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## **Reading Green in Black.**

### **Environmental Knowledge, Race, and African American Literature, 1830s to 1920s**

vorgelegt von

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Ich versichere hiermit an Eides Statt, dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit ohne unzulässige Hilfe Dritter und ohne Benutzung anderer als der angegebenen Hilfsmittel angefertigt habe; die aus fremden Quellen direkt oder indirekt übernommenen Gedanken sind als solche kenntlich gemacht.

Bayreuth,

Matthias Klestil

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# 1.

## Introduction:

### African American Environmental Knowledge at Niagara

“As I approached it I felt somewhat as I did [...] when for the first time I was to stand on free soil. And breath free air.”  
(Frederick Douglass, “Niagara” 183)

“Retracing his footsteps toward the Falls, he saw [...] the familiar form of his servant stretched out on the ground, his face to the sun, his mouth open, sleeping the time away oblivious alike to the grandeur of the scenery, the thunderous roar of the cataract, or the insidious voice of sentiment.”  
(Charles Chesnutt, “The Passing of Grandison” 122)

“Afro-American studies was never meant to be solely for Afro-Americans. It was meant to try to redefine what it means to be human, what it means to be modern, what it means to be American, because people of African descent in this country are profoundly human, profoundly modern, profoundly American.”

(Cornel West, “Conversation with bell hooks” 542)

After his escape from slavery in 1838, Frederick Douglass not only turned himself into the mystically brilliant orator we celebrate until today, but also became widely travelled in the Northern and Mid-Western parts of the United States. After settling down in the “fugitive haven” of New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he changed his name, joined the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and subscribed to William Lloyd Garrison’s *Liberator*, Douglass began working as a general agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in 1841. While his ensuing travels, which took him as far as Ohio, Indiana, and ultimately Great Britain have been well-documented by biographers and historians, what has largely escaped notice so far is a visit Douglass paid to Niagara Falls in 1843.<sup>1</sup> Apparently

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<sup>1</sup> See on Douglass’s travels through the U.S. on lecture tours and abolitionist circuits in the early to mid-1840s, Quarles, *Douglass* 25-37; McFeely 91-118; Levine, *Politics* 28-57; or Stauffer, “Douglass’s Self-Making” 16-18; on Douglass’s voyage to Great Britain see e.g. Fulkerson; McFeely 119-145; Fenton; and Rice/Crawford. None of these accounts, however, mentions Douglass’s 1843 trip to Niagara Falls or any visit there prior to the Civil War; the only references to Niagara can generally be found with respect to Douglass’s honeymoon trip with his second wife, Helen Pitts, in 1884 (cf. McFeely 322). It seems reasonable to assume that the 1843 visit took place in connection with Douglass’s attendance of the “National Convention of Colored Citizens” at Buffalo, New York, in August 1843, where he famously opposed a militant address delivered by Henry Highland Garnet (cf. McFeely 105-107; Levine, *Politics* 28-29; Quarles, *Douglass* 31, 120-121).

fascinated with this icon of “Nature’s Nation” prior to this trip,<sup>2</sup> Douglass recounts his first impression of the cataracts in the “Album of the Friends of Freedom” of the Western Abolitionist Society in a handwritten note dated “Aug 2d 1843” as follows:

When I came into its awful presence the power of discription [sic!] failed me, an irresistible power closed my lips completely, charmed I stood with eyes fixed, all. all. absorbed. - Scarcely conscious of my own existence, I felt as I never felt before. The heavy trees all around me quivered the ground trembled, - the mighty rocks shook! - as its awful roar gave them its terrible mandate. My courage quailed. In unison with tree rock hill and water, I trembled totally subdued I stood in solemn reverence. The awful God - was there! (Douglass, “Niagara” 184)<sup>3</sup>

The passage, at first glance, appears to be strikingly similar to the responses of Douglass’s Euro-American contemporaries, who typically referred to Niagara Falls in terms of the sublime.<sup>4</sup> Against this backdrop, the description in the “Album of the Friends of Freedom” indicates how quickly and impressively its author – who had been a slave a mere five years ago – had familiarized himself with dominant forms of writing and with the aesthetic conventions of his day.

The note, like its Euro-American and European counterparts, is oozing with sublime rhetoric. It includes, for instance, the common reference to God (“The awful God”), and displays stock vocabulary of a multi-sensorial experience (“awful roar”; “with eyes fixed”) that witnessing the Falls entailed and at the same time supposedly transcended, thus rendering the Falls unrepresentable (“the power of discription [sic!] failed me”). Yet

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<sup>2</sup> Douglass, who became widely read in the literature of his day after attaining freedom, must have formed some kind of preconception of Niagara Falls prior to his visit in August 1843. The significant meanings this natural monument apparently held for Douglass may also be seen from the fact that he mentions a “miniature” of Niagara Falls in the note. Although I have not been able to confirm his actual possession of such an object, other indicators suggesting Douglass’s fascination with the natural monument are that he retrospectively mentions being at Niagara prior to the Civil War in his last autobiography (cf. Douglass, *Life* 327), and that he visited Niagara on his second honeymoon.

<sup>3</sup> The unpublished manuscript of Douglass’s note entitled “Niagara” included in the “Album of the Friends of Freedom” of the Western Abolitionist Society is held by the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. I have not altered the original spelling, punctuation, or grammar in my transcription; where missing letters have been inserted, this is indicated by square brackets. A copy and full transcription of the text is included in the appendix to this study (Figure 1).

<sup>4</sup> For mid-nineteenth-century Americans, the concept of the “sublime” offered not only a general way of coming to terms with the nation’s vast and wild natural environs, but also the primary means of relating to Niagara Falls in particular. As countless descriptions by national and international visitors of Niagara, the “single most consumed image in nineteenth-century America,” and various literary voices of major authors like Hawthorne, Dickens, or Henry James suggest, the sublime became the language for grasping this extraordinary part of New World nature (Castronovo 116). On the development of a specifically American form of the sublime, see R. Nash 44-83; or Nye 17-43, who claims that the concept came to function as “an element of social cohesion” in the United States (xiv); on nineteenth-century sublime language on Niagara Falls, see Revie 5-10, 59-112; McGreevy 10-11; McKinsey; and Hutchings.

another typical feature of the mid-nineteenth-century discourse on Niagara that Douglass's text exposes is the reflection on preconceptions of the cataracts while witnessing them. Consider in this respect the passage directly preceding the part of Douglass's note quoted above:

I went to this wonderful place with the most lofty expect[ta]tions. I had heard – read – thought and felt much in regard to it. I had frequently gazed with extreme delight upon its mini[a]ture I bought [o/in] behold the original. In my imagination, I had often seen its broad-blue waters rushing on amidst the dim-dark gloom of its own creation – toward the awful cataract – threatening total destruction [sic!] to any power interposing a barrier to its onward progress. Its in[s]piration of beauty – grandness – wonder and terror (long before I saw it) danced [sportively] in my soul [...]. (Douglass, “Niagara” 183)

The existence of these lines in themselves, in their position in the text as well as their considerable length in comparison to the portrayal of the actual encounter of the Falls, reveals Douglass's engagement with the idea of the visitor's preconceptions that was characteristic of the discourse on Niagara that began to flourish after the monument had lost its remoteness with the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. Travelers' accounts increasingly came to weigh their witnessing of the natural spectacle against their anticipations and previous imaginations, and assessed their actual experience both positively in terms of exceeding admiration and negatively in terms of disappointment.<sup>5</sup> Even though Douglass's text moves exclusively in the former direction, his note clearly embraces this facet of Niagara writing as well. Hence, up to this point, the note seems an almost prototypical example of antebellum sublime discourse on Niagara Falls.

However, Douglass does not remain within these confines but adds a distinctive element to his experience by inserting a single but game-changing sentence: “As I approached it [Niagara Falls] I felt somewhat as I did at the approaching how [sic!], when for the first time I was to stand on free soil. And breath free air” (183). At the interstice between revealing his preconceived idea of Niagara Falls and representing his encounter of the cataracts, Douglass explicitly draws attention to his former enslavement and sets the

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<sup>5</sup> See on the involvement of expectations in writings about Niagara Falls, Revie 59-112; McKinsey 189-202; Conrad 3-29; on Niagara as “honeymoon capital” see R. Shields 117-160; McKinsey 178-187; Dubinsky, *Disappointment*; on Niagara's inclusion in the “Northern Tour” cf. Mulvey; Berton 66-73. Especially after 1850, we register increasingly disappointed, satirical and mocking accounts of Niagara, which culminate in Mortimer Neal Thomson's (Q.K. Philander Doesticks, P.B.'s) “Doesticks on a Bender” (1854) and Samuel Langhorne Clemens's (Mark Twain's) “A Day at Niagara” and “English Festivities” (1869) – mordant burlesques that depict disillusioning visits of Niagara Falls.

experience of overcoming slavery in analogy to the sublime experience of Niagara. In this way, the note produces a break with the sublime it simultaneously endorses. It is the proclaimed distinctiveness in perspective, Douglass's adding of a more self-referential and individual dimension to his record of experiencing the natural spectacle, that interrupts the process of transcendence, a central characteristic of the concept of the sublime. Setting himself apart from what could be called the (supposed) "universalism" of the sublime that is often echoed in antebellum descriptions of the Falls,<sup>6</sup> Douglass embraces the particular perspective of a former slave through his rhetoric. His rhetorical intervention deflates any supposed universalism, "grounds" the sublime within social experience, and thereby reveals it as a mere construction, a rhetorical mode. Hence, by inserting his experience within the *social* as significantly shaping his experience of the *non-human natural*, and thereby implying that an unmarked and seemingly universal – but essentially "white" – position postulated in the sublime must also always be a construed one, Douglass's text signifies on the sublime and exemplifies a politicization of Niagara from an African American perspective.<sup>7</sup>

Almost 60 years later, another African American writer, Charles Waddell Chesnut, places Niagara Falls at the center of one of his texts. In "The Passing of Grandison," part of the celebrated short story collection *The Wife of His Youth* (1899), the North Carolinian author of mixed racial heritage employs Niagara not merely as background and setting, but

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<sup>6</sup> Out of eighteenth-century theorizations (Burke, Kant), the sublime emerged as an ostensibly universal category expressing "humanness" itself. It is, after all, "not restricted to value judgments [...] [but] also describes a state of mind" (Shaw 1), or, more precisely, the mind's distinctly human quality of "rationality" that becomes visible in the beholder of a sublime scene. The sublime thereby acted as a universal "proof" of a subject's humanity and, respectively, a disproof of the humanity of a subject that was (supposedly) incapable of sublime experience. It is precisely such claims to "universality" or a "naturalness" of the sublime, in conjunction with what Cornel West has called a "normative gaze" complicit in furnishing white supremacy, that Douglass's note attacks. He suggests that the sublime cannot be disconnected from social experience and exposes the supposedly universal sublime as a concept that, as Dolan Hubbard puts it, "an Anglo-European intellectual cartel has reserved for themselves and that apparently resides only in the ether of their imaginations" ("Du Bois" 298; on the role of race in the sublime cf. Armstrong (1996); Doyle (1996)). Moreover, Douglass's unmasking of the sublime as mere rhetoric can also be read as a critique of a particular American tradition of the sublime, i.e. of the shallowness of a sublime language in the mid-nineteenth-century U.S. that, as Roderick Nash has suggested, often came to be used "so indiscriminately as to lose meaning" (61).

<sup>7</sup> Douglass is by no means alone in interpreting and politicizing the moment of the first experience of freedom as sublime. Slave narratives, e.g. those by Austin Steward (1857) or Samuel Ringgold Ward (1855), likewise employ the language of the sublime to describe their move into free territory, the latter claiming that "the sublimest sight in North America is the leap of a slave from a boat to the Canadian shore" (158). More evidence of this kind of rhetoric can also be found in various other antebellum texts. In an 1856 letter, for instance, Frances Ellen Harper refers to the "Potomac" as evoking thrills of "sublimity" and to "Niagara chanting the choral hymn of Omnipotence," yet stresses in the same breath that "none of these things have melted me as the first sight of Free Land" (760).

turns it into a vital part of his narrative strategy. The story, set in antebellum times, appears straightforward enough, as a seemingly omniscient voice relates how a well-off adolescent Southerner, Dick Owens, attempts to win the heart of a woman, Charity Lomax, by running off one of his father's slaves to the North. Inspired by the court trial of a "young white man from Ohio" who had attempted to help a slave escape, and by Charity, who dares him to do "something heroic," Dick sets out for the North with a trusted slave named Grandison (109, 111). They travel through New York and Boston and finally reach Niagara Falls, after every effort to entice Grandison to take his freedom and run away has failed. Dick's hope is that once they will arrive on the Canadian side, Grandison will realize "that he is actually free" and will "stay" (120). He seems, however, mistaken once more as Grandison's response to his young master's "raising his voice above the roar of the cataract" to suggest the slave's legally being free, is a mere uneasy "Let's go back ober de ribber, Mars Dick" (121). As a last resort, the master denounces Grandison as a Southern spy to two Canadians, who abduct the "abolitionist-proof" slave while sound asleep on Niagara's shore (116). Dick's last view before setting out for his journey home is

the familiar form of his servant stretched out on the ground, his face to the sun, his mouth open sleeping the time away oblivious alike to the grandeur of the scenery, the thunderous roar of the cataract, or the insidious voice of sentiment. (122)

At this point, Chesnut's story portrays an African American slave's relation to Niagara that seems almost diametrically opposed to Douglass's point of view. Here is a slave who appears perfectly unimpressed by Niagara's sublime nature; in fact, Grandison is depicted as "turning his eyes away from the grand and awe-inspiring spectacle that lay close at hand, [...] looking anxiously toward the inn where his master sat cursing his ill-timed fidelity" (122). Looking after the master appears to negate the possibility of recognizing sublime nature. In suggesting this denial of visual contact as a sign of Grandison's supposed obliviousness to the magnificence and meaning of Niagara, Chesnut's text echoes, on the one hand, a racialized antebellum discourse that generally excluded African Americans from perceiving Niagara Falls – and non-human nature generally – in terms of the sublime.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> If we find African Americans in antebellum mainstream discourses on Niagara Falls at all, they are most often objects, not subjects of sublime experience. Involved in the tourism industry as waiters, drivers, guides, or servants, African Americans figure most often as passive elements, as "black accessory parts" that haunt depictions of Niagara as a Morrisonian "Africanist presence." An emblematic expression of the ways in which nineteenth-century African Americans were generally excluded from articulating their experience in dominant discourses on Niagara Falls can be seen in an 1801 mezzotint engraving by an

On the other hand, however, it is exactly this notion that is exposed in its falseness in the very end of Chesnutt's story, which presents an unforeseen plot development: After his denunciation at Niagara, Grandison initially returns to slavery only to escape with his entire family to Northern territory three weeks later. The story thus finishes on a first-rate deception of a Southern slaveholder; Colonel Owens first rejoices in the "rescue" of Grandison from Canadian abolitionists who were supposedly "locking the poor, faithful nigger up," only to eventually shake "his fist impotently" at a band of fugitives aboard a steamboat headed for Canada (125; 127).

It is crucial to see how the story, through its specific narrative technique, not only undermines the knowledge of the master, but also suggests a hidden knowledge of the slave that centrally involves Niagara. Chesnutt's play on the masters' and the slaves' knowledge works via his creation of a specific relation between the text's levels of *discours* and *histoire*. On the level of *discours*, i.e. regarding *how* the story is told, Chesnutt employs a voice that appears to be omniscient but that turns out to be limited as it focalizes solely through the master's perspective. As readers hear a heterodiegetic voice that sounds reliable and objective, they are tricked into perceiving the story exclusively from the point of view of Colonel Owens and his son. On the level of *histoire*, i.e. of *what* is told, however, the last turn of events marks the existence of a knowledge of the slaves that has so far remained veiled and silenced. In perplexing ways, it becomes clear only at the end of the story that Grandison was convincingly playing an ingenious scheme all along, as he could not bear leaving his family in slavery. Neither was he afraid of contact with abolitionists, which he probably sought, nor did he feel contented in slavery. By no means, Chesnutt implies, did he feel oblivious to Niagara, which is revealed at last as a crucial place; it is here that Grandison for the first time gains the legal freedom that he exploits to the end of attaining collective freedom. The event of Grandison's escape, on the level of *histoire*, therefore highlights a broader epistemological conflict at the heart of the text and reveals what Chesnutt actually has to say, namely that the antebellum masters – and those postwar readers who take their perspective to be "objective" – know only one side of the story. The other side is the hidden knowledge of African American slaves that suddenly becomes

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anonymous British artist, which depicts an abject black figure in the shadow of Columbia and the Falls. I have included the mezzotint in the appendix of this study (Figure 2); see for interpretations also Castronovo 124-128; McKinsey 102-104; on the history of African Americans at Niagara Falls and in the region cf. e.g. Boston; Thomas; Dubinsky, "Vacations" 259-262; Winks 146-150, 325-336.

visible through a last turn of events and that is emphasized through a moment on the shores of Niagara.<sup>9</sup>

In “The Passing of Grandison,” Niagara Falls therefore figures as a subversive liminal space between bondage and freedom exactly because it is *not* visible as such from the perspective of the oppressor that is echoed in the focalization of the narrative voice; it becomes perceivable only in the end as part of an underground belonging to Grandison and his scheme. By not addressing the Falls through Grandison in the mode and vocabulary of the sublime, Chesnut’s text, however, not only demonstrates the one-sidedness and inadequacy of the master’s knowledge, but also becomes complicit in hiding Niagara and its meaning. In this sense, the text’s strategy of veiling by taking the master’s perspective also reflects the strategic veiling of Niagara as part of the secret network that was known as the “Underground Railroad.” Eventually, it is only because Grandison went to Niagara and cunningly employed its hidden meanings and beauty that his escape becomes possible; Niagara is what opens up his fugitive space and enables making arrangements for collective flight, as “the underground railroad seemed to have had its tracks cleared and signals set for this particular train” (126). The story thus becomes what Lawrence Buell calls an “environmental text” not by overt description of Niagara as sublime but by subversively ascribing central meaning to this place. Niagara Falls figures “not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” precisely because that “presence” is *not* openly described from Grandison’s perspective in conventional terms of the sublime (*Imagination* 7). In a paradoxical move, Chesnut’s text signifies through silence on a hidden African American knowledge about Niagara’s nature.

Hence, here are two instances in the nineteenth-century African American literary tradition that engage Niagara; two of a variety of moments attesting to the significance of this natural monument in African American literature and culture from the antebellum

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<sup>9</sup> The late, perspectival shift in the story lies at the centre of most interpretations of “The Passing of Grandison,” which has generally been read as a trickster narrative that plays with the reader. See, for instance, Mason (135-137), who reads Grandison as “a cunning, Br’er-Rabbit-like trickster” in the context of “late-nineteenth-century narratives of canine fidelity” (136, 144); or Cutter, who notes that readers are tricked by a “passing performance” that animates them to overcome “racial ideologies and generic conventions” that are taken for granted (“Passing” 47, 48); also Sundquist 333; Kirkpatrick; Meer, “Passing” 7-9.

period up to the turn of the twentieth century and beyond.<sup>10</sup> The two instances, separated by a chain of major historical events, suggest both the general presence of meaningful encounters with this natural monument, and transformations in relating to Niagara – and non-human nature more generally – in the African American literary imagination. On the one hand, there is Douglass’s antebellum head-on employment and empowering critique of the mode of the sublime. On the other hand, there is Chesnut’s elaborate late nineteenth-century play with racialized perspectives through a narrative technique that effectively uses Niagara as a meaningful place harboring a hidden African American knowledge to undermine and mock the presumptuous perspective of an old Southern aristocracy that falsely assumed their slaves’ obliviousness to both freedom and non-human nature.

Juxtaposing these two texts triggers a host of broader questions: How did nineteenth-century African American literature engage not only Niagara Falls but non-human nature more generally? That is, how, by what means and to which ends did African American writers incorporate and express relationships to non-human environments in a written literary tradition that emerged in the context of racial slavery? What aesthetic modes were employed? What literary spaces and tropes were engaged, created, or transformed? In which ways did writers respond to racialized discourses of “nature” and of the “human” that often sought to exclude them from the realm of the latter? Moreover, in terms of literary history, how did the African American literary tradition become a place where writers expressed and intertextually developed epistemological, moral-ethical, and aesthetic ideas about – and relations to – nature?

Questions such as these lie at the heart of this study, which explores a knowledge of the human in its relation to non-human nature in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American narrative literature. Combining Foucauldian, ecocritical, and African American literary theory, “Reading Green in Black” devises the concept of “environmental knowledge” to trace the foundations and transformations of such knowledge in a literary tradition that has traditionally not been read as significantly concerned with nature or the

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<sup>10</sup> On closer examination, there are many other examples attesting to nineteenth-century African Americans’ engagement with Niagara Falls. Not only do we find antebellum references in slave narratives, in poetry (e.g. in William W. Brown, “Jefferson’s Daughter” in *The Antislavery Harp* (1848), or in the abolitionist poem “The Fugitive Slave’s Apostrophe to Niagara” (1841)), or in Benjamin Drew’s *A Northside View of Slavery* (1856), which draws attention to Niagara’s importance for fugitives to Canada. Moreover, there is a wide range of references to Niagara Falls throughout African American culture of the second half of the nineteenth-century up to the “Niagara Movement,” the black civil rights organization famously initiated by 29 African American leaders on the Canadian shore in 1905, after they had been refused lodging on the U.S. side.

environment. The aim is therefore, to play with Toni Morrison's succinct phrase from *Playing in the Dark* (1992), to "romance the *green* shadows" of this literary and cultural tradition in order to uncover literary African American environmental knowledge.<sup>11</sup> If Morrison has suggested to read "black in white," i.e. to read a Euro-American literary tradition for an often subversively hidden "Africanist presence," the aim of this study is to read "green in black," i.e. to read an African American literary tradition for an environmental knowledge that was fundamentally shaped by the history of race and racism, by mainstream nineteenth-century forms of environmental knowledge, and by specifically African American forms of literary expression and intertextuality. Such a project not only contributes to laying the foundations for a recently emerging field of ecocritical scholarship that focuses on investigating a distinctly African American perspective on environmental issues, but also helps uncover a new facet of African American literary history.

#### Reading Green in Black through "Environmental Knowledge"

"Environmental knowledge," the central concept of this study, can be defined as *such formations of power-knowledge that negotiate and constitute the human in relation to its non-human non-discursive material conditions*. Drawing on this concept, the study of the primary material treated in "Reading Green in Black" suggests that a specifically *African American* environmental knowledge expressed in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American literary and non-literary texts can best be understood by focusing on three primary "dimensions": the *visual*, the *spatial*, and the *biopolitical*. With respect to

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<sup>11</sup> Toni Morrison's ideas from *Playing in the Dark* (1992), even though not involved as explicitly as Foucauldian theory or Gates's notion of signifying, have broadly inspired this study in at least three ways. First, Morrison's notion of a "dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence" has shaped my conceptualization of African American environmental knowledge as a culturally specific yet fundamentally hybrid knowledge that developed due to both Western and African diasporic influences (5). Secondly, her suggestion that an often *hidden* "contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature" (5) parallels the motivation of this study to turn to a literary tradition with a changed perspective. The aim of "Reading Green in Black," too, is to 'reverse the optics' of interpretation, to 'romance a (*green*) shadow' hidden in the underbelly of the African American literary tradition. Thirdly, I believe that Morrison's critique of scholars who "have never read [...] *any* African-American text" and whose "refusal to read black texts [...]" repeats itself when they reread the traditional, established works of literature" (13, emphasis in original), is related to the traditional silence on environmental issues in scholarly readings of African American literature. In this respect, it is my hope that environmentally oriented approaches may help crossing long-standing disciplinary boundaries and that ecocriticism may provide a way for reading and canonizing texts under new headings.

such environmental knowledge, two basic remarks on terminology are necessary. Firstly, “environmental” in “environmental knowledge” is not to be confused with “environmental(ist)” in the sense in which the term is broadly used today. That is, I am not suggesting an African American “environmental(ist) activism” or “movement” for the period under consideration, but employing the term “environment” in its more general (and more original) meaning of non-human and not humanly built material “surroundings” or “conditions.”<sup>12</sup> Secondly, it is crucial that a Foucauldian definition of environmental knowledge does not speak of “non-human *natural*” but of “non-human *non-discursive material*” conditions. In other words, what I mean by “environmental knowledge” is not to be understood as a “knowledge of nature,” even though historically changing conceptions of “nature” are central to any formation of environmental knowledge. Crucially, however, environmental knowledge in a Foucauldian sense turns to “nature/the natural” as an object of discourse analysis, not as a stable or positivistically knowable essence, although the existence of such a (*non-discursive material*) essence and its “real” effects and mutual interactions with the discursive are not denied. Hence, when referring in this study to “nature,” I do not mean an absolute or stable entity but a part of discourse that has fulfilled historically changing functions within the production of a power-knowledge of the human in relation to its non-human non-discursive material conditions.

In this sense, “environmental knowledge” will be employed as a form of what Ursula Heise calls a “weak constructionism” that “analyze[s] cultural constructions of nature with a view towards the constraints that the real environment poses on them” (“Hitchhiker’s Guide” 512). The analytical concept of environmental knowledge, combining Foucauldian with ecocritical and African American literary theory, enables simultaneously addressing the historical and “cultural constructions of nature” through Foucault’s skeptical analytics, and understanding the construction of knowledge as involving the materiality of “the real

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<sup>12</sup> On this broader and older meaning of “environment” – based on the verb “to environ” meaning “to surround” – and its etymological history, see Buell, *Future* 140-141. The necessity of using the terms “environment” and “environmental” in a wider sense when examining African American thought on non-human nature has been emphasized by others as well. Wardi, for instance, in *Water and African American Memory* (2011), stresses that one has to overcome “a restricted conceptualization of environmental writing” in order to read African American literature ecocritically (12). Similarly, Hicks demands that ecocritics working on African American literature “must be willing to speculate outside their critical boxes” (206), and Smith, in *African American Environmental Thought* (2007), claims that only with a “broader definition [of ‘environmental’], there is a great deal in the black political tradition to explore” (3). The broader notion of “environmental,” as it will be employed in the concept of “environmental knowledge” in the present study is also based on these scholars’ insights.

environment.” Based on this idea, “Reading Green in Black” is organized around the three primary dimensions of African American environmental knowledge. Employing Foucauldian and ecocritical thought, the aim is to trace the emergence and development of African American environmental knowledge in terms of its expression through the *visual*, the *spatial*, and the *biopolitical*.

These dimensions may also be identified in Douglass’s and Chesnut’s literary encounters with Niagara Falls. With respect to the *visual*, the examples draw attention to the importance of literary-aesthetic modes as ways of “visualizing” non-human environments. Modes such as the sublime, the pastoral, or the picturesque, which involve viewing non-human non-discursive materialities in particular ways and from specific positions, were denied or obliterated, adapted, transformed or expanded for diverse purposes in African American literature. Douglass’s “Niagara” gives an example of such a process when it strategically adds a social dimension to the supposedly universal sublime. Instead of drawing his literary image of Niagara Falls through the sublime perspective in an uncritical way, Douglass signifies on the position and “vision” of this mode by adding to it the altered perception of a former slave. Regarding the *spatial*, i.e. the creation or transformation of particular (literary) spaces involved in articulating African American environmental knowledge, Chesnut’s text can be read as an instance that strategically plays with Niagara Falls’ subversive meanings as an underground space. Through its narrative technique, “The Passing of Grandison” not only mocks the slave master’s perspective, but also signifies on the notion of the Underground Railroad as a subversive literary space first created in the antebellum slave narrative that could function, as I will argue in this study, as a “loophole” for expressing environmental knowledge.<sup>13</sup> With respect to the *biopolitical*, both Douglass’s and Chesnut’s Niagara-writings draw attention to a particular position of the black body and the written word. Douglass does this by revealing the supposedly universal sublime as a racially charged concept, Chesnut by demonstrating the constructedness of a white slave master’s perspective that falsely assumes a black slave’s obliviousness to Niagara’s nature. In different ways, both writers emphasize how the

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<sup>13</sup> A variety of sources, mostly antebellum and postwar slave narratives, attest to Niagara Falls as part of the secret network of the “Underground Railroad.” These include, for instance, the narratives by Austin Steward (1857); Samuel Ringgold Ward (1855); and Isaac D. Williams (1885); references to Niagara’s role in the Underground Railroad can also be found in many of the accounts collected in Benjamin Drew’s 1856 *A North Side View of Slavery*, e.g. in those by William Grose, Patrick Snead, Sophia Pooley, or Buxton. See, on the Niagara region’s “stations” of the Underground Railroad, e.g. J.B. Hudson 157, 186, 221-222; or Thomas 41-43.

fundamental idea of biopolitics, i.e. the idea of subdividing and structuring the body of living human populations, involved the production of *both* racial and environmental knowledge. They imply, in other words, that knowledge of the human in relation to its non-human non-discursive material conditions had effects on the construction of race and vice versa.

By employing the visual, the spatial, and the biopolitical as central critical lenses, this study takes an explicitly Foucauldian approach that differs from what Greg Garrard, in his introduction to the recent *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (2014), more generally calls a “Foucauldian ecocriticism” (“Introduction” 3). Garrard’s claim is that ecocritics have taken up and expanded the Foucauldian notion of biopower to include non-human forms of life: “While for Foucault, the sole organism of interest is the human animal, the institutions of bio-power the prison, the asylum and the sex clinic, ecocritics have extended his analysis far beyond our own species” (2). The argument is, in Foucault’s own words, that ecocritics have broken up an anthropocentric notion of biopolitics that saw an “entry of [*human*] life into history” and have in turn given rise to “the entry of [*non-human*] life into history” (*Will* 141). While Garrard is no doubt correct in pointing out the emergence of a more skeptical (and obviously less anthropocentric) approach to “life” in ecocriticism, one wonders whether it is adequate to speak in this respect of a “Foucauldian ecocriticism.” For although it is undeniable that there is widespread ecocritical engagement with typical Foucauldian themes such as space, race, or politicized life, and with a more constructivist, “nature”-skeptical method that seems Foucault-inspired, the contributions from the *Handbook* that Garrard references as evidence of a “Foucauldian ecocriticism” hardly mention Foucault and employ his theory at best implicitly.<sup>14</sup>

This is not to suggest that there are no explicitly Foucauldian approaches in environmental scholarship. Most of these, however, cannot be found in ecocriticism, but in what has been termed the “environmental humanities.” Work by Darier (1999) and Alberts (2013), for instance, has explicitly argued for the viability of Foucault for environmentally

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<sup>14</sup> In his introduction, Garrard suggests that “[t]he second part of this volume, ‘Theory,’ attests to the prevalence of Foucauldian ecocriticism” (3). The twelve contributions thus referred to, however, rarely mention Foucault; in fact, only two of the articles (those by Lousley and Sandilands) use Foucault’s work explicitly. Therefore, even if Foucauldian thought hovers inspiringly in the background in many of these contributions – and, respectively, in much current ecocriticism, especially in fields like postcolonial or posthuman ecocriticism – Garrard’s terminology at this point seems problematic as it echoes the inflationary (and not always productive) application of the adjective “Foucauldian” that marks many other fields in the humanities and social sciences.

oriented historical and cultural analyses, and the ideas of “biopolitics” and “governmentality” in particular have been taken up productively in studies by P. Rutherford (1994, 1999), Darier (1996), Luke (1997, 1999), Agrawal (2005), Bäckstrand/Lovbrand (2006), S. Rutherford (2007, 2011), and M. Smith (2011). Based on the recognition of such scholarship that Foucauldian “concepts can be made highly relevant to environmental thinking, whatever attitude to ‘nature’ Foucault himself might have held” (Darier, “Foucault” 6), “Reading Green in Black” proposes an *explicitly* Foucauldian way of reading for ecocriticism as well. Instead of more or less equating “Foucauldian” with “nature-skeptical,” ecocritically working through concrete Foucauldian theory on the visual, the spatial, and the biopolitical might be both much more effective in the context of this study and generally more deserving of the label “*Foucauldian* ecocriticism.”

No matter where one stands on Garrard’s claim of a Foucauldian turn in ecocriticism, a Foucauldian perspective is certainly not widely taken up so far in the immediate scholarly contexts in which this study is situated, i.e. in African American studies and in environmentally oriented work on African American literature and culture. The former, African American studies, has traditionally been critical, sometimes even hostile, towards Western high theory and poststructuralism, and has not extensively used Foucault. This is not to say that particularly influential Foucauldian ideas, for instance those of heterotopia, panopticism, or biopolitics, or his seminal concepts of discourse and power, have never been taken up in the field. However, major studies based on specifically Foucauldian methods like discourse analysis or genealogy, especially on nineteenth-century African American literature, are rarely found.<sup>15</sup>

This is also true for environmentally oriented work on African American literature and culture that has emerged over the past one and a half decades. Much of this scholarship

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<sup>15</sup> Foucauldian ideas about space, power, or discourse are, of course, not entirely absent from African American studies: Some scholars, for instance, have used panopticism as a model to explain a specific facet of African American enslavement (cf. DeLombard; Axelrod/Axelrod; Nielsen). Moreover, a notable exception of African American studies scholarship that centrally relies on Foucauldian (archaeological) theory can be seen in works by Houston A. Baker (e.g. *Turning; Blues*); other contributions inspired by Foucauldian thought are e.g. McBride (2001); R. Ferguson (2005); Tuhkanen (2005); or the collection by Plasa/Ring (1994). Otherwise, however, the field has traditionally remained sceptical towards high “white” theory, in part because of a perceived indifference in poststructuralism’s “death of the author” to the question of “who is speaking” that was crucial to African American studies (cf. Erkkila). A telling example of the battles that erupted over the use of such theory in African American studies is a late 1980s exchange in *New Literary History*, in which Joyce attacked Gates, Baker and others for their “merger of Negro expression with Euro-American expression” (“Black Canon” 339; “Who the Cap Fit”). Responses came from Gates (“What’s Love Got to Do with It?”) and Baker (“In Dubious Battle”) themselves; cf. also James 95-98; Bucknell 80-81; or Joyce’s reassessment two decades later (“Tinker’s Damn”).

does not belong to ecocriticism in a narrow sense, but to the “environmental humanities,” which include the environmentally interested fields of history, philosophy, religion, cultural geography and literature (cf. e.g. Buell *Future* vi). Hence, we find a number of book-length historical and sociological studies (D. Taylor (2002); Proctor (2002); Carney (2002); Stewart (2002); Washington (2005); Glave/Stoll (2006); Glave (2010)<sup>16</sup>) as well as articles in areas as diverse as eco-musicology (Rosenthal (2006)), religious studies (Clay (2011); Holley (2005)), or food studies (Covey/Eisnach (2009)), that deal with environmental issues in African American culture. Moreover, such scholarship has interacted with a considerable amount of academic work on “environmental justice” and “environmental racism.”<sup>17</sup> The overall diverse body of what could be subsumed under the label of an environmental humanities approach to African American perspectives is thus essentially engaged in challenging the false stereotype of an obliviousness to environmental concerns on the part of African Americans.<sup>18</sup>

The same idea also motivates what can be called more narrowly *ecocritical* work on African American literature, i.e. the most immediate scholarly context for “Reading Green in Black.”<sup>19</sup> This steadily growing body of scholarship is located at the intersection between

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<sup>16</sup> Apart from these more extensive works, there is a steadily growing corpus of articles and single book chapters, which are devoted to exploring African American perspectives on environmental issues from historical and/or sociological perspectives. Examples include the fifth chapter in Hurley (1995); Glave (2003); chapter 6 in Knight (2010); Palmer (2011); chapters 4, 8 in Fiege (2012); and Miller (2013).

<sup>17</sup> Some of the most influential work on environmental justice of the past decades has been done in the field of sociology, by scholars like Robert D. Bullard, Bunyan Bryant, or Beverly Wright, as well as in ecocriticism, e.g. by Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, Scott Slovic, or Rob Nixon (2011). An impression of environmental justice ecocriticism can be gained from the collections by Adamson et al. (2002) and Stein (2004); general overviews are found in Sapat et al. (2002); or Mohai et al. (2009). “Environmental racism” has been defined as “any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color” (Bullard, “Environmental Racism” 90-91). For an overview of terminology, see Buell, *Future* 115-119; for scholarship that deals specifically with an African American context, see e.g. Simpson (2002); Kaalund (2004); Washington (2005); and, generally, Bullard’s extensive work.

<sup>18</sup> Several (sociological) studies have argued directly against the notion that “a large proportion of African-Americans do not place a particularly high value on the positive experience of living diversity [...] [or] its protection” (Kellert 61), e.g. D. Taylor (1989); Jones/Carter (1994); R. E. Jones (1998, 2002); or Mohai (1990, 2003). Other contributions that focus more broadly on black cultural history work more implicitly against this stereotype, for instance, by uncovering alternative histories to reveal that environmental concerns were historically part of black communities, or by reassessing the powerful (grassroots) activism of the environmental justice movement.

<sup>19</sup> I am refraining from calling this subfield “African American ecocriticism” as some have done, primarily because I believe that the term (falsely) implies that ecocriticism and African American studies were truly conjoined in a combined effort and field. This seems, however, rarely the case, as African American studies are not (yet) picking up ecocritical concerns as extensively as necessary, while ecocritical studies at times seem to run the danger of simply “applying” their theory to a new set of texts, therein neither taking into account the specificity of the black literary tradition nor the rich tools African American studies have to offer for analysis. In this respect, my study, combining ecocritical thought not only with

two academic fields, namely African American Studies and ecocriticism. The latter has considerably expanded its scope over the past two decades,<sup>20</sup> therein – often in conjunction with postcolonial studies<sup>21</sup> – increasingly posing questions relating to minorities’ and, in particular, African American perspectives on environmental issues. By now, scholars are responding productively to the admonition that “[e]cocritics 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” (Tidwell qtd. Wardi 14). The current convergence between both fields is enhanced by the “political” nature of both ecocriticism and African American Studies. While ecocriticism is “an avowedly political mode of analysis” driven by the conviction that “many, perhaps most, of our most pressing current environmental problems come from systemic socioeconomic and cultural causes” (Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 3; Conway et al. 3), African American studies is essentially shaped by its deep political “commitment to critique the relationship of race and power in America” (Davidson ix). Thus, as “[e]cocritics generally tie their cultural analysis explicitly to a ‘green’ moral and political agenda” (Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 3), and since

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Foucauldian theory but also with African American literary criticism, first and foremost Gates’s idea of signifyin(g), should also be understood as an attempt to bridge the gaps between the two fields. In more integrated approaches, I believe, (eco-)critics need to realize that it is not just African American *literature* that “has much to tell us, if we pay close enough ecocritical attention” (Dodd, “Forum” 1095), but African American *literary criticism* as well.

