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**W.E.B. DU BOIS, BOOKER T. WASHINGTON,  
AND RICHARD WRIGHT**  
**Toward an Ecocriticism of Color**

*by Scott Hicks*

Scholars working in the field of ecocriticism in American literary studies have come to see that their most important task in the coming years is to take up and engage the cultural productions of peoples of color, especially African Americans. Such a transformation entails exploring and theorizing not just African American fictional and nonfictional narratives, but also African American critical and theoretical works that undergird and explicate other forms of cultural production. Currently, the forebearers of ecocriticism—"the study of literature as if the environment mattered" (Mazel 1)—seem to be an unassailable who's who of American nature writing: Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, John Muir, and Rachel Carson. To this pantheon I here would like to add a couple unlikely characters—W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. For as Kathleen Wallace and Karla Armbruster rightly point out, it now behooves literary critics to "question . . . why so few African American voices are recognized as part of nature writing and ecocriticism" (2). To ignore African American voices is to risk the field's ultimate demise, as Paul Tidwell argues:

In short, ecocriticism was founded on a too limited canon of writings based on too narrow a definition of nature writing . . . Ecocritics who continue to resist or reject African American concepts as foreign to their concerns risk a hardening of their developing discourse into a reactionary and racist defense of an essentialized idea of nature. ("The Blackness of the Whale")

Not only must ecocritics reread the fiction of African Americans ecocritically; they must also reread African American critics and thinkers ecocritically, so that all might begin to reformulate the questions and revise the assumptions that undergird the field. Any ecocritical methodology of African American literature must necessarily entail an ecocritical analysis of foundational African American critics and thinkers—not just, and not merely, white American ones. To do so offers the potential to reread literature as if the environment mattered differently.

To recuperate or claim Du Bois and Washington as environmentally conscious thinkers symbolizes an important step in beginning that transformation. Regardless of what one thinks of Washington or Du Bois, it is undeniable that these two men, in myriad ways, have framed America's twentieth-century discourse of race relations.

Consequently, an ecocritical analysis of Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901) and Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) offers a means of deepening critical understanding of their relationship to environmental awareness, in that such consciousness participates in ecocritically reimagining subsequent African American texts. As a "case study" for such a reimagining, I turn to the prominent fiction and nonfiction of novelist, essayist, and memoirist Richard Wright. This essay begins to reconstruct a genealogy of African American ecocriticism, putting Du Bois, Washington, and Wright into creative tension in order to begin to sketch a portrait of an early twentieth-century ecocriticism of color. In so doing, it asks critics to be conscious of various environments (urban, rural, and suburban, and the miscegenation and marginalization therein) as well as be attuned to the political ramifications of social justice, justice not just for the clichéd redwoods and spotted owls, but for communities and cultures as well.

The problem for ecocriticism, say some of its leading practitioners, is its fealty to what today are restrictive definitions and premises, particularly in regard to concerns of race and ethnicity—though its attention to environmental concerns in the late 1970s and early 1980s sounded a much-needed alarm about the health of the planet. As scholars such as Robert D. Bullard and Carolyn Merchant have shown since, though, environmental crises reflect, and cohere along, racial and gender lines, thus demonstrating the importance of "intersectional" ways of thinking "green"—with race and racism a critical axis. Such an attention to race demands a reconfigured consciousness of both the cultural and the political expressions of environmentalism—and such a reconfiguration requires ecocriticism's practitioners to rethink their conceptualizations of environmentalism. Said John Elder at the 1995 conference of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, "Just as the largely white wilderness movement is called upon today to address the condition of our cities, and to enter into closer collaboration with Americans of color, so too the nature writing so closely associated with it must be defined more inclusively" (qtd. Wallace and Armbruster 2–3). While a redefinition of the category of urban nature writing is requisite, ecocritics must beware essentialization and reduction—such as presupposing that communities of color are solely urban.

Wallace and Armbruster explicate the predicament of retheorizing the field. On one hand, they point to grave risks in rethinking a field only a couple decades old, just as it has begun to gain recognition as a viable theoretical methodology by the gatekeepers of literary study. On the other hand, the relatively young field risks alienating and rejecting whole realms even before it fully can come into its own. As Wallace and Armbruster explain,

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

That these ecocritical scholars should rely on racially charged shorthand to encapsulate the problem—the “ghettoizing [of] ecocriticism within literary and cultural studies generally”—portends the difficulty of rethinking the field from within. Despite this problematic formulation, however, Armbruster, Wallace, and others—such as Michael Bennett and David W. Teague, editors of *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments* (1999)—are productively responding to the call to expand the field’s boundaries, in terms both of theme and location. And they are right that acting now will set the course of ecocriticism in the years to come: “[T]he shape the field takes in the future will be influenced by the nature and elasticity of the borders established in its early years” (Wallace and Armbruster 6).

Several essays are helpful here in guiding and revising ecocritical approaches to race. Fundamental is acceptance of the proposition of “the general legacy of the depiction of racial others and nature itself as uncivilized and thus unworthy of equal moral consideration,” Andrew Light writes in “Boyz in the Woods: Urban Wilderness in American Cinema” (1999) (137). In this essay, Light analyzes the films of Spike Lee, John Singleton, and the Hughes brothers to critique “the filmic description of racial minorities as the savage inhabitants of an urban wilderness” (137). In “Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery” (2001), Bennett works against Melvin Dixon’s designation, in *Ride out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (1987), of wilderness as a signifying characteristic of African American literature, rooted in its symbolic heritage in African American spiritual. Rather, Bennett analyzes Douglass’s *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1855) as constitutive of an African American antipastoral tradition. He points to three key issues: (1) that Douglass’s geography is neither simply metaphorical, “to which space is often reduced in nonecological literary criticism,” nor merely lyrically restorative or evocative; (2) that his *Narrative* reverses the prototypical pastoral movement from evil urban sphere to recuperative rural sphere, moving instead from cruel rural landscape to safe urban haven; and (3) that it likewise inverts the temporal nodes of the pastoral, from wistful nostalgia for a mythic past in favor of a focus on “the Promised Land waiting beyond this mortal coil”—a rejection of pastoral attempts that seek to reduce African Americans to mere mechanisms in an “idealized scenery” (Bennett 197–199).

