

casket for your son: priceless" (*Priceless* #1, 2004)—are all productively examined by Jackson, who reminds us that, "In the end, Thomas's work is about bearing witness, making the wounds of capitalism visible" (76). The recent Adidas "shackle" sneakers are an important reminder of just how significant Jackson's work really is. By teaching us how to read images as complex cultural constructs with dynamic histories, Jackson moves us beyond identity politics and asks us to consider what we can *do* with such images.

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**Kimberly N. Ruffin. *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2010. 192 pp. \$22.95.**

Reviewed by Scott Hicks, University of North Carolina-Pembroke

Kimberly N. Ruffin's *Black on Earth: African American Literary Traditions* ranges across history, genre, and geography in exploring African American relationships with, in, and despite nature. The study's thesis centers on what Ruffin calls "an 'ecological burden-and-beauty paradox'" (2). As Robert Bullard, David Pellow, and others have shown, African Americans bear a disproportionate share of environmental burdens, forced by social, political, and economic discrimination to live and work amid toxic waste dumps, heavily polluting factories, and concentrated animal-feeding operations and slaughterhouses. At the same time, however, they draw on heretofore underappreciated and understudied perspectives of natural beauty and belonging that rebuff the malevolence of racism, a point made by Helaine Selin's collection *Nature across Cultures: Views of Nature and the Environment in Non-Western Cultures* (2003), Kimberly K. Smith's *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (2007), and others. Ruffin's gift in *Black on Earth* consists in her ability to meld the antipodes of this profound paradox across not only two centuries of African American history and culture, but borders of genre and space as well. Given this considerable accomplishment, Ruffin's book could have provided even more insight into the complex relationship between race and the environment had it grappled directly with recent ecocriticism of African American literature.

Sandwiched between her recounting of the violent fallout over a "white tree" in Jena, Louisiana, and her narrative of a beautiful parade of people and plants sponsored by Bates College in 2006, Ruffin's analysis delineates and focuses on the interfaces that distinguish African American environmentality: "work, citizenship, enslavement, ancestry, religion, region, myth, and music" (21). In chapter one, Ruffin closely reads selections of slave narrative, antebellum poetry, and oral testimony to call attention to African American survivalist knowledge and agrarian nostalgia cultivated despite the effects of enslavement and violence to deny African Americans roots in the landscape. Chapter two explores recent poetic reinventions of important African American forebears: Frank X Walker on York, William Clark's enslaved body servant; Quraysh Ali Lansana on Harriet Tubman; and Marilyn Nelson on George Washington Carver. Ruffin's purpose in interpreting reinventions of these figures, and not their primary texts, seems explained by her conclusion that "[t]heir work allows readers to claim the historical figures as ecological ancestors" (85). Again in this spirit of identifying models, Ruffin proposes in chapter three that Octavia Butler and Alice Walker serve as "ecotheologians" (93), while chapter four turns to the power of mythmakers: Henry Dumas, who creates ecological "beauty . . . out of the ashes of trauma" (116), and Percival Everett, who satirizes the racist myth of the U. S. West in order to nurture new narratives of belonging. Finally, chapter five uses the blues as a philosophy for confronting ecocrisis and turns to

Jayne Cortez's poetry as a tool for resistance. The blues, Ruffin explains, privilege the disadvantaged, celebrate collective experience, and "[dwell] in reality no matter how stark" (142), among other qualities—all crucial to grappling with the onslaught of imminent global ecocatastrophe. With wide-ranging quotations from Cortez's searing work and nuanced interpretations of those citations, Ruffin underscores the complexity of the poet's ecovision: "Those who are in ecological crisis may find in Cortez's poetry artful acknowledgement and advocacy," she writes. "Those sheltered from ecological crisis may find their buffer eroding from her acidic vision" (150). Such multiplicity comes in handy when confronting a disaster the scale and scope of Hurricane Katrina—the immediacy and immensity of which force Ruffin to leave for a future project a full consideration of its import. Despite the terror and trauma of Katrina, Ruffin closes *Black on Earth* with the affirming images of diverse people united in their celebration of earth and art—making real Ruffin's call to "act and shape human systems in alignment with our soundest ecological desires" (175).

Despite its comprehensive overview of African American texts and compelling narrative of African American environmental engagement, *Black on Earth* does not engage ecocritical theory in a direct, sustained way, as if African American environmentality and the ecocritical perspective through which the environmentality of literary artifacts is interpreted are passing trains gliding on separate tracks. Exemplary of this lack of connection is Ruffin's insistence on a "theoretical foundation" built on the terminology of "ecology"—without any mention of the bombastic complication of the term by Dana Phillips in his provocative *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America* (Oxford UP, 2003). Phillips derides ecocritics for clinging to romanticized understandings of ecological science and blithely borrowing its terms in literary analysis, an argument that roiled conferences of the Association for Study of Literature & Environment for years after its publication. Excavating the popularization of ecology as a utopian discourse in the 1960s, Phillips avers that "[f]or ecocriticism to be of substance as an interdisciplinary field, it needs to realize that ecology is not a slush fund of fact, value, and metaphor, but a less than fully coherent field with a very checkered past and a fairly uncertain future" (45). In this light, Ruffin's preference for "ecology," what she defines as "*the study of the often overlapping experience of relationships among humans and among human and nonhuman nature*" (18; emphasis in original), suggests a sense of underdevelopment. Love it or loathe it, Phillips's book is a "call" that demands Ruffin's "response," even if brief and dismissive.