<sup>20</sup> Springing originally from U.S. literary studies departments in the 1990s, ecocriticism has broadened its perspectives in a variety of way. See for general assessments e.g. Heise, “Hitchhiker’s Guide”; Buell, “Ecocriticism”; on the idea of two “waves” of ecocriticism, see Buell, *Future* esp. 21-28, “Ecocriticism” 88-97; Adamson/Slovic have suggested a “third wave” by now, “which recognizes ethnic and national particularities and yet transcends ethnic and national boundaries” (6). In its course of transformation, ecocriticism has become more diverse thematically and methodologically, more interdisciplinary, more global in its outlook and institutional organization, and, most crucially in the context of the present study, has commenced to take into account more seriously questions of race and ethnicity. Thus, the field has increasingly come to include minorities’ perspectives, as may be seen, for instance, from collections by Armbruster/Wallace (2001), esp. the second part, Deming/Savoy (2002; second edition 2009), or Dungy (2009), all of which place “an emphasis on cultural perspective as a lens through which to see nature, environment, and place” (Deming/Savoy 13).

<sup>21</sup> “Postcolonial ecocriticism” has emerged as a burgeoning scholarly field over the past years, as both ecocritics and postcolonial scholars have recognized crucial overlaps of their concerns in a globalizing world. Although there are points of intersection between this field and ecocriticism on African American literature, the latter no doubt has its specific perspective, as it has to take into account not only a distinct literary history but also a particular tradition of literary criticism in African American studies that provides its very own approaches and concepts. For an impression of the rapidly growing scholarly field of postcolonial ecocriticism, consider e.g. works by Huggan/Tiffin (2009); Mukherjee (2010); the collections by Roos/Hunt (2010) and DeLoughrey/Handley (2011); an overview can be gained from the articles by Nixon (2005); E. James (2012); and Banerjee (2016). On the possible dialogue of postcolonial studies with ecocritical work on African American literature, see Gerhardt, “Greening”; another set of studies related to both ecocriticism on African American literature and postcolonial ecocriticism, are works on plantation culture and “black geographies,” e.g. by P. Carter (2006); McKittrick (2006, 2007); or Inwood (2009).

African American studies “was meant to try to redefine what it means to be human, what it means to be modern, what it means to be American” (C. West 542), both fields have the potential to talk most productively to each other.

Ecocritical work on African American literature, which had a forerunner in Dixon’s *Ride Out the Wilderness* (1987), is driven by the conviction that “literary critics have largely overlooked African American literary traditions” (Ruffin 10). Forming only in the first decades of the twenty-first century, the field comprises by now a handful of book-length studies (K. Smith (2007); Outka (2008); Finseth (2009); Ruffin (2010); Wardi (2011)), an essay collection (Mayer (2003)), and a steadily growing number of scholarly articles.<sup>22</sup> In this expanding corpus, critics have come to address a variety of specific themes and regions, have dealt with genres ranging from autobiography and fiction to poetry and film, and have begun to think about teaching African American literature environmentally (cf. e.g. Slaymaker (2008); Myers (2008); Haladay/Hicks (2010)). Historically speaking, the bulk of scholarship has focused on contemporary African American writing, e.g. by Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, or Alice Walker,<sup>23</sup> although there are also readings of nineteenth-century African American texts by authors such as Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, Charles W. Chesnutt or W.E.B. Du Bois.<sup>24</sup> The state of formation (still) characteristic of the field may be sensed particularly in the ways in which several of the book-length studies, have written their arguments in a rather sweeping

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<sup>22</sup> The growing importance of ecocritical work on African American texts may also be seen from its recent inclusion in major essay collections, handbooks and reference works in both African American studies and ecocriticism. *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (2014), for example, has an entire section on “Environments and Migrations” that features an ecocritical contribution by Kimberly Smith. In ecocriticism, too, collections by now regularly include contributions on African American literature, cf. e.g. Claborn in Garrard (2014); Gersdorf in Zapf (2016); or J. James in LeMenager et al. (2011).

<sup>23</sup> Contemporary African American authors that ecocritics have focused on are Toni Morrison (Ashford 121-149; L. Smith 75-107; Hunt (2000); Wallace/Armbruster (2001); Ruetenik (2010); Wardi (2011), chapters 2 and 3), Octavia Butler (Alaimo (1998); Mayer (2003); Grewe-Volpp (2003); Stein (2004)), and Alice Walker (Slaymaker (2007); James (2011)). There is also work on Charles Johnson (Geilern (2003)), Michael S. Harper (Dodd (2000)), Toni Cade Bambara (C. Walker (2003)), and Henry Dumas (Wardi (2009)); the most extensive study on contemporary African American texts is Ruffin’s *Black on Earth* (2010). For ecocritical engagements with African American films, see Scruggs (2004); and Monani/Beehr (2011).

<sup>24</sup> Ecocriticism that focuses on antebellum African American literature can be found in the studies by Finseth (2009), Outka (2008), and K. Smith (2007); furthermore in articles by Bennett (2001); Finseth (2001); Gerhardt (2002, 2003); Zarzycka (2003); Cook (2003); Hunter (2009); Kilcup (2012); and Finley (2013). Ecocritical readings of African American literature of the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century are given by Clark (2003); Myers (2003); Ownby (2003); K. Smith (2004, 2007); Hicks (2006); in the chapter on Charles Chesnutt in Outka (2008); and the one on Zora Neale Hurston in Willis (2011); by Claborn (2014); and Beilfuss (2015).

fashion (esp. Ruffin; K. Smith). Primarily designed to open up an initially narrow ecocritical canon, and aiming, first of all, to validate the existence of an engagement with environmental issues in African American writing, such studies have at times remained somewhat undertheorized.

What differentiates “Reading Green in Black” from this body of scholarship, beyond its Foucauldian perspective, its time frame and its choice of primary texts, is the critical position the study takes with respect to two well-established ideas of the field, namely those of an overwhelming “antipastoralism” in African American literature and of an often assumed “analogy” between the workings of racism and environmental alienation. The first idea, influentially put forward by Michael Bennett, is “that the nature of slavery in the United States created the link between anti-pastoralism and African American culture that has been operative from Douglass’s day to our own” (195). Although some arguments have begun to modify this claim, one major hypothesis of the field currently remains that of a general antipastoral impulse in the African American literary tradition.<sup>25</sup> Rereading this tradition through the concept of environmental knowledge, by contrast, questions this assessment as it examines aesthetic modes like the pastoral through the Foucauldian lenses of the visual, spatial, and biopolitical. Douglass’s note on Niagara, for instance, when read in terms of expressing visual relations to the Falls, makes clear that African American texts did not necessarily negate modes such as the sublime, but instead problematized and signified on their validity. If it would therefore be oversimplifying to speak of an “antisublime” with respect to Douglass’s depiction of Niagara, one aim of this study is to demonstrate that it is just as erroneous to presume an overwhelming “antipastoralism” of an African American literary tradition that, on the contrary, makes abundant use of the pastoral in its own specific ways.

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<sup>25</sup> Prior to Bennett, a handful of scholars in African American studies had considered the black literary tradition in terms of the pastoral. Bone (1975), for instance, turned to the pastoral in Hurston, Fisher and McKay (139-170); Mootry (1974, 1977) saw early twentieth-century African American novels as exhibiting a “black pastoral”; Shields (1994) noted the subversive potential of the pastoral in Phyllis Wheatley; Hassler (1995) treated Samuel R. Delany as a pastoralist, and Jones (1999) Booker T. Washington. Sometimes, these critics, too, stressed the problematic history of the pastoral in African American letters, claiming, for instance, that the pastoral was often “marked by ruin or desolation” (Mootry, “Love and Death” 10), reading Frederick Douglass as “attacking pastoral locations such as the farm, the woods, and the village” (Butler, “The City” 21), or observing an “anti-pastoral strain” in Wright’s *Black Boy* (Stepto, “Literary and Ascent” 83). It was, however, Bennett’s (2001) argument that made “the antipastoral of African American literature” the prominent theme that has influenced various readings by now, e.g. by Scruggs (2004); D. Martin (2007); Myers (2009); Ownby (2011); Preston-McGee (2011); and Beilfuss (2015).

A second key feature of many ecocritical readings of African American literature is the assumption of an analogy between the workings of racism and (African American) environmental alienation. Ruffin, for instance, speaks of “the coupling of racism and ecological alienation” (2), James suggests that “the legacies of trauma and injustice have attenuated African Americans’ connection to nature” (164), and Myers claims that “Euroamerican racism and alienation from nature derive from the same source and result in the joint and interlocking domination of people of color and the natural world” (15). While the intricate connection between racism and environmental alienation as such cannot be denied and must be at the very heart of a field that explores the “complexities of nature in the African American context” (Lynes 123), the drawing of a general analogy between the two, at times, veils more than it reveals. To suggest a “coupling” (Ruffin), a “same source” (Myers), or some other form of “double oppression” exerted by an exploitative Euro-American worldview is a valid observation at points, but it does not adequately explain the complex processes and effects at work in the intertwined American histories of race and (relating to) the environment. The advantage of a deconstructive, historicizing Foucauldian genealogy in this respect is that it enables exploring a “double oppression” in a more fundamental way, as it understands power relations as productive and looks for moments of resistance and struggle rather than repression and hegemony. Tracing environmental knowledge in this study therefore means to focus not so much on the *repression* of African American environmental knowledge, but on the complex forms and strategies of its *articulation*.

In Chesnutt’s “The Passing of Grandison,” for example, Grandison is, as the story eventually suggests, not oblivious to Niagara’s grandeur. Yet, to focus primarily on the repression of African American environmental knowledge by overemphasizing an analogy of racial oppression and black environmental alienation, repeats, from a literary critical perspective, what Chesnutt mocks through his narrative technique. To consider the story through the notion of a “same source” of racial oppression and African American environmental estrangement to some extent echoes the master’s voice that negates both the humanity and environmental knowledge of his slave; it runs the danger to overlook the subversive processes at work in Chesnutt’s and others’ articulation of environmental knowledge. Focusing overly on the analogy between racism and African American environmental alienation risks missing the central point Chesnutt makes – and the claim that also lies at the heart of this study – namely that there indeed *is* a rich tradition of

African American environmental knowledge. This knowledge may often have been hidden, but sometimes, as Chesnutt's narrative tricksterism suggests, it was precisely its hiddenness, the fact that the master was blind to it, that was employed as a means of expression and resistance. This, by extension, means that one must not turn solely to the master's attempt to silence but trace instead the ways in which this attempt *shaped* the articulation of environmental knowledge in African American literature. In other words, one must not understand the tradition as marked by a "deficit" due to (white) repression, but as characterized by a "difference" in terms of strategies of expression. In order to understand this difference in Chesnutt – and in the tradition of African American environmental knowledge generally – it is crucial to disentangle the legacies of environmental knowledge and race as productive, something that the assumption of a general analogy between the two would largely foreclose.

This said, a handful of less "analogical," more differentiated, and thus more fruitful studies, studies by Outka, Finseth, and K. Smith, have to be mentioned separately as vital groundwork for "Reading Green in Black." Outka's and Finseth's studies focus on both African American and Euro-American writers and present elaborate arguments on the interdependencies between race and relations to non-human environments. Outka, who treats a period similar to the one of the present study, combines ecocriticism and trauma studies to explore "the history of the intersection between the construction of racial identity and natural experience" (4). In this, he turns to Jacobs, Douglass, and Chesnutt, but also to Crèvecoeur, Jefferson and Muir, and aligns the construction of "whiteness" with responses to nature in terms of wilderness and the sublime, and the construction of "blackness" with responses in terms of the trauma resulting from slavery. Finseth's study, which focuses exclusively on the antebellum period, explores how both black and white antislavery writers, such as Equiano or D. Walker, Emerson or Beecher Stowe, related to discourses of natural history, (pseudo-)scientific racism, and Romanticism. In this, his aim is "to identify and explain the energies released at those points where 'nature' and 'race' converged and clashed in the literature and artwork of American slavery" (6). Both studies therefore provide important foundational work, as they emphasize the complexities at the heart of the mutually constitutive relations between concepts of race and nature.<sup>26</sup> The third study, K.

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<sup>26</sup> Outka's *Race and Nature* has been particularly inspiring for "Reading Green in Black," especially its important argument that, because the pastoral became linked to the trauma of slavery, American Romanticism turned to the sublime and the wilderness as providing a psychological distance, an escape

Smith's *African American Environmental Thought* (2007), is the most immediate context of "Reading Green in Black" in terms of its text corpus. Smith considers primarily African American texts, with the aim to explore "ideological roots as they evolved from the abolition movement through the Harlem renaissance period" (3). In this sense, her study is generally comparable to the present one in terms of its general timeframe and outlook, yet distinct in terms of the way it poses its questions. With an in-depth theorization missing, Smith's study investigates "environmental thought," defined "broadly, as a set of ideas concerning the relationship between humans and the natural environment, including the norms that ought to govern that relationship" (3). Moving beyond this rather sweeping approach, which no doubt has its benefits in terms of recovering parts of the African American literary tradition for ecocriticism, "Reading Green in Black" seeks to re-adjust the critical lens through the concept of environmental knowledge.

### Text Corpus and Chapter Overview

Apart from introducing the Foucauldian concept of environmental knowledge to add a new perspective to current ecocritical work on African American literature, "Reading Green in Black" also diverges from previous studies with respect to its choice of texts and the period studied. Firstly, I focus exclusively on African American primary literature,<sup>27</sup> which sets

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from the haunted pastoral. Taking up this general idea regarding African American literature, which Outka likewise reads as seeking to escape or repress the traumatic (plantation) pastoral, e.g. through "the anti-nature writing tendency of the slave narratives" (172), the present study is, among other things, an attempt to rework his thesis in a more specific context. The aim is, accordingly, to show not only how an (anti)pastoralism developed within the black literary tradition, but also how the wilderness and the sublime, as concepts that, according to Outka, were used by the Euro-American literary tradition to repress the trauma of the pastoral, came to function in African American letters.

<sup>27</sup> "African American literature" is understood in this study, in the general sense, as literature written by U.S. Americans of African descent. I am aware of the criticism this may trigger in the face of ongoing debates over what "African American literature" actually is (or was), what terminology to use, or what to include under this rubric, yet this study is not designed as the place to tackle such questions directly. Let it suffice to say that I do not follow a definition as narrow as Warren's (2011), who locates "African American literature" in the context of Jim Crow, but a more general one that sees African American literature as formed to a large extent out of "a prolonged engagement with the problem of slavery" (2). This is not to suggest any kind of ahistorical "essence" of African American literature, either by using this term broadly or through the concept of a specifically African American environmental knowledge. Just as race must be seen as a "real fiction" any naming or explanatory concept must likewise ultimately be understood as a construction that produces subject positions that have "real" effects. Revealing that texts written by Americans of African descent were, among other things, characterized by shared and developing forms of knowledge of the human in relation to its non-human material conditions may then indirectly interact with

the study apart from Outka's and Finseth's comparative approaches. Obviously, this does not mean omitting Euro-American texts as essential contexts, since there are "important influences and exchanges between the two literary traditions" (Finseth, *Shades* 23), but the primary focus lies on African American literature and the specific developments within this tradition. Secondly, the text corpus of this study differs from those chosen by previous studies due to its time frame, which is more extensive than Finseth's, yet more concise than that of Ruffin's and Wardi's broad surveys, and Smith's and Outka's studies, which also include literature of the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>28</sup> Thirdly, and most importantly, this study, as a Foucauldian genealogy, takes into account a body of (con)texts not treated so far from an ecocritical perspective that includes African American magazine articles, pamphlets, sermons, correspondence and journals, as well as broader discursive contexts, for instance, scientific racism or evolutionary thought. In this way, "Reading Green in Black" aims to combine an ecocritical re-assessment of canonical African American texts and authors with drawing attention to lesser-known writing and archival material. The introductory examples by Douglass and Chesnutt are therefore representative of the text corpus treated in this study, as they present African American relations to Niagara Falls in an unpublished manuscript as well as a well-known short story.

"Reading Green in Black" explores its material not only through the dimensions of the visual, the spatial, and the biopolitical, but also in terms of a twofold distinction based on Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s concept of "signifyin(g)." In his seminal study *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), Gates famously described the principle of "signifyin(g)" as "repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference," further proposing that African American texts must be read as "double-voiced in the sense that their literary antecedents are both white and black novels, but also modes of figuration lifted from the black vernacular tradition" (xxiv, xxiii). His theory of African American intertextuality therefore implies two basic forms of "signifyin(g)" that are crucial for tracing environmental knowledge. On the one hand, African American writers repeated and revised Euro-American environmental

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the debate over defining "African American literature," as it can help rethinking the contours and themes of such a body of literature.

<sup>28</sup> Although including, with Du Bois and Hurston, two early-twentieth-century writers more or less associated with the Harlem Renaissance, "Reading Green in Black" does not focus on this movement as such. This is not because there are no forms of environmental knowledge in the Harlem Renaissance, but simply because considering its rich literature adequately would explode the scope of this study. The focus is, after all, on nineteenth-century forms of environmental knowledge in the African American literary tradition; to trace these further into literature of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries will, hopefully, become the task of other studies.

knowledge traditions – an example of this can be seen in Douglass’s adaptation and transformation of the sublime. On the other hand, they repeated and revised African American environmental knowledge ‘internally,’ since “black writers read and critique other black texts” (290) – an example of this is Chesnut’s use of Niagara as part of the Underground Railroad, which in itself was a crucial literary space through which antebellum slave narratives had articulated environmental knowledge.

Building on Gates’s idea, this study will therefore, first, trace antebellum *foundations* of African American environmental knowledge that often entailed signifying on Western traditions and concepts, and, second, turn to postwar *transformations* of African American environmental knowledge that worked centrally through “repetition and revision” within the African American literary tradition. Hence, following a theoretical chapter (2.) on the concept of environmental knowledge, which introduces the central terms, definitions and premises of this study, the first of two chronological main parts (3.1-3.3) explores emerging forms of antebellum African American environmental knowledge in the formative genre of the fugitive slave narrative and in pamphlet literature. This part, considering a broad range of canonical and lesser-known texts, focuses on the visual, spatial, and biopolitical, as foundational dimensions of African American environmental knowledge.

The first two chapters show that antebellum fugitive slave narratives were, on the one hand, marked by a tendency towards “hyper-separation” (Plumwood); narrators had to disjoin themselves from non-human “nature” with which they were associated through the construction of race, and represent themselves as “civilized” in order to be admitted into the realm of the human. On the other hand, narrators nonetheless found ways of expressing environmental knowledge. Chapter 3.1, “Resisting (through) the Eye,” investigates one of these ways by examining the appearance of a specifically African American pastoral tradition in the context of racialized antebellum visual regimes. Read against such visual regimes and a corresponding emergence of the “black observer” and a “rhetoric of visibility” in the antebellum slave narrative, one can see that many texts do more than merely embrace an antipastoral stance. They attain instead a nuanced relation to the pastoral through a critical double vision that simultaneously included a “pastoral eye” and the “eye of the slave.” Chapter 3.2, “Reclaiming (through) Space,” examines another way in which writers of fugitive slave narratives expressed environmental knowledge, namely through a specific form of literary space. This chapter treats the Underground Railroad as a “literary

heterotopia” that became vital to the African American spatial and environmental imagination. It not only enabled narrators’ gaining more authority over their texts by deciding what to veil or unveil about the “Liberty Line,” but also figured as a “loophole” for articulating environmental knowledge within the genre, as writers reimagined collaboration during their escapes as extending beyond human aid. The literary “other-space” of the Underground Railroad thus became a locus that was both a means of constructing a refuge in a material sense, and an imaginative refuge that enabled resisting the slave narrative’s generic urge to “hyper-separate” in order to be accepted as human.

Concluding the focus on the antebellum period, chapter 3.3, “Negotiating (through) the Skin,” moves away from the discourse of the fugitive slave narrative and turns to African American pamphlet literature. Tracing the biopolitical positioning of the black body and its effects on the discursive position of the black writer, this chapter argues that antebellum pamphleteers developed influential strategies of writing against the “biological exclusion” of the black body. In this, they formed arguments around the themes of “birth,” “blood,” and “nature,” and, in some cases, virtually “dissected” the black body in order to demonstrate its anatomical, biological humanity. Ultimately, antebellum black pamphleteers as well as writers of slave narratives thus articulated environmental knowledge in various ways from their distinct perspectives. Whether in terms of repeating and revising the pastoral (3.1), by creating alternative literary space that made it possible to express environmental knowledge (3.2), or by arguing against the biologically racialized state of the black body (3.3), antebellum African American voices provided the literary tradition with a foundational knowledge of the human in relation to its non-human non-discursive material conditions.

The second main part of “Reading Green in Black” (4.1-4.5) focuses on the transformations of such knowledge in African American literature from Reconstruction to the early twentieth century. Turning to slave narratives after slavery, fiction, and a diary, this section traces how African American writers after the Civil War engaged in “repetition and revision” of foundational forms of environmental knowledge, therein often at the same time signifying on shifting epistemological contexts. It is important to note that this part does not suggest a teleological or conclusive development. While there are some identifiable lines of development in terms of the visual, spatial, and biopolitical, one should not assume any single, continuous story along which African American environmental

knowledge “progressed.” Rather, I have selected a number of texts as instances that give an impression of the richness and complexities of articulating environmental knowledge in a literary tradition in which writers signified on both foundational African American environmental knowledge and changing epistemological contexts, such as evolutionary thought or the frontier thesis.

Chapter 4.1, “Nature, Education, Home,” takes up Charlotte Forten’s journals, written mostly during the Civil War, and William Wells Brown’s *My Southern Home* (1880) as cases that indicate a broad reconfiguration of literary space in African American writing that offered new ways for expressing environmental knowledge. In postwar African American literature, education and home emerged not only as central themes but also helped create new forms of literary space. One effect of this was that articulating environmental knowledge did not remain confined to “loopholes” like the slave narrative’s literary heterotopia of the Underground Railroad, but fused into broader literary spaces of education and home. In Forten, for instance, we register a host of such spaces in her picturesque imagery of houses and schools, which become a means to construct “nature” as a multifaceted refuge that is used, among other things, to condemn slavery and racism. Brown’s *My Southern Home*, on the other hand, is a more subversive trickster narrative that expresses relations to the non-human material world by negotiating the ambivalent relationship between African Americans and the South as a “home.” Moreover, Brown’s place-based environmental knowledge is indicative of a postwar form of black agrarianism.

Chapters 4.2 and 4.3 turn to Booker T. Washington and Charles W. Chesnutt, two writers who signify on both African American environmental knowledge and turn-of-the-century evolutionary thought. Chapter 4.2, “Rewriting the Pastoral,” reads two of Washington’s autobiographies, *Up From Slavery* (1901) and *Working with the Hands* (1904), as revisions of the antebellum slave narrative. The texts transform the rhetoric of visibility and disciplinary regime of the genre, but also create Washington’s own version of an African American pastoral. Adapting the pastoral to fit an optimistic, progressive narrative of racial uplift, Washington, on the one hand, presents a “pastoral-as-reward” that is accessible to the hard-working freedman, and, on the other hand, suggests a “Georgic-as-progress” that is supposed to lead to this reward. By transforming the double-eyed pastoralism of the fugitive slave narrative into a biopolitically useful “African American Georgic,” Washington furthermore critically reflects on contemporary evolutionary

thought. Chapter 4.3, “Writing against an Environmental State of Exception,” considers Chesnut’s Uncle Julius stories as texts that revise the black body as an environmental entity. Reading the texts not primarily as “conjure” stories, but identifying them as stories of the “trans-corporeality” (Alaimo) of the black body reveals that they self-reflexively draw attention to the problems of depicting links between the black body and the non-human material, but also emphasize the empowering potential that lies in imagining the black body environmentally. Moreover, Chesnut’s trans-corporeal vision of the black body, like Washington’s African American Georgic, interacts with evolutionary thought. In Chesnut’s case, however, one finds a mocking of a specifically Spencerian stance of evolutionism as well as an epistemological resistance to the very possibility of human knowledge of the non-human world in general. In this respect, Chesnut’s stories seem to be particularly useful “environmental texts” (L. Buell) that are not only crucial within the history of African American environmental knowledge, but more generally of interest to ecocritics as thought-provoking comments on the interrelations between race, discourses of nature, and the non-human material.

The last two chapters examine texts by two major authors that indicate a continuing practice of signifying on environmental knowledge in early twentieth-century African American writing. Chapter 4.4, “Claiming the Wilderness Narrative,” reads W.E.B. Du Bois’s first novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) as repeating and revising environmental knowledge through its central depiction of the swamp. *Quest* echoes the literary heterotopia of the Underground Railroad, presenting an African American relation to the wilderness as something that is both haunted and empowering. Furthermore, Du Bois heterotopically weaves the space of the swamp into his text through the motif of the “silver fleece” – the cotton grown there by his protagonists – and claims an alternative relation to the wilderness that gains its distinct meaning also in the context of Turner’s Frontier Thesis. Considered against the idea of a closing frontier, the text opens up an African American “wilderness narrative.” Chapter 4.5, “Opening the Ethnographic Eye,” concludes with a reading of Zora Neale Hurston’s early short fiction of the 1920s. Hurston, writer and Boasian anthropologist, can be read as continuing a tradition of (quasi-)ethnographically observing and visualizing African American populations in African American literature, which had already been visible in Forten, W.W. Brown, and Washington. In her early writing, the black body emerges as an object of ethnographic as well as environmental knowledge, as she endows non-human nature with agency and celebrates environmental

knowledge through black folklore. Her literary ethnography thus acknowledges the value of the tradition of African American environmental knowledge, and shows what bell hooks claims in “Earthbound,” namely that African Americans were “indeed a people of the earth” (68).

Closing with Du Bois and Hurston demonstrates once more how “Reading Green in Black” understands African American environmental knowledge. On the one hand, such knowledge emerges in specific epistemological contexts, such as scientific racism, anthropology, the frontier thesis, or evolutionary thought; texts must be read within broader histories of racial and environmental knowledge. On the other hand, this study demonstrates that there are characteristic lines of development within the black literary tradition through a specific kind of intertextuality, as writers signified on previous forms of African American environmental knowledge. Even though there are not always explicit links between writers, one finds an interconnectedness within the tradition in terms of expressing environmental knowledge through the dimensions of the visual, spatial, and biopolitical, which potentially has effects up until today. A Foucauldian genealogy is, after all, a “history of the present,” and writing such a history of the present of African American environmental knowledge seems necessary if we want to improve our understanding of the relationship between race and human relations to the non-human world today. If ecocritics have stressed that environmental problems are social problems, and if, as Fanon once put it, “[t]he social constellation, the cultural whole, are deeply modified by the existence of racism,” then African American literature is one crucial place for investigating such problems more thoroughly (“Racism” 36). Rereading the tradition through the lens of environmental knowledge may thus do more than just enable scholars to rethink the African American literary canon from a changed perspective and to discover alternative forms of environmental writing. Ultimately, going back to writers like Hurston, Du Bois, or Washington – or exploring how Douglass and Chesnut wrote about Niagara Falls – may also support our understanding of the social and cultural dynamics involved in the environmental crises the world faces today.

## 2.

### Reading Green in Black: Definitions, Concepts, Premises

“[D]iscourse was not originally a thing, a product, or a possession, but an action situated in a bipolar field of sacred and profane, lawful and unlawful, religious and blasphemous. It was a gesture charged with risks [...]”  
(Foucault, “What Is an Author?” 124)

“If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility – without knowing either what its form will be or what its promises – were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.”  
(Foucault, *The Order of Things* 422)

“Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use. I decided to analyze the nature and function of Signifyin(g) precisely because it *is* repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference. Whatever is black about black American literature is to be found in this identifiable black Signifyin(g) difference.”  
(Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* xxiv)

#### Foucauldian Knowledge

Knowledge is one of the most prominent themes of Foucauldian thought and, as such, cannot be thought apart from his ideas about discourse and power. A definition of “environmental knowledge” that combines Foucauldian and ecocritical theory must therefore begin by calling to mind three basic aspects of Foucauldian knowledge. It is necessary to realize what it means to think of knowledge, first, as formations, second, as discourse, and, third, as inextricably linked to the workings of power.

Knowledge after Foucault must, first of all, be understood as formations. In terms of a traditional distinction between *connaissance* and *savoir*, the focus with Foucault is therefore, in contrast to current epistemology, on the latter.<sup>29</sup> “Knowledge,” in a Foucauldian sense, is

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<sup>29</sup> To some extent, Foucauldian knowledge may be defined *ex negativo* against ideas in current epistemology. Epistemology, as it is practiced today, is largely driven by a central skepticism (see M. Williams 3-5; Lemos 154-68; Moser et al. 9-14), and primarily focuses on propositional knowledge and on knowledge as “justified true belief” (see Lemos 2-5; Hempfer/Traninger, esp. 9; on JTB-ideas Williams 5-21). Thus, it traces the nature (What is knowledge?) as well as the extent (What may we know?) of knowledge in a rather abstract fashion, as “[p]hilosophers typically look at the nature of knowledge *generally*, asking what is

not the sum of scientific knowledge [*connaissance*], since it should always be possible to say whether the latter are true or false, accurate or not, approximate or definite, contradictory or consistent [...] [but the] set of the elements (objects, types of formulation, concepts and theoretical choices) formed from one and the same positivity in a field of a unitary discursive formation [*savoir*]. (Foucault, “Archaeology of the Sciences” 324)

Hence, knowledge designates something that is dispersed within epistemes, the fundamental apparatuses that determine how the knowledge of a historical period is organized and which knowledge is acceptable; it exists and can be analyzed transversally across traditionally identified bodies of knowledge of a certain period.<sup>30</sup> Knowledge after Foucault is, in this sense, that which “preconceptually underpins [...] what people know as knowledge” in a given age (Hannabuss 87). As a precondition for a science or a discipline – but not vice versa – Foucauldian knowledge thus denotes the superordinate category of an analytics that aims to identify formations beneath explicitly organized or seemingly coherent ‘units’ of knowledge and in “discursive layers which fall outside the familiar categories of a book, a work, or an author” (“Author” 113).

Foucauldian knowledge is therefore, secondly, crucially linked to the notion of discourse. Despite the term’s centrality to his *oeuvre*, we hardly find a consistent definition of “discourse” by Foucault himself.<sup>31</sup> The closest thing to a general definition is probably given in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), the book that retrospectively describes the method of his “archaeological” phase of the 1960s.<sup>32</sup> Here, Foucault speaks of discourses not simply

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required for a person genuinely to know that something is true rather than false. A theory of knowledge aims to illuminate such general issues about knowledge” (Moser et al. 3, emphasis in original). A Foucauldian perspective, by contrast, is set precisely against an abstract, formal, potentially ahistorical idea of knowledge. Instead of claiming knowledge as “an honorific title we confer on our paradigm cognitive achievements,” analyzing knowledge through a Foucauldian lens is primarily a descriptive and historicizing task (Williams 10).

<sup>30</sup> My vocabulary at this point is inspired by the use of the term “dispersion” in the work of German literary scholar Joseph Vogl. In his concept of a “poetics of knowledge,” Vogl employs this term to describe the ways in which knowledge is “transversally” expanding across disciplines or single discursive formations of an epistemological period. See, for instance, Vogl “Für eine Poetologie des Wissens,” “Poetologie des Wissens,” esp. 52, “Mimesis and Suspicion”; also Neumeyer 183-185.

<sup>31</sup> The term “discourse” itself has a long history and has been used in different ways by various theorists before and after Foucault, ranging from the philosophers of the Frankfurt School to poststructuralist and postmodernist thinkers like Derrida, Laclau and Mouffe, or Žižek. The result has been, on the one hand, that “discourse” has become “a fashionable term” that, in its general use, seems unified only by the idea “that language is structured according to different patterns that people’s utterances follow when they take part in different domains in social life” (Jørgensen/Phillips 1). In this sense, “discourse” generally means a link between thought and language. On the other hand, the term attains by now a vast variety of more specific meanings in academia, depending on subject area. See for an overview Jørgensen/Phillips; Warnke; Maset 26-30; the contributions in Keller et al. also give a good impression of the various academic uses of the term.

<sup>32</sup> Scholars typically identify three phases of Foucault’s *oeuvre*, an archaeological, a genealogical and an ethical phase (cf. Gutting *Introduction* 104, “Introduction”; Davidson (1986); Smart (1994); Darier,

“as groups of signs [...] but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (54). Otherwise, “discourse” is understood either in an abstract, “wide” sense, meaning any existing but not hierarchically structured body of enunciations (cf. “Order” 64-66), or in the sense of specific (e.g. medical, economic, linguistic, or, later, penal or sexual) “discursive formations,” which occur “[w]henver, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity” (*Archaeology* 41). A discursive formation in this sense is any individualizable group of enunciations.

Despite Foucault’s characteristic (and sometimes frustrating) terminological indeterminacy<sup>33</sup> regarding the term discourse, it is crucial to note that knowledge, which cannot exist outside discourse, must therefore be understood as ‘historically true’ – something that becomes apparent especially in the idea of the “episteme” as “the historical a-priori of knowledge formation, enabling sciences, rationalities, and experiences to be formulated and grounded” (Foucault, *Order* xxii).<sup>34</sup> Knowledge is thus radically historical: The idea of a “justified true belief” itself, for example, so prominent in today’s epistemology, would have to be seen with Foucault as formed within historically changing epistemic conditions via discourse, and it is the non-teleological processes underlying concepts like propositional knowledge which a Foucauldian genealogy must seek to disentangle. By extension, this means that an analytics that builds on a Foucauldian notion of knowledge must always be ready to admit its own historiographic bias. It means accepting the fact that “[w]e are doomed historically to history, to the patient construction of discourses about discourses, and to the task of hearing what has already been said” (*Birth* xvi). We are, in this sense, always writing “histories of the present,” whether we are aware of this – as Foucault urges us to be – or not.

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“Foucault and the Environment” 8-27). A fourfold distinction has been suggested by Dreyfus and Rabinow in *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, who add an early Heideggerian phase; a division into even more (sub-)phases can be found in Raffnsøe/Høyer/Thaning (cf. 45-52).

<sup>33</sup> Many commentators have pointed out that Foucault, being a nominalist, “never really cares to give tightly woven and unequivocal definitions” (Warnier 12; cf. also Warnke 10-14). Yet, most would agree with Downing’s claim that it is exactly the resulting “tensions and internal contradictions [that] make him one of the most relevant thinkers for our current age” (118); Foucault is, after all, in Isaiah Berlin’s distinction, a very inspiring “fox” rather than a “hedgehog” (cf. 22). See on Foucault’s changing uses of the term “discourse” e.g. Danaher et al. 32-36; Åkerstrøm 1-32; Ruoff 100-101; on his nominalism, see Flynn, “Mapping” 39-40, *Historical Reason* 31-47. Terminological matters become even more complicated when taking into account translation problems (cf. Darier 7-8; Downing ix; Beer 1).

<sup>34</sup> Darier further describes an episteme as “a historically specific, coherent configuration of how knowledge is organized (around disciplines, concerns, themes etc.) and what kind of justifications are deemed acceptable to support that knowledge” (“Foucault” 9). The notion of the episteme is thus the clearest indicator of Foucault’s radical historicity, as it implies the idea that knowledge and “[i]dentities are formed in the immanence of history. It is there also that they are unmade. For there is only liberation in and through history” (Gros, “Hermeneutics” 526). See also White 114-121.

If a Foucauldian perspective therefore primarily aims to trace the manufacturing of knowledge via discourse, it is important to realize that this must not be misread as implying that what can be called the “non-discursive material”<sup>35</sup> dimension of the production, distribution, and circulation of knowledge was irrelevant; Foucault was not radically constructivist in this sense.<sup>36</sup> As a recent interpretation by Susan Hekman (2010) convincingly corroborates, “Foucault, far from emphasizing discourse to the exclusion of the material or ‘reality,’ is, on the contrary, always acutely aware of the interaction between discourse and reality” (48).<sup>37</sup> A Foucauldian analysis of knowledge must therefore turn to both the “discursive” and the “non-discursive material.” True, one of the premises of Foucault’s analytics is that we cannot analyze and historicize knowledge manufacturing but *via* discourse. However, this does not mean a denial of the interrelations of the discursive with the non-discursive material within knowledge production, especially if we take seriously Foucault’s emphasis on the ways in which discourse, in an imagined primal state (cf. “Order” 66), was fundamentally marked by material threats as an “action situated in a bipolar field of sacred and profane, lawful and unlawful, religious and blasphemous,” i.e. as a material “gesture charged with risks” (“Author” 124). In its imagined *Urzustand*, the discursive is seen as emerging within and in relation to “really” existing external, non-discursive materialities that could be as much as

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<sup>35</sup> Two aspects play into my use of the term “non-discursive material” in this study. First, it indicates that I seek to refine and expand Foucault’s own dichotomic use of the terms “discursive” and “non-discursive.” For Foucault, “non-discursive” meant broadly “any kind of extrinsic” that may be involved in the production of subjectivities and that is *not* discursive. He means, in other words, such “practices which are external to individuals not in their effects but in their fields of operation” (Smart, *Michel Foucault* 107); the idea is most generally that “[d]iscursive practices have a material basis because they cannot be extricated from their historical setting” (Cherryholmes 34). In this respect, I use the term “non-discursive material” to place stronger emphasis on the physical, the material, as something that *shapes* the discursive and that involves *different types* of materialities. Moreover, the term signals that my interpretation of Foucault has been loosely inspired by the turn to matter in the so-called “new materialism,” which has been flourishing over the past years (cf. e.g. Alaimo/Hekman (2008); Coole/Frost (2010); Alaimo (2010); Hekman (2010); J. Bennett (2010); Bryant (2011); Iovino/Oppermann (2014)). Although this study does not centrally employ notions from this field, my readings of new materialist scholarship, especially Hekman’s work, have influenced my interpretation of Foucault and the concept of environmental knowledge.