He concludes that the

main current within African American culture has, from Frederick Douglass to Toni Morrison, expressed a profound antipathy toward the ecological niches usually focused on in ecocriticism: pastoral space and wilderness. This fact challenges ecocritics to train our methods of reading and theorizing on African American cultural texts that question mainstream assumptions about the universal appeal of ‘unspoiled’ nature. (208)

Bennett here makes several crucial points. First, ecocritics must be willing to speculate outside their critical boxes in order to theorize African American cultural production, which has historically repudiated the spaces valorized in white American nature

writing and criticism. Indeed, in an earlier essay titled “Manufacturing the Ghetto,” Bennett calls on ecocritics to look outside the ivory tower: “This challenge to mainstream environmentalism could provide an equally important corrective for the deficiencies of mainstream ecocriticism” (169). Second, he rightly calls on ecocritics to suspend all predilections toward the “universal,” in that African American literature represents more accurately a regenerative corrective to ecocriticism. Finally, he calls on ecocritics to consider spaces other than natural and pastoral landscapes as worthy of ecocriticism—specifically, urban landscapes. These interventions encapsulate his criticism of field principal Lawrence Buell’s claims in *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995) that African Americans’ “‘tepid . . . interest to date in environmental causes’” stems from “the depiction of the countryside within African American literature as ‘an area of chance violence and enslavement.’” Bennett counters that “Buell has it backwards,” noting the vivacity of the environmental justice movement and calling on ecocritics to recognize urban space as ecological space, thus breaking down further barriers of race, class, and gender (208).<sup>1</sup>

Bennett’s criticism of the field and his recommendations function to spur critics to continue the foundational work of ecocritically theorizing African American texts, thus invigorating the ecocritical canon. But it is not enough simply to add African American fictional and nonfictional texts to the roll of reliable standbys; it is crucial that critics expand the critical underpinnings of an ecocritical canon with the theoretical and analytical frameworks provided by African American scholars and thinkers. Thus I submit an ecocritical reading of Du Bois and Washington, the two men whose dissonant ideologies have set for more than a century the American debate on race and race relations—ideologies that in similar ways, I would submit, emerge in ecocritical readings of their works. With a critical and theoretical framework thus laid, I put forward the example of Richard Wright as a case study. Not only do critics need the contemporary critical context, such as that provided by Armbruster, Bennett, Light, Wallace, and others; they need a historical grounding on which to situate Wright’s prolific corpus. I will read Du Bois’s and Washington’s work “as if the environment mattered,” focusing on their relationship to two key aspects of textual production and environmental awareness: nature and land.<sup>2</sup>

As Raymond Williams famously notes in *Keywords* (1976), “Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language” (184)—and it remains so for Washington and Du Bois. The former sees nature useful not only for him and his family, but for all people, black or white. In recreation and in industry, Washington posits nature as something that must be conquered and exploited. His educational plan at Tuskegee “was not to teach [students] to work in the old way, but to show them how to make the forces of nature—air, water, steam, electricity, horse-power—assist them in their labour” (*Up From Slavery* 103). “Nature” here encodes all external means of power that a properly taught human subject might draw together and deploy to human advantage. Even if African Americans could not exercise their rights of suffrage, assembly, and fair trial, they at least could control nature, he proclaimed.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in his famous Atlanta Compromise speech (1895), he celebrates environmental degradation and exploitation past and future:

Cast down your bucket among these people who have, without strikes and labour wars, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth, and helped make possible this magnificent representation of the progress of the South. Casting down your bucket among my people, helping and encouraging them as you are doing on these grounds, and to education of head, hand, and heart, you will find that they will buy your surplus land, make blossom the waste places in your fields, and run your factories. (*Up From Slavery* 153–154)

Such a construction of nature replicates his notion of human accommodationism, evidenced by Tuskegee alumni who later salute him that the school “started as we did, and built ourselves up year by year, by a slow and natural process of growth” (113)—certainly not an accommodationism of ecological integrity. That “slow” equals “natural” encapsulates the Washingtonian program: African Americans must not agitate for their rights through protest or politics; rather, they will receive their rights in due time, at the right season, when relations between whites and blacks have progressed in a “natural” way. Paradoxically, this line of thought represents one “nature” that even the best educated Tuskegee student cannot control: this is racism as “natural” fact, as inalienable and self-evident as human equality.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout *Up From Slavery*, Washington posits himself as a figure who is cultured and refined in the appropriate mores and styles of his day. To be sure, he is not cultured out of harmony with his supposed racial status, just as he would not educate his students out of harmony with their predestined work in agriculture and industry: he presents himself as a nonthreatening, likable man in no way subversive or anarchical. His and his family’s relationship to nature—aesthetic, cultured capital-N “Nature”—works to solidify that image:

[W]hat is nearly most equal to [telling a story with his family] is to go with them for an hour or more, as we like to do on Sunday afternoons, into the woods, where we can live for a while near the heart of nature, where no one can disturb or vex us, surrounded by pure air, the trees, the shrubbery, the flowers, and the sweet fragrance that springs from a hundred plants, enjoying the chirp of the crickets and the songs of the birds. This is solid rest. (*Up From Slavery* 185)

Washington here participates in the Europeanized pastoral ideal, a Wordsworthian sublime and Thoreauvian retreat. “Nature” becomes a space that allows him to escape, and to escape on his terms alone, a world too much with him—questions of race, methods of education, the duties of fund raising. Moreover, it becomes a place of moral and spiritual rejuvenation, a sort of Sabbath service of worship characterized by time spent with family. That the family disappears into “the heart of nature, where no one can disturb or vex us” suggests a significant space for interiority; such a public man whose narrative recounts his many speeches thus encloses in his narrative a

private, privileged sphere. This sphere exists outside racial categories: his only company is his family and the plants and animals of the forest. Moreover, it exists outside history—for many black men and women of the period, such a space would have been charged with the memory of the victims of lynching and rape—and thus would have been a place quite inhospitable. As William Cronon argues, such convictions in the separateness of wild nature are bogus, given that wilderness cannot help but be constructed by and in history: “Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it is quite profoundly a human creation—indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history” (69).

His musing on his garden on campus reflects his myopia toward his privileged position as a landowner, not tenant, and as a college administrator, not agricultural worker.

My garden, also, what little time I can be at Tuskegee, is another source of rest and enjoyment. Somehow I like, as often as possible, to touch nature, not something that is artificial or an imitation, but the real thing. When I can leave my office in time so that I may spend thirty or forty minutes in spading the ground, in planting seeds, in digging about the plants, I feel that I am coming into contact with something that is giving me strength for the many duties and hard places that await me out in the world. I pity the man or woman who has never learned to enjoy nature and to get strength and inspiration out of it. (*Up From Slavery* 185)

Washington’s rejection of the “artificial” and “imitation” in favor of untainted nature dovetails with his rejection of the cultivation of the mind in favor of the cultivation of capital; perhaps it is a coded jab at the Du Bois’s project of uplift through classical education. But his reflections on his garden agitate against his emphasis throughout his text of the primacy of agricultural participation as a means of economic uplift: were his students to spend more time in the dilettante’s garden and less time growing sweet potatoes, raising livestock, and making bricks, they would fail to achieve the improvement Washington desires for them. Such appreciation for nature, as Washington would have it, ultimately is impossible for the proletariat; indeed, it cannot help but exclude the laborers who make it possible in the first place.<sup>5</sup>

