one and the same movement, an act of overcoming (*aufheben*, in Hegel’s terms). Baldwin raises the question of this overcoming when he then asks: “how can the American Negro past be used?” (1963: 103).

It is one contention of this book that eco-historicism is a method for breaking up the past and reinventing it for the present, which is a central task for the interdisciplinary field of the environmental humanities. Those in the environmental humanities should integrate into their analyses the dual temporalities of environmental (deep time and the *longue durée*) and anthropocentric (human, social, cultural, and economic) histories. Make history plastic. Force the past to self-avail itself for the future. In breaking up the past produced by anthropocentric historicisms, I have sought a history for the present—a life-serving, politically exigent history—by assembling an archive of African-American and race-conscious environmental writing that engage, directly or indirectly, the rhetoric and politics of conservation, the natural sciences, scientific ecology, and other emergent forms of early-twentieth-century environmentalism. This project has also recontextualized African-American

writing in light of environmental history, breaking up, and reinventing more anthropocentric histories. In such a way, eco-historicism provides a model on which to build for future scholarship in the environmental humanities.

In *Civil Rights and the Environment*, I have argued that problems of ecology, nature, and environments play a significant role in the development of early-twentieth-century African-American writing, including the racial uplift debates, in black periodicals such as *The Crisis*, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Great Migration narrative. Ecology, nature, and conservation were appropriated, refashioned, or discarded for the political aims of civil rights and black radicalism. This interest in nature also shows that African-American writers are more pluralist—politically and aesthetically—than most scholars indicate. In rereading modern African-American literature, I argue that writers such as Du Bois and Hurston grappled with questions about the relation of civil rights and racial uplift to nature, environment, and ecological events. The history of civil rights and environmental history are interfused, and should not be isolated from one another. There are usable histories here that can add to the intellectual and political diversity of movements for environmental, climate, and interspecies justice.

My own interpretive strategies have included rhetorical and comparative forms of textual analysis, placing African-American history in the context of environmental history, and reading for the textual eco-unconscious. At the same time, I have not confined myself to a single approach, instead adopting a number of heuristics and methods as multivariate as the writers, texts, and environments studied in this book. My goal has not been to downplay the 1980s emergence of environmental justice, but rather to expand its scope by predating the movement's issues well before the 1980s; the literature and politics of the early civil rights movement already encompassed and responded to the issues that the contemporary environmental justice movement raises.

If conservation, scientific ecology, and a general politicization of nature were already there in the work of Washington, Du Bois, and other black writers and intellectuals, then race is already also interconnected with environmental politics in the early twentieth century and even before. Though their methods and views differ, African-American writers and black intellectuals approach ecological events such as the 1927 flood disaster or the slow violence of industrialization through the prism of social exclusion and disparate impacts. Their

rhetorical and interpretive strategies include setting up counter-discourses, as in the case of Du Bois and Newsome; or narrating the intersection of class, gender, race, and ecology, as in the cases of Hurston and Attaway; or revealing the workings of environmental history and ecological agencies in debates about racial advancement, as in the case of Washington.

What new visions of an eco-politics of color and a justice-oriented conservationism might come into view in the twenty-first century? An ecological perspective on civil rights can connect in newly productive ways to urgent political and scholarly problems today. Look at the variegated models in *Civil Rights and the Environment* for a black eco-politics or a civil rights-based approach to conservation and climate change that is grounded in the concepts of social, economic, climate, and interspecies justice. The civil rights and the environmental movements of today can draw on the history of this difficult marriage. An eco-historicism of twentieth-century America shows that concepts of civil rights, social justice, and environmentalism have been intertwined at least since Washington's autobiographies and possibly as far back as the abolitionist movement.¹

With Booker T. Washington, for example, we find a layered textual engagement with southern environmental history, and the histories of the plantation form and sharecropping system. Washington's writings unconsciously give voice to ecological agencies, including a proto-sustainability that activists employ today, such as Majora Carter with her praxis of "Greening the Ghetto" (Pope et al., 2011: 516–17). The unconscious advocacy of ecological agencies in Washington's autobiographies finds echoes in the sustainable communities guided by a "New Work" philosophy in rust belt "waste places" such as Detroit.² The New Work movement focuses on local efforts to build sustainable communities in such "waste places" as Flint and Detroit, Michigan. What is most crucial in Washington's writings for today is the easy synthesis between economic justice and sustainability. Recall that sustainable farming or gardening practices are just one form of ecological agency: other agencies include setting up local economies that acquire some level of relative autonomy vis-à-vis global capitalism, or the assertion of dignified labor by partially withdrawing from an alienated labor market. Tapping into ecological agencies also goes much further than the neoliberal focus on consumer habits (recycling, buying eco-friendly products, etc.), without relying on an