<sup>36</sup> Many interpretations read Foucault as a (radical) constructivist, especially with respect to his take on the death of the subject and the idea of power. For discussions of Foucault’s constructivism, see e.g. Assiter, esp. 140; Nola; or Barker/Galasiński 12-14.

<sup>37</sup> Turning to Foucault and Wittgenstein as well as more recent theorists such as Latour, Pickering and Barad, Hekman’s goal in *The Material of Knowledge* is to lay the groundwork for a new “approach that brings the material back in” by incorporating “the insights of linguistic constructionism without falling into its error of rejecting the material. It must describe the complex interactions of language and matter, the human and the nonhuman, as well as the diverse entities we have created in our world” (4). In Hekman’s argument, Foucauldian thought has an exposed position (Chapter 3), as it “can be interpreted as accomplishing precisely what postmodernism claimed but generally failed to do: a deconstruction of the discourse/reality dichotomy” (8). Thus, Hekman’s study in important ways problematizes the widespread perception of Foucault as merely a “founding father of the linguistic constructionism” (64).

life threatening, and there is no indication of Foucault's ignoring of such materialities in his later genealogical works on specific bodies of knowledge.

In Foucault, a "non-discursive material dimension" involves both the human and the non-human. On the one hand, there are *human* non-discursive materialities interacting with the discursive in the production of knowledge, which range from political, economic or institutional events and the human body to the "material reality" of the human product discourse itself, as "a thing pronounced or written" ("Order" 52).<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, the *non-human* non-discursive material dimension, too, becomes a potential part of knowledge production, as it figures in events such as non-anthropogenic catastrophes or disasters (e.g. the breakout of the plague, cf. *Discipline* 195-199), or, more generally, in the conditions provided by non-human surroundings including what we would commonly refer to as "nature." In both cases, the relation between the discursive and the non-discursive material are regarded as mutually constitutive; their relation is imagined by Foucault as "neither one of determination nor one of expression" (Torfing 91).

The non-discursive material dimensions play a decisive role especially in Foucault's "genealogical" phase of the 1970s. Knowledge must therefore, and here is the third aspect of a Foucauldian perspective, be understood as intimately connected with power – an idea central to this phase. Especially in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The Will to Knowledge* (1976), but also in numerous lectures, articles and interviews of this decade,<sup>39</sup> a characteristic link between knowledge and power figures prominently. The nature of this link can only be understood in light of Foucault's general idea of power as not simply "negative." Distancing himself thereby from Marxist, structuralist or juridical conceptions,<sup>40</sup> Foucault's distinctive claim is that power

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<sup>38</sup> With respect to these materialities, the human body is without a doubt the most important cipher of a (human) non-discursive material dimension in Foucault. Especially after his reading of Nietzsche, i.e. in his genealogical phase, Foucault was clearly focusing on the human body, not viewing it "simply as a conscious enclosing vessel that makes acts possible, but as a diffuse materiality that eats, and engages in physical exercise and sexual practices of one kind or another" (Barker 3).

<sup>39</sup> Lectures held during the "genealogical" phase at the Collège de France have posthumously been published over the past decades in the volumes *Psychiatric Power* (1973/74), *Abnormal* (1974/75), *Society Must Be Defended* (1975/76), *Security, Territory, Population* (1977/78), and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978/79). One of the most important articles of the 1970s, which delineates Foucault's genealogical method is "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1971).

<sup>40</sup> In opposition to other, more essentialist conceptions of power, Foucault is not interested in "defining/anchoring a theory of power 'outside' the limits of what power is currently understood to be" (Darier, "Foucault" 16). On Foucault's relation to structuralist or juridical conceptions of power, cf. Baudrillard/Lotringer 10; Darier 18; on his relation to structuralism more generally, Prado 21; Dreyfus/Rabinow; on his opposition to Marxist ideas of hegemony, see e.g. Smart, *Marxism*; Poster; Boyne 125-130. For important general critiques of Foucault's concept of power, cf. e.g. Baudrillard/Lotringer; Habermas; Taylor, *Sources*.

is not evil. Power is games of strategy. [...] For example, let us take sexual or amorous relationships: to wield power over the other in a sort of open-ended strategic game where the situation may be reversed is not evil; it's a part of love, of passion, of sexual pleasure. And let us take as another example [...] the pedagogical institution. I see nothing wrong in the practice of a person who, knowing more than others in a specific game of truth, tells those others what to do, teaches them, and transmits knowledge and techniques to them. ("Ethics of the Concern" 298-299)

Power is not inherently "bad" or solely repressive. It needs to be understood in terms of its strategic application and as "an action upon an action" ("Subject" 323), i.e. as something performed rather than possessed. Moreover, power in this sense is regarded as de-centralized, as it emanates from "a multiplicity of sources" ("Body/Power" 58). It permeates the capillaries of society on a micro-level and works from innumerable points "at the level of mechanisms, techniques and technologies" (*Society* 165).

With this idea of power in mind, Foucault envisions mutually constitutive interactions between power and knowledge and claims that "[t]he exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power" ("Prison Talk" 52). This does not mean that the two are the same. While power and knowledge "directly imply one another," they are not identical (*Discipline* 27); in fact, Foucault somewhat polemically states that "[i]f power were identical to knowledge, I would not have anything to study" ("Body/Power" 57). What is then at the heart of analyzing "power-knowledge" – the term Foucault employs to describe this link<sup>41</sup> – is tracing how the two combine to produce forms of identity, individuality and resistance. As Michel de Certeau writes, Foucault's aim is

to bring to light the springs of this opaque power that has no possessor, no privileged place, no superiors or inferiors, no repressive activity or dogmatism, that is almost autonomously effective through its technological ability to distribute, classify, analyze and spatially individualize the objects dealt with. (46)

These "objects" produced by power-knowledge are not merely discursive "objects, types of formulation, concepts" of *savoir*, but crucially also material "subjects" in a twofold sense of the word: as subjected to modes of power that may entail forms of domination, and as individualized

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<sup>41</sup> Foucault employs the neologism "power-knowledge" to signal the intimate relation between its two components. In *Discipline and Punish*, for instance, he suggests that "'power-knowledge relations' are to be analysed [...] not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system, but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations (27-28). See also on power-knowledge Barker 76-84; Hacking, *Ontology* 73-86; Lemke 90-95.

and endowed with an identity that enables resistance (“Archaeology of the Sciences” 324).<sup>42</sup> In this sense, knowledge, being inextricably connected with power, is always marked by immanent struggles, for “where there is power, there is resistance” (*Will to Knowledge* 95).<sup>43</sup>

To sum up, Foucauldian knowledge, understood in the proposed threefold sense as broadly dispersed *formations* that are manufactured through the *interplay* of the discursive and the non-discursive material, and that are always *interested* as parts of power struggles, is fundamentally dynamic and pragmatic. There is no knowledge in this sense that does not also involve both strategic and non-discursive material dimensions in furnishing the discursive formations we are left with to analyze. Thus, even if a discourse analysis works from the premise that one may only access formations of knowledge via discourse, its aim is also to trace forms of the non-discursive material in the production of the knowledge expressed in this discourse. Working with Foucault does therefore not mean taking the “discursive” as an absolute. Rather, when read not as a radical constructivist or relativist but as “a contextualist of the statements of observers of ‘objective reality,’” Foucault enables an analytics that aims to identify interdependencies between the discursive and the (human as well as non-human) non-discursive material (Darier, “Foucault” 10).

## Environmental Knowledge

To speak of “*human* knowledge” would therefore, from a Foucauldian perspective, be tautological, since there is no accessible knowledge that is not always also man-made, even if this is not to deny a non-human non-discursive material dimension in the manufacturing of knowledge. This in part anthropocentric stance of Foucault’s analytics is one reason for the traditionally problematic relationship between Foucauldian and environmental thought.

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<sup>42</sup> On the one hand, the word *subject* expresses the idea of “being subject to someone else by control and dependence”; on the other hand, it means more positively “tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (Foucault, “Subject” 331). On the subject as central Foucauldian theme, see e.g. Gros, “Hermeneutics”; Deleuze 78-101; Barker 48-69; Rieger-Ladich; and Besley/Peters; on the problematic terminology of Foucault’s work on subjectivity, see e.g. Savoia; Warnier.

<sup>43</sup> Power in a Foucauldian sense always implies a potential of resistance, a possible “way out.” Thus, he claims that relationships of complete domination can never be relationships of power: “If one or the other were completely at the disposition of the other and became his thing, an object on which he can exercise an infinite and unlimited violence, there would not be relations of power. [...] In order to exercise a relation of power, there must be on both sides at least a certain form of liberty” (“Ethic of Care” 12). Hence, slavery, for example, is “not a power relationship when a man is in chains, only when he has some possible mobility, even a chance of escape” (“Subject” 341-342).

Moreover, the somewhat surprising long-term omission of Foucauldian ideas in the environmental humanities and ecocriticism<sup>44</sup> is due to the minor role of nature in Foucault's work and the widespread hostility towards poststructuralist and postmodern theory in early ecocriticism. On the one hand, Foucault was "far from being an environmental thinker" and mentioned environmental concerns only marginally (Alberts 544).<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, he was one of those figures who were perceived, especially by early ecocritics,<sup>46</sup> as too radically constructivist and as denying agency through the idea of the "death of the subject."<sup>47</sup>

The situation has considerably changed over the past one and a half decades, however, as environmentally oriented scholarship and ecocriticism have come to revalue once despised "high theory,"<sup>48</sup> including Foucauldian thought, as pioneering work by Darier (1999), Goodbody (2009), and Alberts (2013) demonstrates. While these contributions propose the

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<sup>44</sup> In light of the overwhelming influence of Foucauldian thought across disciplines over the past decades, it is indeed a "puzzling lacuna" that it has taken so long for Foucault to reach environmental thought (Darier 5; cf. also Quigley 183). Cf. for an overview of Foucault's impact in various subject areas Lloyd/Thacker; Kammler et al. 307-441; on Foucault's impact on literary studies in particular, see D. Kremer; Kirchhofer; Geisenhanslüke 121-131; Neumeyer; and the contributions in Müller-Seidel et al.

<sup>45</sup> Alberts suggests that, since "Foucault wrote virtually nothing on environmental issues [...] it has been the task of interpreters to draw out and elucidate possibilities" (544). Darier agrees that Foucault "never addressed the environmental issue directly, or the ecological crisis as such," draws attention to an anecdote that recalls "that Foucault detested nature," and concludes that there are thus only "unintended Foucauldian effects on environmental critique" ("Foucault" 6, 28). Rare moments in which Foucault touches upon environmental issues may be found in the lecture series of 1975/76 (cf. *Society* 245), or in a late interview ("Ethic of Care"), where Foucault speaks of an ecological movement that "has often been, in one sense, in hostile relationship with science or at least with a technology guaranteed in terms of truth" (15). Otherwise, however, Foucault remains silent on the environment.

<sup>46</sup> Quigley gives an example of the kind of attitude that prevailed among many ecocritics in the 1990s when he reports on the "general tendency" at an ecocritical conference at Kansas State University "to scoff at, deflect and generally seek consensus regarding the mischievous nuisances created by that unknowing urbanite, and European import, poststructuralism" (183). Other (early) voices from the environmental humanities that criticize the relativism of poststructuralism and postmodernism and their tendency to "exorcise nature and materiality out of representation [...] thus clos[ing] in representation on itself" (Herzogenrath 2) can be found e.g. in Gare (1995); Soulé/Lease (1995).

<sup>47</sup> A whole range of critiques has revolted against Foucault's proclaimed "death of the subject" (cf. e.g. McNay 83; Warnier 12; Rieger-Ladich 203) or debated a possible "return" of the subject in Foucault's late work (see Harrer; Devos; Dews; Flynn, "Subjectivation"). In addition to Foucault's anthropocentrism as a constructivist, the nightmarish idea that "rather than being the free and active organizers of society, we are products of discourses and power relations" is another possible reason why ecocritics – driven, after all, by the conviction that (environmental) political action and agency was possible – may have found it difficult to open up to Foucault (Danaher et al. 118).

<sup>48</sup> Besides ecocriticism's revaluation of poststructuralist and postmodern theory, for example, by Barthes, Deleuze, or Latour, or in the "poststructuralist variant of literary anthropology" (Müller, "Literary Anthropology" 71) that has been flourishing under the heading "literature as cultural ecology" (cf. Zapf, *Kulturelle Ökologie, Cultural Ecology*), we also find ecocritical readings based on phenomenology (Norris; Westling), systems theory (Clarke; Hofer), cultural materialism (Ryle), or Bakhtinian ideas (Müller, "Notes"; Murphy). An impression of ecocriticism's increasingly broad range of methods may best be gleaned from the collections by Gersdorf/Mayer (2006); Goodbody/Rigby (2011); Garrard (2012); and in the recent "Handbooks" edited by Garrard (2014) and Zapf (2016).

usefulness of Foucault for environmental thinking in general terms,<sup>49</sup> two Foucauldian concepts in particular have triggered responses from environmentally oriented literary and cultural critics, sociologists and historians, namely “governmentality” and “biopolitics.”<sup>50</sup> It is certainly no coincidence that both of the concepts that have been most appealing to environmental thought stem from Foucault’s genealogical phase. After all, it was this phase that saw a turn away from a history of systems of thought and towards the “body – and everything that touches it: diet, climate, and soil,” i.e. a turn away from the discursive and towards the non-discursive material dimension of knowledge (Foucault, “Nietzsche” 148). Thus, even though much remains to be done,<sup>51</sup> environmentally interested scholars have begun by now to find their way with Foucault’s thought, especially that of the 1970s, recognizing that his “concepts can be made highly relevant to environmental thinking, whatever attitude to ‘nature’ Foucault himself might have held” (Darier “Foucault” 6).

Building on this conviction, Foucauldian thought will be adapted for the purposes of this study through the concept of “environmental knowledge.” Based on what I have outlined so far, environmental knowledge can be defined as *such formations of power-knowledge that negotiate and constitute the human in relation to its non-human non-discursive material conditions*. It is crucial to note at this point that a Foucauldian perspective does not speak of “non-human *natural*” but of “non-human *non-discursive material*” conditions. In other words, “environmental knowledge” is not to be confused with a “knowledge of nature,” even though historically changing conceptions of “nature” are central to any formation of environmental knowledge. Crucially, however, environmental knowledge in a Foucauldian sense turns to “nature/the natural” as an *object of discourse analysis*, not as a stable or positivistically knowable essence,

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<sup>49</sup> Goodbody broadly calls for a combination of critical discourse analysis with discourse linguistics and ecocriticism, while Alberts’s contribution and Darier’s collection of essays, which was the “first systematic study of the useful and relevant exchanges between Michel Foucault’s work and environmental thinking” (C. Keller 285), more specifically deal with the use of Foucauldian concepts for environmental thought in the hope that “Foucault’s provocative and creative thinking may help us to face up to the environmental challenge” (Darier, “Foucault” 27). A forerunner of such scholarship could be seen in Berman’s study (1981), which employs a Foucauldian archeological approach in an environmental context.

<sup>50</sup> Studies that explicitly employ concepts of an “environmental,” “green,” or “eco-”governmentality include those by P. Rutherford (1994); Darier (1996); Luke (1999); Agrawal (2005); Bäckstrand and Lovbrand (2006); and S. Rutherford (2007; 2011). Studies inspired by Foucauldian biopolitics are, for instance, those by P. Rutherford (1999); M. Smith (2011); and Alberts (2013).

<sup>51</sup> Although Garrard speaks of recent ecocriticism as “Foucauldian ecocriticism,” because “ecocritics have extended his [Foucault’s] analysis far beyond our own species” to include the non-human within new concepts of biopower (“Introduction” 2), it seems that the scholarship Garrard suggests to be “Foucauldian” is most often at best loosely inspired by Foucauldian themes, yet rarely employs Foucauldian theory as such. Thus, much more remains to be done in terms of more explicitly Foucault-based studies in the environmental humanities and, in particular, in ecocriticism.

although the existence of such a (*non-discursive material*) essence and its “real” effects and mutual interactions with the discursive are not denied. Hence, when this study refers to “nature,” I mean not an absolute or stable entity but a part of discourse that has fulfilled historically changing functions within the production of a power-knowledge of the human in relation to its non-human non-discursive material conditions.

To further clarify this point, it is helpful to turn in more detail to the meanings of “nature/the natural” in Foucault’s work. On the one hand, “nature” and its grammatical derivatives are, for Foucault, primarily objects of discourse analysis. Where the term “nature” occurs, it is generally read as part of those plays of power-knowledge that *produce* the human in its relation to the non-human and in its “historically true” designs; it is crucially involved in the “modes of objectification that transform human beings into subjects” (“Subject” 326). In this way, “nature/the natural” figures primarily as a *function* of discourse. Like the name of an author, the name ‘nature,’ too, is in Foucault the bearer of a “general function within discourse” and within games of power-knowledge (“Author” 113). The idea is, perhaps, most clearly visible in Foucault’s genealogical work on sexuality.<sup>52</sup> When demonstrating, for instance, how new, modern categories such as the “homosexual” or the “pervert” were effectively installed through discursive formations of the nineteenth century that involved ideas of the “(un-)natural,” sexuality is unveiled as “historical construct” that “must not be thought of as a kind of natural given” (*Will* 105; cf. also Dreyfus/Rabinow 126-142). That is, (sexual) “nature” is revealed not as something essential that could ultimately be “freed,” but instead – and this is generally true for the subjectivities Foucault traces – as an immanent functional element of discourse itself, which can be analyzed genealogically. By revealing the *name* “nature” as interwoven within the construction of subjectivities through power-knowledge, Foucault’s analytics liberates itself from assuming the existence of a “natural loadstone [that] pulls subjects towards a necessary pattern of behavior” (Alberts 559). “Nature” becomes readable as part of the process Ian Hacking, in his Foucauldian argument on nineteenth-century statistics, calls “making up people” (*Making* 222). It becomes a central element of modern techniques of normalization and of the production of subjects that involve

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<sup>52</sup> Foucault’s historical analysis of sexuality, officially begun with *The Will to Knowledge* (1976), took quite another shape than originally envisioned. Instead of the planned publication of volumes two through six of a *History of Sexuality*, there followed an eight-year silence (in terms of book publications within this project) before the simultaneous appearance of volumes two (*The Use of Pleasures* (1984)) and three (*The Care of the Self* (1984)), which reflect a general shift in Foucault’s thought by that time. His genealogical project on sexuality, however, is also presented in interviews and lectures of the 1970s.

exactly not “a process of uncovering a pre-existing nature,” even if they may draw their legitimation in their respective historical contexts precisely from claiming this (Levy 30). In this sense, Foucauldian “nature” is nonessential, a strategic function of discourse that must be analyzed in its entanglements within power-knowledge, where it helps create the ‘fissures’ that form, divide, or, to use environmental philosopher Val Plumwood’s term, “hyper-separate” the human in its relation to the non-human.

On the other hand, this does not mean, as I have pointed out above, that a Foucauldian perspective is denying the existence of a non-discursive material dimension including what we would commonly call “nature.” There is neither a denial of the “real” existence and epistemologically significant forces of the non-discursive materiality of *human* bodies, whether it is with regard to sexual, mental, or other “natural” phenomena, nor a repudiation of the conditioning effects and shaping powers of the *non-human* non-discursive material world more generally. That a Foucauldian framework chronicles “not only the aggregate of rocks, trees, or rivers, or any interaction between them [...] [but] also the various ways in which humans have come to perceive and interpret those ‘rocks,’ ‘trees’ and ‘rivers,’ and their ‘interactions’” does not imply that “rocks, trees, or rivers” as such are deemed negligible as parts of a non-discursive materiality (Darier, “Environmental Studies” 157). However, even though the presence and potential effects of the non-human non-discursive material conditions are therefore acknowledged from a Foucauldian perspective, Foucault’s own emphasis no doubt lies on the negotiation of the non-discursive material dimensions *within* power-knowledge, so that Alberts has a point when suggesting that “the most powerful and lasting influence of Foucault on questions of nature might simply be his ability to raise important skeptical doubts about the validity of positing nature as an unquestionable foundation or given for the production of knowledge” (545). In this sense, Foucault’s analytics does not utilize, but nonetheless holds the potential to provide a skeptical framework for ecocriticism that can be particularly useful because it enables both a critical questioning of how “nature” as discourse was mobilized in producing categories of subjecthood, and an investigation of the interdependencies between the discursive and the non-human non-discursive material conditions in the manufacturing of power-knowledge.

In a way, Foucault himself, even though by no means an “environmental thinker,” may then be reread as providing a basis for investigating environmental knowledge through many of his projects. A passage that most radically suggests the potential of reassessing Foucault in this way can be seen, for example, in those famous last words of *The Order of Things* that

purport that one could “certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (422). Foucault’s provocative claim that “man is an invention of recent date” (422) implies that “the human” that lies at the heart of this and many of his other studies is essentially a product of modern power-knowledges – a thought that touches upon the very core of an analytics of environmental knowledge that examines the negotiation and constitution of the human in relation to its non-human non-discursive materialities. Reading environmental knowledge through but also *in* Foucault could therefore be seen as continuing Foucault’s own practice of rereading his previous thought.<sup>53</sup> For even though rarely explicitly focusing on environmental issues or on “nature” in the way ecocritics commonly do, much of Foucault’s work can retrospectively be understood as tracing precisely those ruptures in modern history that produced the hyper-separated modern designs of “the human” that today’s ecocriticism is up against and that it, in a sense, seeks to “erase.” In other words, in closely reconsidering Foucault, ecocritics might find that their own shift of emphasis enables a much wider, more productive use of Foucauldian thought than a more traditional reception of Foucault as constructivist has generally suggested.

Understood in the proposed way, analyzing environmental knowledge on a Foucauldian basis may therefore be one form of a “weak constructionism” Ursula Heise calls for when she suggests employing ecocritical perspectives that “analyze cultural constructions of nature with a view towards the constraints that the real environment poses on them” (“Hitchhiker’s Guide” 512). Working with a framework of environmental knowledge implies focusing on both the “cultural construction of nature” *and* on the “reality” of a non-human non-discursive materiality. On the one hand, we have to take a step back and analyze “nature” not as the stable essence as which it has often been mobilized throughout history, but as a historically changing, functionalized signifier.<sup>54</sup> Foucauldian environmental knowledge offers the

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<sup>53</sup> Foucault himself not only accepted but in fact embraced retrospectively endowing his own works and terms with new meaning; he openly claimed his purpose to be that “each new work profoundly changes the terms of thinking which I had reached with the previous work. In this sense, I consider myself more an ‘experimenter’ than a theorist [...]. When I write, I do it above all to change myself and not think the same thing as before” (*Remarks on Marx* 27). Thus, if taking Foucault’s texts – despite the various characteristic shifts and identifiable phases – as retrospective “attempt[s] to establish unity” (Han 1), it seems reasonable to rethink Foucault as potentially writing histories of “environmental knowledge.”

<sup>54</sup> In this respect, the analysis of environmental knowledge is related to a “nature-scepticism” characteristic of a number of ecocritical and environmental philosophical studies of the last decades that have questioned the viability of the term “nature” as such, therein often criticizing bio- or ecocentric concepts. See, for instance, Evernden (1992); Goin (1996); Luke (1997); D. Phillips (2003); Demos (2013); or Latour’s influential call to abandon the idea of an autonomous “nature” (*Politics of Nature*). One of the most radical recent examples in this respect is Morton’s work (2009; 2012; 2013), which is driven by the notion that “the very idea of ‘nature’ [...] will have to wither away in an ‘ecological’ state of human society” (*Ecology* 1).

methodological means to analyze this signifier in its uses, implications, and multiple effects within the production of power-knowledge. On the other hand, analyzing environmental knowledge also means tracing the involvement of the non-human non-discursive material as a shaping force within the manufacturing of power-knowledge. The analysis therefore does not leave out what Hayles calls the “unmediated flux” (cf. “Common Ground” 53-54; “Simulations”), or Morton conceptualizes as “the mesh” of interconnection that is “the ecological thought” (*Ecological Thought* 1), but critically addresses the complex networks unfolding between the signifier “nature” and the non-human non-discursive material within the manufacturing of a power-knowledge that creates the modern human. In this way, the concept of environmental knowledge bridges poststructuralist and ecocritical theory by providing the basis for a skeptical ecocritical project that recognizes the necessity of combining an investigation of “the connections between the making and evolution of nature and the making and evolution of the discourses and practices through which nature is historically produced and known” (Escobar 46). Within such a project, Foucault, after all one of the most important critics of our modern “grand narratives of liberation” that first “created the conditions for ecological ‘crises,’” should not be missing, as his thought, adapted through the concept of environmental knowledge, offers productive “weak constructivist” analytical means, and may be one “promising theoretical ground from which to pursue the analysis of environmental literature in its relation to cultural and rhetorical traditions, on the one hand, and social as well as scientific realities, on the other” (Darier, “Foucault” 19-20; Heise, “Hitchhiker’s Guide” 512).

This said, there are three major themes of Foucauldian thought that are particularly productive for ecocriticism and, especially, for an ecocritical analysis of African American literature, namely vision, space, and biopolitics. While all these themes would appear to be generally relevant for ecocritics, I chose them specifically because my readings of the primary material treated in this study have suggested that African American literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth century articulates its environmental knowledge predominantly through the dimensions of the visual, the spatial, and the biopolitical. In the following, I will briefly introduce the three themes in terms of their general usefulness for an

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While a Foucault-inspired genealogy of environmental knowledge likewise questions nature as an objectively verifiable essence, “nature” must nonetheless remain central to this mode of ecocritical analysis as the discursive entity – the “name” – it seeks to deconstruct and investigate in its relations to non-human non-discursive materialities.

analysis of environmental knowledge; more specific introductions to particular visual, spatial, and biopolitical Foucauldian concepts will follow later on, in the thematic chapters where they are used.

Vision plays a prominent role in many of Foucault's works, especially in connection with modern techniques of power. The central concept in this respect is an "indefinitely generalizable mechanism of 'panopticism'" outlined primarily in *Discipline and Punish* (216, cf. 195-228),<sup>55</sup> where Foucault explains panopticism by turning to spatial arrangements emerging due to historic events (e.g. the breakout of the plague, cf. 195-199), architectural designs (e.g. the school of "Mettray" or military camps (293,171)), and, of course, panopticism's namesake, Jeremy Bentham's 1791 blueprint for a new prison. In his interpretation of the latter, Foucault suggests that Bentham's panopticon epitomizes the disciplinary principle that "space tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed" (143). With its central tower and a peripheral ring containing separated cells for the delinquents (cf. 200-204), Bentham's model enables a guard to "observe from the tower [...] the many small captive shadows in the cells" in accordance with the principle that "power should be visible but unverifiable" (200, 201). Since prisoners in their cells are not aware whether they are actually being watched, the panoptic mode of power exemplifies a "most economical form of surveillance" that ultimately incites "self-surveillance" (Danaher 76). Panoptic power works without exhaustive rituals and expresses the characteristic decentralization and de-personalization of modern power, as the gaze is not attached to a particular 'powerful' person: "Any individual [...] can operate the machine" (202). Hence, the major effect of panopticism is both the automation and decentralisation of power; Bentham's device produces "homogeneous effects of power" through stones and patterns of visibility (202).

If this reading of the panopticon as an emblem of a modern disciplinary regime, which has inspired a variety of studies,<sup>56</sup> demonstrates a crucial link between seeing and power,

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<sup>55</sup> Other texts where Foucault focuses on panopticism are his lecture series of 1973/74 (*Psychiatric Power*, esp. 73-87) and 1977/78 (*Security*). However, vision was central to Foucault's thought in other contexts and phases as well: *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), for instance, focused extensively on how a medical gaze was reorganized in conjunction with new knowledge of the human body, and *The Order of Things* (1966) famously opened with an interpretation of visual relations in Velazquez *Las Meninas*.

<sup>56</sup> Although the panopticon has figured as "something intellectuals care passionately about" even before Foucault's interpretation (P. Smith 112; cf. e.g. Himmelfarb (1968); Zuboff (1988)), his reading of Bentham's model has clearly been an inspiration for studies such as Semple's (1993); Božovič's (1995); Kleinberg-Levin's (1997); and P. Smith's (2008). Moreover, major studies on vision like those by Crary (1990) or Shapiro (2003), as well as what is known today as the interdisciplinary field of "surveillance studies" (cf. Lyon (2007)), are indebted in many ways to Foucault's observations on panopticism.

vision must be understood somewhat more broadly in the context of environmental knowledge. In the panopticon, we find relations between vision and power in their most excessive forms; the model puts the panoptic mechanism, so to speak, under the microscope. However, the fact that the panopticon as such remained purely theoretical<sup>57</sup> hints at the ways in which vision most often played out its connection to power in much more subversive forms, which also means that its analysis must consider phenomena more broadly dispersed and hidden within epistemic processes. Hence, in this study, what I will refer to as the dimension of “the visual,” will be traced in both its connection with discourses on “nature,” and in the broader, dominant “visual regimes” of the period in question. On the one hand, “the visual” must be examined in its involvement in aesthetic modes based on particular ideas of “nature,” such as the pastoral, the picturesque, or the sublime. These modes will be understood as expressions of both relations between the human and its non-human non-discursive material conditions and of power relations and “visual regimes” like, for instance, panopticism. On the other hand, the more general ways of looking through socially constructed frameworks, e.g. the visual relations that marked the peculiar institution, working arrangements, or (pseudo-)scientific racism, will be understood as not only revealing relationships of power but also as potentially expressing environmental knowledge. The ways in which vision and visibility are arranged, in which the eye aims to grasp the world through historically changing lenses, can be read as connected to the production of environmental knowledge. The general question with respect to the dimension of “the visual” is how the arrangements of (consciously or unconsciously) adopted visual regimes, models, or concepts interact with the negotiation and constitution of a knowledge of the human in its relation to its non-human material conditions.

Space, too, is a central theme in Foucault, after all one of the thinkers commonly associated with the “spatial turn.” Foucault’s most prominent and influential spatial concept is the idea of “heterotopia,”<sup>58</sup> i.e. of “other spaces” or “real utopias” that fulfil specific

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<sup>57</sup> The panopticon was never built, although the architecture of several reformatory penitentiaries of the nineteenth century, e.g. in Pentonville (Great Britain), Petite Roquette (France), or Philadelphia (United States), was inspired by Bentham’s model. Thus, the model is to be understood “not as the key historical mechanism by which power has gained its place in our lives, but as an ideal symbol of the way in which it operates” (Magill 64). Cf. also Foucault, *Psychiatric Power* 73; also Ruoff 159.

<sup>58</sup> This is not to suggest that “heterotopia” is the only spatial concept in Foucault; space is also central with respect to Foucault’s archaeological thought (e.g. in the famous interpretation of Borges Chinese encyclopedia in *The Order of Things*), disciplinary power and panopticism (cf. e.g. “Space, Knowledge, and Power”), or in his early readings of modern literature. However, his notion of “heterotopia,” as it appeared for the first time in a 1967 radio talk, has certainly been Foucault’s most influential spatial idea, and has been employed in a variety of fields including sociology, history, geography, and literary and cultural

functions with respect to all other spaces (“Other Spaces” 232). While Foucault’s “heterotopology” holds some concrete advice as to how heterotopias might be further categorized and investigated<sup>59</sup> it is the general openness of the concept that has vouched for its ongoing popularity and that makes the “heterotopia” productive for environmental thought as well.<sup>60</sup> For although, as Darier notes, “the ‘space’ that Foucault is talking about is not the unproblematic physical and material environment of the environmentalists, but the various problematizations of ‘space’” (25), it is precisely this “problematizing” quality that makes it so fruitful to think about space in Foucauldian terms. By opening up to an idea of space as always also “problematized,” i.e. functional, “the spatial” can be read as another dimension of environmental knowledge that, on the one hand, deconstructs the normalizing effects in conceptualizing space as “natural,” and, on the other hand, does not omit the materiality of space. This means, of course, that space ultimately cannot be thought as “pristine” with Foucault, since from the moment we think or perceive space, it becomes part of discourse; Foucauldian space is never free from power relations – especially if it is thought of as “natural” – but becomes strategized within power-knowledge. However, the productive potential of using an idea of “problematized” space as part of a weak constructionism is that it reveals interconnections between how we perceive, read and construct certain spaces and the underlying power relations involved in this process. Through a Foucauldian concept of space, we can trace the involvement of the materiality of space in the manufacturing of power-knowledge, i.e. detect interrelations between the discursive and the non-discursive. The ways in which we think space are in this sense potentially ciphers of environmental knowledge, and reading “the spatial” in a Foucauldian way as involving a multiplicity of (social, linguistic, material) functions helps detect these ciphers. The central question that arises with regard to “the spatial” as a dimension of environmental knowledge is then how (material) spaces are “wrapped” into concepts or frames of representation from different perspectives and how they are thereby involved in producing a power-knowledge of the human in relation to its non-human non-discursive material conditions.

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studies. Cf. e.g. Topinka; Crampton 385-388; or the scholarly bibliography found on sociologist Peter Johnson’s website of the journal *Heterotopia Studies* (<<http://www.heterotopiastudies.com/bibliography/>>).

<sup>59</sup> Foucault makes, for instance, a distinction between “compensation heterotopias” and “crisis heterotopias,” and outlines his thoughts against what he calls the six general principles of a “heterotopology” (cf. 232-236).

<sup>60</sup> Darier, too, has identified space as a Foucauldian “concept which might also be extremely relevant to an environmental critique” and suggests that the idea of heterotopia in particular may be a way to “break in our current ‘physical’ understanding(s) of space” (“Foucault” 23, 25). Some environmentally interested contributions (Quigley; Heyd) that employ the concept in their analyses support this claim.

Biopolitics is that theme of Foucault's work that has been most appealing to environmentally oriented scholarship so far.<sup>61</sup> During his genealogical phase, Foucault extensively discussed biopolitics and biopower in lectures (*Society; Security; Birth of Biopolitics*), articles and interviews (e.g. "Body/Power"), and, most prominently, in the final chapter of *The Will to Knowledge*. In the latter, we find the clearest general definition of the notion of "biopower" when Foucault describes the historical moment of its emergence in the eighteenth century as "nothing less than the entry of life into history, that is, the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power, into the sphere of political techniques" (141-2). After millennia of viewing man as "a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence," it is, according to Foucault's historical argument, around the turn from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century that we can locate the formation of a mode of power that primarily aimed "to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order" (143, 138). Here, the power of the sovereign and his "ancient right to *take* life and *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life and *disallow* it to the point of death" (138; emphasis in original); an old power of the *Ancien regime* was gradually abandoned in favor of a new mode of biopower that productively managed life through an "administration of bodies" (27).

According to Foucault, biopower and its aims, methods, and instruments "evolved in two basic forms" (*Will* 139). Firstly, its emergence worked in conjunction with modern disciplinary techniques, since "a power whose task is to take charge of life needs continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms [...] [and] has to qualify, measure, appraise and hierarchize" (144). This was precisely what the general formulae of discipline, its methods of (panoptic) surveillance, normalization and examination, had to offer.<sup>62</sup> Secondly, the development of biopower was linked to the "emergence of 'population' as an economic and

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<sup>61</sup> One reason of this is probably that Foucault at times explicitly focuses on non-human environments when he talks about biopolitics. Alberts suggests that "the paradigm of biopower that Foucault developed to explain the politicized character of human life in modern political rationality can be expanded and elaborated to include the ways in which living things in general, wild and domesticated, form the necessary infrastructural supports of modern, secure, normalized life" (561); Darier regards biopolitics as one of the concepts "emerging from the genealogical period which can be particularly helpful for an environmental critique" ("Foucault" 21).

<sup>62</sup> The disciplines, as "techniques for the ordering of human multiplicities," provided "general formulas [that] could be operated in the most diverse political regimes, apparatuses, or institutions," and that became crucial to the emergence of biopower (*Discipline* 218, 221). On disciplinary techniques, which Foucault became interested in from the mid-1970s on, see *Discipline and Punish* and the lecture series *The Punitive Society; Psychiatric Power*; and *Abnormal*.

political problem” and to the necessity of its regulation (25).<sup>63</sup> The new power attended, for the first time, to “man-as-living-being; [...] to man-as-species” (*Society* 242), and it was primarily the nation state that took on the responsibility of managing the population as a living resource. Thus, the basic methods of biopower can be seen as organized in a two-fold way along the double meaning of the term “body.” On the one hand, strategies of biopower act on the bodies of individuals, employing the instruments of discipline on a micro-level; on the other hand, biopower has as its main objective the production and management of the larger “body of society, which becomes the new principle” (Foucault, “Body/Knowledge” 55). Modern biopolitics therefore works in simultaneously individualizing and totalizing ways, as it seeks to govern “biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity” (*Will* 139). In this sense, strategies of (re-)producing biopolitical subjects may involve the broadest range of measures – they may entail anything deemed necessary to fulfil the task of administering and fostering human life, of managing the bodies of both individuals and, through this, of entire populations.