Du Bois’s conception of nature diametrically opposes Washington’s. Nature articulated as birds, crickets, seeds, pure air, and helpful forces for Washington becomes instead “sticks and stones and beasts”—the abjected litter that defines and delineates African American existence—for Du Bois:

When sticks and stones and beasts form the sole environment of a people, their attitude is largely one of determined opposition to and conquest of natural forces. But when to earth and brute is added an environment of men and ideas, then the attitude of the imprisoned group may take three main forms,—a feeling of revolt and revenge; an attempt to adjust all thought and action to

the will of the greater group; or, finally, a determined effort at self-realization and self-development despite enviroing opinion. (*The Souls of Black Folk* 37)

Du Bois seems to seek some way to justify a Washingtonian fixation on human domination of the environment, suggesting that such a need stems reasonably from a sense of helplessness and alienation. If anything, Du Bois argues for a move from segregation to integration, a move that appears to emblemize a move from the rural (“sticks and stones and beasts”) to the urban (an “environment of men and ideas”). Though African Americans subjugated in such a narrow environment have three options, the last seems to be Du Bois’s preference: that human beings utilize the fruits of knowledge and education as a means of reformulating their relationship to their environment. Washington’s dismay at a young man studying French grammar among the decay of a farm thus becomes Du Bois’s revisioning of self-awareness and self-consciousness in a self-remade world.

Like his conception of nature, Washington’s conception of land signifies yet another untapped resource available for human usage. It assumes a sort of grail power in Washington’s argument, as a space on which racism and discrimination can be forever undone:

How many times I wished then, and have often wished since, that by some power of magic I might remove the great bulk of these people into the country districts and plant them upon the soil, upon the solid and never deceptive foundation of Mother Nature, where all nations and races that have ever succeeded have gotten their start,—a start that at first may be slow and toilsome, but one that nevertheless is real. (*Up From Slavery* 63)

Only the land—seemingly the end all, be all to a plethora of woes—shall set human-kind free, a rhetoric Washington puts into practice at Tuskegee, where one of the founder’s initial efforts “was in the direction of increasing the cultivation of the land . . . All the industries at Tuskegee have been started in natural and logical order, growing out of the needs of a community settlement. We began with farming, because we wanted something to eat” (*Up From Slavery* 96).<sup>6</sup> This exodus into the Promised Land also stands outside of history, as if the acquisition of land—not the institution and perpetuation of slavery (a “school,” in his estimation) and its eventual cessation thanks to the Emancipation Proclamation—shall become the start of history for African peoples in America, a history that is somehow purged of unnaturalness (*Up From Slavery* 11).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the text constructs the acquisition of land as antithetical to the practice of politics; removing African Americans to the land thus serves to remove them from the public sphere. Unlike the bulk of African American literary production before and after Washington, *Up From Slavery* lauds without qualification a reverse migration, a sort of magical Trail of Tears from the city to the country. Houston A. Baker Jr. further problematizes this notion of land through his emphasis on “abandoned lands,” calling attention to the fact that that they never truly were



abandoned: "What transpired on land reclaimed by treasonous white southern patriarchs and 'officers' was a scandal of legalized black-labor exploitation—a brutalization of the black-South body that endured well into the twentieth century" (80).

The question thus becomes who, Washington or Du Bois, does a better job of "reading" the land, a quandary Wright posits in *Black Boy* (1945) of "reading my present environment in the light of my old one" (264). Whereas Washington posits the land of the South as a space that predates historical inscription, repudiates racial categorization, and offers nothing but infinite potential, Du Bois denaturalizes and defamiliarizes such assumptions by seeking to speak for the mute subject. He engages a variety of tactics in speaking about the land, rejecting in full Washington's perspective. In the main, Du Bois resists ways of speaking about the land that subordinate it to human activities and epistemologies.

More than simply "reading" the land of the South, this "Egypt of the Confederacy," Du Bois personifies it, constructing a narrative and genealogy that give voice simultaneously to its trials and tribulations: "How curious a land is this,—how full of untold story, of tragedy and laughter, and the rich legacy of human life; shadowed with a tragic past, and big with future promise!" (*Souls of Black Folk* 81). The earth here becomes not merely a medium on which human desires and needs are fulfilled, but a sort of embodied peer. The text further anthropomorphizes the land by likening it to a woman in labor: "The poor land groans with its birthpains, and brings forth scarcely a hundred pounds of cotton to the acre, where fifty years ago it yielded eight times as much. Of this meager yield the tenant pays from a quarter to a third in rent, and most of the rest in interest on food and supplies bought on credit" (*Souls of Black Folk* 85).<sup>8</sup> The deplorable conditions that entrap sharecroppers in a never-ending circle of toil and debt parallel the feminization of the land and the theft of the woman's child, who is, paradoxically, the woman herself. This sort of self-generating, self-sustaining act of creation rails at the theft of the sharecroppers' labor and the usurpation of African American women, whose virtue and chastity Du Bois later defends. Problematic, though, is its categorical reliance on antropocentrism in its construction and maintenance of meaning.

The intractability of questions of ownership abets Du Bois's conceptualization of the land as human. Indeed, by reconstructing African American history, culture, and society, *The Souls of Black Folk* aims to repudiate the slave mentality, that African Americans—that people of any color—can be enslaved. While "'Field-order Number Fifteen'" states that "[t]he islands from Charleston south, the abandoned rice-fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea, and the country bordering the St. John's River, Florida, are reserved and set apart for the settlement of Negroes now made free by act of war," liberated slaves never receive their promised forty acres and a mule: "In well-nigh the whole rural South the black farmers are peons, bound by law and custom to an economic slavery, from which the only escape is death or the penitentiary" (*Souls of Black Folk* 21, 33). As Du Bois's personification of the land makes clear, the enslavement of a whole people forces a revisioning of customary ways of thinking of the entire environment as an object of enslavement. No longer, that is, should humans blindly adhere to a "tendency . . . , born of slavery and quickened to renewed life by the crazy imperialism of the day, to regard human

beings as among the material resources of a land to be trained with an eye single to future dividends" (*Souls of Black Folk* 65). Du Bois here detaches notions of economic value from environmental sites and epistemologies, unlike Washington.