overarching twentieth-century vision of communist revolution. There is also the integrated history of sustainable practices and racial uplift discussed with regard to the Tuskegee Institute. The current ideology of sustainability, which attaches “green” and “eco” to more and more consumer products, means nothing other than the continuation of consumerism with a slightly better conscience; sustainability can regain some of its subversive power to the existing order of corporate, big agribusiness capitalism when coupled with the Tuskegee program for economic empowerment of the poor and people of color. Ecological agencies cannot be fully controlled by state apparatuses, and they can be used for either capitalist or collectivist ends.

Du Bois develops an aesthetic and political project of parallel racial integration and integrated access to the “nature” of modern spaces such as national parks and urban natural spaces. Du Bois’s notion of double environments marks both the physical separation of black and white neighborhoods, and the psychological difference between white and black experiences of human-made and natural environments. Taking his notion of “second sight” into account will always already racialize any environment. Newsome promoted the coexistence of human and natural worlds; she strengthened the connection between civil rights and natural environments through an—albeit flawed—analogy between biodiversity and integrationism.³ The histories of conservation and environmentalism remain incomplete if *The Crisis* is not included along with *Forest and Stream*, *Ecology*, and other traditionally “white” publications. In the pages of *The Crisis*, conservation has indeed been a concern of black intellectuals and writers, especially Newsome, Du Bois, and Charles Young. Hurston envisioned multiethnic ecological collectives, in which distinctions between human and nonhuman break down, suggesting solidarity not just across racial and class groups—southern black folk, migrant Bahaman laborers, and the like—but also across species. Attaway narrated a Marxian and ecosystemic analysis of the Great Migration and industrialization in the Pittsburgh region. *Blood on the Forge* implies that environmental justice and climate justice alone may not solve the global warming crisis. In *Blood on the Forge*, when Smothers affectively registers the gathering intensity of the steel, the narrator waxes sublime on its creative and destructive possibilities on a global scale: steel “was shipped across endless tracks to all the world. On the consignment slips were Chicago, Los Angeles, New York,

rails for South America, tin for Africa, tool steel for Europe” (1941: 179–80). It may take a more radical and global transformation of the capitalist mode of production. That novel implies that saving the planet, saving the “ground,” cannot be done without also fighting the class war and the way the class war pits races against each other. Solidarity across race, class, and gender is necessary to combat planetary destruction.

The concerns of Anne Spencer’s “White Things” and Du Bois’s “The Souls of White Folk,” which opened this book, come full circle in 2017. The historic path of death and domination left by this modern invention of personal whiteness continues to soldier onward with the seeming force of destiny. Despair freezes the moment when decisive action against climate change is necessary but seems impossible. Stoked by anti-immigrant *ressentiment*, these anti-globalization, authoritarian nationalists in Europe (e.g., Turkey’s Erdoğan) and in the United States seem to personify the death drive. It is telling that so many Trump “survival” books and websites have become available only weeks after the November 2016 election. See, for instance, Gene Stone’s *The Trump Survival Guide: Everything You Need to Know About Living through What You Hoped Would Never Happen* (2017).

But survivalism, to invoke Spencer again, is a white thing. Survivalism is an individualistic persistence through despair, while resilience is a collective persistence through despair that—through the support of the group—can potentially overcome despair. Resilience depends on solidarity and thus has more potential for a leftist model of civil rights advancement and antiauthoritarian resistance. This book provides a usable past, an integrated history of civil rights and the environment, a critical history of the oppressed: it is in many ways a history of resilience and solidarity. Instead of making the connections today across the fragmented left—the Sierra Club over here, Black Lives Matter over there—we can *recover* an integrated history that can allow us to reconfigure these fragments into some kind of solidarity—a kind of historically grounded solidarity that grows out of shared oppression (to invoke the Combahee River Collective statement). The literature and politics of the early civil rights and environmentalist movements—combined with the spirit of those movements’ ethos of resilience—can illuminate the darkness of our current political and existential moment. The problems of the color line and the destruction of our common home are more soldered and burning than ever.