It should therefore be clear that Foucault’s influential notion of biopolitics and biopower is central to tracing knowledge-formations that negotiate and constitute the human in relation to its non-human non-discursive material conditions, since the dimension of “the biopolitical” most directly involves defining what a *human* life that has to be administered, managed and fostered, actually is. Thus, when Giorgio Agamben, one of the scholars who further developed Foucault’s biopolitics, asks “What is man, if he is always the place – and, at the same time, the result – of ceaseless divisions and caesurae?” and urges us “to work on these divisions, to ask in what way – within man – has man been separated from non-man,” he points to the core of biopolitics that an analysis of environmental knowledge must be after (Agamben, *Open* 16). One must examine closely the ways in which conceptions of “the human” have been produced by forms of power-knowledge that involved dividing the human from the non-human. Especially in the context of modernity, “the biopolitical” and its central question of where we find caesuras that produced “the human,” may therefore be seen as the most revealing of the three dimensions of environmental knowledge. To sum up, for the purposes of this study, “environmental knowledge” will thus generally denote such

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<sup>63</sup> On biopower, which “does not simply do away with the disciplinary techniques, because it exists at a different level, on a different scale,” and on the entanglements between the two poles of these “techniques” and the new idea of a “governable population,” see, apart from *The Will to Knowledge*, especially the lecture series *Society Must Be Defended; Security, Territory, Population; Birth of Biopolitics*; and “Two Lectures.”

*formations of power-knowledge that negotiate and construct the human in relation to its non-human non-discursive material conditions, and that can be analyzed through dimensions such as the visual, spatial, and biopolitical.*

### African American Environmental Knowledge

Based on this definition, the aim of this study is to genealogically excavate an *African American* environmental knowledge by tracing its articulation and transformation in the black literary tradition through the dimensions of the visual, the spatial, and the biopolitical. Before turning to this literary tradition, however, three premises deriving from the above definition of environmental knowledge need to be clarified, which concern: first, the universality of environmental knowledge as a general category; second, the link, especially in the period studied, between environmental knowledge and race; and, third, the resulting discursive position from which an African American environmental knowledge was articulated.

As should be clear from the above, a first general premise is that environmental knowledge is not something limited to any one human (cultural, social or ethnic) group, but something that, in the broadest sense, marks human life. Note that this means that environmental knowledge does not necessarily have to be envisioned as expressed through the visual, the spatial, and the biopolitical – dimensions that I have, after all, chosen in part due to the material analyzed. Nor is it to imply, therefore, that environmental knowledge must inevitably be driven by articulating where human life *begins or ends*, as one might also imagine an environmental knowledge articulating quite the opposite – an *open(-ended)ness* instead of a clear demarcation – in less anthropocentric forms. Yet, in a basic sense, there is no imaginable human life that does not define itself in some way or another within its non-human non-discursive material conditions; that does not in some way seek to articulate its place in the world through environmental knowledge in order to create meanings of its existence. Living, for man, is always an interaction through the category of knowledge, no matter whether this leads into the hyper-separating biopolitical divisions that have come to mark Western modernity or into other forms of relating to non-human non-discursive materialities. In this broad sense, the interactions of man as an “epistemic animal” with its materiality always involve some form of environmental knowledge.

For the analysis of this study, assuming this universality means that environmental knowledge will be traced across various – and not only African American – discursive formations. Even though the primary aim is to detect African American environmental knowledge in the black literary tradition, environmental knowledge as such will not be treated as an inherent or unique feature of African American literature and culture. Rather, it will be seen as articulated throughout a variety of discursive formations of the period studied, ranging from those of scientific racism, evolutionary thought, historiography or politics to those more obviously crucial ones of nineteenth-century literary culture and (nature) aesthetics. The assumed universality of the notion of environmental knowledge thus makes it possible to trace the *conditions* of the formation and transformation of an African American environmental knowledge in its interaction with other forms of environmental knowledge.

A second important premise is the idea that, especially for the period under consideration, such other forms of environmental knowledge were often closely connected with ideas of race. This link becomes most apparent when viewed through the lens of the biopolitical. In Foucault, who has also been read as a theorist of racism by now,<sup>64</sup> we are given an idea of how race was intertwined with biopolitics in the nineteenth century. In *Society Must Be Defended*, for instance, Foucault claims that while racism was “certainly not [...] invented” at this time, it is “at this moment that racism is inscribed as the basic mechanism of power, as it is exercised in modern States” (254). Investigating what this (state-)racism “in fact is,” Foucault arrives at a definition that is revealing also with respect to the convergence of environmental knowledge and race:

It [state racism] is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die. The appearance within the biological continuum of the human race of races, the distinction among races, the hierarchy of races, the fact that certain races are described as good and that others, in contrast, are described as inferior; all this is a way of fragmenting the field of the biological that power controls. (254-255)

Foucault goes on to suggest that racism is, “in short, a way of establishing a biological-type caesura within a population that appears to be a biological domain” (255). He claims its two

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<sup>64</sup> For a long time, race has not been recognized as a major Foucauldian theme. Not many biographies of the 1980s and 1990s even index the subject “race” and, until the publication of Stoler’s *Race and the Education of Desire* (1995), there were no major studies of race in Foucault’s *oeuvre*, which may in part be due to the fact that Foucault looked at a particular form of “state racism.” However, this long-term and somewhat surprising “silence of his interlocutors” has considerably changed by now, as scholars have come to recognize that “race is not a subject marginal to Foucault’s work” but is, in fact, centrally involved in works such as *Will to Knowledge* or in the lecture series of 1975/76 (Stoler 21, viii). See for treatments of race in Foucault e.g. Stoler (1995); Macey (2008); the contributions in the special issue “Foucault and Race” in *Foucault Studies* (2011); Allen (2013); and Gougelet/Feder (2013).

primary effects to be both the creation of “caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower” and the establishment of a kind of “relationship of war” characterized by the principle that “[t]he very fact that you let more die will allow you to live more” (255). Moreover, he explicates – thereby hinting at core concerns of environmental justice today – that by acting out a biological-type caesura through “killing,” we “obviously do not mean simply murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder; the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on” (256).

The establishment of what Foucault reads at this point as *racializing* “biological-type caesuras” often intersected with biopolitics more generally, with what Agamben calls the *biopolitical* “divisions and caesurae” that separated the human from the non-human throughout Western modernity (*Open* 16). It is precisely here that we may locate the crucial link between environmental knowledge and race. For the timeframe considered in this study, biopolitical caesuras did not simply create breaks between the human and the non-human but thereby often simultaneously produced racializing breaks *within* human populations. Nineteenth-century America saw a whole range of such biopolitical caesuras that at the same time created racial difference. Whether based on dichotomies or on trajectories that marked what was (non-)human, a variety of models emerged in discursive formations that concurrently articulated environmental knowledge and constructed racial difference. Often, the (de-)humanizing and racially normalizing power-knowledge conveyed in such formations expressed its caesuras through notions of “nature.” What was, for example, acceptable as “natural” could also be purported as “racially” acceptable; or, in a different logic, what was established as “closer to nature” – as opposed to a hegemonic Western notion of “culture” – could be postulated as racially unacceptable or inferior, because it was seen as not belonging to the realm of the human on the basis of a “naturalized” concept of culture. One crucial task in tracing an African American environmental knowledge in its conditions of emergence is therefore charting precisely such moments where forms of environmental knowledge converged with a knowledge of race, i.e. the points where both met in processes of “fragmenting the field of the biological that power controls” (Foucault, *Society* 255).

One crucial effect of this simultaneously (de-)humanizing and racially normalizing convergence of environmental knowledge with race was – and here lies a third premise – that it produced a particular discursive position for an African American voice that affected the articulation of African American environmental knowledge in literature. This is neither to

suggest that this discursive position was solely shaped by this constellation nor that African American literature was simply passively “responding” to discursive formations that placed its voice in this position. However, working with the prime objective of tracing a *discursive* position that also formed in response to a convergence of environmental and racial knowledge allows for an examination of one major factor with respect to how African American literature came to articulate environmental knowledge. There are two other important implications: On the one hand, it means that “race” will be treated, in accordance with the bulk of existing scholarship on the subject today, as a social construction that, nonetheless, has very real effects.<sup>65</sup> “Races” are, after all, as Anthony Appiah puts it, “like witches: however unreal witches are, *belief* in witches, like belief in races, has had – and in many communities continues to have – profound consequences for human social life” (Appiah, “Race” 277, emphasis in original). What this study investigates is one specific aspect of the production of this belief; the question is how the “belief race” was produced as a “true belief” in correspondence with forms of environmental knowledge, and how this (co-)created the racialized discursive position of African American writing that influenced its production of environmental knowledge.

On the other hand, tracing African American environmental knowledge in terms of a particular discursive position of an African American voice means that such knowledge must not be misread as what has sometimes been called an “indigenous” or “local” knowledge, i.e. forms of knowledge that developed in response to specific regions or that were developed by a particular people.<sup>66</sup> African American environmental knowledge did develop to a significant extent in response to specific places or locales in the New World – especially, of course, in the

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<sup>65</sup> Currently, race is generally treated as a social or cultural construction – a “real fiction” – of some form, since there is a “fairly widespread consensus in the sciences of biology and anthropology that the word ‘race,’ at least as it is used in most unscientific discussions, refers to nothing that science should recognize as real” (Appiah, “Race” 277). See also, for instance, Appiah, *House* 28-46; Omi/Winant, who use an anti-essentialist concept of “racial formation”; or Gates, who reads race and “blackness” in his works as “produced in the text only through a complex process of signification,” i.e. “as a function of its signifiers” (*Monkey* 237).

<sup>66</sup> “Indigenous knowledge,” sometimes also called “traditional ecological knowledge,” is often contrasted with scientific knowledge and can be defined as “knowledge held by indigenous people, where ‘indigenous’ stands for aboriginal, native or autochthonous, though; that is, it is used to make reference to the knowledge of the people who comprise the descendants of the original inhabitants of a land” (Heyd, “Indigenous” 63). On “indigenous knowledge” see e.g. the contributions in Williams/Baines (1993); and in Inglis (1993); also Heyd (1995); and Matowanyika et al. (1995). Although some have used the term “environmental knowledge” as a synonym for “indigenous knowledge” (e.g. Slaymaker, “Natural”; Ybarra), it should be clear at this point that a Foucauldian concept of “African American environmental knowledge” as I use it in this study diverges from such a definition in various ways. First, “indigenous/environmental knowledge” would be inadequate to describe the knowledge of an all but indigenous, deported African American people; second, it would be too narrow as a “local” knowledge; thirdly, contrasting “indigenous/environmental knowledge” with “scientific knowledge” is incompatible with my broader idea of a transversal Foucauldian “environmental knowledge.”

context of the American South. However, to speak in this respect of an “indigenous” knowledge would be outright cynical for a forcibly displaced, enslaved, ethnically and culturally diverse group. Moreover, referring to African American environmental knowledge as a “local” knowledge would falsely imply a knowledge largely separated and independent from broader contexts, when, in fact, one main point of tracing African American environmental knowledge is to demonstrate how it emerged as part of larger epistemological contexts and processes. To examine African American environmental knowledge means to trace such knowledge as part of complex discursive and non-discursive interactions, exchanges and struggles that saw nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American writers in a particular position from which they responded to both racially infused Western forms of environmental knowledge and a developing African American literary tradition of environmental knowledge.

This last thought points to another general organizational principle of this study. An African American environmental knowledge can also be explicated in terms of Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s idea of “signifyin(g).” In texts such as “The Blackness of Blackness” (1983), *Figures in Black* (1987), and especially *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), Gates introduces signifying as a theory of African American literary criticism. Combining structuralist and poststructuralist theory with an African (American) vernacular tradition, Gates’s theory is based on the idea that a rhetorical tradition, which can be traced back to sub-Saharan and Western African cultures and figures such as the trickster-God Esu-Elegbara and his “Pan-African kinsman,” the Signifying Monkey, became an integral part of African American culture and literature (*Monkey* 21).<sup>67</sup> What was transmitted across the Atlantic, according to Gates, were characteristic forms of verbal play, i.e. a specific use of language that involved rhetorical tropes like “‘marking’, ‘loud-talking’, ‘specifying’, ‘testifying’, ‘calling out’ (of one’s name), ‘sounding’, ‘rapping’, and ‘playing the dozens’” (“Blackness” 286; see also *Monkey* 94). As a consequence, “signifyin(g)/Signification” – as opposed to Saussurean “signifying/signification” – emerged as something characteristic of African American culture.<sup>68</sup> What developed in essence was a continuing rearrangement of signifier and

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<sup>67</sup> By tracing back the linguistic “signifying” games to African folklore of the Yoruba and the Ashanti, e.g. to the tales of the Signifying Monkey, Anansi the Spider, or the myth of the trickster-God Esu-Elegbara, Gates’s theory involves what Feith calls a “diasporic critical myth” (59). While the former two are animal tricksters who manipulate more powerful animals through language, Gates reads the latter as the very embodiment of “the ambiguity of figurative language. [...] Esu is our metaphor for the uncertainties of explication, for the open-endedness of every literary text” (*Monkey* 21).

<sup>68</sup> Gates uses the (non-capitalized) term “signification” when he means a Western Saussurean notion, while (capitalized) “Signification” denotes a much more ambiguous African American trickster discourse (see *Monkey* 44-51). Similarly, the term “signifying” stands for a white tradition, whereas the bracketed “g” in

signified, a specific form of “saying one thing to mean something quite other” that had very practical purposes during black enslavement in the New World and thus became a means of “black survival in oppressive Western cultures” (“Jungle” 6; cf. also Robinson 368-373).

Crucially, according to Gates’s theory, this tradition of signifying, based on an “alternative Afro-American notion of the sign” in the black vernacular, became engrained as a core principle in the African American verbal, musical, and literary tradition (Lane 409). Convinced that “it is language, the black language of the black texts, that expresses the distinctive quality of our literary tradition” (*Figures* xxi), Gates asserts that, as essential characteristics of signifying,

[r]epetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use. I decided to analyze the nature and function of Signifyin(g) precisely because it is repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference. Whatever is black about black American literature is to be found in this identifiable black Signifyin(g) difference. (Gates, *Monkey* xxiv)

This implies more than just an explicit incorporation of vernacular rhetorical forms like marking, loud-talking or playing the dozens into African American “speakerly texts” (cf. *Monkey* xxv-xxvi). Rather, Gates envisions the technique of “repetition and revision” as a general organizing principle of an African American writing tradition at large, where black writers not only “seek to place their works in the ‘larger’ tradition of their genre, [...] [but] also revise tropes from substantive antecedent texts in the Afro-American canon” (*Monkey* 122). Accordingly, African American writers engaged in a specific form of intertextuality and *literarily* signified in two basic ways. First, by repeating and revising Western traditions (“genre”), and, second, by repeating and revising their black predecessors (“antecedent texts”). Thus, “Signification” is marked by a

double-voicedness; because it always entails formal revision and an intertextual relation, and because of Esu’s double-voiced representation in art, I find it an ideal metaphor for black literary criticism, for the formal manner in which texts seem concerned to address their antecedents. Repetition, with a signal difference, is fundamental to the nature of Signifyin(g). (Gates, *Monkey* 51)

In this sense, race and blackness are not simply a social but essentially a *linguistic* construction, since “[s]ignifyin(g) is a uniquely black rhetorical concept, entirely textual” (*Figures* 49). What emerges as the “blackness” of a text that literary critics of African

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“signifyin(g)” “connote[s] the fact that this word is, more often than not, spoken by black people without the final *g*” and therefore “stands as the trace of black difference in a remarkably sophisticated and fascinating (re)naming ritual graphically in evidence here” (46). In the course of this study, I will use the word “signifying” to refer to *African American* forms of “repetition and revision.”

American literature have to trace is “not an absolute or metaphysical condition” but “specific uses of literary language that are shared, repeated, critiqued, and revised” (*Monkey* 121). The distinct features of African American literature lie in its characteristic employment of language, as it relates to the discourses of both white and black predecessors.

Combining this idea with the concept of environmental knowledge, the aim of “Reading Green in Black” is to trace this characteristic use of language in the African American literary tradition with respect to its articulation of a knowledge of the human in relation to its non-human non-discursive material conditions. Therefore, I will not closely follow the same themes and tropes that Gates has identified, but adapt the general principles of signifying as endowing signifiers with new meaning and as intertextual “repetition and revision” more openly. The objective is thereby to examine, along the dimensions of environmental knowledge, a “greenness” within the “blackness” of the African American literary tradition. If, as Gates suggests, “[w]hatever is black about black American literature is to be found in this identifiable black Signifyin(g) difference,” then whatever is ‘green’ about this literature must also be traced through a “black Signifyin(g) difference” (*Monkey* xxiv). “Reading Green in Black” in this sense means identifying specifically those recurring themes and tropes that negotiate and constitute environmental knowledge by signifying on Western as well as African (American) traditions. That is, if Gates and others have identified Euro-American genres like the autobiography, the bildungsroman, or plantation fiction as appropriated and signified on by black writers, this study shows how African American writers also signified on Euro-American forms of environmental knowledge – for example by repeating and revising modes such as the pastoral, the picturesque, or the sublime – and on environmental knowledge of their black literary predecessors.

Hence, in addition to the central concept of environmental knowledge, a second organizing principle of this study lies in the basic distinction between a *foundational* signifying on Western traditions of environmental knowledge and a *transformational* signifying on African American environmental knowledge in signifying revisions internal to the black literary tradition. The two main parts of this study correspond to this distinction: Part one (3.1-3.3) broadly examines foundations of African American environmental knowledge in the antebellum period along the dimensions of the visual, spatial, and biopolitical. Part two (4.1-4.5) focuses on internal “repetition and revision,” i.e. on transformations of foundational African American environmental knowledge within the black literary tradition from Reconstruction to the early twentieth century.

Foundations:

Antebellum African American Environmental Knowledge

### 3.1

## Resisting (through) the Eye: The Slave's Narrative, the Black Observer, and the African American Pastoral

The reader “will see here portrayed in the language of truth, by an eye witness and a slave, the sufferings, the hardships, and the evils which are inflicted upon the millions of human beings, in the name of the law of the land and of the Constitution of the United States.”

(Prospectus of Charles Ball's *Slavery in the United States*, qtd. Starling 107)

“Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition. I have often, in the deep stillness of a summer's Sabbath, stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay, and traced, with saddened heart and tearful eye, the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean. The sight of these always affected me powerfully.”

(Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life* 46)

Theocritus's “Idyll 11,” one of the foundational texts of the pastoral tradition, presents the lovelorn figure of Polyphemus the Cyclops, mourning and starving in mad love for Galatea the sea-nymph. Framed by Theocritus's lyrical I addressing the doctor-poet Nicias, Polyphemus's monologue in Sicily, the setting of the *Idylls*, expresses his pain at being rejected by his beloved as well as the assumed reasons of this rejection:

I fell in love with you, my sweet, when first you came  
With my mother to gather flowers of hyacinth  
On the mountain, and I was your guide. From the day  
I set eyes on you up to this moment, I've loved you  
Without a break; but you care nothing, nothing at all.  
I know, my beautiful girl, why you run from me:  
A shaggy brow spreads right across my face  
From ear to ear in one unbroken line. Below is a  
Single eye, and above my lip is set a broad flat nose. (lines 25-33)

As a whole, “Idyll 11” carries the earmarks of prototypical pastoral.<sup>69</sup> It deals in an

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<sup>69</sup> See for established general definitions of the pastoral e.g. Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 33-58; Gifford, who distinguishes three uses of the term and gives a list of major characteristics (cf. *Pastoral* 33, 1-12; “Pastoral”); or Sales, who identifies “five Rs: refuge, reflection, rescue, requiem and reconstruction” as

idealizing manner with a one-eyed herdsman who “pasture[s] a thousand beasts” (line 37), and is driven by a nostalgic longing, as it involves Theocritus’s looking back onto his childhood in Sicily. Furthermore, it implies a retreat-and-return pattern through the poet’s and doctor-poet’s framing comments that serve to contrast an urban (i.e. Alexandrian) audience with Polyphemus, who epitomizes the rustic way of life of a Sicilian shepherd-bard who plays the “pipe better than any Cyclops here” (line 38). More than that, however, the quoted passage hints at yet another – largely ignored<sup>70</sup> – aspect of the pastoral. Rather than merely being an emblem of a somewhat comical form of pastoral through the idea of a Cyclops who wishes “to learn to swim” to live with a sea-nymph (line 60),<sup>71</sup> Theocritus’s text paradigmatically expresses a vital link between the pastoral and the visual.

The scene exposes such a connection on multiple levels. On the one hand, the figures of Theocritus and Nicias allow an external gaze on the Cyclops-shepherd in his rustic setting, as they become mediators of an urban audience that is thus enabled to access and visualize both the monologue-scene and its frame. On the other hand, “Idyll 11” problematizes vision in its protagonist Polyphemus himself; through the Cyclops, the scene emphasizes and paradigmatically shifts its focus to vision as such, symbolized by the characteristic “single eye.” Vision, through this figure, becomes a complex theme in two ways. Firstly, as Polyphemus’s literal one-sightedness epitomizes the subjectivities, idiosyncrasies and potential deficiencies involved in pastoral looking; secondly, as the one eye in itself is not

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typical of the pastoral (15). For studies that specifically focus on the ancient tradition, cf. e.g. Halperin; Segal; and Haber 12-52; on Theocritus in particular see T. Hubbard; and Rosenmeyer.

<sup>70</sup> In the vast critical literature on pastoralism we may find all kinds of descriptive categories (e.g. Empson’s distinction between proletarian/covert pastoral (1935), or Leo Marx’s between sentimental/complex pastoral (1964)); new labels such as anti-pastoral, post-pastoral (Gifford *Pastoral* 116-145, 146-174; “Pastoral” 54-61), meta-pastoral (Haber), or postmodern pastoral (Legler (2003)); readings of the potentially subversive politics of the pastoral (esp. in the Marxist critiques by Empson and Williams; also in Alpers and A. Patterson; in a U.S. context in Marx “Pastoralism”); or debates over the future of the pastoral, as some have pronounced the pastoral (politically) dead (e.g. Barrell and Bull (1974); Williams (1975)) while others see the potential for reinventing the pastoral (e.g. Marx, “Pastoralism”; Buell, “American Pastoral Ideology”; Newman and Walls, “Cosmopolitics”; Gifford, “Pastoral” 55-61). Yet, there appears to be an omission from a literary critical perspective with respect to the link between the pastoral and the visual. Although critics often stress a general “perspectivalism” in their interpretations of the pastoral, we rarely find readings that literally focus on vision, let alone major studies of the correlation between the pastoral and the visual. A recent exception may be found in Finseth, who, albeit briefly, remarks on “the highly visual nature of pastoral experience and pastoral literary strategy,” and regards the visual as ensuring the possibility of transcendence in pastoral frames: “the viscosity of pastoral remains always ambiguous or divided, speaking of the longing of the ‘lonely species’ to find communion with nature while reaffirming the dissevering, objectivizing power of vision” (*Shades* 219; 221).

<sup>71</sup> Most commentators and critics have emphasized irony and humor as particular qualities of “Idyll 11,” cf. e.g. Verity/Hunter xii; 100; Fantuzzi/Hunter 170-190; or Gifford “Afterword” 249. Others have read the figure of Polyphemus, who also appears in “Idyll 6,” with a more pitiful note, e.g. Hopkinson, who sees “a quintessentially naïve and rustic character” (149); or Griffin, who evaluates the Theocritan Cyclops as little more than “pathetic and love-lorn” (191).

only looking but is also being looked at. The single eye is considered, by the Cyclops himself and an implied audience, as a marker of bodily distortion; the “shaggy brow spread[ing],” in conjunction with the “lip set [on] a broad flat nose,” are intimately connected not only with Polyphemus’s own way of seeing, but also with his visually produced position (lines 31; 33). In this way, Theocritus’s text emphasizes the visual as an integral part of the “ancient cultural tool” of the pastoral from the outset (Gifford, “Pastoral” 46). The Cyclops’s one eye emblematically hints at the complexity of relationships that potentially arise out of the accumulation of observers and their positions within pastoral frameworks. It self-consciously draws attention to what may be called the “visual games” involved in the pastoral, to observers’ relations to each other and to themselves, and to the potential effects that occur if sight diverges from dominant norms.

The idea of such visual games provides a productive context for reconsidering the pastoral as part of an African American environmental knowledge in the antebellum period. Both elements, the pastoral and the visual, were in themselves central to this era’s cultural matrix. On the one hand, the visual was involved in culturally significant shifts occurring during the first half of the nineteenth-century, as a number of scholars have suggested. Whether in the sense of the emergence of a new corporealized observer in Western culture (Crary), in terms of a powerful normalizing gaze that produced “normal” and “abnormal” bodies in pre-Civil War America (Etter), or in the sense of a modernization of the “simpler, older technologies of the picture, the book, the letter” through new technologies such as “printing, mechanical production and reproduction, travel, postal systems” that affected vision during the early to mid-nineteenth century (Cale/Di Bello 6) – one of the general observations in a growing body of visual culture scholarship of the past decades has been that of influential developments in visual techniques and modes throughout the period.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> While there has generally been an enormous scholarly engagement with the visual and “the ubiquity of vision as the master sense of the modern era” (Jay, “Scopic Regimes” 3) over the past decades through prominent critics such as W.J.T. Mitchell, Martin Jay, or Nicholas Mirzoeff, Jonathan Crary’s influential *Techniques of the Observer* (1990) provides a particularly productive context for thinking about the antebellum period. Envisioned as a pre-history of Guy Debord’s “spectacle,” Crary’s central thesis of “the emergence of models of subjective vision in a wide range of disciplines during the period 1810-1840” (Crary, “Incapacities” 60; cf. also *Suspensions* 11-13) has triggered a variety of responses over the past decades that include, for instance, Etter’s *The Good Body* (2002), which argues that “American culture of the antebellum and Civil War eras was influenced, informed, and in some respects even characterized by a dichotomy between bodies imagined as physically ‘normal’ and bodies imagined as physically ‘abnormal’” (2); or Cale/Di Bello’s compilation *Illustrations, Optics, and Objects* (2010), which is an important corrective to Crary’s broad and somewhat “problematic sweep,” as it “pay[s] attention to small details” (5, 7). See also for recent readings of nineteenth-century visual culture in a specifically U.S.

Such developments have particular importance with respect to the discourses that formed around racial slavery and its abolition in the decades leading up to the Civil War, since there was undoubtedly what Finseth calls a broadly waged “war of words and images” over the “peculiar institution” (*Shades* 1). Some of those involved in this “war” explicitly articulated their take on the central role of the visual. Frederick Douglass, for instance, one of the most prolific African American voices of the antebellum period, drew attention to the importance of the visual, especially with respect to the invention of the daguerreotype, as an 1861 speech entitled “Pictures and Progress” reveals:

A very pleasing feature of our [new] pictorial relations is the very easy terms upon which all may enjoy them. The servant girl can now see a likeness of herself, such as noble ladies and even royalty itself could not purchase fifty years ago. Formerly, the luxury of a likeness was the exclusive privilege of the rich and great. But now, like education and a thousand other blessings brought to us by the advancing march of civilization, such pictures, are placed within easy reach of the humblest members of society. (455)

Being possibly the most photographed man – and certainly the most photographed African American – of the nineteenth century, Douglass not only confesses himself a fierce believer in the democratizing potential of Louis Daguerre’s invention.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, he also comes to the fore as one of the most acute theorists of vision of his time. Douglass thoroughly investigated “man [as] the only picture-making animal in the world” (“Pictures” n.p.), and, speaking from the position of a former slave, hints at the ways in which African American slave narratives of the period must be read in the context of dominant contemporary discourses that relied on certain ideas about vision. The “eye of the slave” did not emerge in a vacuum but was circumscribed by a set of powerful visual and discursive practices.

In addition to the visual, it was, on the other hand, the pastoral, in its U.S. American tradition and form,<sup>74</sup> which played a central role in antebellum (literary) culture. Whereas some have argued that a striving towards pastoral “middle landscapes,” driven by the urge

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American context Folsom, “Nineteenth-century Visual Culture”; Morgan (esp. 103-134; 165-196); and Burrows (esp. Introduction and Chapter One).

<sup>73</sup> Douglass, in one of his speeches, claims Daguerre to be the “great discoverer of modern times” (“Pictures” n.p.), who inaugurated with his invention a more egalitarian form of representation deemed by Douglass morally even more important for a country than “the making of its laws” (Douglass, “Pictures and Progress” 457). Cf. for Douglass’s relation to the daguerreotype Faisst; Hill; and Wells.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. for a concise overview of the pastoral in a U.S. American context Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 48-56, who identifies an American pastoral tradition that “has followed its own distinct trajectory as a response to an environmental and social history very different from that of Britain” (34). Major studies of the American pastoral include, for instance, those by Marx (*Machine*; “Pastoralism”) and Buell (*Environmental Imagination*; “Pastoral Ideology”); readings of the pastoral in antebellum American literature can also be found in Garrard, “Wordsworth and Thoreau”; Hartman; Cella 15-54; Magowan; or Yu.

to dominate and be renewed by an encountered wilderness, is characteristic of American culture generally,<sup>75</sup> other scholars have identified the formation of an American pastoral tradition specifically with respect to the first half of the nineteenth-century. While Leo Marx, for instance, in his classic *Machine in the Garden* (1964), suggests a coexistence of progressivist and pastoral ideals in the image of the “Machine” as part of an “interrupted idyll” (“Pastoralism in America” 57), and traces the pastoral in major authors like Thoreau, Emerson or Whitman, Lawrence Buell notes on the basis of his extensive research on this period that “to Americanists” pastoral generally refers to “all literature [...] that celebrates the ethos of nature/rurality over against the ethos of the town or city” (“American Pastoral Ideology” 23). Thus recognizing the vital importance of the pastoral to the development of both the United States as “nature’s nation” generally and of the antebellum period and the “American Renaissance” in particular, Americanists have tended to employ exceedingly broad definitions in order to describe the conceptions, challenges, and contradictions of the pastoral in a U.S. context.<sup>76</sup>

Nowhere, perhaps, do such challenges and contradictions become more apparent than in the rapid development of the African American fugitive slave narrative into a major genre in the 1830s and 1840s. With respect to this moment, which saw an explosion in publications of such texts as the abolitionist movement gained unprecedented strength and a more radical rhetoric, thinking about the slave narrative through the fundamental correlation between the visual and the pastoral becomes a particularly productive lens for

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<sup>75</sup> Although many (American) ecocritics, driven by a preservationist ethos, have seen “the wild” as the ultimate locus of American environmentalism, others have identified a pastoral “middle landscape” as the characteristic destination of the American literary tradition. Lawrence Buell, for instance, notes that “[e]ver since an American literary canon began to crystallize, American literature has been thought of as markedly ‘pastoral’ in the loose sense of being preoccupied with nature and rurality in setting, theme, and value in contradistinction from society and the urban” (“American Pastoral Ideology” 1). Leo Marx is, of course, a central precursor for this statement, as he recognizes since the revolutionary generation a “Rousseauistic possibility [...] [in] the captivating topographical image, or mental map, of the new nation as an ideal society of the ‘middle landscape’ midway between *l’ancien regime* and the wild frontier,” and argues that “pastoral fables occupy so prominent a place in classic American literature” (“Pastoralism” 38, 51). Wolfgang Born complements Marx’s perspective with respect to “landscape painting,” declaring that this art form “did not develop in America until her people had mastered the virginal and tough continent,” thereby hinting at a generally sought transformation of wilderness into middle landscapes (24).

<sup>76</sup> In an Americanist context, the pastoral is most often used “to refer to any kind of rural content, rather than to a particular generic tradition, because this hybridization [e.g. Theocritan, Virgilian, Biblical etc.] is so completely naturalized in American literature” (Lewis 430); it became, in this sense, to use Kolodny’s term, one of the United States’ “national fantasies” (4). Historically speaking, one might locate the “loss of identity” of the pastoral in the sense of its traditional poetic forms as occurring in the eighteenth century. Marx suggests that it was American romanticism that subsequently “released pastoral motives from their bondage to the shepherd convention” and thus triggered the “veritable explosion of those same motives” in the first half of the nineteenth century (“Pastoralism” 52).

tracing the employment, function, and transformation of pastoral elements in African American writing. As antebellum African American literary production as such became intertwined with black (eye-)witnessing through the fugitive slave narrative, the inception of a (written) African American pastoral tradition crucially intersected with the emergence of an African American observer.<sup>77</sup> In the following, the story of this intersection will be traced by considering, firstly, the visual, and, secondly, its relation to the pastoral.

## Antebellum Visual Regimes

Rereading how and in what contexts formerly enslaved African Americans came to *look* also means investigating more broadly the ways in which they were being *looked at*. In this respect, one may identify two “visual regimes,”<sup>78</sup> two basic ways in which the visual was fundamentally connected with the African American experience throughout the antebellum period. On the one hand, visual regimes occurred in terms of concrete, distinctly Southern spatial settings that applied certain modes of seeing to the end of surveilling and exploiting slave labor. On the other hand, there existed a broader racialized visual regime that involved a gaze on the black as the observed and a set of basic premises underlying

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<sup>77</sup> Numerous scholars have drawn attention to the fugitive slave narrative as “witness literature,” e.g. Gates (1991), esp. 3-9; Smith Foster (1994); McBride (2001); or Phillips (2004); Lockard (2008) provides a more general critique of an antebellum cultural practice of “*watching slavery* instead of *witnessing slavery*” (xxiv, emphasis in original). Moreover, there has recently been a growing number of approaches to the antebellum period, its racial politics, and abolitionism, in terms of visual culture, e.g. in Chaney (2008); Finseth (2009); Morgan-Owens (2010); Rogers (2010); Clytus (2012); and the contributions in Kaplan/Oldfield (2010) and Wallace/Smith (2012). However, and even though such work on witnessing or the visual cultures of abolition explicitly address issues of vision, the “black observer” as such has not (yet) become a specific concern of scholars with respect to the African American literary – let alone literary environmental – tradition. Hence, my approach of tracing the emergence of the “black observer” through antebellum “visual regimes” diverges from previous readings in two ways. Firstly, by emphasizing the links between vision and power in a more literal reading of the processes connected with an African American “eye.” Secondly, and more importantly, with respect to the ultimate aim of exploring the link between vision and the formation of an environmental knowledge articulated through the pastoral.

<sup>78</sup> While somewhat inspired in coinage by Martin Jay’s term “scopic regimes,” my use of the term “visual regime” is primarily based on Foucauldian notions of vision and power. That is, while agreeing with Jay’s basic idea of vision as “a contested terrain, rather than a harmoniously integrated complex of visual theories and practices” (“Scopic Regimes” 4), and implying a mutuality in the sense of W.J.T. Mitchell’s definition of visual culture as “the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision” (237), I use the term “visual regimes” broadly to mean those socially produced (and most often tacitly agreed upon) sets of rules and norms which govern the ways in which humans look at the human and the non-human world. In this sense, “visual regimes” have to be understood as intricately intertwined with visually inscribed forms of power, such as, for instance, panopticism or disciplinary power, and have to be traced not only on the “macro-level” of discursive formations and practices, but also on the “micro-level” of singled out visual acts that always bear the potential of resistance.

antebellum visual concepts and practices more generally.

The effects of the first kind of visual regime, found in settings of enslavement that arranged vision strategically in such ways as to secure effective slave labor, have been continuously documented in fugitive slave narratives. One of the most explicit depictions of such arrangements can be found in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), a book that has been decisive in shaping American views of slavery until today. In one scene in particular, set on a small Maryland plantation Douglass had been sent to in order to be disciplined by the "negro-breaker" Edward Covey, the author-narrator vividly describes the workings of a visual regime under slavery:

There was no deceiving him [Covey]. His work went on in his absence almost as well as in his presence; and he had the faculty of making us feel that he was ever present with us. [...] He seldom approached the spot where we were at work openly, if he could do it secretly. He always aimed at taking us by surprise. [...] it was never safe to stop a single minute. His comings were like a thief in the night. He appeared to us as being ever at hand. He was under every tree, behind every stump, in every bush, and at every window, on the plantation. [...] he would turn short and crawl into a fence-corner, or behind some tree, and there watch us till the going down of the sun. (Douglass, *Narrative* 44)

Scholarly work on the Covey-episode has traditionally focused on the fierce physical battle that erupts between Douglass and the slave-breaker.<sup>79</sup> After all, the fight, "cast as a theatrical performance" in which, Douglass assures his readers, the slaveholder "had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him," is depicted by the author-narrator as the pivotal turning point of his passage from slavery to freedom (Stauffer, "Self-Fashioning" 205; *Narrative* 50). Read along these lines, the above passage acts as a prequel to this climactic scene and is part of Douglass's engagement with notions of "manhood" that is captured in his famous chiasmic statement "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (47).<sup>80</sup> By far fewer critics, however, have considered the ways in which Douglass's experience at Covey's plantation attests to a particular setting and mode of surveillance reminiscent of a Foucauldian "infinitely generalizable mechanism

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<sup>79</sup> For an overview of important classic interpretations of Douglass's *Narrative*, see Andrews's "African American Autobiography" 195-215. More recent readings of Douglass's first autobiography that focus on the Covey-episode can be found in Levine, "Identity"; Wallace, "Violence"; and Boxill.