Du Bois enriches his conceptualization of land in *The Souls of Black Folk* by attending to its margins and edges. His consideration of the swamp exemplifies his commitment to a full accounting not just of African Americans but their environment as well:

the Swamp, to the west, where the Chickasawhatchee flows sullenly southward. The shadow of an old plantation lies at its edge, forlorn and dark. Then comes the pool; pendent gray moss and brackish waters appear, and forests filled with wild-fowl. In one place the wood is on fire, smouldering in dull red anger; but nobody minds. Then the swamp grows beautiful; a raised road, built by chained Negro convicts, dips down into it, and forms a way walled and almost covered in living green. Spreading trees spring from a prodigal luxuriance of undergrowth; great dark green shadows fade into the black background, until all is one mass of tangled semi-tropical foliage, marvelous in its weird savage splendor. Once we crossed a black silent stream, where the sad trees and writhing creepers, all glinting fiery yellow and green, and seemed like some vast cathedral,—some green Milan builded of wildwood. (*Souls of Black Folk* 81)

If the center of the forest far away from human habitation is Washington's Wordsworthian solace, then this "vast cathedral—some green Milan builded of wildwood" is Du Bois's Tintern Abbey. As Bennett points out in his analysis of Douglass's *Narrative*, the wilderness serves as anything but a safe haven. Through the image of the swamp, Du Bois fashions a viable alternative, an alternative that values sullenness, brackishness, and anger. The material reality of history remains at hand—the "shadow of an old plantation" borders the swamp, while the residue of a raised road's construction by "chained Negro convicts" persists. Despite this torpor and offense, though, shines a beauty Du Bois alone defines: plants and wildlife teem in "prodigal luxuriance," and the deeper one penetrates the swamp—and the further one moves from white culture and law—the more vivid colors become, sharpened on their edges by difference and contrast: "a black silent stream" interspersed by "sad trees and writhing creepers, all glinting fiery yellow and green," taken together a palette "marvelous in its weird savage splendor." If the South is the Egypt of the Confederacy, this is its Nile River delta: a space where meanings and significations, like water and soil, mingle and muddy, rethinking and refashioning all that converge. The space persists as one of sanctity and protection because of its enveloping power—and because humans enter it not as spoilers but as prostrated appreciators.<sup>9</sup>

Juxtaposed against the richness and fertility of the swampland soil stands the decayed and wasted richness and fertility of the archetypal Southern plantation. Like the swamp, this place remains a site of fertility; a sense of optimism for the possibility of renaissance appears to pervade it:

Wherever the King may be, the parks and palaces of the Cotton Kingdom have not wholly disappeared. We plunge even now into great groves of oak and towering pine, with an undergrowth of myrtle and shrubbery. This was the 'home-house' of the Thompsons,—slave-barons who drove their coach and four in the merry past. All is silence now, and ashes, and tangled weeds. . . . Yonder is another grove, with unkempt lawn, great magnolias, and grass-grown paths. (*Souls of Black Folk* 79)

Du Bois's description of the plantation speaks to the indelible legibility of human affairs on the earth. The unruly regrowth of the plants on the former estate suggests a period of redefinition, with the ingredients—ashes—available to accomplish that alteration.<sup>10</sup> Undercutting this sense of sanguinity, though, remains the reality that faces the estate's new inhabitants. First, its inhabitant, an "unlucky and irresolute" African American, does not hold the deed to the property, but rather pays a "white girl," an absentee owner who lives in Savannah, Georgia. Second, this tenant still does not possess (or have access to) a dignity that would allow him to come and go by the house's front door, not "the back part grotesquely restored" for him. And, third, at least one necessity—a land able to support a cash crop, a knowledge of agricultural methods, or physical strength—is lacking, as "he digs hard to rent" (*Souls of Black Folk* 79). Perhaps its new owner cannot erase the force of painful memory that must be associated with such a place: "'This land was a little Hell . . . I've seen niggers drop dead in the furrow, but they were kicked aside, and the plough stopped. And down in the guardhouse, there's where the blood ran'" (*Souls of Black Folk* 82). For not only might ash serve as a fertilizer: so too might blood.

In contrast, Du Bois offers as a foil to this melancholic figure a paragon of virtue, industry, and tenacity: the African American farmer, idealized in the form of "Jack Delson, the most prosperous Negro farmer in the country. It is a joy to meet him,—a great broad-shouldered, handsome black man, intelligent and jovial." Du Bois goes on to report that Delson owns 650 acres and manages eleven tenants, all African American. But what symbolizes his success, more than figures and statistics, is the environment he has constructed amidst the environment he cultivates: "[a] neat and tidy home nestled in a flower-garden, and a little store stands beside it" (*Souls of Black Folk* 87). In contrast to the "[r]ows of old cabins . . . filled with renters and laborers,—cheerless, bare, and dirty, for the most part, although here and there the very age and decay makes the scene picturesque" that otherwise pervade the landscape, Delson's reformulation of the picturesque—self-sufficient, self-actualized, and self-made—provide a basis for Du Bois's confidence that "the Negro is rising" (*Souls of Black Folk* 84). This sense of a rejuvenation of an impression of agency contradicts the material realities that Du Bois describes—hard work fails to keep the vast majority of sharecroppers out of debt, and debt hounds those fortunate enough to own land.<sup>11</sup> But it serves to reiterate the text's intention to emphasize the importance of classical education as a means of lifting the race culturally, socially, and intellectually: in all aspects of human endeavor, that is, exists a "Talented Tenth;" through the example of these successes, Du Bois offers, didactically and practically, hope for those who desire a more fulfilling life.

A synthesis of Washington's and Du Bois's stances toward the environment seems to hinge on the former's famous image of a young African American man studying French grammar amidst poverty and ruin. According to Washington's program, nature exists insofar as it has instrumental value—and insofar as humans take advantage of it and use it. Moreover, Washington's reverence of a Romantic European archetype of nature serves to impose and instate a socioeconomic hierarchy on human relationships to the environment: that is, only those who earn success in work have a right to enjoy an aestheticized nature. Yet Du Bois, through his sociological research, interrogates the polar opposite of “what it feels like to have a territory” (Evernden 97)—or to have a territory that ostensibly is in conflict with the ecology of the intellect. Both men's texts point to the signal importance of rethinking the place of agriculture in ecocriticism, in that “American wilderness writing ignores the black, because of his association with agriculture” (Lutwack 72). Du Bois and Washington both acknowledge the centrality of agricultural means of epistemology and production, and the richness of their potential place in a reopened ecocriticism derives from intersections and divergences of their thinking thereof. Indeed, I would like to echo Elizabeth Dodd's rejection of the sense that

academic inquiry, including the work of ecocritics, already expects black literature to focus on the social realm; literary studies categorizes black literature as offering an interest in the environment similar to the interest in socioeconomic environment that characterized naturalistic novels at the close of the nineteenth century. (177)

In sum, the two men embody diametrically opposed ways of thinking about human relationships to the environment—from Washington's belief that humans shape their environment to their needs and desires to Du Bois's conviction that the environment directs humans in their construction of necessity and longing—that ecocritics would do well to probe further in all aspects of twentieth century African American literary production.