To my mind, such theoretical shortcoming is significant because it perpetuates the already identified problem of African American invisibility in ecocriticism and foregoes the opportunity to complicate and critique the development of ecocritical approaches to African American texts that has unfolded in the wake of this recognition. Ruffin rightly quotes Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace's course-correcting and often cited observation in 2001 that "[i]f ecocriticism limits itself to the study of one genre . . . or to one physical landscape . . . it risks seriously misrepresenting the significance of multiple natural and built environments to writers with other ethnic, national, or racial affiliations" (qtd. in 13). Since Armbruster and Wallace's *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Nature Writing* appeared in 2001, a bevy of ecocritical studies of African American literature has appeared, including Jeffery Myers's *Converging Stories: Race, Ecology, and Environmental Justice in American Literature* (2005), Paul Outka's *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (2008), and Ian Finseth's *Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770-1860* (2009). In *Black on Earth*, however, Myers, Outka, and Finseth get the barest of mentions—a sentence for the former, a footnote for the latter two. The elision is significant, for the field remains contentious. For example, Outka—whose monograph won ASLE's book prize in 2009—takes issue with Myers, arguing that his predecessor's view of ecocentricity as antidote to racism is ahistorical and that his elision of marked differences in African American and Euroamerican relationships to nature is naïve. Had Ruffin weighed in on such instances of

theoretical dissensus, she could have reshaped how we critics interpret the very African American “ecoliterature” she catalogs and explicates in *Black on Earth*.

In sum, it is a pleasure to recommend *Black on Earth* for its exploration of understudied African American texts and its resituation of those texts within vital conversations of environmentalism, environmental justice, social liberation, and cultural reimagination. I applaud Ruffin for reminding us of earlier works, like Maud Cuney-Hare’s *The Message of the Trees: An Anthology of Leaves and Branches* (1918) and Haki R. Madhubuti’s *Claiming Earth: Race, Rage, Rape, Redemption—Blacks Seeking a Culture of Enlightened Empowerment* (1994), and pointing us to new ones like Wangari Maathai’s *Unbowed: A Memoir* (2006) and Camille Dungy’s *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (2009). As *Black on Earth* makes clear, the important work of recovery and reinterpretation goes on—and so likewise does the work of theorization. I hope Ruffin will weigh in on the theoretical debates that are unfolding in ecocriticism, and I look forward to her future contributions to the field.

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**Erica R. Edwards. *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2012. 288 pp. \$25.00.**

Reviewed by Bryan Wagner, University of California at Berkeley

**C**harisma and the *Fictions of Black Leadership* interprets the topos of charismatic leadership as it has appeared in African American politics and culture. Across the book, Edwards candidly assesses the popular investment in singular and magnetic male leaders, such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Barack Obama, whose eloquence and personal vision are thought to be indispensable to the struggle for freedom. According to Edwards, there are three costs associated with this cult of personality. First, it equates leadership with normative masculinity, downplaying in particular women’s role in political history. Second, it reduces the heterogeneity of movement politics, underestimating the importance of everyday resistance to mass mobilization. Third, it introduces antidemocratic tendencies into political organization, promoting obedience rather than deliberative action.

Edwards brings these claims to bear not only on the problems of political representation and political organization but also on a variety of fascinating cases from African American literature and performance. As Edwards demonstrates, these works are staged in relation to the problem of charisma in black politics, supplying a skeptical and sometimes satirical commentary on the most common settings and tropes associated with the public performance of racial leadership.

The book is a remarkable work of synthesis. Historical coverage is convincing and substantial, demonstrating how the scenario of political leadership was changed, yet also left unchanged, by emancipation, disfranchisement, urbanization, migration, and civil-rights legislation. The book features close analysis of a remarkably diverse collection of texts and performances: speeches (from Frederick Douglass’s address at the Haytian Pavilion at the 1893 Columbian World Exposition to Oprah Winfrey’s 2007 Obama endorsement), pageants and protests (from UNIA parades and street-corner preaching in the 1920s to the Million Man and Millions More marches in the 1990s), novels (from *Dark Princess* to *White Boy Shuffle*), cinema (from *The Man to the Barbershop* films), and histories (from C. L. R. James’s *Toussaint* to Taylor Branch’s *MLK*).

Sometimes ambitious surveys, even useful ones, sacrifice attention to detail in order to place works in a general framework. That is not the case here. Edwards treats her examples in a way that makes them intelligible within the larger story she

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