<sup>80</sup> Douglass's ideals of masculinity and manhood have been widely discussed by critics for decades: Valerie Smith, for example, emphasizes that Douglass's *Narrative*, "by mythologizing rugged individuality, physical strength, and geographical mobility [...] enshrine[s] cultural definitions of masculinity," and draws attention to analogies between Douglass's text and "the fundamental American plot, the myth of the self-made man" (*Self-Discovery* 34, 27). On Douglass's notion of masculinity cf. also Andrews, who reads Douglass as "the heroic individualist par excellence" (*To Tell* 152); Yarborough, who focuses on Douglass's novella *The Heroic Slave*; Wallace, "Power"; and Zafar, "Franklinian Douglass."

of panopticism” (*Discipline* 216).<sup>81</sup> This mechanism, which Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* on the basis of Jeremy Bentham’s late-eighteenth century prison design as a panoptic mode of power (cf. 195-209), may be traced throughout the scenery Douglass depicts. Although the gaze is not, as in Bentham’s model, “unverifiable” (cf. 201) – after all, the slaves know all too well that it is Covey whom the punishing eye belongs to – there are at least three features of a quasi-panoptic technique in the spatial setup described by Douglass. Firstly, space *itself* is inscribed by the gaze; the basic panoptic idea that it is “stones that can make people docile” (172) is, in Douglass’s case, expanded to include not only a consciously designed built environment but also the non-human natural world, since “every stump,” “every bush” and “every window” is being made complicit (*Narrative* 44). Secondly, visibility is employed in a panoptic way to “see constantly and to recognize immediately” (Foucault, *Discipline* 200). For the slaves, “it was never safe to stop a single minute” since Covey “appeared to us as being ever at hand” (*Narrative* 44). Thirdly, the gaze is profoundly one-sided, i.e. asymmetrical. The slave becomes, in Foucault’s words, “the object of information, never a subject of communication” (*Discipline* 200). Douglass and his fellow slaves are bound up in a disciplinary world set up by the master that aims for both purest exploitation of the body and utmost docility of the soul, the latter being, after all, Covey’s primary goal and that on which his very livelihood as a well-known “slave-breaker” depends.<sup>82</sup>

Taken together, these features, which can be found not only in Douglass but throughout a large number of antebellum slave narratives,<sup>83</sup> attest to the involvement and effects of panoptic mechanisms within the practices of the peculiar institution. This is neither to suggest panopticism as homogeneously woven into the multiple forms of New World racial

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<sup>81</sup> Among those who see this dimension are Axelrod, DeLombard, and Nielsen’s recent contributions. On the plantation as a space of surveillance, see Harkin (2002); on surveillance techniques in the antebellum period more generally, see Parenti, esp. 13-32; and Peterson 7-9. An important recent reading of the involvement of the visual within the peculiar institution is also given by Walter Johnson, who identifies modes of “visual mastery” (*River of Dark Dreams* 168, esp. 166-168, 221-227).

<sup>82</sup> Douglass’s take on why Covey does not have him punished by the officials after their fight involves the “negro-breaker’s” dependence on maintaining an impression of invincibility. Douglass assumes that the reason for his remaining unmolested afterwards lies in Covey’s “most unbounded reputation for being a first-rate overseer” and concludes that this “reputation was at stake” (*Narrative* 51).

<sup>83</sup> Even if rarely in such explicit and vivid form as in Douglass’s case, we find a host of depictions of quasi-panoptic surveillance in fugitive slave narratives from the 1830s on. Such depictions, e.g. in narratives by Roper, Green, William W. Brown, Bibb, or Jacobs, most often refer to a constant supervision of slaves’ working spaces, for instance, in the field or, in Jacobs’s case, in bourgeois households. Moreover, there are portrayals of more or less strictly regulated spaces beyond the confines of the work-place, which are often shown as visually controlled by the haunting presence of patrols and “slave hunters.”

slavery<sup>84</sup> nor to imply an unproblematic link between the autobiographical word and historical truth.<sup>85</sup> However, the recurrence of depictions attesting to the application of surveillance techniques and the resemblance such techniques show to panoptic supervision lend weight to the claim that there was yet another dimension of atrocities involved and documented by former slaves. In addition to the various “stock” abuses committed under the peculiar institution, ranging from the iconic physical punishments to psychological, sexual and moral cruelties, there was also an abuse via the visual. A first kind of antebellum visual regime lay thus in a particular form of “visual violence” of racial slavery that a considerable number of former slaves contemplated in their narratives.

At the same time, however, this concretely acted out visual violence experienced by the enslaved was intricately connected with broader modes of racialized vision that pervaded antebellum culture more extensively both in geographical terms, i.e. as not restricted to the slaveholding South, and in terms of manifesting across a variety of discourses and practices. This second, broader and more fundamental visual regime evolved primarily around two premises, namely an assumed immediacy between seeing and knowing, and the idea of a disembodiment of visual perception. On this basis, and in conjunction with antebellum notions about race, a dominant racialized vision emerged that generally posed the black body as “the observed,” and which, I will argue, had crucial implications for the role of the visual and, ultimately, the pastoral, in the slave narrative.

To illustrate the functioning of the two premises, one may consider a variety of discursive formations of the 1830s and 1840s such as scientific racism, transcendentalism or autobiography criticism. Regardless of their distinct (and often opposed) motivations and aims, I want to suggest that such discourses formed and relied upon a common visual matrix that furnished a fundamental “visual regime” through which the fugitive slave narrative emerged. A first and perhaps the most obvious instance in which the visual came to play a crucial role can be found in polygenist (pseudo-)scientific racism, which gained

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<sup>84</sup> As scholars have repeatedly emphasized, the forms enslavement could take for black slaves in the antebellum South varied significantly and depended both on region and on the status of individual slaves within the hierarchies that marked the peculiar institution (cf. e.g. Larry Hudson, esp. 1-31; Gilyard and Wardi 99-111; Boles 221-230). Thus, even though panopticism seems to be a central technique of power in Southern slavery, one should not draw a parallel to totalitarianism. To do so would be “hyperbolic,” since no single “powerful state hounded independent thought in the antebellum South” (Gilmore 3).

<sup>85</sup> One of the long-standing debates in African American Studies concerns the question of the status of fugitive slave narratives as, on the one hand, a “historical source” and, on the other hand, “literature/autobiography.” For discussions cf. the contributions in Sekora/Turner (esp. Hedin; and Cobb); or Davis/Gates (esp. Blassingame, “Using the Testimony”; and Olney); for more recent engagements cf. e.g. Kachun; Bruce, “Slave Narratives”; Warren, “A Reflection”; or V. Smith, *Self-Discovery* 9-12.

prominence in the first half of the nineteenth century through the works of Samuel George Morton, George Robins Gliddon, Josiah Nott and Louis Agassiz.<sup>86</sup> This “American School of Polygenesis,” unified by a belief in the idea that human races or, in their terminology, “human types,” had separate origins, did not simply employ a prescriptive rhetoric (cf. Jackson/Weidman 45). That is, its proponents did not merely impose a hierarchical structuring on the ‘human family’ that was “almost wholly devoted to the research paradigm of Anglo-Saxon, Teutonic superiority” (Graves 4), but they did so by creating forms of knowledge centrally based on underlying assumptions about vision. U.S. polygenism heavily relied on the incitement of a specific way of looking as it fundamentally connected the idea of seeing-as-knowing to its truth-claims.

A prominent example illustrating how this specific way of looking functioned may be found in Morton’s *Crania Americana*, published in Philadelphia in 1839. This work of “craniometry,” highly popular at its time and much admired by Morton’s fellow-polygenists Nott and Gliddon, is remarkable with respect to its involvement of the visual. *Crania* consists primarily of two parts: Roughly the first half of Morton’s book, preceded by a letter to John S. Phillips, a member of the “Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia,” presents Morton’s (pseudo-)scientific discourse on over 100 human skulls he had collected in the 1830s. This section is the place where we find what might be expected, namely explicit claims on essentially differing human “types,” seemingly well-grounded in Morton’s simplifying and twisted logic that primarily relied on quantitative measurements of brain capacities of his objects of inquiry. By contrast, the second half of Morton’s book exhibits – owing to the volume’s gigantic dimension – almost life-size illustrations of the skulls he had assembled and painstakingly examined. It presents, page after page, and without additional commentary apart from brief labelings, images of each of the crania treated in the discussion of the first part.

The way in which *Crania* thus seeks to assure its scientific objectivity on the basis of deliberately inciting acts of seeing is representative of (pseudo-)scientific racism’s general reliance on the visual in the creation of its racial knowledge. In the prefixed “Letter,” Morton sets the stage for his theater to the eye, when he writes that “it appeared to me the

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<sup>86</sup> Still one of the most useful overviews of antebellum polygenist racial science is Stanton’s *The Leopard’s Spots* (1960). For a corrective of Stanton’s somewhat sterile historical account that also takes into account the practical impact of the antebellum “science of man,” see Frederickson, esp. 71-96; for more recent accounts cf. e.g. Gould 62-104; Simon-Aaron 223-264; or Jackson/Weidman 45-54. Recent readings of the work of Louis Agassiz are given by Rogers (2010), who focuses on a series of photographs of slaves taken in the 1850s, and Irmscher (2013); for classical studies of phrenology cf. e.g. Davies; Stern.

wiser plan to present the facts unbiased by theory, and let the reader draw his own conclusions” by engaging the “evidence” of the second part (i). His book therefore, from the outset, plays on a dominant visual rationale; it reaches out to its reader her/himself to visualize, to visually rationalize and “draw his own conclusions” on the basis of what s/he finds presented in the latter pages of the volume (i). By bracketing his essentialist claims (first part) within the admonition and incitement of a link between eye and truth (Morton’s “Letter”), and the actual images as evidence for the observing reader’s eye (second part), Morton relies on the workings of a broader, underlying poetics of knowledge that poses the eye as the organ of truth par excellence.

In this respect, the volume may be read as part of a larger shift towards more “subjective” forms of vision in Western cultures that Crary traces in his *Techniques of the Observer* (1990). Morton’s book, by seeking to withdraw itself from the observation process and by stating the recipient’s eye itself as the key to (racial) truth, participates in a transformative process of a “reorganization of vision in the first half of the nineteenth century [...] that produced a new kind of observer” and that turned away from an older model of vision (2-3).<sup>87</sup> According to Crary, the *camera obscura* had been the epitome of this older model which had conceptualized vision as “objective,” and which was gradually replaced from the beginning of the nineteenth century on by a new model that saw vision as a more “subjective” act that depended on the individual’s eye or new optical devices such as the stereoscope or the phenakistiscope. Morton’s work can be located within this broad shift; in order to regain an assumed objective truth that may have been lost at least in the sense of being accessible via an objective, completely disembodied eye, it is both a step towards a more *subjective* eye and one that is yet bound to arrive at an *objective* truth. Assuming that vision is indeed subjective (the text wants to leave *individual* readers see for themselves), Morton’s tract is nevertheless based on the assumption that there *exists* an inherent connection between what an eye perceives and a fixed, objective “Truth” about what it must eventually see. Truth may not be available through an objective eye, but it

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<sup>87</sup> The new kind of observer produced in the first half of the nineteenth century, according to Crary, meant the emergence of “a new set of relations between the body on one hand and forms of institutional and discursive power on the other,” which “redefined the status of an observing subject” (Crary, *Observer* 3). One should note here that Crary primarily makes his claims of a “passage from the geometrical optics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to physiological optics, which dominated both scientific and philosophical discussions of vision in the nineteenth century” with respect to a European context (16). Nonetheless, Crary’s thesis of a general shift in Western ideas of vision seems equally productive for reflecting on a pre-Civil War U.S. that was influenced just as strongly as European cultures by the “photographic camera” as a new mode of perception and documentation (66).

objectively exists and becomes available through “properly” directed subjective vision. In this sense, Morton’s and many of the American School’s productions were heavily reliant on a supposedly inherent connection between an observing eye and “Truth,” which they deployed within processes of (pseudo-)scientific racialization.

The idea of a connection between eye and truth was also central to other influential discourses of the time that framed the rise of the fugitive slave narrative as a major antebellum genre, for instance, those of transcendentalism and autobiography criticism. The former, although fundamentally different in its premises and aims from polygenism,<sup>88</sup> shares with the latter a strong preoccupation with vision. Transcendentalists often showed, as F.O. Matthiesen once noted in his classic *American Renaissance*, a “stress on seeing” and an “identification of the poet with the prophet or seer” (xiv).<sup>89</sup> Especially Emerson, the conceptual father of Transcendentalism, is well known for his idea of vision as providing access to transcendental truth. In what may be the most famous symbol of the Transcendentalist movement, the ocular image in his essay “Nature” (1836), Emerson lets the lyrical “I” read itself as

[s]tanding on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite spaces, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. (10)

With Emerson, we therefore not only find a celebration of the idea of an access to truth via the eye (“I see all”), but more precisely via a characteristically *disembodied* eye (“I am nothing”). Only as vision becomes disconnected from the body, it becomes bound to a truth about what it then ever more purely perceives. Emerson’s is thus, as Legler points out, an “infallible metaphysical eye” (“Politics of Vision” 246).

This is not to suggest, however, that the idea of vision embraced in “Nature” and other transcendentalist texts was thereby disengaging the notion of a subjectivity of vision. On

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<sup>88</sup> Possibly the most obvious difference can be seen with respect to the question of slavery: Even though not all transcendentalists were active abolitionists (nor, to be fair, all polygenists explicitly proslavery), transcendentalism was vitally connected with antislavery thought through figures such as Emerson, Thoreau, or Whitman. Cf. e.g. Packer 218-273; Goldberg; Gougeon (1995; 2012); L. Buell, *Emerson* 242-287; on Whitman’s changing attitudes towards black Americans cf. Folsom, “Lucifer and Ethiopia”; for transcendentalists’ involvement in the Underground Railroad, see Harding; Collison; and Siebert, “Underground Railroad in Massachusetts.”

<sup>89</sup> Various other scholars have explored Transcendentalism’s preoccupation with vision. On Emerson and vision cf. e.g. Legler, “Transparent Eyeball”; Blinder; and A. Ryan; on Transcendentalism and vision more generally, see Kohler; L. Buell, “Transcendentalist Catalogue Rhetoric”; or Folsom, “Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture.”

the contrary, vision became essentially bound to the subject, or, in transcendentalist vocabulary, to the “individual.” Read as a whole, Emerson’s notion ultimately exhibits by no means less of a tension between objectivity and subjectivity within the act of seeing than polygenist discourse often did, and is, in this sense, likewise readable as part of the broader transformative processes described by Crary. In Emerson’s case, however, the tension between subjectivity and objectivity is not acted out in terms of an assumed necessity to “privatize” or “subjectivize” an eye’s perception to the end of arriving at some kind of seemingly objective racial truth, but in terms of a supposedly liberating oscillation between the one and the many, the particle and the whole, the individual and the oversoul. The transcendentalist notion of the poet’s vision is thus not only based upon the general premise of an inherent connection between seeing and truth, but furthermore also expresses the long-standing notion of a disembodied eye.

A similar observation can be made for autobiography criticism, or, more precisely, for antebellum “theorizations” of what we would call today life writing. As Lawrence Buell points out, the first half of the nineteenth century was “pivotal for the history of American autobiography,” as this mode of writing fit the period’s high valuation of “literature that strongly emphasized didactic and/or informational content” and its celebration of “the individual as a social unit” (“Autobiography” 47, 50-51).<sup>90</sup> In the first decades of the nineteenth century, which saw a widespread reception and popularity of Benjamin Franklin’s memoirs as well as a growing engagement with new forms of (Romantic) individuality, the autobiography emerged, in Robert Sayre’s words, as “the preeminent kind of American expression” (147). Articles and essays on how to properly record one’s life were written and published in magazines like *The North American Review* or *Blackwood’s Magazine*, or in textbooks such as Caleb Bingham’s *Columbian Orator*, which also became one of Douglass’s earliest inspirations.<sup>91</sup> Thus, although Lawrence Buell is right in pointing out the paradox that “although the autobiographical mode strongly marks American writing

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<sup>90</sup> The term “autobiography” first appeared in 1809 and became widely used throughout the first half of the nineteenth century (cf. Rinehart 177). In an American context, we find “autobiographical subgenres that had roots going back to the previous century” (L. Buell, “Autobiography” 48). Among those were, for instance, the “exploration narrative, the narrative of conversion, the spiritual journal, and the criminal’s confession,” all of which were by the mid-nineteenth-century, “established and popular types” (50).

<sup>91</sup> Douglass explicitly refers to the *Columbian Orator* in several of his autobiographies (*Narrative* 32; *My Bondage* 157-158); cf. also Blassingame, *Douglass Papers*, Series Two, Vol. 1 “Introduction” xxiii. On Douglass’s relation to the discourse on autobiography of his time see Sekora, “Black Message”; Blassingame, *Douglass Papers*, Series Two, Vol. 1 “Introduction” xxviii; Baker, *Journey* 27-52, esp. 32-43; Levine, “Slave Narrative.” For readings of Douglass against Franklin’s autobiography, see e.g. Levine, “Slave Narrative” esp. 104-107, 109-112; or Andrews, “African-American Autobiography Criticism” 197.

from the start [...], autobiography in the strictest current sense does not fully flower as a literary genre in America much before the time of Henry Adams” (“Autobiography” 47-48),<sup>92</sup> it is undoubtedly true that autobiographical writing became an issue widely debated throughout the antebellum period.<sup>93</sup>

Crucially, this debate, too, exhibits some of the fundamental ideas of a dominant visual regime. First of all, a preoccupation with vision can be noted in the ways commentators made prescriptive claims on how to write autobiographically in terms of oratory and rhetorical style; in this respect, we find what Martin Jay calls an “ocular permeation of language” (Jay, *Downcast Eyes* 2). John Foster, an English pioneer in autobiography criticism, whose essay “On a Man’s Writing Memoirs of Himself” (1805) was widely received in the U.S. throughout the first half of the nineteenth century,<sup>94</sup> laid some of the groundwork from which an American discourse drew when making claims with respect to autobiographical style. Viewing the general purpose of autobiography as tracing the progress of a character, Foster proposed that autobiographical style “should be as simple as possible” (78). As Blassingame has suggested, antebellum essayists expanded on this notion of stylistic simplicity, as “they became more confident of their ability to determine the veracity of autobiographies. By concentrating on the patterns of revelation and concealment in a work, the critics believed that they could uncover an author’s true self-portrait” (*Douglass Papers* Series Two, Vol. 1 “Introduction” xxi). Accordingly, antebellum essayists proposed to “test” autobiographies (cf. xxi-xxii) and, thereby, came to express ideas of what can be called a “visual style.” An 1844 article in the *North American Review*, for instance, which argued for “completeness” as one marker of the quality of

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<sup>92</sup> Reading the “autobiographical scene” of the American Renaissance as both “a state of burgeoning possibility” and “a state of cultural erosion” (“Autobiography” 65), L. Buell notes that, on the one hand, “Americans of the mid-nineteenth-century had very severe reservations about the appropriateness of celebrating the lifeline of the private, secular self in public narrative discourse” (49), while, on the other hand, “pressures were being brought to bear on traditional literary forms that would ensure that they became more autobiographical and that autobiography would become practiced in America as a more self-conscious art” (50). Hence autobiography’s paradoxical standing at a time that saw “crossings between autobiography and the fictive” (50).

<sup>93</sup> This is not to suggest that there was a systematic or academic discourse on autobiography yet; as Kley suggests, the beginnings of a proper scholarly engagement (“Autobiographieforschung”) can only be located in the late nineteenth century with Dilthey (39). Nonetheless, what Rinehart has more generally suggested for the Victorian period, namely that writers and critics seem to have been “eager and more curious about” autobiography, even if they “never found an adequate definition or a satisfactory classification of the genre” (Rinehart 177, 186), also holds true for a U.S. antebellum context.

<sup>94</sup> Foster’s 21-page essay was part of his *Essays in a Series of Letters*, which went through several editions in England from 1805 on, and was also widely received in the U.S. between 1807 and 1845 (the Library of Congress lists eleven editions). Cf. Rinehart 179; Blassingame, *Douglass Papers*, Series Two, Vol.1, “Introduction” xix-xx.

autobiographical accounts, is representative in thinking of autobiographical texts in visual terms when it states, “the only *truth* is the whole *truth*. The complete *portrait* is the only faithful *portrait*” (qtd. Xxi, emphasis in original). Thus, the stylistic advice given by commentators often not only expressed ideas on how to adequately give an account of oneself as it “translated [Foster’s] ‘simple’ into ‘appropriate’” (Blassingame xxii). Moreover, critics also displayed, through their choice of terms for an “appropriate” style, ideas that were deeply rooted in a broader visual regime. If ‘good’ autobiographical writing had to be, like Franklin’s, “as transparent as the atmosphere,” where “thoughts lie before us like *objects seen* in one of our finest and clearest day” (*North American Review*, September 1818, qtd. Blassingame xxiii, emphasis mine), then the ocular language (“portrait”; “objects seen”) of antebellum autobiography criticism itself signals the presence and influences of the visual regime of the age.

Moreover, the idea of “visualizing” oneself through writing down one’s life is also expressed in connection with the moralism and didacticism that shaped discourses on autobiography in the first half of the nineteenth century. While Rinehart identifies two general aspects for a Victorian attitude toward autobiography, namely “to instruct and to delight” (178),<sup>95</sup> it is especially the former that became central in an antebellum context. Lawrence Buell speaks in this respect of a “post-Puritan didacticism” (“Autobiography” 64), and Blassingame asserts that antebellum writers generally contended that “[i]t was infinitely better [...] for youths to read autobiographies than novels. Because autobiographies sketched their lives from childhood to their attainment of eminence and stressed ‘the cultivation of intellectual and moral power,’ they could provide lessons, examples, and inspirations to the young” (*Douglass Papers Series Two*, Vol. 1 “Introduction” xxi). As the aim of ‘proper’ autobiography was thus generally held to be, in Foster’s words, the presentation of “what our character was, and what it was likely to become” (7-8), there was at the same time the notion of a central observational process, which linked (autobiographical) vision with character truth. Writing one’s life involved a process of seeing oneself and exposing a character to vision that was, in the antebellum period, vitally connected with a more general visual regime. Writers had to make visible and “lay open to the world the deepest and darkest nooks of their own hearts, however ugly

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<sup>95</sup> Rinehart sees a historical shift with respect to these two aims of autobiography throughout the nineteenth century, suggesting that “[t]he early Victorian emphasis was upon autobiography as a moral influence; the later, upon autobiography as art” (178).

and loathsome may be the things which dwell therein,” as one critic pointed out in the *New England Magazine* in 1834, (qtd. Blassingame, *Douglass Papers*, Series Two, Vol.1 xxii). It was, eventually, a logic of visibility, of an “objective eye” on oneself that had to be activated in autobiography in order to transmit a character’s inner truth and progress; one had to make perceivable, as another critic put it in the *New York Review* of October 1838, “the picture in the glass and the real man behind it” (qtd. xxi).

The poetics of knowledge through which the fugitive slave narrative emerged was thus profoundly shaped by a set of general and transversally existing ideas on vision that further added to the manifold complexities faced by fugitive slaves writing and publishing their texts in the context of an often patronizing abolitionism. As they told or wrote down their stories, formerly enslaved narrators not only had to cope with portraying the panoptic facets that had often been part of their experience of the peculiar institution. Moreover, the fugitive slave narrative must also be read as “resisting (through) the eye” of a fundamentally racialized socio-visual terrain that was marked by two premises about vision that interlinked with the racial views of the antebellum period. Firstly, there was an overwhelmingly assumed immediacy between seeing and knowing, i.e. the notion of an automatic availability of true knowledge of the observed through the beholding eye. Secondly, and despite an ongoing subjectivization of observership in the sense Crary proposes, we find a pervasive residual idea of disembodiment within thereby often presumably “objective” acts of vision.<sup>96</sup> These two premises converged with notions about race, leading to a predominant equating of the black with the observed and its simultaneous denial of an observer-status. There was thus a fundamentally racializing asymmetry of looking, which is visible in its most excessive forms in the visual regimes of the peculiar institution and in polygenist theory.

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<sup>96</sup> This residual idea can also be read as a remnant of what Jay has called “Cartesian perspectivalism,” meaning the “dominant, even totally hegemonic, visual model of the modern era, that which we can identify with Renaissance notions of perspective in the visual arts and Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality in philosophy” (“Scopic Regimes” 4). For the specific context of antebellum African American enslavement, Etter has moreover suggested a general centrality of the disembodied/embodied dichotomy, as “[i]n the ideology of American slavery disembodiment was figured as the condition of intellectual power and embodiment as the condition of physical subjugation” (87).

## Rhetoric of Visibility and the Emergence of the Black Observer

Reread in this context, the fugitive slave narrative came to employ what could be termed a “rhetoric of visibility.” On the one hand, this rhetoric of visibility was a necessity emerging out of an abolitionism that employed ex-slaves’ voices as politicized (eye-)witnessing; on the other hand, it also provided a potential means of black resistance to the general visual regime. To disentangle the workings of this rhetoric of visibility, one must first note how heavily abolitionists relied on “the visible,” as one of their overarching goals was to expose to a (Northern) observer’s eye the various abuses and the moral evil of the peculiar institution. Theodore Dwight Weld’s 1839 *American Slavery As It Is*, for instance, a seminal abolitionist text that compiled various testimonies of events in the South, illustrates abolitionism’s preoccupation with the visible when it stresses the central importance of moving eye-witnesses to “speak what they know, and testify to what they have seen” (9-10). Weld goes on to clarify that “[t]estimony respects matters of *fact*, not matters of opinion: it is the declaration of a witness as to *facts*, not the giving of an opinion as to the nature or qualities of actions” that was crucial to the antislavery project (110, emphasis in original). To act in this way as “expositor[s] of the truth” (Bourne 13) through making slavery visible became an earmark of abolitionist discourse from the 1830s on – even more so in the context of the scandals over a number of fake narratives (cf. Starling 226-230).

At the same time, aiming to achieve their central goal of “exposing more and more of the odious system of Slavery” through a rhetoric of visibility meant abolitionists’ increasing employment of those who had actually eye-witnessed the accursed system, namely former slaves (James Forten to Garrison, qtd. Billington, “Introduction” 18). There was, in the words of a commentator in the *Liberator* (March 9, 1838), a strong necessity for such “profound eye-witnesses,” for “the few competent narrators of slavery as it exists in our country” (qtd. Blassingame, *Douglass Papers Vol 1* xvii). At this point of shifting the rhetoric of visibility from (predominantly white) abolitionists onto former slaves a profound change occurs: the introduction of the black observer. It is here, as abolitionists come to employ the “eyes of the slaves” more and more thoroughly that, for the first time, the African American enters the scene as a large-scale, legitimized observer, not merely – as the dominant logic of the delineated antebellum visual regimes had it – as an observed.

Note in this respect, for example, the emphasis that the prospectus and preface to Charles Ball’s *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of*

*Charles Ball* (1837) place on the former slave's own act of visual perception. Readers of this narrative, the prospectus promotes,

will see here portrayed in the language of truth, by an eye witness and a slave, the sufferings, the hardships, and the evils which are inflicted upon the millions of human beings, in the name of the law of the land and of the Constitution of the United States (qtd. Starling 107)

The explicit aim of Ball's text is "to give a faithful portrait" and to "introduce the reader [...] to a view of the cotton fields, and exhibit, not to his imagination, but to his *very eyes*, the mode of life to which the slaves on the southern plantations must conform" (Ball xi, emphasis mine). Even though written down, in Ball's case, by an amanuensis envisioning himself as a faithful "recorder of the facts detailed to him by another," the eye of the slave is thus widely admitted into discourse (xi). In fact, the "I saw," the "I have seen with my own eyes" or the "I have witnessed" – earmarks of the fugitive slave's rhetoric of visibility – become just as common to the genre from the 1830s on as the stock "I was born" with which the majority of the narratives started out.<sup>97</sup> Through this "ocular permeation of language" (Jay, *Downcast Eyes* 2), the fugitive slave narrative therefore not only gave former slaves a *voice*, as a host of critics have emphasized.<sup>98</sup> Rather, it also marked the moment of instating a black *eye* as a new player in the field of documented visual perception and observation.

This is not to suggest, of course, that the black observer did not remain bound up in a network of surveillance and objectification her/himself, even in the cases where fugitives' accounts were "written by themselves." Although some abolitionists may have embraced, as Stauffer points out, "an ethic of a black heart" that sought to overcome racism in addition to slavery, there was by no means a general disengagement in abolitionism of the racializing visual regime that marked the antebellum period (*Black Hearts* 1): As abolitionists' "benevolent projects bore the marks of their racial ideologies" (Ryan 5), Douglass and other formerly enslaved agents of abolitionist societies such as William Wells Brown, Henry Box Brown or Henry Bibb were still primarily regarded as "living, speaking,

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<sup>97</sup> The argument, at this point, may well be expanded beyond what is commonly regarded as the genre of the slave narrative: As Blassingame has emphasized, it was not only the published and widely read narratives and their at times impressively eloquent narrators, but also a host of more "untutored" voices that were instrumentalized in order to "give an eyewitness account of the peculiar institution affecting in its simplicity and credibility" (*Slave Testimony* 123; cf. for examples of this kind 124-174).

<sup>98</sup> Against "slavery as a regime of silence and repression in which the only voice permitted is that of the master" (Gilmore 123), the fugitive slave narrative has often been read as an act of gaining voice, cf. e.g. Niemtzow; Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*; Baker, *Journey Back* 27-52; Smith, *Self-Discovery*.

startling proof” in and of themselves (*Salem Register*, qtd. Sekora 498). They were often degraded to being the mere props of the “performances in the theater of antislavery culture” (Ernest, *Liberation Historiography* 187), where the logic of the black as the observed was re-enacted through abolitionist practices that fixated on the black body and its scarred back as signs of the despised system.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, the very moments in which the black observer’s gaze reached documentation and manifestation in discourse through written and published accounts were highly mediated, as they were circumscribed by a formulaic “master outline” (Olney, “I Was Born” 152).<sup>100</sup> As Sekora describes, fugitive slave narratives’ black voices were “sealed within a white envelope,” and there is no denying that this “white envelope” included also the ‘granted’ (because deemed necessary) acts of documenting visual perception (502). In this sense, the African American ex-slave observer’s eye may have been the slave’s, but the eyelids that determined when it had to have opened and what it had to have looked at were most often powerfully held within patronizing constraints.

Nonetheless, and despite such restrictions, the fact is undeniable that the slave’s eye was there, that an African American observer had emerged.<sup>101</sup> And not only had s/he emerged, but s/he had done so with a significant transformative potential with respect to the delineated visual regime. The entry of the formerly enslaved observer into documentation

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<sup>99</sup> In this sense, the entry into becoming an acknowledged observing subject through an autobiographical act in the slave narrative was typically marked by first becoming an object of the racialized visual regime described above, in which the “black” was primarily the “observed.” Only by first being exposed as “the most visible symbols of the abolitionist cause” to the eyes of a Northern public was it possible for former slaves to move into the position of becoming a documenting eyewitness (Bruce 213). Douglass, for instance, retrospectively describes the first stage of this process in *My Bondage*, when he recalls how he “was generally introduced as a ‘*chattel*’ – a ‘*thing*’ – a piece of southern ‘*property*’ – the chairman assuring the audience that *it* could speak” (360, emphasis in original). On the black body as a spectacle on abolitionist circuits cf. Cutter; Wood; or Fleetwood; on the tradition of antebellum blackface minstrelsy as one component of producing the black as the “observed” cf. e.g. Nowatzki; and Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*.

<sup>100</sup> Many scholars have emphasized the mediatedness and the “various degrees of editorial distortion” that mark the over 6,000 texts that make up the genre (Ring 119). Not only was a considerable number of the narratives written down by (most often white) amanuenses such as, for instance, Isaac T. Hopper, who published what former slaves told him in a continuous column in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* under heading “Tales of Oppression.” Moreover, the slave’s voices as such – even where a text was “Written by Her/Himself” – were typically “enclosed” by writings of white abolitionists that “testified to the narrator’s accuracy, his character, his very existence” (Hedin 25). On the mediatedness of the slave’s voice cf. Ernest, “African American Literature”; Andrews, “The First Fifty Years.”

<sup>101</sup> Even though my focus at this point lies predominantly on the slave narrative, it should be noted that the “entry of the formerly enslaved observer” was a much broader cultural phenomenon that played out throughout various forms of antebellum African American cultural production. One important example apart from the narratives I discuss are the moving panoramas, for instance, that by Henry Box Brown’s, that became particularly popular throughout the 1840s and 1850s. Cf. on Brown’s panorama e.g. Moody, “We Wish to Plead” 149-150; and J. Ruggles 69-109. More generally on panoramas as parts of antebellum visual culture, see Anne Baker; or Born 87-90.

and discourse not only reversed the formerly ubiquitous logic of the black as the object – never the subject – of vision; it also became a vital part of a subversive critique of the other two central premises underlying an antebellum visual regime, namely of the ideas of an accessibility of truth via vision and of a disembodied eye. Beyond offering “an alternative to the story of bondage whipped onto the backs of slaves” in the racial spectacles of abolitionism (Moody, “African American Women” 110), the fugitive slave narrative undermined precisely these two notions, and it did so in part through its own discursive status as a thoroughly questioned and contested eye-witness account.

An example that reveals the ways in which the fugitive slave narrative, considered as the discursive event of the entry of the slave-observer, presented a critique of dominant antebellum assumptions about vision through its very existence as eye-witness-account may be found when turning to a letter by a former slaveholder, A.C.C. Thompson. Written as a response to Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative*, and published in the *Delaware Republican* in 1845, Thompson’s letter accuses Douglass’s *Narrative* of exhibiting a “glaring impress of falsehood on every page,” and seeks to “give the public some information respecting the validity of this narrative” (88). Crucially, however, the author seeks justification of his claims on the grounds of his *own* status as an eye-witness, claiming to give a first-hand knowledge of the persons depicted in Douglass’s book whom he has been “acquainted with” (88). Thus engaging *itself* in a rhetoric of visibility, Thompson’s response becomes immersed in the very “visual battleground” first opened up by the fugitive’s eye. He claims to “speak truth” and begins to catalogue his observations, such as that Douglass had been “an unlearned, and rather an ordinary negro,” Thomas Lamdin a “good-natured and harmless” fellow, and Thomas Auld of “irreproachable Christian character.” Ultimately, Thompson concludes that “I have given a true representation of the persons connected with the aforesaid Narrative, and I respectfully submit the fact to the judgment of an impartial public” (89-91).

Read in the context of the delineated visual regimes, the letter thus not only exemplifies the controversies that typically surrounded antebellum slave narratives, but also reveals the deeper subversive potential of the slave’s eye. By relying on visibility, Thompson’s letter hints at the ways in which vision itself, or, more precisely, the fundamental assumption of seeing as knowing, was effectively subverted in the very act of attacking and thereby *not* denying the *unreliability* of the eye. If Douglass, backed up by Garrison’s “white envelope,” claimed to have seen and tell truth, and Thompson likewise claimed to have

seen and tell truth, then the “impartial public” – crucially, those are the words on which Thompson’s letter ends – becomes the ultimate end that is faced with the dilemma of a pure discourse that subverts, as a whole, the act of seeing as inherently connected to truth. The constellation itself, in which the former slave sees, in combination with the attacks on such seeing that played out on the very same ground of a rhetoric of visibility, bears the potential to deconstruct the basic assumptions of this ground. The black observer, through the genre of the fugitive slave narrative, became part of a general challenge of the link between a subject’s vision and truth. Thus, if, as Crary notes, “[t]hroughout the first half of the nineteenth century, an extensive amount of work in science, philosophy, psychology, and aesthetics was coming to terms in various ways with the understanding that vision, or any of the senses, could no longer claim an essential objectivity or certainty” (“Incapacities” 60), then the fugitive slave narrative’s emergence played a vital role in this broader process in a U.S. American context. As the ex-slave’s eye entered into discourse and became a factor to be negotiated, the underlying matrix itself became unsettled – attacking the slave’s eye meant, at the same time, an attack on the truth-seeking eye itself.

### Two Eyes: African American (Anti-)Pastoralism

This multifaceted problematization of vision within and through the slave narrative provides a crucial context for reconsidering the formation of an African American pastoral tradition. When reread through the lens of a long-established link between the pastoral and the visual, the delineated emergence of the black observer not only meant a critique of dominant antebellum visual regimes, but must also be considered a shaping influence on an African American employment of the pastoral. The particular ways in which former slaves were being looked at, came to look, and documented their observations through the visual politics and rhetoric of visibility of the fugitive slave narrative had profound effects on how these authors came to pastoralize; vision became foundational to the functioning of the pastoral as a mode of environmental knowledge in the African American literary tradition.

As noted above (cf. chapter 1, esp. 16-17), (eco-)critics have predominantly read the African American literary tradition as marked by an antipastoral impulse. Michael Bennett influentially reinforced this trend in ecocriticism through his claim that “the nature of slavery in the United States created the link between anti-pastoralism and African

American culture that has been operative from Douglass's day to our own" (195), and others have since added considerable evidence in support of Bennett's assessment, thus further validating the notion of an antipastoral stance of African American literature in general and of the slave narrative in particular.<sup>102</sup> However, while it cannot be denied that the African American relation to the pastoral is generally problematic, since the mode was undoubtedly deeply racialized as "a system whereby those of European descent controlled a pastoral landscape that includes those of African descent as part of their property" (Bennett 205-206), the question is nonetheless in how far "antipastoral" is an adequate descriptive term for conceptualizing African American literature's environmental dimensions and for closely reading what happens in this particular tradition.

In this respect, two points of critique come to mind. First, the term "antipastoral" in itself, if read against the common Americanist notion of "pastoral" as referring "broadly to all literature that celebrates an ethos of rurality or nature or wilderness over against an ethos of metropolitanism" (Buell, *Imagination* 439), seems to imply an overwhelming separation in African American literature not only from the pastoral mode but from nature per se. If, in other words, "pastoral" is used "to refer to *any* kind of rural content" (Lewis 430, emphasis mine), then referring to African American literature as deeply "*antipastoral*" in turn runs the danger of becoming complicit in subconsciously reinforcing the (false) stereotype of a general African American disinterestedness in environmental questions. Although I am not suggesting that this is what happened – let alone was intended – in ecocritical engagements with African American literature as antipastoral, a word of caution in this respect may be at hand. In the context of American racial history and of the popular Americanist use of the term "pastoral," applying the term "antipastoral" too universally or unreflexively may mislead into notions of an "absence" or "deficiency" within the black literary tradition. We may run the risk of doing precisely that of which bell hooks warns us when she writes that "it has been easy for folks to forget that black people were first and foremost a people of the land" ("Touching the Earth" 30).

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<sup>102</sup> Myers, for instance, agrees with Bennett that "the pastoral and the wild are sites of terror and incarceration" ("Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral" 152); Martin sees a trauma that leaves the texts he explores as carrying "with them a pejorative understanding of pastoral" ("Lynching Sites" 94); and Scruggs argues with respect African American films that an antipastoral tradition often involves "the pastoral becom[ing] the site of a primal crime" (323). See also Ownby; and Preston-McGee, who is more critical of the antipastoral as describing the African American literary tradition when she argues that "[r]ather than tak[ing] an entirely anti-pastoral stance, black writers frequently reworked and embraced the pastoral mode often as a way to expose their casting out from it" (ii). For a general assessment of scholarship on the pastoral in African American literature cf. note 25 (chapter 1).