Out of these notions should emerge a reinvigorated African American ecocriticism. To my mind, this analysis of *Up From Slavery* and *The Souls of Black Folk* suggests a few tools or guidelines of analysis that ecocritics must bear in mind when undertaking an ecocritical analysis of African American textual production. First, in keeping with parameters Bennett sketches in his ecocritical analysis of Douglass, we must attend to the radical reimaginings of the pastoral convention, specifically from their derivation in agricultural praxis and philosophy. Second, we must attend to revised ways of thinking about space and place, particularly in integrating analyses of constructed urban spaces alongside traditional evaluations of clichés of natural space. Third, we must attend to questions of ways of knowing and the construction of knowledge. In this endeavor I would like to offer Richard Wright as a provisional example. I would like to focus on Wright for several reasons: his vacillation between the rural South and the urban North; his interest and success in genres as diverse as novel, travelogue, memoir, and essay; his role as both an insider and an exile; and his

political consciousness and practice. In each of these realms, notions of the environment and the environmental are inherent and always already under construction.

From *Uncle Tom's Children* (1940) to *Black Boy* (1945) to *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), Wright problematizes conventions of the pastoral, attentive to its associations with agriculture. His surprise, in *Pagan Spain* (1957), at seeing "a vast flock of sheep . . . ambling down the broad, modern avenue" in Barcelona, led by "[a] boy with a long staff" (30), provides a metaphor for his treatment of the pastoral elsewhere. In many ways, his collision in *Pagan Spain* with such a primal pastoral scene epitomizes the denaturalization and defamiliarization of the pastoral that he undertakes across genres and categories. In *Black Boy*, Wright's handling of the pastoral opens the trope to attack. He works against the optimistic pastoralism of *Up From Slavery* and the narrative distance of the learned speaker of *The Souls of Black Folk*:

There was the delight I caught in seeing long straight rows of red and green vegetables stretching away in the sun to the bright horizon.

There was the faint, cool kiss of sensuality when dew came to my cheeks and shins as I ran down the wet green garden paths in the early morning.

There was the vague sense of the infinite as I looked down upon the yellow, dreaming waters of the Mississippi River from the verdant bluffs of Natchez.

There were the echoes of nostalgia I heard in the crying strings of wild geese winging south against a bleak, autumn sky. (*Black Boy* 7-8)

Wright unsettles and upends the pastoral. He rejects its simplistic appreciation for nature unreflected on in favor of one in which danger and disorder are imminent and endemic, one in which terror and fear are always but a few steps away. This sort of dream-like litany suggests a double consciousness that is both Washingtonian and Du Boisian. Wright is a country boy, attuned to rural, instinctual ways of knowing and experiencing nature, yet he seems to enjoy a sense of retreat, a freedom from the work that puts the "red and green vegetables" in the ground and allows him to meditate on a view of the mighty Mississippi. There is likewise a sort of studied sense to these reflections, a certain literary quality of transcription in that these observations are simultaneously instantaneous and reflective. But the text does not allow these images to stand unchallenged and uncomplicated:

There was the experience of feeling death without dying that came from watching a chicken leap about blindly after its neck had been snapped by a quick twist of my father's wrist.

There was the great joke that I felt God played on cats and dogs by making them lap their milk and water with their tongues. . . .

There was the speechless astonishment of seeing a hog stabbed through the heart, dipped into boiling water, scraped, split open, gutted and strung up gaping and bloody. . . .

And there was the quiet terror that suffused my senses when vast hazes of gold washed earthward from star-heavy skies on silent nights . . . . (*Black Boy* 8-9)

Moreover, the very plots of his work reinforce this fear: pastoral moments are without fail enveloped by the atrocities of murder and rape (*Native Son*, 1940), fire (*Black Boy*), and lynching (“Big Boy Leaves Home” in *Uncle Tom’s Children*). Wright’s contribution to a reworking of pastoral lies in his ability to render it insidious and lethal: “[u]nder this calm, dreary landscape there seemed to lurk coiled tensions, fears,” he writes in *Pagan Spain*, referring to the ubiquity of machine gun-toting soldiers across the Spanish landscape (8).

Wright’s handling of the pastoral reiterates its inseparability from agricultural concerns. Unlike Du Bois’s celebration of farmer Jack Delson, Wright’s description of the wasted figure of his father emphasizes the plight of African American farmers:

I stood before him, poised, my mind aching as it embraced the simple nakedness of his life, feeling how completely his soul was imprisoned by the slow flow of the seasons, by wind and rain and sun, how fastened were his memories to a crude and raw past, how chained were his actions and emotions to the direct, animalistic impulses of his withering body . . . . (*Black Boy* 34)

Writing from the perspective of a man who has lived in both the country and the city, Wright’s visit to his father reveals what Leo Marx later terms a “complex” pastoralism: at once “simple,” “season[al],” and “animalistic,” yet also “aching,” “imprisoned,” “chained,” “crude,” “raw,” and “withering.”<sup>12</sup>

The deployment of the term “environment” throughout Wright’s corpus, and specifically in *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, permits a revisioning of modes of imagining space and place, especially in building bridges between supposedly “natural” spaces (though, as Bill McKibben argues, nothing now exists that has been untouched by humanity) and obviously constructed urban environments.<sup>13</sup> *Black Boy*, for example, resists conventional environmentalist thinking of nature and wilderness by conflating them with images of built space:

To starve in order to learn about my environment was irrational, but so were my hungers. With my books slung over my shoulder, I would tramp with a gang into the woods, to rivers, to creeks, into the business district, to the doors of poolrooms, into the movies when we could slip in without paying, to neighborhood ball games, to brick kilns, to lumberyards, to cottonseed mills to watch men work. (*Black Boy* 127)

Like Washington, Wright seeks out woods, rivers, and creeks, as well as brick kilns and lumberyards. But unlike Washington, Wright sees the two realms as intimately interconnected, slipping and sliding into each other. It is crucial that he “know” his environment, be it in a rational or irrational manner—an exercise Du Bois certainly would have applauded.

Consequently, in my thinking of Wright’s usage of the term “environment” in his work, I would like to resist a facile classification of his production as “naturalistic”;

indeed, I think it might be productive for scholars in the future to reconsider this term (and indeed their critical work and assumptions therein) in light of a post-*Silent Spring* contextualization.<sup>14</sup> Juxtaposed against “naturalism,” the term “environment” in *Native Son* registers on several currents. First, it is a term controlled and regulated by whites, as shown in Mr. and Mrs. Dalton’s discussion before hiring Bigger Thomas as their chauffeur:

‘Don’t you think it would be a wise procedure to inject him into his new environment at once, so he could get the feel of things?’ the woman asked, addressing herself by the tone of her voice to the man now.

‘Well, tomorrow’ll be time enough,’ the man said hesitantly.