Secondly, and this point is of more “practical” relevance, the notion and term “antipastoral,” when taken in too narrow a sense, may foreclose more concrete analyses for the (eco-)critic who reads African American literature. One may unduly de-emphasize, through an overly antipastoral lens, those parts of the tradition in which black authors indeed *did* employ the pastoral, and overlook to what specific ends and with what effects this happened. If we approach African American letters primarily through a notion of the antipastoral as occurring in moments when “the natural world can no longer be constructed as ‘a land of dreams,’ but is in fact a bleak battle for survival” (Gifford, *Pastoral* 120), it may indeed be hard to look beyond the antipastoral impulse so often recognized. What I want to suggest instead, however, is taking a step back through a more fundamental understanding of the pastoral that involves the delineated correlation of the pastoral with the visual, in order to trace the concrete ways in which African American writers did (or did not) adopt pastoral perspectives and language. If the authors of slave narratives, as Ernest points out, “demonstrate familiarity with the literary conventions and standards of their day” (“Beyond” 223), e.g. with those of sentimentalism or the Gothic, we can treat the pastoral as another contemporary discursive convention that could become the vehicle of a critique that involved more than can be captured by the term “antipastoral.” Moving thus against an uncomplicated antipastoral reading by taking into account the emergence of the black observer opens up the potential to trace what Michelle Lewis has hinted at in her article on the “African-American Meta-Pastoral and Spatial Materialism,” namely African American writers’ “appropriation of classical pastoral texts and the entering into dialogue with modern pastoral writers” (Lewis 430).<sup>103</sup> Hence, the pastoral should be understood as a mode of environmental knowledge that intersected with the visual politics of the fugitive slave narrative and that enabled resistance in the sense of a pastoral-visual frame.

This is not to suggest, of course, that there is no antipastoralism in the diegetic worlds of the fugitive slave narrative when viewed through the lens of an emerging black observer.

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<sup>103</sup> In her discussion, Lewis primarily focuses on early twentieth century authors such as Hopkins, Chesnutt, Du Bois, Larsen, or Fauset. Although her article is brief and her readings somewhat cursory, the idea of the “meta-pastoral” is in some ways related to what I am suggesting with respect to reading an African American pastoral tradition more generally. When Lewis writes, for instance, that black authors “adopted and adapted the genre of classical pastoral as a language uniquely suited to discussions of American social space” and thus “deconstructed a long-standing American pastoral discourse,” it is precisely the “adopted and adapted” that also becomes the focus of a reading of the pastoral in conjunction with the visual. We need to trace – and in this respect the term “meta-pastoral” seems more productive than “antipastoral” – the concrete ways in which African American writers from the start set up and then developed a tradition of adapting, transforming, and signifying on the pastoral in conjunction with the visual.

Too numerous are the recurring images of violence and backbreaking work in the “field of blood and blasphemy” (Douglass, *Narrative* 17); too harmful appear the imagery and tropes that mark landscapes of flight often replete with a threatening wilderness, bloodhounds and slave-hunters that do not allow for an idealizing pastoralism; and too positive seem the frequent representations of cities (even in slave states) in opposition to injurious rural-pastoral environments.<sup>104</sup> As nature was “harnessed by the system of slavery” in various ways, the looks that slave narratives’ rhetoric of visibility put on display thus often either disengaged pastoral impulses altogether or portrayed potentially pastoral scenes and landscapes in antipastoral terms (Zarzycka 257). At least in this sense, an absence of pastoral and presence of antipastoral imagery therefore support the prevalent (ecocritical) idea that encounters with non-human nature were primarily parts of a “bleak battle for survival” in the context of the fugitive slave narrative (Gifford, *Pastoral* 120).

At the same time, however, and despite such depictions of harmful landscapes, there is much more than a mere antipastoral impulse in the fugitive slave narrative when closely reading the genre within the context of the emergence of a black observer and a rhetoric of visibility. What becomes visible are moments of a “pastoral vision”; there exist pastoral forms and language that attain a crucial function within the context of the slave narrative’s visual politics. More precisely, I want to suggest that the pastoral became involved in a characteristic “double vision” in the slave narrative: Through the employment of a “pastoral eye,” i.e. forms of a literary visualization that enabled a pastoral appreciation and depiction of nature, the narrative became all the more powerful in depicting the “slave’s eye.” Vision came to oscillate between “two eyes,” one being that of the pastoral, the other being that of the slave. Thus read, the employment of pastoral elements in the slave narrative not only meant acknowledging an aesthetic understanding of a pastoralized relation to nature, but also became both a means for understanding (and ultimately attaining) freedom, as well as

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<sup>104</sup> The celebration of the liberating potential of cities has for a long time been noted in African American studies, and ecocritics have often incorporated such claims into their readings, e.g. when Bennett notes how fugitives embraced “the rejuvenating forces of the city” over “the deadening influence of the country” (204); or when Myers (2009) argues that “the usually pastoral characteristics of freedom and sustenance” have mostly been attributed to the city in African American literature and culture, and that there “is certainly a historical trend in African-American culture to privilege the city” (152, 155). On the diverse treatments of the city in African American literature cf. Tyner, who focuses on the meanings of the city in the Black Power movement; Denning (1998) or Emmett (2011) on the “ghetto pastoral”; Scruggs, who focuses on film; or for a general overview the contributions in Hakutani and Butler (1995). For interpretations of the city in nineteenth-century African American literature see e.g. Ostrowski, who analyzes intersections between the slave narrative and the city-mysteries novel; Hassler, who considers the city in Delany; or Butler (“The City”), who focuses on Frederick Douglass.

a vehicle for the critique of slavery. In this way, the intersection of the pastoral with the visual in the slave narrative marks the emergence of a self-conscious double vision that is a foundational component of an African American environmental knowledge.

A text that illustrates such a complex involvement of the pastoral is Henry Box Brown's 1849 *Narrative of Henry Box Brown*. Judged by the mere quantity of negatively connoted descriptions of non-human nature, this narrative, which won fame due to Brown's ingenious escape via mailing himself in a crate to Philadelphia, may well be read as an antipastoral text. The author-narrator recounts, for instance, how his mother explains slavery to him by analogizing being ripped apart as a family to the way in which "leaves are stripped from off the trees of the forest," thereby obstructing the development of idealizing impulses with respect to both family relationships and natural environments (Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown* 15). Moreover, Brown repeatedly laments the "plains of Southern oppression," describing in painful detail how the slave's cries "are wafted on every Southern gale to the ears of our Northern brethren, and the hot winds of the South reach our fastnesses amid the mountains and hills of our rugged land, loaded with stifled cries and choking sobs of poor desolate women, as her babes are torn one by one from her embrace" (36). "Gales," "hot winds," "rugged land" – there is apparently not much in this kind of imagery that goes beyond an outspoken antipastoral stance.

The matter appears in a different light, however, when turning to one of the central scenes of Brown's *Narrative*, namely that which motivates the author-narrator's decision to take flight. The passage describes the day Brown's wife and children are, without warning, sold away from him – a pivotal event that according to Brown reveals the most devastating and dehumanizing aspect of Southern slavery, since there is "no comparison with those internal pangs which are felt by the soul when the hand of the merciless tyrant plucks from one's bosom the object of one's ripened affections" (*Narrative of the Life* ii). On the outset, however, the passage depicts a summer day in pastoral terms:

It was on a pleasant morning, in the month of August, 1848, that I left my wife and three children safely at our little home, and proceeded to my allotted labor. The sun shone brightly as he commenced his daily task, and as I gazed upon his early rays, emitting their golden light upon the rich fields adjacent to the city, and glancing across the abode of my wife and family, and as I beheld the numerous companies of slaves, hieing [sic!] their way to their daily labors, and reflected upon the difference between their lot and mine, I felt that, although I was a slave, there were many alleviations to my cup of sorrow. (Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown* 50)

Although somewhat compromised by “a cup of sorrow,” a pastoral eye is, at first, the dominant mode of the narrator’s perception. A “gaze upon the early rays emitting their golden light” appears temporarily possible for Brown, and is complemented by the family idyll of “a parting kiss upon the lips of my faithful wife” and a pressing “to my bosom [of] the little darling cherubs” (51).

The almost Arcadian qualities of the scene which echoes the conventions of the plantation pastoral is, however, rhetorically interrupted by Brown’s direct address of the reader (cf. 50), which foreshadows the horrid news that “[y]our wife and smiling babes are gone” (51). The pastoral, at this point, is disrupted, pulled back into a reality that the (white) plantation pastoral completely omits. Instead of remaining in his pastoral frame, Brown’s horrid revelation is followed by a phrase that clearly echoes the title of Weld’s *American Slavery As It Is*: “And this is Slavery, its certain, necessary and constituent part. [...] This is Slavery” (52). The rhetoric of visibility resurfaces, seeking to recover, at the interstice between abolitionist rhetoric and the fugitive witness’s account, an image of the peculiar institution that both neglects the pastoral as part of the slave’s experience and denies the pastoral imagination of a (Northern) readership that had just been incited: “No, reader,” Brown apologetically implies, “for as long as three millions of my countrymen pine in cruel bondage, on Virginia’s exhausted soil, and in Carolina’s pestilential rice swamps; in the cane-breaks of Georgia, and on the cotton fields of Louisiana and Mississippi, and in the insalubrious climate of Texas,” imagining nature in pastoral terms is impossible (56). The pastoral thus becomes part of a “split” of the slave’s vision: By temporarily releasing his readers into a familiar pastoral gaze, Brown’s text all the more roughly opens their eyes to the lot of the slave and her/his violently impaired vision.

Taken as a whole, the passage thus depicts a much more complex employment of pastoral elements than the claim of an overwhelmingly antipastoral African American tradition would suggest. If, according to Gifford, elements of antipastoral “are not in any way idealized; in fact, they are often harsh and and [sic!] unattractive” (“Pastoral” 54), then the scene’s ultimate negation of the pastoral is not merely an instance of antipastoralism, but a deliberate critique of slavery through a pastoralism that has been incorporated into Brown’s rhetoric of visibility. On the one hand, the passage envisions the landscape for the reader (and for the author-narrator himself) as pastorally accessible and appreciable. There is the idea of a universally human pastoral eye that seems possible even if there is a “little cup of sorrow” (Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown* 50). Brown at this point

strategically grants temporary access to an established pastoral framework and vision in order to align his readership. On the other hand, however, there is simultaneously that poisoned eye of the slave – vision as embodied within the unfree materiality of the slave’s body, which the narrator seeks to make visible in itself. Here, the rhetoric of visibility is not merely used to show the atrocities of the peculiar institution as such, but to draw attention to the presence of a double vision for the slave that does not categorically exclude the pastoral per se, but that stresses its status as a white privilege. In this sense, we find yet another form of “visual violence” of antebellum slavery. Not only is there a panoptic regime, i.e. a master’s gaze that aligned non-human nature within modes of surveillance, but the de-humanizing denial of pastoral appreciation to the slave is revealed as one of the peculiar institution’s atrocities that produced a split vision which often marked the slave narrative’s rhetoric of visibility.

This split of vision can be found in a variety of texts. The most famous of them, Douglass’s *Narrative* (1845), has been read by Bennett as “a fascinating anti-pastoral that both draws on and calls into question the conventions of American nature writing” (198). There are indeed numerous incidents and descriptions within the *Narrative* that support its categorization as antipastoral. One finds, for instance, the celebration of the liberating potential of the city as opposed to the country (and not vice versa), the repeated emphases on the hardships experienced with respect to work-life in the field, or references to the ways in which nature is portrayed as complicit in enslavement, for instance, in the Covey-episode discussed above. Two passages in particular appear to be strikingly antipastoral. On the one hand, there is the description, centrally discussed by Bennett, of Colonel Lloyd’s “finely cultivated garden,” where “tarred” fences symbolize the inaccessibility of the Southern pastoral to the ones who maintain it (cf. Douglass, *Narrative* 20).<sup>105</sup> On the other hand, I would suggest that another clearly antipastoral moment might be found in Douglass’s account of his grandmother’s fate:

[M]y grandmother, who was now very old, having outlived my old master and all his children, having seen the beginning and end of all of them, and her present owners finding she was of but little value, her frame already racked with the pains of old age, and complete helplessness fast stealing over her once active limbs, they took her to the woods, built her a little hut, put up a little mud chimney, and then made her welcome to the privilege of supporting herself there in perfect loneliness;

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<sup>105</sup> The discussion of this passage is central to Bennett’s claim of Douglass’s antipastoralism (cf. esp. 200). For another environmentally oriented interpretation that reads this scene along the lines of American wilderness, Puritanism and American Romanticism cf. Hunter, esp. 101-103.

thus virtually turning her out to die! (*Narrative* 37)

The description is stunning when read as an antipastoral mirror-image to transcendentalist conceptions of nature, e.g. in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). Instead of seeking refuge and renewal in the nature of the woods, as is the case for Thoreau's author-narrator, the old woman in this scene is virtually banned, which leaves Douglass only an antipastoral lens for describing her experience. Hence, a pastoral imagination becomes unavailable even with respect to the retiring slave; left to herself, it is not a revelation but a curse for the worn-out woman to "hear by day the moans of the dove, and by night the screams of the hideous owl" in her lonely hut "before a few dim embers" (38).<sup>106</sup>

Nonetheless, and despite these antipastoral overtones of Douglass's narrative, it is, again, a central scene, that highlights how the employment of pastoral elements also extends beyond the mere antipastoral. Consider in this respect Douglass's contemplation when standing on the banks of the Chesapeake Bay:

Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition. I have often, in the deep stillness of a summer's Sabbath, stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay, and traced, with saddened heart and tearful eye, the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean. The sight of these always affected me powerfully. (Douglass, *Narrative* 46)

While scholars have repeatedly and intensely focused on what follows, namely Douglass's famous apostrophe, this passage was rarely taken as an act of vision as such, an act of seeing and relating to the world in its very materiality. Doing so, the setting would at first glance qualify, as in the case of Brown's *Narrative*, as an appreciable one, as a rural site that could be perceived in pastoral terms. The scenery potentially carries the earmarks of a "delight in the natural" (Gifford, *Pastoral* 2), and the text to some extent recognizes this potential in the apostrophe, where we catch glimpses of a harmonious pastoral imagery in the depiction of "the gentle gales" that "merrily" move the ships at a distance (Douglass, *Narrative* 46).

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<sup>106</sup> An instance from another well-known narrative that parallels this scene's equation of life in the woods with threat and disaster rather than Romantic renewal and refuge can be found in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Although, in this text, the threat of leading a life in a cabin corresponds not with being left to die a lonely death, but with the sexual prosecution and potential rape of a female slave, Dr. Flint's proposal of building "a small house for me [Linda Brent], in a secluded place, four miles away from the town" similarly suggests that the non-human natural world cannot be framed and conceptualized in pastoral but only in horrifying terms (45).

For Douglass the slave, however, this way of seeing and framing is, although not unimaginable, at least temporarily inaccessible. Standing on the “lofty banks” he does indeed see “those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white” (46), and even alludes to the potential appeal of the scene for a pastoral depiction in his imagining what this sight must be like for the “eye of the freemen” (46). Instead of taking this position, however, not only his mind but essentially his *vision* remains tied to the very materiality connected to the seeing eye; his capability of sight is inevitably bound to his moment, to his body, to his situation. The slave’s eye in itself is, Douglass emphasizes, “tearful,” becoming thus a materially altered visual organ, and it is the very materiality of this visual organ – the tear-water *within* his eyes – that ultimately does not permit the pastoral mode for an appreciation of the waters stretching out outside of his body and *before* his eyes.

A similar case can be found in a narrative published only four years after Douglass’s, Henry Bibb’s *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* (1849). In a passage highly reminiscent and apparently strongly influenced by Douglass’s apostrophe (cf. N. Morton 43), Bibb recalls:

I have stood upon the lofty banks of the river Ohio, gazing upon the splendid steamboats, wafted with all their magnificence up and down the river, and I thought of the fishes of the water, the fowls of the air, the wild beasts of the forest, all appeared to be free to go just where they pleased, and I was an unhappy slave!  
(Bibb 29-30)

Again, we find an act of seeing by the side of a body of water – a predominant theme in fugitive slave narratives as well as African American literature in general.<sup>107</sup> In this particular case, the prime object of perception is the scenery of the Ohio River that marks the boundary between Kentucky and Ohio, between slavery and freedom. The landscape visually perceived here is thus in itself inscribed as a demarcation of the all-embracing institution of the South.<sup>108</sup> In Bibb’s act of vision, too, we face a moment of looking that is simultaneously denying the pastoral whilst employing pastoral language. While Bibb goes even further than Douglass in explicitly assembling elements that would make for Southern pastoral imagery – consider the references to “the fishes of the water,” or “the fowls of the

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<sup>107</sup> On the crucial role of water in African American literature cf. the studies by Wardi (*Water*; “Currents of Memory”).

<sup>108</sup> See on the Ohio River region, its role as a “natural” border between slavery and freedom, and its involvement in the Underground Railroad e.g. Hagedorn (2002), who focuses on the “Ripley Line” as part of the Underground Railroad network; also Griffler (2004) and LaRoche (2014). Other literary depictions of this particular region may be found e.g. in Henry Parker’s narrative, or in the famous scene of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that describes Eliza Harris’s flight over a frozen Ohio River.

air” in their potentially harmonious interplay with the steamboats – the slave observer is, again, ultimately marked by a double vision. Although there are pastoral associations on the surface, the act of perception is inevitably marked by Bibb’s own position; the tension is, again, that between a universal “pastoral eye” and the embodied “eye of the slave.” All Bibb’s author-narrator can find due to this split in seeing is a stark contrast between the freedom found in the observed nature and the denial of such freedom to himself. While perceiving and striving towards the pastoral through the notion of a mode of vision that is eventually inaccessible to him, Bibb, by recognizing his embodied act of visual perception, draws attention to the unnaturalness of his own position as a slave and, more generally, criticizes the unnaturalness of the system of slavery as such.

The fugitive slave narrative therefore not only unsettles dominant antebellum visual regimes as it marks the entry of a black observer and neglects a disembodied, unmarked vision through its emphasis on the connection of the eye to the (enslaved) body, but also involves the pastoral in a visual play with a double-edged eye. Brown, Douglass, Bibb and others not merely engage the antipastoral, but employ the pastoral through a rhetoric of visibility marked by a double vision – a process that is reminiscent of W.E.B. Du Bois’ famous notion of a “double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (*Souls* 14).

In this respect, the discussed texts testify to the ways in which “looking at one’s self through the eyes of others,” i.e. in terms of a gaze that, for Du Bois, is turned *inward*, also existed in terms of looking *outward* at non-human natural environments through lenses such as the pastoral. On the one hand, the implications of this *environmental* double-consciousness, articulated in the case of the fugitive slave narrative through a double vision that involved the pastoral, were no doubt torturous, as the “free,” pastoral eye made the “unfree,” enslaved one even more aware of its bondage. On the other hand, it has been seen that there lies also a twofold liberating potential in the “two eyes” of the fugitive slave narrative. Firstly, because a doubled eye, turned into a doubled discourse, could engage antebellum audiences through the familiar frame of the pastoral that could, however, ultimately be denied to the end of exposing even more drastically the harmfulness of slavery. Secondly, since looking at nature through the pastoral held an empowering potential for the slave her/himself, as it consciously drew attention to the possibility that the mind and soul of the slave may eventually be freed. This potentially liberating effect of the

employment of a “pastoral eye” becomes particularly prominent in Douglass. For if we take the Chesapeake apostrophe as a crucial part of the turning point within his character’s development, it becomes clear that the fight and victory over Covey that promptly follow in the *Narrative* are also the result of embracing a double vision that involved the pastoral. Thus, the pastoral itself and the self-conscious recognition of the “two eyes” – the pastoralizing “eye of freeman” and the “eye of the slave” (cf. Douglass, *Narrative* 46) – are crucially involved in opening up the possibility of Douglass’s chiasmus, of gaining what in Douglass’s case is emphasized as “manhood,” and, ultimately, of freedom.

Thus, the pastoral, as problematic as it is from an antebellum African American perspective, attained a much more complex status in terms of its effects on the psychology of former slaves, their audiences, and the cultural moment of the period in general than could possibly be communicated through the notion of a mere antipastoralism. This is not to deny that the relation of African American slaves to the pastoral as well as to non-human nature more generally has largely been one of trauma and alienation. Through what Outka has called a “conflation of blackness with nature” (25) that was often used to justify the existence of the peculiar institution, there was without a doubt a general urge in the fugitive slave narrative to move *out of* nature and *into* “civilization” in order to become human. Former slaves often display in their narratives a felt necessity to *separate* themselves from the non-human world as far as possible *in order to* enter the realms of what was recognized as the human, and when scholars like Stepto emphasize that “the Afro-American quest for freedom has been more precisely a quest for freedom *and* literacy” (“Distrust” 301, emphasis in original), this urge towards the written word may also be read as one of many instances through which this separation was acted out. In this respect, the slave narrative as a genre displays at its core, to employ a term coined by ecofeminist Val Plumwood, a move towards “hyper-separation” from non-human nature as part of its overall strategy of turning the “racialized” slave into the “civilized” human.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> By “hyper-separation,” Plumwood generally means such separating and subordinating dualisms characteristic of Western culture that “create a sharp, ontological break or radical discontinuity” between “nature” and “reason” (101). Plumwood applies her concept in the context of particular groups such as women and colonized Others, where one of the functions of hyper-separation was “to mark out the Other for separate and inferior treatment. Separate ‘natures’ explain, justify and naturalise widely different privileges and fates between men and women, coloniser and colonised, justify assigning the Other inferior access to cultural goods, and block identification, sympathy, and tendencies to question inequalities” (102). With respect to the fugitive slave narrative, one may identify several of these aspects. On the one hand, it must be noted that (U.S. American) “civilization’s” power relied on the general hyper-separation between “reason” and “nature” that entailed the justification of black enslavement. On the other hand, one

This observation notwithstanding, however, one can see that this hyper-separation should not be confused with an all-embracing antipastoral stance of the fugitive slave narrative let alone the African American literary tradition. Instead of displaying some form of pure antipastoral, the genre frequently invoked and signified on the pastoral, even if it typically did so via engaging an environmental double-consciousness that was acted out through its rhetoric of visibility. Whether in terms of using the pastoral as a critical lens to engage (and disillusion) audiences in order to expose slavery's evils, or in terms of self-consciously employing a (partial) access to the pastoral eye in order to psychologically initiate freedom and gain agency, the pastoral became involved in the slave narrative as a multifaceted device that was played out through the genre's "two eyes." Hence, if, as Gifford has suggested, "[n]o other trope is so deeply entrenched in Western culture" as the pastoral (*Ecocriticism* 33), then this trope and mode became "entrenched" in the case of the African American literary tradition via the visual, i.e. by becoming a critical lens within the rhetoric of visibility of the fugitive slave narrative. This entry through the fundamental correlation between the visual and the pastoral – symbolized in Theocritus's Ur-emblem of the Cyclops – and the resulting "double vision" in the slave narrative are foundational to an environmental knowledge in the African American literary tradition.

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should realize how the racialization coming out of this first hyper-separation in turn produced a second, literary hyper-separation that marked the fugitive slave narrative. In this sense, the second hyper-separation is essentially a product of the ones first "hyper-separated."

## 3.2

### Reclaiming (through) Space: Topographies of Enslavement, the Literary Heterotopia of the Underground Railroad, and the Co-Agency of the Non-Human

“[T]he slave was a fixture; he had no choice, no goal, but was pegged down to one single spot, and must take his root there or nowhere. The idea of removal elsewhere came generally in the form of a threat, and in punishment for a crime.”  
(Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times* 119)

“I have never approved of the very public manner in which some of our western friends have conducted what they call the *underground railroad*, but which, I think, by their own declarations, has been made most emphatically the *upperground railroad*.”  
(Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life* 65-66)

“I thanked God, and thanked the horse for what he had done for me, and wished him a safe journey back home.”  
(Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures* 163)

From the early 1850s on, William Still, one of the most effective “conductors” of the Underground Railroad, entrusted his records to a Philadelphia graveyard. Whether he snuck out at night-time, hastily rushing to his secret hiding place, as romantics of the “Liberty Line” might imagine, or placed his writings there in broad daylight we will probably never know for sure. What we do know, however, is that Still literally buried his memories in a crypt,<sup>110</sup> where they remained hidden throughout some of the most eventful years of American history. The Civil War came and went, and it was only in the late 1860s that Still finally recovered his material from the vault that held his treasure “in the very midst of the region of the dead and the land of forgetfulness” (Boyd xxxiv). His purpose then was to commence working on a project to write, as he terms it in a letter to his daughter dated August 13, 1867, “the History of the U.G.R.R” (qtd. Hendrick and Hendrick 17), and his efforts were finally crowned in

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<sup>110</sup> These “memories” consisted of notes taken from interviews with fugitives and correspondence of the “Philadelphia Vigilance Committee,” the organization that conducted Underground Railroad activities in the area. Initially, the Committee did not keep records of its activities for the obvious risks involved in an enterprise, in which “[t]he right hand was not to know what the left hand was doing” (Still xx). The motivation to begin his documentation lay in William Still’s accidental reunion with his long-lost brother Peter, which made him aware that others, “separated by Slavery, were in a similar way living without the slightest knowledge of each other’s whereabouts,” and for whose future reunion it may be vital to furnish his records (xx). For more biographical information on Still cf. Boyd and Khan.

1872 with the publication of *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, &c.*

The story of Still and his records is fascinating and revealing in a number of ways. To begin with, both the way in which Still employed his secret hiding-place and the reception of his work by contemporaries and subsequent generations are representative of the Underground Railroad and its legacy. On the one hand, the long-term secret placelessness of Still's writings mirrors the subversive spatial matrix commonly associated with the Underground Railroad. The crypt was a perfect choice in this sense, not only as the term stems from the Greek "krypte," meaning "hidden, secret" (cf. Hoad), but also because a cemetery seems to conceptually coincide with an imagery of "entombment" and "rebirth" often found in fugitives' descriptions of slavery and their escapes. On the other hand, the fairing of Still's work through time may be read as characteristic of a long-standing discourse on the Underground Railroad since Reconstruction. Although favourably received upon its publication in 1872,<sup>111</sup> *The Underground Rail Road* was largely ignored afterwards and has been republished only twice in unabridged form in the twentieth century<sup>112</sup> – a process that is emblematic of some of the turns that engagement with the "Liberty Line" took in both the American imagination and in academic scholarship.

For a considerable time, such Underground Railroad scholarship remained under the major influence of a handful of post-Civil War reminiscences by (white) abolitionists such as Levi Coffin (1876), Eber M. Pettit (1879), Laura Haviland (1881), Robert C. Smedley (1883), and, in particular, Wilbur Siebert's pioneering academic work. Siebert's *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (1898), the first major scholarly study on the subject, for which its author had contacted hundreds of former abolitionists and their descendants in the 1890s to gather up evidence, remains a crucial source as "a landmark history of much value" until today (McEntee 952). For most of this time, however, working with Siebert's material also meant

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<sup>111</sup> Still's work went through three consecutive editions between 1872 and 1883 despite its enormous length of almost 800 pages and its deficits in terms of a proper organization of its vast material. According to Gara, *The Underground Rail Road* nevertheless "undoubtedly circulated more widely than any other first-hand account of the underground railroad" ("William Still" 50). For more information on Still's methods of publishing and distribution (for the third edition the author took on the role of publisher himself), cf. Stevens (148); and Gara, "William Still" 49-50.

<sup>112</sup> Unabridged versions of Still's work were published by Arno Press and the *New York Times* in 1968, and by Plexus in 2005; subsequent references will be to the 2005 edition. Apart from these reprints, recent editions by George and Wilene Hendrick (2004) and by Ian Finseth (2007) incorporate longer excerpts of Still's monumental work. Moreover, Still's original records are now available on the internet (cf. for more information, Foner 238). Taken together, this renewed availability suggests that *The Underground Rail Road* and its important message, which had for a considerable time "been hidden under a mass of literature written by the abolitionists, their descendants, and admirers" (Gara, "William Still" 50), has finally been restored to its rightful place and is now indeed regarded, as Foner suggests, as a "treasure trove" (12).

accepting his idea of the Underground Railroad as a “great and intricate network” of stations run by white abolitionists (Siebert, *Underground Railroad* 62). Thus, as Bordewich points out in *Bound for Canaan* (2005), “[f]or generations, Americans thought of the Underground Railroad as a mostly monochromatic narrative of high-minded white people condescending to assist terrified and helpless blacks” (4) – a tendency that only changed with Larry Gara’s critical work in the early 1960s. In *The Liberty Line* (1961), Gara attacked both Siebert’s exaggerated idea of an elaborately organized underground network as well as the focus that scholars had so far exhibited on its basis on white male protagonists at the expense of the agency of the fugitives themselves and of free blacks.<sup>113</sup> As the argument was in tune with the changing climate of the 1960s, Gara’s study set up a lasting Underground Railroad scepticism that effectuated a temporary neglect of the phenomenon as a mere “myth” in scholarly work.<sup>114</sup>

More recent academic engagement with the subject, however, tends to be more equilibrated between the extreme poles of Siebert’s “intricate network”-idea and Gara’s vehement scepticism, therein turning the focus onto the biographical<sup>115</sup> and, especially, the local.<sup>116</sup> While certainly

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<sup>113</sup> And, one might add here, at the expense of the agency and crucial involvement of women. Although their role is not duly represented in Siebert, the Underground Railroad movement has more recently also been identified as a “seedbed of American feminism” (Bordewich 6); see for accounts of women in the abolitionist and Underground Railroad movements e.g. Yellin (1989); Ginzberg (1990); Sánchez-Eppler (1993); Jeffrey (1998); or Zackodnik (2011). The numerous misrepresentations in the Siebert tradition are by now routinely emphasized by scholars (Foner; Bordewich; Finseth (2007)), and researchers such as Charles Blockson, the pioneering collector of the Underground Railroad and eponymous donator of Temple University’s “Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection,” who laments that the story has “[r]arely [...] been told from the viewpoint of the central characters, the fugitive slaves” (*Underground Railroad* 1).

<sup>114</sup> Both the profound impact Gara’s argument had, and the subsequent tendency to ignore the Underground Railroad must be read in the context of “a much broader literature that challenged the idea that slaves were generally pliant and resigned to their roles as human chattel” (Carbado and Weise xi). Studies that evidently embrace this impetus (and by extension neglect the Underground Railroad as myth) range from Quarles’s *Black Abolitionists* (1969) to works such as Kolchin’s *American Slavery 1619-1877* (1993), which refers to “the fabled ‘Underground Railroad’” only once (158), and Franklin and Schweninger’s *Runaway Slaves* (1999), which likewise avoids addressing the phenomenon.

<sup>115</sup> There is recently a notable trend towards the biographical in literature and scholarship on the Underground Railroad. Apart from the abundance of both popular historical and scholarly writing on the eminent Harriet Tubman, a number of book-length biographies have turned to Underground Railroad figures such as Jermain W. Loguen (e.g. Hunter (1993); a second edition was published in 2013), Robert Purvis (Bacon (2007)), or David Ruggles (Hodges (2010)).

<sup>116</sup> Next to a “biographical” turn, there has also been a “local” turn in recent Underground Railroad scholarship, as a vast and growing number of (amateur) histories and scholarly studies since the turn of the twenty-first century reconsider the workings of the Underground Railroad with a focus on specific regions. Work has, for instance, been done on the Adirondacks region (Calarco (2004)), the Ohio Valley and River (Griffler (2004); LaRoche (2014); Hagedorn (2002)), Pennsylvania (Blockson (2001); Switala (2001)), Delaware, Maryland and West Virginia (Switala (2004)), or the urban settings of Washington, D.C. (Harrold (2003)) and New York (Sernett (2002); Wellman (2005); Switala (2006)); there is also work on the Canadian history and perspective (e.g. Smardz Frost (2007)). The process seems to be ongoing: Foner, in his 2015 *Gateway to Freedom*, which turns primarily to Underground Railroad activities in New York, suggests that “[f]ar more [...] remains to be done in analysing how vigilance networks functioned on the local level” (14-15).

denying the kind of coherent large-scale organization once suggested by Siebert, the general understanding at present is that the Underground Railroad was nevertheless “much more than a picturesque legend” (Bordewich 8). It should be understood, Foner proposes in *Gateway to Freedom* (2015), “not as a single entity but as an umbrella term for local groups that employed numerous methods to assist fugitives, some public and entirely legal, some flagrant violations of the law” (15). This noted, a more balanced perspective and a broadening of scope in scholarship<sup>117</sup> – which seem to be called for also in the face of the popularity the topic attains nowadays<sup>118</sup> – cannot belie the fact that the overall focus remains a largely historiographical one centered on the myth-vs.-reality paradigm. Scholars of the twenty-first century, although focusing meticulously on specific localities and regions, continue to be driven by the question Gara poses through the title of his contribution to Miller’s 2001 *Complete History of American Slavery*, namely, “Was there really an underground railroad?” (439).

The approach of this chapter diverges from this predominantly historiographic perspective, taking as its inspiration and point of departure another aspect of the Underground Railroad hinted at in Still’s hiding scheme: the question of the relation between *writing* (in Still’s case his “Records”) and *space* (in Still’s case the secret crypt). Thus, while the focus has so far been on how appropriating and signifying on the pastoral through the *visual* affected the articulation of African American environmental knowledge, the following turns to the foundations of African American environmental knowledge through the *spatial*. In this, I will trace the spatial and environmental dimensions of the Underground Railroad in the fugitive slave narrative not from a historiographical, but from a so far rarely taken literary perspective.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Apart from the focus on the local and the biographical, some recent scholarship has engaged in other aspects such as the (disputable) role of quilts as a means of secret communication (Tobin/Dobard (1999); for a critique see Smardz Frost 185) or the Underground Railroad as an American “Road Narrative” (Eke (2013)). Additionally, the recent past has seen the publication of Underground Railroad encyclopaedic works such as Hudson’s (2006); Snodgrass’s (2008); and Calarco’s (2008).

<sup>118</sup> Today, the Underground Railroad is not only “one of the most fascinating and misunderstood phenomena of nineteenth-century America,” but probably also the most popular one (DeBlasio 254; cf. also Blight, “Why the Underground Railroad”). In the face of growing public attention to the subject – e.g. through the iconic figure of “General Tubman” (cf. Casement 53-69), or through institutions such as the “National Underground Railroad Freedom Center at Cincinnati” (opened in 2004), regularly held Underground Railroad conferences, or activities of the U.S. Parks Service (cf. e.g. Ernest, “Traumatic Theology” 30) – it seems appropriate when Bordewich describes the Underground Railroad as occupying “a romantic place in the American imagination that is shared by only a few episodes in the nation’s history” (3). Part of the reason for this popularity may lie in the sense of interracial collaboration displayed in “the country’s first racially integrated civil rights movement” (4), i.e. in the fact that the Underground Railroad provides a “story of American ideals in action” (Horton, “Crusade” 175).

<sup>119</sup> While historiographical approaches routinely deploy former slaves’ autobiographies as (historical) sources, a deliberately literary perspective that turns specifically to the fugitive slave narrative’s depiction and employment of the Underground Railroad is rarely found. A rare exception that has an explicit focus on the literary is Earhart’s short entry in Gabler-Hover and Sattelmeyer’s *American History through Literature*

From this point of view, the Underground Railroad can be explored as a literary “heterotopia” (Foucault) which formerly enslaved authors employed to reinterpret traumatic notions of confinement into empowering concepts of concealment, and which they used strategically to subvert antebellum discourse. Crucially, thus rethinking the Underground Railroad as a literary “other-space” reveals its expanded meanings and functions within the discourse of the fugitive slave narrative. As the genre conceptualized the Underground Railroad in its own terms, it opened up an alternative Underground Railroad space that also included a co-agency of the non-human. Formerly enslaved narrators often present non-human elements of the fugitive’s space and, in particular, animated nature, as fulfilling the same functions (rendering assistance, offering confidants) usually attributed to the “human” Underground Railroad. In this sense, the slave narrative not only heterotopically functionalized what was conventionally known in the antebellum period as Underground Railroad, but also imaginatively carved out its own, alternative version of that space, which, to employ typical Underground Railroad vocabulary,<sup>120</sup> came to incorporate non-human “agents” and “conductors.” Hence, the Underground Railroad, while in its conventional understanding deeply anthropocentric,<sup>121</sup> was to some extent de-anthropocentrized in the fugitive slave narrative. Its space became a means of imagining identifications and alliances with non-human materialities and, thus, opened up another way for articulating environmental knowledge within a genre that was otherwise marked by a predominant urge toward “hyper-separation.”

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(2006). Moreover, two approaches that are somewhat related to an examination of the Underground Railroad from an African American literary perspective can be found in Zabel (2004) and Dixon (1987). Eventually, however, both take a different direction than my argument. Zabel, while starting out with questions relating to African Americans’ relation to the railroad in the nineteenth-century, has the overall aim to show how “twentieth-century African American writers use the train as a literary symbol” (1), and Dixon reads the *underground* metaphorically as “the region in slave songs that lies ‘down in the lonesome valley’ where individual strength is tested and autonomy achieved” (4), but does not focus on the functionalization of an Underground Railroad space.

<sup>120</sup> For a list of the kind of terminology that developed with respect to the Underground Railroad (e.g. “passenger” or “packages” for fugitives; “conductor” or “agent” for active members), see Ripley, “The Underground Railroad” 45; Khan 16; River; or Hudson (2006).

<sup>121</sup> Here, in the anthropocentrism that usually pertains to the idea of the Underground Railroad, lies in all probability the main reason why ecocritical work on African American literature and culture has hardly dealt with the concept so far; the only ecocritical study that makes a brief mention of the term is Ruffin’s (2010). To modify this perception and make the Underground Railroad a part of ecocritical discussions by reading it more broadly as a space that also includes the co-agency of the non-human is one of the major aims of this chapter.