‘I think it’s important emotionally that he feels free to trust his environment,’ the woman said. ‘Using the analysis contained in the case record the relief sent us, I think we should evoke an immediate feeling of confidence . . . .’ (*Native Son* 48)

Both the content and the manner of the Daltons’ conversation speak to a definition of “environment.” For the Daltons, “environment” is something outside them, something that can be controlled; they are the puppet master, and Thomas the puppet. They fail to consider that his inclusion in their home environment will necessarily alter their environment, such that it is no longer under their control; they fail to grant him even the courtesy of pretending that his conception of his environment will conflict with their sense of the environment they believe they have “created.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the fact that they speak about him, in his presence, without his input, relegates him to the status of yet another mute organism in their environment. As centers of power and privilege, they believe that they alone can speak for the natural organisms in their environment.<sup>16</sup> Thomas feels this sort of powerlessness when he reflects on his action: “He had been so conditioned in a cramped environment that hard words or kicks alone knocked him upright and made him capable of action—action that was futile because the world was too much for him” (*Native Son* 225). Thomas seems to feel that he must reject this environment, that he must rebel against it through great action in order to begin the work of redefinition.

But I would argue that it is this sense of cooptation of “environment” by whites that the novel works against: social work agencies seek to pathologize Thomas, and the Daltons wish to create an appropriate environment for him, yet in the end the crux is that Mr. Dalton owns the central city building in which he and his family live, a building that is unsanitary and unsafe—and crippling to the development of self-awareness and self-actualization. Indeed, the building is nothing but a Pavlovian maze in which the rats comprise Thomas’s family. Here the insights and narratives of the environmental justice movement become critically helpful, as a consolidation of raced, gendered, and classed concerns with realities of environmental depredation, degradation, and ghettoization. As Ralph Ellison says, “He has converted the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation and ‘going-under-ground’ into a will to confront the world, to evaluate his experience honestly and throw his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America” (94). Though I disagree with

James Baldwin's negative assessment of *Uncle Tom's Children*, he is correct in the importance he places on our existence within a web, a key ecocritical concept of systems and symbiosis: "only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves" (Baldwin 15).<sup>17</sup>

Third, ecocritics must attend to questions of epistemology and ontology. Wright's diverse work points to the multiplicity and multivocality of ways of apprehending and comprehending the environment. Writing from the inside (*Uncle Tom's Children*, *Black Boy*, and *Native Son*) and the outside (*Pagan Spain*) Wright shows the multiple perspectives from which experience is judged, analyzed, and recorded. Wright seems deeply conscious of the promise embedded in such work. Referring to his autobiography, *Black Boy*, he writes:

I wrote [*Black Boy*] to tell a series of incidents strung through my childhood, but the main desire was . . . to render a judgment on my environment. I wanted to render that judgment because I felt the necessity to . . . That judgment was this: the environment the South creates is too small to nourish human beings, especially Negro human beings. (*Conversations with Richard Wright* 78)

What is striking here is Wright's awareness that he can be both within and without his environment; he has claimed the right to judge and assess his surroundings and their effect on his development, primarily intellectual but also physical (evidenced through his allusions to hunger and food).<sup>18</sup> This revolutionary position denaturalizes the South, permitting it to become eligible for new inquiry into the construction of nation and world:

I am all for the redemption of Africa from the imperialist powers and I believe that it would help the entire world if it were taken out of the clutches of those imperialist nations that exploit it and the natives of Africa were allowed to assimilate the ideals of western civilization and the instrumentalities of our industrial life. But I do not believe that we should in any degree feel that they should have Africa because of any special characteristics, biological, cultural, or psychological. (*Conversations with Richard Wright* 78)

Thus we have access to a powerful revisioning of the relationship of African American textual production to ecocritical concerns: Wright offers perspectives both local-individual and global-collective in nature, thus expanding the boundaries of his fiction and this critical methodology. Moreover, his political praxis and speech allows him to connect his concerns with the concerns of environmental justice, be it in the South, the United States, or the world.<sup>19</sup>

His visit to a gold mine in Ghana, recounted in *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (1954), seems to provide a fitting conclusion to an exploration of his work. As he declares at the beginning of the book, his job is to provide the facts;



whether his interpretation is Marxian or otherwise, "I insist that any other method *must not exclude the facts!*" (*Black Power* xiii, emphasis original). Thus he provides a critical framework for his relating of a visit to the gold mine: narrative as a means of simultaneously conveying and apprehending meaning. That is, epistemology and ontology here are both indictment and responsibility, a critique of insider status from the point of view of the exile, the traveler. The result is a representation of the environment that is inherent and always already under (de)construction:

That afternoon I watched the elaborate mechanical and chemical processes by which gold was extracted from rock. Endless tons of crushed ore ran over conveyor belts and poured into huge revolving bins which emptied into vast steel drums that whirred and groaned, pulverizing the ore for twenty-four hours a day. From crusher to crusher I followed the ore until finally I saw vats in which the ore has been reduced to the consistency of talcum powder. At last I came to that section where, from a shaking table covered with corduroy, water washed down a trickling stream of golden flakes into a metal pail over which stood, stripped to the waist and barefooted, a black boy keeping track of the wet gold dust. Behind him stood an armed Britisher. (*Black Power* 311)

With the image of the black boy, foregrounded against the archetypal image of armed white imperial and colonial power, we come full circle, rejoining the black boy of Wright's memoir. In the process, though, we see mountains turned to dust, just as the psyches of the mine's workers and families see their psyches "rejected, repressed, and sublimated" (*Black Power* 310). The deconstruction of the mountain into flakes of gold, to be reconstituted into gold bars and thus wealth, represents as if in a still frame the overarching aim of Wright's work: the deconstruction of Western conceptualizations of the environment, and a reimagining of the place of diverse peoples therein. The prolific writings of Du Bois and Washington revolve around this central tenet, the latter offering alternatives, the former co-optations. But, in the end, the problem is the same: "The strange soil of the Western world, composed as it is of individualism, hunger for a personal destiny, a romantic sense of self redemption, gives birth to fantastic human plants that it is ashamed of!" (*Black Power* 238). Evolving from the collision of Du Boisian and Washingtonian philosophies, Wright's transcategorical, intergeneric work offers a third meditation on the problematic of nature, land, soil—and the "fantastic human plants" that inevitably, and felicitously or infelicitously, ensue.

In this essay, I have striven to be as focused and (for lack of a better word) obtuse as possible on the significations of the environment in the work of three major figures of African American thought, criticism, and literature. This intensity is grounded in my conviction that ecocritics must talk more often and more comprehensively about African American textual production. Because of a paucity of forebearers, this is necessarily a provisional effort that deserves sustained attention from a diversity of disciplinary and political viewpoints. First, we must investigate in greater depth the cultural history of nature and the environment in Africa; as Levita Mondie notes, "In order to understand nature consciousness in African-American literature, one must

understand the holistic aesthetic and worldview that informs the West and Central African cultures of enslaved Africans" (66). Second, we must examine the scientific history of farming in the postbellum South as a means to concretize further Du Bois's and Washington's ecocritical praxis. Third, we must further explore these writers' politics in the specific realm of environmentalist awareness, agitation, and organization. (As former President Jimmy Carter said, he has come to realize that human rights are no longer simply rights of assembly, speech, press, religion, and autonomy; they are also the rights of clean water, air, and soil.) Fourth, we must continue to theorize ways of applying ecocritical analyses of African American thinkers and scholars to the work of their literary progeny. My intention here in highlighting the work of Richard Wright is simply to propose some approximation of a framework that might be applicable to other writers. This is critical work, and the payoff is great. Not only will "an examination of [African American writers'] work from an ecocritical perspective . . . illuminate previously unrecognized aspects of the work, increasing our understanding of how sense of place and ethical awareness intersect" (Dodd 178); it will help us to reimagine new ways of relating to the environment that might curtail the pernicious effects of pollution and exploitation. Social and cultural criticism has reformed the way humans see the organization of society, leading to the great movements of feminism and civil rights. Ecocriticism has the potential to revise how we humans see ourselves in the world—an intellectual, epistemological, and ontological revolution as far-reaching and radical as the revolutions of race that Du Bois, Washington, and Wright imagine.

#### NOTES

1. In *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (2001), Buell explores African American responses to environmentalism through the prisms of "ecopopulist protest," the "rhetoric of pastoral betrayal," and "toxic diffusion" (38–39), addressing the examples of Love Canal and Gary, Indiana, for example, and the narratives of Gwendolyn Brooks, John Edgar Wideman, and Richard Wright.
2. While Wright and Du Bois were readers of each other's work and publicly expressed their opinions thereof, Wright stated, after an invitation to write a script for a life of Washington, that he was "ashamed to admit that I've never read *Up From Slavery*. I shall and I must. This admission might sound doubly strange coming from me, but I escaped being educated in Negro institutions and never quite got around to reading those books everyone is supposed to have read" (Fabre 168–169). Fabre notes that Wright subsequently purchased a copy of Washington's autobiography, which remained in his library. For the purposes of this paper, I am interested in the ways that these three men and their works participate in an ecocritical discourse; indeed, as Wright makes clear, he seemed to have a quite visceral familiarity with the Tuskegee Wizard's *chef d'œuvre*: "I would suggest that Mayor Robert R. Morton be boiled slowly, seasoned with peppers and sauces, stuffed, baked and served to the Justices of the United States Supreme Court with a red apple in his mouth. Surely he would not object greatly, for he follows the philosophy of Booker T. Washington which counsels him to be 'separate as the fingers in all things social yet as one hand in all things essential to mutual purpose'" (qtd. Fabre 168–169). As Hazel Rowley notes, African American parents emphasized the power of education in cultivating greatness: "'Get an education was the byword. The male image of greatness was Booker T. Washington to some, and Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois to others, but our parents always reminded us that there were great people in our race'" (21).
3. Zhang Juguo records how, in 1907, the National Negro Business League perpetuates at its annual business meeting this very rhetoric: "Soil, sunshine, rain and the laws of trade have no

regard for race or colour. We are learning that we must be builders if we would succeed. As we learn this lesson, we shall find help at the South and at the North. We must not be content to be tolerated in the communities, we must make ourselves needed. The law that governs the universe knows no race or colour. The forces of nature will respond as readily to the hand of the Chinaman, the Indian, or the Negro as to any other race. Man may discriminate, but nature and the laws that control the affairs of men will not and cannot. Nature does not hide her wealth from a black hand" (56–57)

4. To my mind, Joel Williamson, in his groundbreaking work *The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (1984), puts the result of this casting down of buckets best: "They had cast down their buckets where they were, and now the water came up salty, bitter, and foul" (220).
5. For an oft-anthologized poetic explication of this complaint, see Stephen Duck's *The Thresher's Labour* (1730):

Now in the Air our knotty Weapons fly;  
And now with equal Force descend from high:  
Down one, one up, so well they keep the Time,  
The Cyclops Hammers could not truer chime;  
Nor with more heavy Strokes could Ætna groan,  
When Vulcan forg'd the Arms for Thetis' Son.  
In briny Streams our Sweat descends apace,  
Drops from our Locks, or trickles down our Face.  
No intermission in our Works we know;  
The noisy Threshall must for ever go. (ll. 38–47)

This famous poem also suggests a linkage between economic inequity and environmental degradation and violence, imagining the scythe as a "Weapon destin'd to uncloth the field" (l. 108).

6. Hear Washington's pride for a bumper crop of sweet potatoes one Tuskegee alumnus raises one year: "I spoke of an instance where one of our graduates had produced two hundred and sixty-six bushels of sweet potatoes from an acre of ground, in a community where the average production had been only forty-nine bushels to the acre. He had been able to do this by reason of his knowledge of the chemistry of the soil and by his knowledge of improved methods of agriculture" (141).
7. In another, yet probably unintentional, spell of historical amnesia, perhaps the model Washington has in mind for a wildly successful agricultural program comes from Holland, which he visited in 1899: "The thing that impressed itself most on me in Holland was the thoroughness of the agriculture and the excellence of the Holstein cattle. I never knew, before visiting Holland, how much it was possible for people to get out of a small plot of ground. It seemed to me that absolutely no land was wasted. It was worth a trip to Holland, too, just to get a sight of three or four hundred fine Holstein cows grazing in one of those intensely green fields" (194). The Dutch dominated the transatlantic slave trade from its first unloading of slaves at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619.
8. Du Bois links the image of the groan again with the land: "And yet with all this there was something sordid, something forced,—a certain feverish unrest and recklessness; for was not all this show and tinsel built upon a groan?" (82). This groan encapsulates the land's continuous primal speech act, signifying a range of meanings despite its inarticulateness.
9. Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988), compares the usage of the image of the swamp in Du Bois's *Quest for the Silver Fleece* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937): "The trope of the swamp, furthermore, in *Their Eyes* signifies exactly the opposite of what it does in Du Bois's *Quest for the Silver Fleece*. Whereas the swamp in Du Bois's text figures an uncontrolled chaos that must be plowed under and controlled, for Hurston the swamp is the trope of freedom of erotic love, the antithesis of the bourgeois life and order that her protagonist flees but to which Du Bois's protagonists aspire. Whereas Du Bois's characters gain economic security by plowing up and cultivating cotton in the swamp, Janie flees the bourgeois life that Du Bois's characters realize, precisely by abandoning traditional values for the uncertainties and the potential chaos of the uncultivated, untamed swamp, where love and death linger side by side" (193).
10. The evocation of the ghosts of the Thompson family seems to mirror the evocation of its postbellum counterpart: "The Wizard of the North—the Capitalist—had rushed down in the

seventies to woo this coy dark soil. He bought a square mile or more, and for a time the field-hands sang, the gins groaned, and the mills buzzed. Then came a change. The agent's son embezzled the funds and ran off with them. Then the agent himself disappeared. Finally the new agent stole even the books, and the company in wrath closed its business and its houses, refused to sell, and let houses and furniture and machinery rust and rot" (*Souls of Black Folk* 81). What seems just as evil and deleterious as capitalist malfeasance here is the notion of the ensuing profligacy: not only do the owners fail in business; they also fail to keep usable machinery and facilities from going to waste.