## The Underground Railroad as African American Literary Heterotopia

In order to capture this environmental dimension of an African American literary Underground Railroad, it is crucial to consider first how the Underground Railroad came to be incorporated in fugitives' autobiographies as a space. Thus, one must ask on the outset: How did the concept become written *as a space* in the antebellum slave narrative, and how did it come to function as such both *within* and *through* these texts? Where and how did it hide or show itself as part of a "normal" or as a subversive space? How and with what implications, that is, was the Underground Railroad *heterotopic* in antebellum fugitives' accounts, and what characterized its functioning as a *literary* heterotopia?

In "Of Other Spaces," the text that first introduced the concept of heterotopia,<sup>122</sup> Foucault introduces "heterotopology" as "the study, analysis, description, and 'reading' of these different spaces" (232), and suggests six general principles of heterotopias. Heterotopias are (I) universal to all cultures; (II) diachronically variable; they (III) juxtapose many real, compatible spaces into one space; are (IV) intimately connected with time (heterochrony); (V) involve a system of opening and closing that isolates while simultaneously maintaining penetrability; and have (VI) a specific function respecting all other sites (cf. Foucault, "Other Spaces" 232-236).

When thinking the Underground Railroad along these criteria and in terms of the popular notion, still cherished by many Americans, of "a mysterious Underground Railroad with tunnels and hidey-holes" (Foner 11), it may thus seem rather obvious to identify the Underground Railroad as heterotopic. The "Liberty Line" might be imagined as a space that included several (secret) spaces (principle III); it seems to have involved a system of opening and closing, as fugitives entered into its matrix once they found one of its "operators" (V); and it appears to have had an overall function – that of remaining hidden until achieving freedom – with respect to all other spaces (VI).

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<sup>122</sup> Foucault's "Des espaces autres" (1967), originally a radio talk given in 1967, was first translated into English by Jay Miskowiec in 1984; references are to this translation. While the history of the concept of heterotopia within Foucault's work may be traced back to *The Order of Things* (1970), where Foucault refers to "heterotopias" in a linguistic sense as "destroy[ing] 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things [...] to 'hold together'" (xix), the concept has subsequently been crucial in influencing what is commonly referred to as the "spatial turn" in fields such as sociology, history, or literary and cultural studies. See for a well-organized scholarly bibliography on the concept sociologist Peter Johnson's website of the journal *Heterotopia Studies* (<<http://www.heterotopiastudies.com/bibliography/>>); cf. also chapter 2 of this study (40-41).

The matter appears in a different light, however, when considering the Underground Railroad as a *literary* heterotopia, i.e. a heterotopia emerging through the discourse of the antebellum slave narrative in its cultural dynamics and in its play with relations of racialized power. In this context, it is crucial to take into account the general topographies of Southern enslavement that form the spatial backdrop against which formerly enslaved narrators set and recount their personal experiences. The most prominent, grand spatial divide of these topographies, of the general “map” fugitives draw in their accounts, is no doubt that between North and South.<sup>123</sup> On the one hand, there is a North meaning the free states, freedom, spatial mobility, work and wages, and, often, Canada as Canaan. On the other hand, we find a South meaning slavery, being exposed to the arbitrary and cruel will of masters and overseers, to the physical and psychological atrocities of the “peculiar institution,” and to the thoroughly coerced relations of the slave’s body within space.

At the heart of topographies of enslavement, as they are depicted through fugitives’ texts, lies a sense of immobility coinciding with a seemingly all-embracing hierarchization of spatial patterns. The continuously described system, adhering to the dominant racial order, perpetually sought to control movements, directions and placements, and, thus, excessively compartmentalized space into confining units for the slave’s body. Consider, for instance, laws such as the following, compiled by Theodore Weld in *American Slavery As It Is* (1839):

If more than seven slaves together are found in any road without a white person, twenty lashes apiece; for visiting a plantation without a written pass, ten lashes; for letting loose a boat from where it is made fast, thirty-nine lashes; for having any article for sale without a ticket from his master, ten lashes; for traveling in any other than the most usual and accustomed road, when going alone to any place, forty lashes; for traveling in the night without a pass, forty lashes; for being found in another person’s Negro quarters, forty lashes; for hunting with dogs in the woods, thirty lashes; for being on horseback without the written permission of their master, twenty-five lashes; for riding or going abroad in the night, or riding horses in the daytime, without leave, a slave may be whipped, cropped, or branded in the cheek with the letter R, or otherwise punished, such punishment not extending to life, or so as to render him unfit for labor. (Weld 144)

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<sup>123</sup> It should be clear at this point that I am making this observation with respect to the *discourse* of antebellum fugitive slave narratives, not in terms of a general historical thesis. The latter could hardly be upheld, as various studies have demonstrated the actual diversity of fugitives’ flight behavior. On the one hand, there was a range of alternative forms of resistance apart from running away that would have to be taken into account. On the other hand, the direction taken in flights was by no means exclusively that from South to North, as numerous fugitive slaves, especially in the “Deep South,” remained in the vicinity becoming maroons, or sought to reach Southern cities seeking to blend in with the free black population (cf. Franklin and Schweninger (1999). This said, however, the South/North axis is without a doubt predominant in the representations considered in this chapter and the space they mapped out. For recent scholarship on marooning see Cowan (2005); Lockley (2009); Baram (2012); on maroons in antebellum literature, Schoolman (2012).

Such laws, cited by numerous abolitionist texts and narratives of the period,<sup>124</sup> articulate enslavement and non-freedom primarily in terms of a confining spatial control. Designed in accordance with the slaveholder's ultimate goal of controlling his "property," their punishments are primarily punishments for the commitment of "spatial" crimes, as the verbs used ("visiting"; "traveling"; "riding"; "going abroad") indicate. Space itself thus becomes corrupted through the production and sanctioning of crimes that break with a dominant spatial pattern, and that furnish a sense of immobility that became one of the earmarks of fugitive slave narratives' depictions of Southern enslavement.

Coincidental with this immobility, fugitives' accounts continually emphasize the forced mobility that characterized Southern chattel slavery.<sup>125</sup> Slaves were "herded" together in units, as extensively described, for instance, in William Wells Brown's *Narrative* (1847),<sup>126</sup> or individually hired out, sent off, or sold away in slave auctions that are vividly depicted in many seminal narratives such as Douglass's (*My Bondage* 412, 444-447) or Jacobs's (14-17). Thus, the only kind of "mobility" the black body underwent in spaces of enslavement was an enforced one that produced trauma and, most often, caused the separation of families. The sole kind of motion possible was therefore in itself an articulation of the inertia the slave's body attained in spaces of enslavement, since the prime principle, Douglass retrospectively points out, was that "the slave was a fixture; he had no choice, no goal, but was pegged down to one single spot, and must take his root there or nowhere. The idea of removal elsewhere came generally in the form of a threat, and in punishment for a crime" (*Life and Times* 119).

Moreover, the (im)mobility which laws sought to impose on the slave's body was, from a practical point of view, enforced through a variety of extra-legal social practices and institutions that are sometimes vividly described in fugitives' accounts, and that ranged from plantation

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<sup>124</sup> Weld's compilation is quoted, for instance, by John Passmore Edwards' 1852 *Uncle Tom's Companions* (208-209), and is repeated in several of Frederick Douglass's speeches and pamphlets, and, most famously, in his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) (cf. 413-414). Often, slave narratives used such enumerations to show how spatial restrictions extended to (nominally) free blacks as well (cf. e.g. *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, which extensively describes legal measures that hindered the movement of (free) blacks in Tennessee, Arkansas or Missouri (37-38)).

<sup>125</sup> On the slave population's movements due to the workings of the internal slave trade and what Walter Johnson has described as the "chattel principle" of Southern racial slavery (cf. "Introduction: The Future Store"), see Tadman (1989); Johnson (1999); Berlin (2003); and Deyle (2005).

<sup>126</sup> William W. Brown's *Narrative* gives an extensive first-hand account of his work in the domestic slave-trade, as he was hired out to a slave trader named James Walker who shipped slaves up and down the Mississippi (cf. 39-62). Brown's vivid portrayals range from depicting the methods of storing their "cargo of human flesh" (42) on boats or in "negro-pens" (45) to descriptions of the preparation of slaves' bodies for the slave market. The haunting (im)mobility perceivable in Brown's and other antebellum descriptions is memorably captured in a phrase from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which at one point retrospectively describes slaves as being "moved around like checkers" (27).

overseers to slave patrols and professional slave-hunters with their bloodhounds.<sup>127</sup> As Benjamin Drew, in his *North-Side View of Slavery* (1855), concluded from interviews he had conducted with fugitives in Canada, there appeared to be a “strong police [which] must watch the motions of the oppressed” and which “usually answers its atrocious purpose very well” (4).<sup>128</sup> Thus, the general background against which fugitives set their flights may be understood as a combination of the panoptic modes of a Southern visual regime (cf. Chapter 3.1) with corporeal and spatial punishments that functioned together towards controlling and confining the slave in space, including natural space. What emerged, as nature was harnessed by the peculiar institution, was read by many fugitives as a “prisonhouse,” a “fortress” in which the non-human material world was made complicit in their enslavement, as its elements were made to correspond with the master’s point of view, his spatial patterns and logic of confinement.<sup>129</sup> There was, to employ a term recently introduced by Walter Johnson, a “carceral landscape”<sup>130</sup> which was not only the product of a “patterned ecology of slaveholding agro-capitalism” (*River* 210), but which, I would add, employed an ensemble of visual and spatial practices to ensure the slaveholder’s ultimate goal

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<sup>127</sup> For an extensive treatment of the history and role of such “militias,” see Hadden (2001), esp. chapters 2-3; Ripley, “Underground Railroad,” who stresses the racial power articulated through a “restrictive web that made illicit slave movement nearly impossible” (51); Franklin and Schweninger, “The Quest for Freedom” 33-35; or Finkelman, *Slave Rebels* (Introduction, n.p.). Another important element that was part of the spatial control of the (plantation) workplace has been suggested by Mark Smith (1997), who turns to clock time as a means of Southern control of its enslaved workforce; on the role of dogs as a means of spatial control, cf. Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams* 234-240.

<sup>128</sup> Drew’s work in its very title draws attention to how abolitionist discourse corresponded with the North/South-divide that was central to the topographies of the fugitive slave narrative. The book was an explicit response to Nehemiah Adams’s *A South-Side View of Slavery* (1854), which had appeared one year earlier and had defended the “peculiar institution.” The immediate context of the above quote, in which Drew refers to a strong Southern “police,” is his discussion of a (pro-slavery) “absence of mobs”-argument found in Adams, but refuted by Drew who counters that “the cause of liberty in the world has been much indebted to mobs” (4).

<sup>129</sup> There are numerous points in the narratives that suggest this alignment of the non-human material world with the spatially confining and enslaving power (cf. also Chapter 3.1). Not only do we find lengthy descriptions of torturous work in the fields, the space that was integral to the confining functionalization of the slave’s body, but also telling instances in which the non-human world was being conceptually (ab)used for influencing the slave population’s world views. Henry Box Brown, for instance, recounts how slave children were being deceived into believing that the master “thundered; and caused the rain to fall,” thus drawing attention to the ways in which “the blasphemous teachings of the heathen system of slavery” extended to the natural world and made it complicit in the general functioning of spaces of enslavement (*Narrative of Henry Box Brown* 17, 18). Moreover, the genre abounds with scenes where punishments are intimately connected with components of the non-human material world. Think e.g. of Douglass’s description of Colonel Lloyd’s beautiful garden and the “tarred” fences that were to defend it against the invasion of fruit-stealing slaves (20), or of the frequent moments in which the (supposedly flawed) care of animals led to punishments (e.g. in Douglass 21; Curry 34; or Roper 6, 8).

<sup>130</sup> In chapter eight of his *River of Dark Dreams* (2013), Johnson uses the term to show that “enslavement was a material and spatial condition, as much as an economic and legal one” (210), and broadly conceptualizes “carceral landscapes” as such organizational principles with respect to (natural) space that work towards controlling, subjugating and hindering flight movements of a group of humans.

of “maintain[ing] complete authority over his slave” and exerting a “constant vigilance” (Douglass, “Lecture on Slavery” 27). The slave, by these combined means, had to be held in, and had to *know* his place, but was not allowed a *sense* of it.

Against this framework and its notion of an “ideally” complete confinement and functionalization of the slave’s body, the notion of an Underground Railroad, which can be found in slave narratives from the mid-1830s on, held the potential for fundamentally reinterpreting spatial relations. It provided authors with the means of conceptually transforming spaces of confinement within topographies of enslavement into empowering spaces of mobile concealment. In this sense, the Underground Railroad – even though, historically speaking, the actual number of fugitives may have been relatively low<sup>131</sup> – had both a significant political and cultural impact (cf. Bordewich 6-8; Foner 4, 26), and a profound “literary” effect on African American fugitives’ writing. On the one hand, it was instrumental in aggravating sectional tensions, as slaveholders, especially in the upper South, came to fear a significant loss of “property,” while abolitionists felt reassured of their course of action by the powerful statement of discontentment with slavery each fugitive represented. On the other hand, it meant the entry of a space to be negotiated in an imaginative task by the escapees themselves. No matter the mode of travel chosen by fugitives,<sup>132</sup> narrators retrospectively had to come to terms not only with what freedom actually meant, but also with how the process of gaining freedom was rooted in a transitory space. The task was, among other things, that of imagining and reclaiming a sense of space against the “map” they had drawn for their experiences, of “rooting” freedom and identity conceptually within the fugitive’s space.

Two cases, both widely celebrated as stories of the Underground Railroad in their time, are particularly revealing with respect to how this task was performed, as they illustrate how the notion of an Underground Railroad was written as heterotopic space against the backdrop of the spatio-visual system of slavery, and how confinement became re-interpreted as empowering concealment. The first case is that of Henry “Box” Brown. Having escaped from slavery in Virginia in March

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<sup>131</sup> On this point, estimates vary. Most historians assume that, in the last decades before the Civil War, only between one and five thousand individuals per year reached freedom through the activities of the Underground Railroad (cf. e.g. Foner 4; McEntee 947).

<sup>132</sup> The antebellum period saw a diversification of the means of escape employed by fugitives (cf. Vlach, “Above Ground”). While some narrators refer to their concealment aboard seaborne vessels (e.g. Roper 35-36; James Williams 73-74; or Voorhis 18-20; cf. generally on waterways of the Underground Railroad Siebert (1936)), others “came in boxes and chests” (Still xix). Moreover, in some areas, “[m]uch of the Underground Railroad’s route [...] involved real trains” (Taylor 50; cf. also Isaac D. Williams 45-48). The importance and hope some attributed to this latter mode of escape may be perceived, for instance, in an 1840 article in the *Colored American*, in which the author suggests that “[n]ow so extensive are our railroads [...] that a poor fugitive may leave Baltimore in the morning, and the third night following, may find himself safely in Canada” (qtd. Foner 17).

1849, Brown's means of flight instantly made him a celebrity, first in the U.S. and then in Britain. His *Narrative of Henry Box Brown* (1849; a British edition appeared in 1851) is somewhat atypical for the genre, as its author, having been treated comparatively well, admits to only giving the "beautiful side" of slavery, having left "for other pens far abler than mine [...] the labor of an exposé of the enormities of slavery" (Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown* 11).<sup>133</sup> Hence, after a relatively brief (generically obligatory) description of slavery's atrocities, the text focuses instead on Brown's means of escape, thus becoming an Underground Railroad story par excellence. The narrative extensively describes how Brown, inspired by what he thinks of as a god-given vision, thinks up a plan to be conveyed to freedom in a crate, employs a carpenter to furnish this device, and receives help from a sympathetic white man, Samuel A. Smith, who "packs" him in the box and has him shipped for 86\$ by Adams Express Company to Philadelphia (cf. 59-62).<sup>134</sup>

Throughout the portrayal of this journey, Brown, on the one hand, repeatedly refers to his ordeal as one of traumatic confinement by recounting the hardships of travelling in what he consecutively terms a "portable prison" (*Narrative of Henry Box Brown* v), "a moving tomb" (vii), a "narrow prison," and a "darkened home of three feet by two" (60). On the other hand, however, after Brown's eventual safe arrival in Philadelphia, the opening of the crate, and standing "erect before my equal fellow men; no longer a crouching slave" (63), his reinterpretation gains the overtones of self-empowerment *through* self-confinement. His previously negative rhetoric that emphasized trauma with respect to confinement changes to a celebratory one regarding concealment, which becomes particularly visible in Brown's changed use of personal pronouns, especially in the British version of his narrative. Only by enduring spatial confinement in "my box", he retrospectively argues, i.e. only by deliberately employing space in this specific, personal way, and by concealing his body heterotopically out of the spatial matrix that enslaved him, does freedom become possible (*Narrative of the Life* 54, 56, my emphasis). As his merging into his alternate other-space becomes the cause for a celebratory "song" about "my fete in the box," Brown appropriates his confinement

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<sup>133</sup> In fact, William Still, who was among those who first received and "unpacked" Brown when he arrived in Philadelphia, seems to be somewhat critical of Brown on this point, when he writes in *The Underground Rail Road* that "neither before nor after escaping did he suffer one-half what many others have experienced" (49). Part of the reason of Still's criticism probably lies in the somewhat bumptious attitude Brown displayed after his escape, as he became what could be called a "runaway-celebrity." James Williams's report of how "Brown promenaded the yard, flushed with victory" and "evidently feeling quite conscious of the wonderful feat he had performed" lends more weight to Still's critical assessment of this fugitive's character (71).

<sup>134</sup> Brown was not the only fugitive resorting to this means of escape. Other cases in which crates were employed as spaces of concealment, were, for instance, that of William "Box" Peel Jones (cf. Still 21-22) and Lear Green (cf. Still 203-205). Regarding the latter, see also James Williams's description (69-70), who purported in 1893 to have "preserved" the original chest "as a rare trophy," and to have taken Green's photograph "while in the chest" (70).

as concealment within a self-created heterotopia that enabled “my resurrection from the grave of slavery” (60, 57, my emphasis).

Another instance where Underground Railroad space becomes visible as a heterotopic reinterpretation of confinement may be found in the story of William and Ellen Craft, a text that is exceptional for describing the flight of more than one (typically male) person. The couple, in comparison to Brown, travelled not only a much greater distance, approximately *A Thousand Miles to Freedom* (1860), as the title of their pamphlet goes, but also employed a different but by no means less original scheme of escape. Their narrative, which is “not intended as a full history of the life of my wife, nor of myself, but is merely an account of our escape,” presents its Underground Railroad story as a tale of disguise (iii-iv).<sup>135</sup> Ellen, the nearly white (unacknowledged) daughter of her master, dresses up as William’s “master,” and travels with her “slave” for four days from Macon, Georgia to Philadelphia, which is hailed as a Bunyanesque “great city” (70).<sup>136</sup> It is the intimate knowledge of the spatial system surrounding them and, ironically, the fact that, according to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, “slaveholders have the privilege of taking their slaves to any part of the country they think proper,” that leads to their eventual success (29). Only by becoming a master/slave-couple, William and Ellen are able to make their way into free territory; crossdressing was necessary as it was “not customary in the South for white ladies to travel with male servants” (35), and using devices such as “poultices” for the “right hand in a sling” were crucial to avoid signing paperwork (36, 34).

In such ways, the Crafts’ Underground Railroad experience, which technically employs overt transportation in trains and steamers, effectively undermines the hierarchical spatial matrix they are part of. The space that the couple carve out for themselves is that of a heterotopia that employs both the body and systemic heterotopias (trains, ships) for its own purpose. Their Underground Railroad space thus reveals in paradigmatic ways its consciously realized heterotopic qualities, as the story emphasizes how their space of resistance is ultimately rooted in language, performance and their “concealing” bodies themselves,<sup>137</sup> which attain the function of

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<sup>135</sup> Disguise, as another form of confining and concealing the body, was chosen as a means of escape by a considerable number of fugitives. William Still refers to a variety of more or less elaborate strategies of disguise, for instance in the cases of Clarissa Davis (33-34) or Maria Weems alias Joe Wright (123-132). Cf. also Hendrick and Hendrick 7; Horton and Horton, “Crusade” 191.

<sup>136</sup> *A Thousand Miles to Freedom* abounds with explicit and implicit references to Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), for instance, when the couple describe that “we knew it would never do to turn back to the ‘City of Destruction’ [...] but [that we must] press on, like noble Christian and Hopeful, to the great city in which dwelt a few ‘shining ones’” (70; see for further references also 74, 78).

<sup>137</sup> One way in which *A Thousand Miles to Freedom* reveals the heterotopia of the Underground Railroad as rooted within language itself can be seen in the way in which William Craft refers, even retrospectively, to his wife throughout their escape as a “him” (“He obtained a ticket for himself” (42); “He had been fearfully

heterotopic signatures subversively cutting through the social and spatial texture of Southern enslavement.

Taken together, such cases attest to the slave narrative's general reinterpretation of confinement into concealment through reflecting on a heterotopic Underground Railroad. In numerous instances, fugitives' bodies themselves are depicted as acting heterotopically within carceral landscapes and topographies of enslavement, thus offering the means of escape by complying with the relations and obliging to the rules of the very spatial and racial system they seek to transcend. By entering into a box (obliging to the "rules of shipment") or by entering into pre-defined roles (complying with the racial logics of topographies of enslavement), fugitive slaves demonstrate how confinement could be subversively employed and become a means of concealed resistance. If, as Douglass wrote, the slave "must take his root there or nowhere" (*Life and Times* 119), i.e. if s/he had to know her/his place during slavery but was not allowed a sense thereof, then the notion of an Underground Railroad provided fugitives with a means of imagining a concealment through which identity could be (re-)rooted through the body in space. In this sense, the Underground Railroad endowed formerly enslaved narrators' writing with a basic way of re-conceptualizing themselves in their spatial relations; it enabled imagining a renewed use of space, as the formerly enslaved body could self-consciously be transformed into a sign of empowerment and resistance.

Moreover, the space of the Underground Railroad was crucially conceptualized as a *mobile* heterotopia, which made it, apart from being a general means of redefining the slave's body spatially, a powerful act of resistance against the enforced (im-)mobility characteristic of topographies of enslavement. A comparison of the Underground Railroad as a mobile heterotopic space with other forms of resistance through concealment, such as that depicted in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), clarifies this point. In a memorable scene of this by now canonical text,<sup>138</sup> Jacobs's literary alter ego, Linda Brent, in order to evade the sexual persecutions

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nervous" (77) etc.), thus attesting to the power of speech as a means of self-consciously performing a heterotopic disguise (cf. on this use of pronouns also Brusky 188). It is furthermore crucial to note how skin color – as a mark of the body that was, after all, the defining feature of the racialized system of enslavement – is employed as a means of performing heterotopic space. Ellen Craft's becoming a *white* man, while emphasizing the inconsistencies and arbitrariness of the supposedly "natural" categories justifying enslavement, makes the skin itself into the means of creating a space of concealment; the skin of the body itself becomes its heterotopic disguise. On Ellen's crossdressing as a white *man*, which has been a major theme in criticism on *A Thousand Miles*, cf. e.g. McCaskill; Weinauer; and Millette.

<sup>138</sup> For a broad overview of scholarship on this text, the first full-length slave narrative by a woman before the Civil War, cf. e.g. Garfield and Zafar's essay collection (esp. the introduction); or Soto, esp. 31-33. Important classic readings of *Incidents* are those by Yellin, "the premier scholar on Jacobs" (Archer 54), who settled the question over the authenticity of Jacobs's narrative in the early 1980s (cf. "Written by Herself") and wrote the first biography on Jacobs (2004); and by Valerie Smith (1990); McKay (1991); and Burnham (1993). Major concerns in such scholarship have traditionally been *Incident's* feminism and the

of her master, hides for an alleged seven years in a “very small garret, never occupied by anything but rats and mice,” and “only nine feet long and seven wide” (Jacobs 91). This “Loophole of Retreat,”<sup>139</sup> as she calls it, may be identified in analogy to the above cases as a heterotopic space. It secretly maintains relations to the surrounding topographies of enslavement, as Linda has a handful of confidants and catches “glimpses of things out of doors” (97), and functions as a crucial means of resistance that enables the narrator to watch her children grow up and to lay false trails for deceiving her owner, Dr. Flint (cf. 101). By sending documents that bear post stamps of New York, Linda uses the aid of her confidants “to continue to write letters from the north from time to time” (104).

It is at this point, however, that Jacobs’s text, whilst certainly giving an instance of effective resistance through Linda’s ingenious employment of heterotopic space, diverges significantly from the notion of a mobile heterotopia that is characteristic of narrators’ depictions of Underground Railroad space. For even though Linda, as critics like Gruesser have remarked, “confines herself to circumvent the confinement of slavery” (14), the fact remains that this confinement is not a mobile concealment that engages movement into a liberating space. Her letters are exactly *not* written from the North; the writing body does not strike off the slave body’s inertia symptomatic of a topography of enslavement. Instead, I would agree with Kawash that her letters’ false addresses merely “project [...] her body into a virtual space” (78), so that Linda Brent’s is an empowering but eventually purely imaginary mobility that does not (yet) translate into a real mobility. By contrast, the features of Underground Railroad space in antebellum fugitive slave narratives include not only the notion of a subversive use of the spatial matrix that enslaved them – the self-conscious creation of a heterotopia – but also a mobility that was performed by the body’s actual movement along a South-North-axis. As stories such as the Crafts’ or Henry Box Brown’s suggest, the space of the

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text’s play with the generic conventions of the sentimental novel, the male slave narrative, or the Bildungsroman; an environmentally oriented reading that focuses on environmental justice issues can be found in Cook.

<sup>139</sup> This part of Jacobs’s narrative in particular has caught the attention of critics and has led to a variety of approaches that concentrate on the role of space in *Incidents*. There are three articles focusing on space that carry the term “loophole” in their titles (Burnham; V. Smith, “Loopholes”; Green-Barteet), and a variety of contributions that treat the “Loophole-of-Retreat”-passage centrally in terms of spatial theory, e.g. by focusing on voyeurism and panopticism (cf. Soto; Randle). Generally, scholars seem to agree in such readings that there is a problematic ambivalence to Jacobs’s employment of space. Linda has, as Soto puts it, “literally backed herself into a corner, a confined space which paradoxically removes her from the economy of slavery” (35). I would argue that it is precisely this tension between the empowering and disempowering qualities of her space, the spatial “ambiguities of her situation” (35), which point to the conceptual difference between a mobile heterotopia of Underground Railroad space, and the enabling yet eventually immobile spatial resistance of Linda’s garret-space.

Underground Railroad in these texts crucially involved the representation of a *real* mobility as a means of reinterpreting spatial relations and engaging resistance.

At the same time, the Underground Railroad was more than just “represented” as heterotopic space in the discourse of the fugitive slave narrative. It also came to function as what could be called a truly literary heterotopia – a literarily (co-)produced “real utopia” that first emerged through the African American word in its strategic interaction with a broader contemporary discourse on the Underground Railroad. To understand this second dimension of the slave narrative’s Underground Railroad heterotopia, one has to consider what the “Liberty Line” meant more broadly culturally in the antebellum period and to abolitionists.

Abolitionism, as the heterogeneous movement it was, was by no means unanimously supportive of Underground Railroad activities, which were, after all, both risky endeavours<sup>140</sup> and open violations of the law.<sup>141</sup> However, despite the controversies the Underground Railroad thus sparked, abolitionist circles eventually turned out to be more than willing to gain momentum through this part of antislavery work, since it was helping their propaganda against the “peculiar institution.” Thus, as “Vigilance Committees” rapidly spread across the North from the mid-1840s on,<sup>142</sup> and energized through the pivotal Fugitive Slave Act,<sup>143</sup> abolitionism as well as a broader Northern public increasingly came to employ a celebratory rhetoric with respect to the

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<sup>140</sup> Although Foner notes that it is “striking how few underground railroad activists north of the Mason-Dixon Line suffered legal consequences for their activities” considering how prominently some of them acted within the public sphere (21), a number of those engaged in the Underground Railroad were substantially fined (e.g. Thomas Garrett in Delaware; John van Zandt in Ohio), pursued (e.g. William Henry Johnson in Philadelphia) or arrested (as in the well-known case of Charles T. Torrey, who eventually died in a Maryland prison in 1846). Cf. Earhart 1207; Ripley, “Underground Railroad” 63.

<sup>141</sup> At the latest with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, helping fugitives became explicitly illegal by federal law. Nonetheless, evidence suggests that this act of “Civil Disobedience” (Thoreau) was performed by a significant number of antebellum Northerners, even if they did not count themselves as abolitionists. In this respect, many seem to have agreed with Benjamin Drew’s question and assessment: “[H]ow can it be wrong to assist a slave who is making his escape? Surely, to aid the unfortunate is a duty, which no power on earth can legislate into a crime” (2).

<sup>142</sup> Vigilance Committees emerged especially as an immediate response to the growing number of kidnappings in the North (cf. e.g. Whitman, who speaks in this respect of “two Underground Railroads” (168); or Winch; probably the most famous narrative describing such a case is Northup’s 1853 *12 Years a Slave*). The activities of these organizations were diverse, as they “assisted destitute fugitives by providing board and room, clothing, medicine, and money [...] informed fugitives of their legal rights, gave them legal protection from kidnappers, and frequently prosecuted individuals who attempted to abduct, sell, or violate the legal rights of free blacks” (Blockson, *Underground Railroad* 234).

<sup>143</sup> As part of the Compromise of 1850, the Fugitive Slave Law, which denied African Americans trial and testimony in courts and turned federal law enforcement officials into slave hunters, marked the climax of a series of legislative events and court decisions on the pressing question of runaways (e.g. the 1842 Prigg vs. Pennsylvania case, which had already strengthened the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793). Cf. on the Fugitive Slave Law generally Aptheker 229; Carbado and Weise xviii-xix; Harrold, *Border War* 138-158; and Henderson. One (unintended) effect of the bill was growing opposition to slavery in the North; in its wake, even more antislavery committees formed, whose aim it was, as one commentator in the *Liberty Bell* of 1858 put it, to “trample the Fugitive Slave Bill in the dust” (Jackson 30).

Underground Railroad, thereby turning this most “practical antislavery action” into a culturally influential concept (Foner 20). No matter where and when the term “Underground Railroad” actually emerged,<sup>144</sup> it quickly gained discursive currency throughout the 1840s in a variety of ways. On the one hand, there was a tendency, in some of the “Committees,” to broadcast their achievements as part of what became mystified as an elaborate network aiding fugitives in their escapes. On the other hand, this myth of the Underground Railroad seems to have catered to the sentimental and sensational tastes of a broader antebellum public, which may be sensed from its widespread presence in visual representations<sup>145</sup> and abolitionist songs<sup>146</sup> of the time, or the legendary status of figures such as “General” Tubman, the “Father of the Underground Railroad” Robert Purvis, or the “Underground Railroad king” Jermain Loguen (cf. Foner 14).

In conjunction with this kind of popularization as a “most romantic and exciting amusement open to men who had high moral standards” (Hart viii), the Underground Railroad also became a major theme in a variety of written texts. It figured, for instance, in widely read literary works such as Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), which presented the Underground Railroad as central to the escape of (otherwise helpless) slaves, or Thoreau’s “A Plea for Captain John Brown” (1859), which referred to the Underground Railroad as “[t]he only *free* road, [...] owned and managed by the Vigilant Committee” (n.p., emphasis in original). Moreover, what might be called “abolitionist documentaries,” i.e. works such as Weld’s *American Slavery As It Is*, Drew’s *Northside View of Slavery*, or Redpath’s *The Roving Editor* (1859), contributed continuously to

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<sup>144</sup> According to one legend, the term was coined by a Kentucky slave-owner, who could not keep track of a fleeing slave named Tice Davids, who seemed to have disappeared and “gone off on an underground road” (Hendrick and Hendrick 3; see also Blight, “Introduction” 3; McEntee 948-949; Buckmaster 59; and Switala, *Pennsylvania* 12-13). Other accounts attribute the term to an enslaved boy who wished to go “underground all the way to Boston” (cf. Foner 6); and yet others to a slave who revealed the term under torture (Hendrick and Hendrick 3). The name itself seems well-chosen as it connotes some of the central ideological and economic tensions between North and South beyond the slavery-question. The popularity of the railroad in the antebellum North, where it emerged as “the central symbol of the expanding industrial economy” (McPherson/Williams 8), and where “the press kept up the excitement with stories about every imaginable aspect of the new technology and practitioners of the popular arts contributed songs and pictures, poems and fictions to the hubbub,” was by no means equally strong in a South that based its wealth on a rural, slave-based plantation economy (Marx, “Railroad” 184).

<sup>145</sup> An instance may be found in an 1844 advertisement entitled “Liberty Line. New Arrangement Night and Day,” first published in *The Western Citizen*, which shows an actual train entering into a mountain hole (cf. Hendrick/Hendrick; the image is included in the appendix (Figure 3)). Other instances that attest to the visual popularization of the Underground Railroad are the signs broadcasting the “Stockholders of the Underground R.R. Company” (cf. Ripley, “Underground Railroad” 69); or a Cleveland Vigilance Committee banner that is described in *Frederick Douglass’s Paper* (cf. Foner 22).

<sup>146</sup> Exemplary in its use of railroading terminology is the 1844 song “Long Steel Rail,” the lyrics of which include the following: “Ho! the Car Emancipation Rides majestic thro’ our nation,/ Bearing on its Train, the Story, Liberty! a Nation’s Glory./ Roll it along, Roll it along, Roll it along, thro’ the Nation Freedom’s Car./ Emancipation” (qtd. Gordon 133).

the popularization of the idea, as did the printing press in general, in which “the phrase [Underground Railroad] soon became ubiquitous” (Foner 6).<sup>147</sup> Hence “perfectly understood throughout the United States and Canada” in the decades leading up to the Civil War (Mitchell 1), and although the Underground Railroad may *factually* have been characterized by a “minimum of central direction and a maximum of grassroots involvement” (Bordewich 5), it *discursively* certainly became a powerful reality.

While the concept thus “fired the public imagination” (Gara 114), the perspective from which fugitives’ related to the Underground Railroad through their narratives was markedly different. Although some willingly gave up information on the modes of their escape and were broadcasted as Underground Railroad heroes (e.g. Box Brown or the Crafts), there prevailed, at the same time, a general anonymity and “necessary obscurity” with respect to this part of the former slaves’ experience (Earhart 1206). What emerged in fugitives’ texts was a twofold movement: While often giving some information about their modes and means of flight, therein spatially reinterpreting enslaving confinement into liberating concealment, the discourse of the fugitive slave narrative at the same time created a characteristic silence around the Underground Railroad. The genre’s discourse came to oscillate between veiling and unveiling, hiding and revealing, thereby strategically creating the Underground Railroad as a truly heterotopic space, i.e. as simultaneously “utopic” and “real.”

Marking one pole within this spectrum, fugitive slave narratives, on the one hand, consistently and consciously covered up their Underground Railroad spaces; they cut them off from clear referents by leaving out the names of persons and places involved, and by often remaining vague in their descriptions. Henry Watson, a runaway from Virginia, is exemplary when denying information “lest I should block up the way, or affect the business of the under-ground railroad” (40); Thomas Smallwood promises in the title of his 1851 *Narrative* to give “an account of the underground railroad” and reveal something about “the mode of our operations,” yet leaves his depiction by and large intangible (20); and William Wells Brown, in his description of William Still in *The Black Man* (1863), maintains that “[i]t would not be good policy to say how many persons passed through his [Still’s] hands” (211). As expendable as this list is, it would be false to

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<sup>147</sup> For more evidence on the involvement of the Underground Railroad in the antebellum press, see Foner, who points out that the Underground Railroad was not only present in the Northern (abolitionist) press, but was also known and mystified in the slave states, as “[t]he southern press attributed escapes of all kinds – by land and sea, to the North, Canada, or southern cities – to the underground railroad” (6).

assume that all (white) abolitionists carelessly published their deeds<sup>148</sup> while all African American narrators were constantly cautious in terms of leaving out explicit references to underground activities. As a tendency, however, the pattern of veiling the Underground Railroad as a strategic space certainly prevailed in fugitives' narratives, which is all the more noteworthy when read in the context of the general "rhetoric of visibility" that was part of the reason for the genre's widespread existence as witness-literature in the first place (cf. Chapter I). Notwithstanding the pressures fugitive faced in this respect as the public was craving for more information, and as patronized as the process of writing may have been, writers managed by and large to throw a veil over "their" Underground Railroad – and they did so with a purpose and strategic implications beyond that of simply averting immediately impending dangers too much openness bore.

For while *veiling* and thus rendering Underground Railroad space almost utopic in its intangibility, slave narratives, on the other hand, simultaneously and deliberately sought to co-create the Underground Railroad as a discursive space that ought to be conceived as real as possible. This process of *unveiling* lies at the heart of the representation of the Underground Railroad in narratives of the 1840s and 1850s, for instance those by John Brown (1855) and Frederick Douglass (1845). The former, having escaped from bondage in Georgia, recalls encountering a "friend [who] gave me a full account of the Underground Railroad" and the name of one of its members,

and precise instructions to find out his residence; but, for obvious reasons, I do not think it prudent to mention his name, or that of the town in which he lived; nay, perhaps lives now. His was the first station of the Underground line, in that part of the country, and it was absolutely necessary for me to reach it that night. (John Brown 154-155)

At this point, Brown employs the characteristic mode of veiling, as he omits references to both helper and place. Simultaneously, however, his narrative engages the public discourse of the Underground Railroad by both embracing a typical "railroading" vocabulary ("Chapter XVII. I AM BOOKED TO CANADA, EXPRESS, BY THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD" (163)) and by adding that "I have been permitted to add, in another chapter, a brief history of it [Underground Railroad], penned by the Editor of my Narrative" (154).