11. See the following passages from *Souls* for examples of the unsettling sense of pessimism in regard to the South's agricultural and economic reality. First, any distinction between owner and tenant seems, in reality, merely technical (and wholly inscrutable by empirical epistemology), evidenced by this description of "the Cotton Kingdom,—the shadow of a marvelous dream. And where is the King? Perhaps this is he,—the sweating ploughman, filling his eighty acres with two lean mules, and fighting a hard battle with debt. So we sit musing, until, as we turn a corner on the sandy road, there comes a fairer scene suddenly in view,—a neat cottage snugly ensconced by the road, and near it a little store. A tall bronzed man rises from the porch as we hail him, and comes out to our carriage. . . . He walks too straight to be a tenant,—yes, he owns two hundred and forty acres. 'The land is run down since the boom-days of eighteen hundred and fifty,' he explains, and cotton is low. Three black tenants live on his place, and in his little store he keeps a small stock of tobacco, snuff, soap, and soda, for the neighborhood. Here is his ginhouse with new machinery just installed. Three hundred bales of cotton went through it last year. Two children he has sent away to school. Yes, he says sadly, he is getting on, but cotton is down to four cents; I know how Debt sits staring at him" (79). Second, the impoverishment of the land reflects the impoverishment of its inhabitants: "Here is one of them now,—a tall brown man, a hard worker and a hard drinker, illiterate, but versed in farmlore, as his nodding crops declare. This distressingly new board house is his, and he has just moved out of yonder moss-grown cabin with its one square room. . . . And the half-desolate spirit of neglect born of the very soil seems to have settled on these acres. In times past there were cotton-gins and machinery here; but they have rotted away. . . . Then he went, and his neighbors too, and now only the black tenant remains; but the shadow-hand of the master's grand-nephew or cousin or creditor stretches out of the gray distance to collect the rack-rent remorselessly, and so the land is uncared-for and poor. Only black tenants can stand such a system, and they only because they must. Ten miles we have ridden to-day and have seen no white face" (78). Wright conceives of such men—"the poor guys in Harlem and imigres from farms" as "the backbone of the race and it is through them—when organized and led—that salvation will come" (*Conversations with Richard Wright* 56).
12. Citing writers such as Faulkner, Robert Frost, and Ernest Hemingway, Leo Marx describes "complex pastoralism": "Again and again they invoke the image of a green landscape—a terrain either wild or, if cultivated, rural—as a symbolic repository of meaning and value. But at the same time they acknowledge the power of a counterforce, a machine or some other symbol of the forces which have stripped the old ideal of most, if not all, of its meaning. Complex pastoralism, to put it another way, acknowledges the reality of history" (362–363).
13. See Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (1989). Hazel Rowley demonstrates, felicitously and dissonantly, how one might read *Native Son* as a novel about simple, beautiful nature: "In the spring of 1940, Paul Green had walked through the woods on his farm in North Carolina, jotting down a list of the flora he observed (dogwood, plum, hawthorn, huckleberry, willow, buckeye, Judas trees) and musing about that violent, urban novel *Native Son*. 'Found it horrifying, brutal, and extraordinarily vivid,' he noted in his journal" (213).
14. See Dan McCall, *The Example of Richard Wright* (1969), for an early representative discussion of Wright's relationship to naturalism: "A few years later in *Black Boy* Wright would speak of how [Theodore] Dreiser was one of his first, favorite authors, and also claim that 'all my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel . . .'. In Dreiser as in Wright we see naturalism in its traditional form. The prose of both writers was often sloppy, hasty; their effort was not to fashion any delicate local effects but to build, to pile it on, to reach some kind of crashing force which would show us the sickness of our society. These works followed man as if he were an animal in a laboratory, a clinical case. Dorothy Canfield Fisher called *Native Son* 'The first report in fiction we have had from those who succumb to these distracting cross-currents of contradictory nerve impulses, from those whose behavior-patterns give evidence of the same bewildered, senseless tangle of abnormal nerve-reactions studied in animals by psychologists in laboratory experiments'" (68).

15. Wright speaks to the importance of environmental knowledge in *Black Boy* after his arrival in Chicago: "I was slowly beginning to comprehend the meaning of my environment; a sense of direction was beginning to emerge from the conditions of my life. I began to feel something more powerful than I could express. My speech and manner changed. My cynicism slid from me. I grew opening and questioning. I wanted to know" (301). Wright's self-awareness links knowledge to the environment, locating in speech and expression the means by which knowledge of the environment is simultaneously created and conveyed. Further knowledge stems from further interrogation and articulation of his surroundings.
16. In a similar vein, playwright Paul Green rejects the notion of environmental effects during his collaboration with Wright to dramatize *Native Son*: " 'I didn't subscribe to that old familiar whine that "the reason I'm a dead beat, or I'm mean, or I can't get anywhere in the world is that the world treats me wrong." No. Every man has something to do with what he becomes'" (qtd. in Rowley 219).
17. *Native Son* seems consistently conscientious to the unacceptable reality of the city as a place of pollution. As Wright explains in "How Bigger Was Born," a prefatory essay to the novel, it is a place "huge, roaring, dirty, noisy, raw, stark, brutal" (xxvi; emphasis added); Thomas later comes to see the central city as the health hazard it is: "they had shunted him off into a corner of the city to rot and die" (225). See Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (2000), for a sociologically based study of the relationship between environmental pollution and the health of minority groups.
18. Wright compliments William Faulkner on his treatment of the South: "He is the only white writer I know of living in Mississippi who is trying to tell the truth in fiction. . . . Faulkner shows how human beings are stunted and degraded in Mississippi" (*Conversations with Richard Wright* 10). In contrast, Du Bois "publicly said that he doubted if the things I described were true. He is a leader of the Negro people and he must feel that if what I wrote is true, then it reflects upon him as a leader who is trying to bring about better conditions. . . . [T]he truth of the matter is that we Negroes have not yet really faced the real problem of our lives" (qtd. in *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* 56).
19. I would submit that his photographic exposition *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), his attempt to "[telescope] Negro history in terms of the urbanization of a feudal folk" (*Conversations with Richard Wright* 44), gestures to a multimedia, multidisciplinary, politically engaged brand of social criticism.

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