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<sup>148</sup> The *National Anti-Slavery Standard* officially warned abolitionists of the "disposition to boast publicly of the success with which the slave hunter has been foiled" (qtd. Foner 22), and, in fact, the operators of the Underground Railroad "seldom asked the name of an escaping slave [...]. Neither would they ever disclose to a fugitive their own names, and, hence, escaped detection unless the slaves were found hidden on their premises, or were apprehended while in the act of conveying him away" (Chesney 124). Thus, many of those immediately involved – and many abolitionist authors such as Benjamin Drew, who deleted for his *North-Side View of Slavery* "the real names which appear in the manuscripts of the narratives published" (xxviii) – certainly did act with due care on this point.

With “the Editor,” an abolitionist, the attached “Chapter XXI. THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD,” employs precisely the kind of figure so often responsible for creating the Underground Railroad as a legendary space in a broader public discourse. The chapter, not falling short of what may be expected, inscribes into Brown’s work the popular version of the “Liberty Line” as a “complicated machinery of vigilance committees, spies, pilots, conveyances, and signals” (217), and conjures up the powerful image of an Underground Railroad, which

[...] may be said properly to commence at what is technically known as Mason and Dixon’s line; that is at the junction of the Slave States with the Free States: and to terminate at the southern frontier of Canada. Its course is by no means regular, for it has to encounter the Alleghany range of mountains and several considerable rivers, including the Ohio. Lake Erie too lies in its track, nor is it altogether independent of forests. In spite, however, of all these, and numerous minor obstacles, the line has been constructed with admirable skill, as they can testify whose circumstances have compelled them to avail themselves of this mode of transit. Travelling by it cannot strictly be said to be either pleasant or altogether safe; yet the traffic is greatly on the increase. It is exclusively a passenger traffic; the trains are all express, and strange to add, run all one way, namely, from South towards the North: there are no return tickets. (Editor’s comment in Brown 210-211)

By incorporating the editor’s chapter, which creates the potent myth of an actual railroad (“track,” “mode of transit,” “traffic,” “express”) and uses the idea of its operating along a one-way South/North-line (“there are no return tickets”), the strategy of Brown’s text as a whole is altered. His narrative, at the intersection between an abolitionist’s and a former slave’s voice, merges both veiling and unveiling. On the one hand, it denies the Underground Railroad as a concrete, real space; on the other hand, it allows and furnishes its qualities as an imaginative, utopic space, thereby functionalizing its mythic potential through a strategic employment of the Underground Railroad as a popular concept.

Douglass’s text is likewise revealing in this respect, even though it appears, at first glance, to be driven exclusively by an impulse of veiling. In fact, Douglass at one point formulates what is perhaps the most outspoken antebellum critique of the creation of an explicit discourse about the Underground Railroad. He complains:

I have never approved of the very public manner in which some of our western friends have conducted what they call the *underground railroad*, but which, I think, by their own declarations, has been made most emphatically the *upperground railroad*. I honor those good men and women for their noble daring, and applaud them for willingly subjecting themselves to bloody persecution, by openly avowing their participation in the escape of slaves. I, however, can see very little good resulting from such a course, either to themselves or the slaves escaping; while, upon the other hand, I see and feel assured that those open declarations are a positive evil to the slaves remaining, who are seeking to escape. (Douglass *Narrative* 65-6)

Thus, Douglass, who was himself actively engaged in Underground Railroad work from the 1840s on,<sup>149</sup> explicitly suggests that it is unwise to divulge too much information on the processes of the underground.<sup>150</sup> Too dangerous would be, in his view, the possibility that “others would thereby be involved in the most embarrassing difficulties” (64).

Read with respect to the creation of a literary heterotopia, however, Douglass’s text is not merely an instance of critique of the production of an “upperground” railroad, but also a crucial example of the twofold process that furnishes a strategic Underground Railroad space through veiling and unveiling. That is to say, not *although* but *because* Douglass does not give concrete information despite being pressured on this point,<sup>151</sup> his text produces the Underground Railroad as even more powerful. The creation of a *utopic* non-referentiality of the Underground Railroad in itself, Douglass implies, is to become the means of making its power all the more *real*:

I would keep the merciless slaveholder profoundly ignorant of the means of flight adopted by the slave. I would leave him to imagine himself surrounded by myriads of invisible tormentors, ever ready to snatch from his infernal grasp his trembling prey. Let him be left to feel his way in the dark; let darkness commensurate with his crime hover over him; and let him feel that at every step he takes, in pursuit of the flying bondman, he is running the frightful risk of having his hot brains dashed out by an invisible agency. Let us render the tyrant no aid; let us not hold the light by which he can trace the footprints of our flying brother. (Douglass *Narrative* 66)

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<sup>149</sup> In the last version of his autobiography, Douglass alludes to harbouring fugitives in his Rochester home on their way to Canada, recalling that “I never did more congenial, attractive, fascinating, and satisfactory work” than for the Underground Railroad (*Life and Times* 329); see also DeBlasio 256; Butler 30. On Douglass’s critique of William Still, which, according to him, led to his not being mentioned in Still’s *Under Ground Rail Road*, cf. Gara, “William Still” 48-50.

<sup>150</sup> He emphasizes this point even more in his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. As Andrews notes, by the time he wrote *My Bondage*, Douglass had “gained a perspective that allowed him to see signs of ‘oppression’ in the very ‘form’ of the fugitive slave narrative that he had written in 1845” (*To Tell* 217). One way in which this perspective seems to have manifested in the 1855 text is the even more outspoken critique of the overtness often displayed in relation to Underground Railroad activities. Douglass argues, for instance, that this practice “has neither wisdom nor necessity” and explicitly criticizes abolitionists as well as Henry Box Brown and William and Ellen Craft for their frankness (*My Bondage* 323). Part of the reason for this even more critical stance may have been Douglass’s frustration with (Garrisonian) abolitionists; he emphasizes almost sneeringly that “[n]o anti-slavery man can wish” him to give away his means of escape (322), and sarcastically adds that revealing and celebrating one’s deeds “may kindle an enthusiasm, very pleasant to inhale” (324).

<sup>151</sup> There was, as correspondence suggests, considerable pressure on Douglass with respect to revealing more about the manner of his flight, which may also be sensed from Douglass’s apologies in his first two autobiographies for having to “deprive [...] the curious of the gratification” of learning the full story of his escape (*My Bondage* 323). Some scholars have pointed out that such refusals are an important part of Douglass’s overall strategy of resistance. Ernest, for instance, argues that one means of Douglass’s resistance to the confines of writing according to abolitionists’ expectations lay in “withholding information, refusing to satisfy mere curiosity” (“African American Literature” 98), and Wood suggests that Douglass applied “models of how *not* to give the white Northern abolitionist readers what they wanted or expected” (100, emphasis in original).

In the sense of a reversed panopticism, one turned back onto the slaveholder who has to feel “at every step he takes” the power of the Underground Railroad,<sup>152</sup> Douglass plays with the two great fears of the slaveholding South: insurrections and the loss of slave property. Thereby, he co-creates Underground Railroad space as a heterotopia, a *real utopia*, through the slave narrative. The Underground Railroad is to remain intangible and non-referential – it must indeed be *utopic* and veiled in “darkness” – but it must do so exactly in order to produce, through the discourse of the fugitive slave narrative in conjunction with the popular concept of the Underground Railroad, the *reality* that may effectuate a potential panopticism that acts on the slaveholder, who has to feel “the frightful risk of having his hot brains dashed out by an invisible agency” (*Narrative* 66).

Hence, we find a second sense in which the Underground Railroad was functionalized in the slave narrative. Not only did the literary heterotopia of the Underground Railroad become a means of reinterpreting confinement into empowering concealment, and of gaining a new sense of space. Moreover, the ultimate power of this literary heterotopia came to reside precisely in the production of a real utopia that eventually relied on the material existence of the former slave’s word itself. By producing a discourse that simultaneously veiled the referents due to which it existed and unveiled a mythic space to which such referents belonged, the slave narrative created a reversed panopticism through itself as the ultimate proof of a mobile heterotopia of the Underground Railroad. What ultimately weighed down Underground Railroad space in reality and made it, more than anything else, a heterotopia – a *real utopia* – was the fugitives’ word.

### Underground Railroad Space and the Co-Agency of the Non-Human

Identifying the Underground Railroad as a literary heterotopia opens up the possibility of reconsidering its space in terms of its distinguishing function. In this respect, recent scholarly definitions commonly emphasize one aspect in particular: Whether understood in terms of Whitman’s idea of the Underground Railroad as “organized networks of principled men and women who assisted fugitives” (164), Eric Foner’s concept of an “interlocking series of local

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<sup>152</sup> Supporting evidence for the thesis of a reversed panopticism can be found when comparing this passage with the Covey-episode (cf. also Chapter 3.1) in terms of Douglass’s analogous use of vocabulary. The wording of the latter scene, which depicts a panoptic principle as part of keeping the slave in his place (Covey is lurking “under every tree, behind every stump, in every bush, and at every window” (*Narrative* 44)) is clearly mirrored in the above quote (“let him be left to feel his way in the dark”; “let him feel that at every step he takes” (66)).

networks [...] which together helped a substantial number of fugitives” (15), or Bordewich’s definition, which maintains that “the essential nature of the Underground Railroad lay in the character and motivation of the people who made it work, not in bricks and mortar” (xv), the central defining marker generally agreed upon is that of assistance.<sup>153</sup> Functionally, the Underground Railroad thus means, first and foremost, some form of collaboration.

By extension, we may therefore ask anew and more broadly where exactly the space of the Underground Railroad begins and how far it extends. That is, if aid and collaboration are the crucial distinguishing characteristics, do we look merely at the space tied to those figures explicitly referred to in the terms of Underground Railroad vocabulary, i.e. the more or less well-organized “agents,” “stationmasters,” or “conductors”? Or do we include those who offered temporary assistance, who engaged in spontaneous and “compulsive acts of compassion” (McEntee 948)?<sup>154</sup> And, if thinking the Underground Railroad as a fugitive space, how do we make sense of the ones who, like James W.C. Pennington, maintain that they came through this space “without the aid [...] of any *human* being” (qtd. Foner 18, emphasis mine), thus locating collaboration outside the realm of the human and what is commonly understood as the Underground Railroad?

These questions pertaining to the extent of the space that functioned as Underground Railroad may be addressed by differentiating three basic dimensions of assistance and collaboration in fugitive slave narratives. Firstly, there was the aid rendered by numerous well-known white abolitionists such as Levi Coffin, Thomas Garrett, Elijah Lovejoy or John Rankin. That there has been a decade-long overemphasis on such figures, especially on the role played by Quakers, should not draw attention away from the fact that numerous fugitive slave narratives reference and revere such assistance.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Other recent definitions that similarly emphasize assistance as the central function may be found in Hudson, who reads the Underground Railroad as the “interlocking histories of those who fled slavery and those who sometimes assisted them” (223); or Alonso-Breto, who sees the essential function of the Underground Railroad as “helping them [slaves] to reach safe territories where slavery had been abolished” (226). A broader use of the term can be found in LaRoche (2014), who thinks of the Underground Railroad in terms of “escapes, assisted or not, which originated after 1830 where escapees either used known routes or accepted aid once they crossed into the border states” (xii). While this definition seems useful for LaRoche’s reading of what she calls “geographies of resistance,” the crucial point of my argument is precisely *that* assistance was given in moments so far unrecognized in this sense. Assistance as a concept must be allowed to potentially include the non-human material world.

<sup>154</sup> In recent scholarship, the presence of groups of activists that rendered spontaneous assistance “wherever practicable” (Garlick 6) is often particularly emphasized (cf. the studies of Bordewich or Foner). The general assessment today is that, “[f]or the most part, persons helping runaways performed impulsive acts of compassion and did not consider themselves part of a resistance group,” without denying, however, that there were also some “predetermined escape routes, safe houses, and plans of action” (McEntee 948).

<sup>155</sup> Instances in which aid is given by this first group can be found in several of the texts I have discussed so far, e.g. in John Brown’s (cf. 154-157) or Henry Box Brown’s narratives (cf. *Narrative of Henry Box Brown* 59-60). William and Ellen Craft’s text also contains explicit references to their “good Quaker friends in

Secondly, there was the help provided by black abolitionists and free blacks in both the North and the South, perhaps the most effective dimension of assistance and that crucial part of the story which historians have painstakingly recovered over the past decades.<sup>156</sup> In this respect, narratives often portray the opening up of the Underground Railroad as happening gradually, as help was encountered rather spontaneously underway. William Craft, for instance, coincidentally receives assistance from abolition-minded train passengers, who give him “a good deal of information” (78), and Frederick Douglass has his first contact with the Underground Railroad network of New York City through the spontaneous help of a sailor, who refers him to David Ruggles (cf. *My Bondage* 340). In addition to such modes of help given in a space in which “[p]ractically every clump of Negro settlers in the free states was an underground depot by definition” (Furnas 214), one has to take into account the work of prominent African American Underground Railroad conductors. In this category, we find, for instance, William Still, John Malvin, W.M. Mitchell, or the Rev. Jermain Wesley Loguen, and, of course, those who did the most daring work of all, namely heroic figures such as Harriet Tubman or the so-called “Knights of Liberty,” who ventured back into Southern slave territory to save family members and others from their fate in bondage.<sup>157</sup>

Apart from these forms of human collaboration, however, reading the Underground Railroad in the sense of a functionally defined literary space makes visible yet another, third form of collaboration that formerly enslaved narrators portrayed as crucial to their flight experiences, namely non-human assistance. In this respect, the literary heterotopia of the Underground Railroad, beyond offering a means of imaginatively reinterpreting confinement into liberating concealment and of strategically employing the popular antebellum discourse on the Underground Railroad, came to function as a space of collaboration that was not merely thought as a “container” for human agents, but that included non-human co-agencies. In other words, non-human spaces of flight were not only general fugitive space to *move through*, but often became Underground Railroad space to

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Pennsylvania” (108), who first sheltered the couple, and through whom Ellen realizes that there exist “good and bad persons of every shade and complexion” (85). Cf. on the role of Quakers in antislavery and Underground Railroad activities Hendrick and Hendrick 5-8; Blockson, *Underground Railroad* 2-3, 188-191.

<sup>156</sup> On the involvement of free black communities in the Underground Railroad, see LaRoche’s recent study (2014); on the African American involvement in the abolitionist movement more generally, cf. e.g. Coddon (2004); and Quarles (1969).

<sup>157</sup> While white Northern abolitionists generally shrank from conducting rescue missions (on the rare exceptions cf. Horton and Horton 145), some African American individuals (e.g. Tubman, Mitchell, Loguen, or Bibb) and organizations dared to conduct such ventures in the 1840s and 1850s. One such organization were the so-called “Twelve Knights of Tabor,” formed by AME-reverent Moses Dixon in 1846 and later known as the army of the “Knights of Liberty.” Cf. Minges 65; for a general account of abolitionist and Underground Railroad work in the South, see Buckmaster 106-126; and Harrold (1995).

*interact with*. Where the non-referentiality that resulted from the delineated strategy of veiling and unveiling made the (human) Underground Railroad non-representable, slave narratives often came to fill in another, representable (non-human) Underground Railroad space that enabled an articulation of African American environmental knowledge.

Reading the Underground Railroad in this sense not only reveals another, environmental dimension of assistance that complements the conventionally identified modes of aid, but also helps relocating the prime agency within the figure of the fugitive her/himself. Thinking the Underground Railroad more broadly as a space must re-install agency, first of all, in the individual; aid is, first and foremost, self-aid in the single most courageous act of the fugitive's taking flight, even as the space of this flight extends beyond the human to include the non-human as potential co-agent. Therefore, we need a broader definition of the Underground Railroad than Bordewich's: The defining marker of the Underground Railroad is not just the "character and motivation" of the people fugitives moved *towards*, but becomes, read through the lens of the narrators themselves, the space, consisting of both "brick and mortars" and non-human nature, that they interacted *with* (xv). The production of the Underground Railroad as an African American literary space in the fugitive slave narrative thus entailed, as the remainder of this chapter will demonstrate, more than the described processes of veiling and unveiling. It also crucially depended on imagining an alternative Underground Railroad space through which narrators continually emphasized that the Underground Railroad to them was more than a network of human sympathizers. It became the discursive loophole of a hyper-separating genre for producing environmental knowledge; a literary other-space where black fugitives incorporated their recognition of the power of a non-human co-agency.

A first way in which the slave narrative connected the non-human non-discursive material world to the literary space of the Underground Railroad was by portraying "nature" as opening up the latter conceptually. The genre often depicts non-human materialities through a discourse of "nature" that incited what could be called a "hermeneutics of freedom." Freedom, as a concept by definition central to the fugitive slave narrative, became even more crucial from the 1840s on, as fugitives increasingly came to articulate their right to freedom in terms of a natural right.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> This is not to suggest that natural rights philosophy was not present in abolitionist discourse prior to the 1840s. William Lloyd Garrison's immediate abolitionism, for instance, was firmly rooted in the general idea that, as he put it in a speech delivered in June, 1831, in Philadelphia, a natural right made *every* human being "but a little lower than the angels" (5); and William Ellery Channing, the influential Unitarian clergyman, was one of the most pronounced proponents of natural rights philosophy with his claim that "a human being cannot rightfully be held and used as property" due to "human nature" (29). With respect to fugitive slave narratives, however, such ideas were more forcefully and regularly adapted only from the 1840s on.

Whereas narrators had previously often portrayed the immediate motivation for taking flight to lie in excessive punishments, family separations, or being sold away or cheated out of buying themselves,<sup>159</sup> there is a tendency in texts of the last two decades before the Civil War to emphasize more than ever before the importance of freedom as a fundamental right given “by nature.” Freedom as natural right became *the* theme not only in the narratives themselves, but also, as numerous sources suggest, in discourse among the enslaved. “Of course, no slave would dare to say, in the presence of a white man, that he wished for freedom,” James Curry conceded in his 1840 *Narrative*, only to point out: “But among themselves, it is their constant theme. No slaves think they are made to be slaves” (28).<sup>160</sup>

The idea that freedom was given *by* nature coincided with the emergence of new forms of expression that literally rooted this idea in a discourse and depictions *of* nature. Melvin Dixon, in the first chapter of *Ride Out the Wilderness*, emphasizes the particular role of wilderness in this respect, and links moments of slaves’ (self-)interpretations through the natural world with religious conversion: “Nature offered examples of the harmony of life similar to those in traditional religious thought; for enslaved Africans the wilderness in America simply offered another covenant between man and God” (23).<sup>161</sup> Even though Dixon convincingly substantiates this argument with evidence from slave songs and narratives, one could expand his idea with respect to the antebellum slave narrative both in terms of the emphasis Dixon places exclusively on “the wilderness, the lonesome valley and the mountain” (16), and regarding (an absence of) religious dimensions. For while there

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<sup>159</sup> Especially the latter was frequently given as a main reason for taking flight in pre-1830s narratives (cf. e.g. Voorhis; instances of being cheated out of promised manumission can be seen in a variety of narratives (e.g. Jacobs 11)). William Still argues in this sense that “[t]he slave auction block indirectly proved to be in some respects a very active agent in promoting travel on the U.G.R.R.” (xx); on the “push” and “pull” factors for slaves’ flights, see also Whitman 175-177.

<sup>160</sup> William Still, too, notes that many slaves coming through his Philadelphia “station” had often “deeply thought on the subject of their freedom,” and that many had been planning their escapes “very early in life” (qtd. E. Foner 22-23); cf. for an insightful reading of how enslaved blacks thought about freedom, Blassingame’s chapter “Runaways and Rebels” in *The Slave Community* (esp. 192-195). In this context, one should also be aware of the elaborate networks of communication that existed among slaves. As Chesney asserts, “[i]t was not necessary that the missionary of freedom should visit every plantation and present this picture [of happiness and prosperity at the North] to each slave, but communicate it to a few in each neighbourhood, and it would spread from lip to lip, from plantation to plantation, like wild fire” (121); Redpath speaks in this respect of a well-working “Underground Telegraph” (241). Cf. also Bordewich 5; and W. Johnson who describes a hidden “network of informers” and “an underground network, set up and quickly dismantled, which circulated fragments of information about freedom and the North among those who could be trusted” (*Soul* 31; 74).

<sup>161</sup> Reading nature as “both obstacle and aid” for the slave, Dixon ascribes to wilderness the function of “an important test of man’s faith in himself and in God’s power to bring deliverance or free territory in reach” (26). In this way, his argument emphasizes both the centrality and metaphorical meanings of the wilderness and, in particular, the religious dimension of reflections on nature, as “the wilderness, the lonesome valley, and the mountain” are read primarily as “places of deliverance” (16).

certainly is religious conversion in some narratives of the 1840s and 1850s, others do not overly emphasize this aspect in their acts of reading freedom through “nature.” Moreover, while various articulations of freedom through depicting the non-human material world employ settings of wilderness, e.g. when Bibb refers to “the fishes of the water, the fowls of the air, the wild beasts of the forest, [who] all appeared to be free to go where they please, and I was an unhappy slave” (*Narrative* 30),<sup>162</sup> or when Northup recalls envying the “birds singing in the trees” (57),<sup>163</sup> there are also instances in which other kinds of environs become the catalysts of a hermeneutics of freedom.

This happens sometimes, for example, when narrators describe scenes from their childhood, in which even the pastoral of the plantation could be perceived as “a scene of almost Eden-like beauty” and could thus initiate an articulation of freedom through ‘nature’ (Douglass, *My Bondage* 67). Consider, for instance, this description by Douglass:

Outside this select inclosure, were parks, where – as about the residences of the English nobility – rabbits, deer, and other wild game, might be seen, peering and playing about, with none to molest them or make them afraid. The tops of the stately poplars were often covered with the red-winged black-birds, making all nature vocal with the joyous life and beauty of their wild, warbling notes. These all belonged to me, as well as to Col. Edward Lloyd, and for a time I greatly enjoyed them. (Douglass, *Bondage* 62-63)

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<sup>162</sup> Bibb is particularly pronounced in stressing the importance of reading freedom through nature. Evidence may be found not only in his narrative but also in correspondence, such as a letter to his former master Sibley, where he writes that the freedom to act as a self-conscious being is a right “highly appreciated by the wild beasts of the forest and fowls of the air. The terrific screech of the hooting owl is animating to himself and musical to his kind as he goes through the tall forest, from hill top to valley. Not so, with the miserable little screech owl, while he is tied by the leg, or boxed up, in a cage. Though well fed he is made the sport of children” (qtd. Blassingame, *Slave Testimony* 53).

<sup>163</sup> Further examples can be found in narratives by J.D. Green (954), Curry (28), or Henry Watson; the first African American novella, Douglass’s *Heroic Slave* (1852), likewise starts out with an iconic moment of Madison Washington’s “human voice” addressing “a dark pine forest” (cf. 4-8). Another revealing case may also be seen in William Still, who retrospectively stresses the potential of the natural world as enacting a hermeneutics of freedom. In “William Still: His Life and Work to this Time,” James Boyd’s short biography that was first published as an appendix to the 1883 revised edition of Still’s *Underground Rail Road*, we find a moment that powerfully echoes the fugitive slave narrative, when the text’s voice unexpectedly switches to first person, giving Still’s own description of an encounter with the forest wilds: “I went one morning to the woods [...]. The ground and trees were all covered with snow. The sun shone out brightly, and soon the snow began to melt before his rays. To my amazement, my load of sorrow began of a sudden to leave me, to melt away, as it were, like the snow before the sun. [...] Never before in my experience or conception had I approached such a transition. Even the lonely woods and chilly snow seemed pervaded with loveliness and a source of indescribable cheer. I felt that it was the heart deliverance which appropriately followed my previous mental surrender to the great Ruler and my recorded resolve to seek his kingdom, takeing [sic!] the Sermon on the Mount as my guide and inspiration” (Boyd xi). It seems significant that Boyd’s text at this point – and only once – quotes Still directly and leaves space for the biographee’s own lyrical “I” to celebrate the importance of such moments, which must have been central to the plight of the fugitives Still received.

Even as Douglass's last assertion painfully turns out to be the temporary illusion of an enslaved child, one may see from this instance that the kinds of settings that incited moments of making sense of freedom and oneself through a discourse of "nature" did involve more than the wilderness beyond the plantation. There are non-human material environs apart from "[t]he nearby woods" (Dixon 17) that are portrayed by formerly enslaved narrators as places for thought-provoking reflections on liberty and a hermeneutic questioning of one's own position as a slave. Taken together, such moments mark a first way in which the non-human became connected to an Underground Railroad experience in the topographies depicted by fugitive slave narratives. Consciously reading in the 'book of nature' had the potential of inciting a hermeneutics of freedom that led to the recognition that "the natural order is freedom and that nature cannot permanently be thwarted" (Fetrow 199), and that thereby conceptually initiated a fugitive's Underground Railroad space. As narratives such as Bibb's or Douglass's suggest, entering the Underground Railroad first of all became possible through reflection on a kind of freedom at display in the non-human world.

Crucially, however, the non-human material world functioned as part of a literary Underground Railroad space in ways extending beyond merely inciting a hermeneutics of freedom. Whereas a discourse of "nature" and a "hermeneutics of freedom" are often involved in acts of first of all defining freedom *before* taking flight, depictions of experiences *during* escapes are frequently endowed with a vision of the non-human as a collaborator and co-agent. The non-human itself rendered assistance and became part of the Underground Railroad.

This is not to suggest that the non-human material world involved in spaces of flight had only positive connotations. Although there was the potential to read freedom in the "book of nature," and although collaboration with the non-human oftentimes became possible, literary fugitive space is also portrayed as challenging or, in Dixon's words, as a "zone of trial and deliverance" (13). In many ways, spaces of flight were presented as an extension of the topographies of enslavement and as ripe with dangers. On the one hand, there were the obstacles and threats inherent to the environs fugitives entered, where beasts such as the "howling wolves in the Red River Swamp" were constantly lurking (Bibb, *Narrative* 131),<sup>164</sup> where torrential rivers were to be crossed,<sup>165</sup> and

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<sup>164</sup> Other narratives that broach the issue of the dangers emanating from wolves or other "beasts" are, for instance, those by Roper (31) or Curry (36).

<sup>165</sup> Roper, for instance, reads this part of nature primarily as a dangerous obstacle, as he recounts successively crossing a total of five rivers in Florida and Georgia. In his descriptions, he points to several kinds of risks involved in passing streams: Some are "beset with alligators, [so] that I dared not attempt to swim across" (30), others make swimming such a painful task that it leaves him "dreadfully frightened, and most earnestly pray[ing] that I might be kept from a water grave" (34); and yet others present a "great difficulty in crossing" (34) as not even boats could be steered across for "the swiftness of the river" (31).

where the practical problems of journeying and surviving without sufficient nutrition or means of orientation had to be overcome.<sup>166</sup> In this sense, there was the obstacle of a threatening non-human nature itself.

On the other hand, narrators frequently stress yet another dimension of threat, apart from moving through at times harsh territory, which was perceived as infinitely more haunting. Jermaine Loguen, for example, refers to this second aspect when he writes:

I had broken from the sunny South, and fought a passage through storms and tempests, which made the forests crash and the mountains moan – difficulties, new, awful, and unexpected, but not so dreaded as my white enemies who were comfortably sheltered among them. (339)

The real danger, and the most dreaded part of fugitive space as an extension of the topographies of enslavement was therefore, as Loguen and others suggest, a corrupted “human” one, namely the gangs of man-hunters and their bloodhounds.<sup>167</sup> The manner in which the latter were specifically trained for slave chases<sup>168</sup> is suggestive of how the “human” and the “non-human” dimensions of threat merged. The bloodhound is an emblem of both the enforced complicity of the non-human that characterizes topographies of enslavement, and of the extension of this process into fugitive space.

In spite of these dangers and obstacles, however, which were no doubt often anticipated by fugitives before taking flight,<sup>169</sup> there is at the same time an emerging sense of collaboration with

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<sup>166</sup> Just as the portrayal of insufficient nutrition under slavery was one of the earmarks of slave narratives generally, the same aspect was also a stock feature of fugitive space (cf. e.g. Curry 35; Roper 5, 12). Similarly, disorientation in the woods or in swamps is frequently referred to with respect to escape routes (see e.g. Bibb, *Narrative* 51-52, 161; Curry 35-36); judging by the frequent occurrence of this feature, following the North Star appears to have been more of a myth than a reality.

<sup>167</sup> In this respect, fugitives’ texts often employ similes and other analogizing rhetoric. Bibb’s writing, for instance, is typical when the narrative voice recalls that “I felt that my chance was by far better among the howling wolves in the Red River Swamp than before Deacon Whitfield on the cotton plantation” (*Narrative* 131), or when Bibb likens being in “a strange city, among slaveholders and slave hunters” to “entering a wilderness among wolves and vipers, blindfolded” (76).

<sup>168</sup> The “yell and howl of the bloodhound” is iconic of fugitive space (Ward 165). In fact, it seems that such animals became almost as valuable a commodity as those they were hunting down. A telling fact in this respect is, for instance, that the Virginian Zachary Taylor, 12th president of the United States, had special hounds imported for slave-hunts. Moreover, the commodification of trained dogs for this particular purpose may be sensed from advertisements in Southern newspapers: In the *New Orleans Picayune* of 1853, for example, we find an offer for sale of “some prime dogs” that can “snuff a nigger an eternal distance off, and nose him out anywhere” (qtd. John Brown 213; cf. also Franklin and Schweninger, “The Quest for Freedom” 35).

<sup>169</sup> Many texts suggest that fugitives were, if obviously in most cases not well prepared, by and large aware of the dangers of taking flight. Pennington, for example, writes that “I considered the difficulties of the way – the reward that would be offered – the human bloodhounds that would be set upon my track – the weariness – the hunger” (*Fugitive Blacksmith* 14), and Douglass, in a typical manner, describes the preparations for the (ill-fated) collective flight he planned: “The case sometimes stood thus: At every gate through which we were to pass, we saw a watchman – at every ferry a guard – on every bridge a sentinel – and in every wood

the non-human that becomes central to the slave narrative's depiction of fugitive space and that functionally turns this space into Underground Railroad space. In this respect, literary Underground Railroad space denotes more than what Dixon traces in his metaphorical reading of fugitives as being engaged in a "zone of trial and deliverance" (13). Beyond recognizing that a "test of the wilderness [...] required a code of situational ethics" that was mirrored in fugitives' relations to wilderness (25), reading their relations to the non-human world through the lens of Underground Railroad space enables a focus on the material, epistemological, and ethical engagements *with* that space. Not conceptualizing fugitive space anthropocentrically as a "container" or "mirror" in which to act out or make visible a "situational ethics" captures the crucial points where an environmental knowledge and ethos emerges *from* that situation, and where former slaves describe how they were shaped by collaboration with that space.

One such point where the hostile aspects of fugitive space are complemented with a form of co-agency of the non-human that turns fugitive space into an Underground Railroad space may be seen in the *Narrative of James Curry* (1840). In one passage describing his flight from Person County, North Carolina, Curry writes:

In that afternoon I was attacked by a wild beast. I knew not what it was. I thought, surely I am beset this day, but unlike the men, more ferocious than wild beasts, I succeeded in driving him away, and that night crossed a branch of the Potomac. Just before I reached the town of Dumfries, I came across an old horse in a field with a bell on his neck. I had been warned by a colored man, a few nights before, to beware of Dumfries. I was worn out with running, and I took the bell off the horse's neck, took the bell collar for a whip, and putting a hickory bark round his head for a bridle, I jumped on his back, and thus mounted, I rode through Dumfries. The bull-dogs lay along the street, ready to seize the poor night traveller, but, being on horseback, they did not molest me. I have no doubt that I should have been taken up, if I had been on foot. When I got through the town, I dismounted, and said to my horse, 'go back to your master, I did not mean to injure him, and hope we will get you again, but you have done me a great deal of good.' And then I hastened on, and got as far from him as I could before morning. (Curry 36-7)

The beginning of the excerpt is in many ways exemplary of a hostile fugitive space, as Curry refers to both "non-human" as well as even greater "human" threats. By contrast, however, the passage also emphasizes how a non-human co-agent becomes crucial to Curry's flight, thereby functionally transforming fugitive space into Underground Railroad space.<sup>170</sup> Employing an "old horse" and "a

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a patrol" (*Narrative* 57). Taken together, such anticipations reveal even more how courageous the act of taking flight was in the first place, and that it should thus eventually be standing above whatever type of assistance might have been received.

<sup>170</sup> In fact, Curry only enters what was commonly understood as an Underground Railroad network run by abolitionists after this scene takes place: After crossing the Potomac, "I entered a colored person's house on the side of the canal, where they gave me breakfast and treated me very kindly" (37). While this encounter

hickory bark round his head for a bridle” becomes the means of deceiving that part of the non-human world that has been thoroughly corrupted and harnessed by slavery, namely the bloodhounds and “bull-dogs” of the town that has to be passed (36). Curry, at this point, spatially “cuts” through a Southern topography in ways functionally not unlike those described by the Crafts, as he reclaims himself through space by relying on the assistance of the non-human material world. Moreover, he clearly recognizes this process as such, thanking the horse for having “done me a great deal of good” (37). While Curry’s fugitive space is thus certainly also interpretable in terms of Dixon’s “situational ethics” – stealing is recognized as such (“I did not mean to injure him”) but justified (“but you have done me a great deal of good”) – the example moreover attests to an African American literary Underground Railroad space that attains additional meanings by including the non-human as a co-agency.

Another instance that suggests, in a parabolic way, the potential ascribed to a collaboration with the non-human during flights may be found in Solomon Bayley’s *Narrative of Some Remarkable Incidents* (1825). Fleeing from slavery in Delaware, Bayley describes how, after coming to a Virginian place called “Anderson’s Cross-Roads,” he “met with the greatest trial I ever met with in all my distress” (120). Being pursued by two locals into the woods, Bayley eventually hides in a “thin place” where

I felt very strange: I said to myself I never felt so in all my distress: I said something was going to happen to me today. So I studied about my feelings until I fell to sleep, and when I awoke, there had come two birds near to me; and seeing the little strange looking birds, it roused up all my senses; and a thought came quick into my mind that these birds were sent to caution me to be away out of this naked place [i.e. thin place]; that there was danger at hand. And as I was about to start, it came into my mind with great energy and force, ‘If you move out of this circle this day, you will be taken;’ for I saw the birds went all around me: I asked myself what this meant, and the impression grew stronger, that I must stay in the circle which the birds made. (Bayley 121)

Even though Bayley’s description, from this point on, may be said to involve mere superstition and seems much less “practically” significant than Curry’s, the passage nevertheless draws attention to both the concrete potential for resistance that lay in employing the non-human material world (literally) as underground space, and the process of retrospectively recognizing and ascribing meaning to this potential of the non-human natural world as part of the Underground Railroad. On

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is an example of spontaneous assistance (the second type of collaboration identified above), it is only in a third step “near Philadelphia, [where] I fell in with members of the Society of Friends, whom I never feared to trust” (38) that Curry engages a more conventionally understood Underground Railroad network. *Functionally*, however, Curry’s text conceptualizes fugitive space as Underground Railroad space as early as his encounter with the “old horse.”

the one hand, Bayley indeed manages to remain undiscovered in a hair-breadth moment in which one of the men “stopped and looked right down on me, as I thought, and I looked right up into his eyes” (Bayley 123). The “thin place” marked by Bayley’s reading of nature (“the circle”) becomes one that enables a heterotopic concealment and resistance that is just as effective as Henry Brown’s box. On the other hand, the way in which Bailey places such a moment at the centre of attention, reading it as the “greatest trial” of his entire story and stressing the involvement of “two great powers [which] have met here this day; the power of darkness, and the power of God” (123), lends weight to the general importance attributed to the non-human as collaborative underground in fugitives’ experiences. Through this scene and its religious overtones and parabolic manner, Bayley’s narrative highlights that it was collaborating *with* a natural space, and not merely the aid of human helpers or acting out a particular ethics *within* that space that bore the potential to overcome slavery.

The same is true for Henry Bibb’s *Narrative of the Life and Adventures* (1849), perhaps the text that like no other fugitive slave narrative captures the multiple dimensions of collaboration involved in African American literary Underground Railroad space. In many ways a typical representative of the genre with its focus on issues such as family separations, corporeal punishments, and religion,<sup>171</sup> Bibb’s narrative is nevertheless somewhat of an exception with respect to its vivid depiction of multiple flights and the explicitness and detail in which it describes a broad range of terrains and regions. The author-narrator’s going back and forth between slave and free territory in order to save his family not only let him learn “the art of running away to perfection” (Bibb, *Narrative* 15), but turn his account, as Gerhardt points out, into “a text that correlates the formulation of an African American cultural identity with detailed reflections about nature” (“Border Ecology” 13).<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Hence, Andrews notes that “[o]ne cannot read Bibb’s autobiography without wondering if he were not the more representative man than Douglass” (*To Tell* 158). For recent readings of Bibb see e.g. Stepto, *A Home Elsewhere* 100-120, who identifies four key features of Bibb’s *Narrative* (Indian captivity, family separations, the relationship between church and slaveholding, and the narrative’s “figurative language as for its rhetoric and ideology” (106)); Heglar 33-77; Morton; and Swan. For classic readings of Bibb’s narrative cf. e.g. Andrews, *To Tell* 151-161; Davis, “Slave Narrative”; Hite; Stepto, “Sharing”; on Bibb’s career after permanently gaining his freedom in Canada cf. Tobin and Jones 77-113.

<sup>172</sup> This quality has made Bibb’s *Narrative* somewhat of a favourite for ecocriticism on African American literature. While most ecocritics have emphasized Bibb’s dichotomous representation of Northern landscapes of freedom as opposed to Southern landscapes of enslavement (cf. e.g. Kimberly Smith 54-56; Outka 76-97; or Millner), other environmentally oriented readings have more generally seen the liberating potential of Bibb’s representations of non-human natural space (e.g. Myers 104-105; McClure 40-56; with a specific focus on wilderness also Dixon 23-27), or have focused on contexts such as the frontier-myth (Gerhardt, “Border Ecology”) or the Free Soil movement (Finley). Cooper gives another resourceful that discusses the history of the Detroit River region during the mid-nineteenth century through Bibb, and argues for a “fluid frontier” in the sense of both “its watery nature” and as “a metaphor for the shifting and multiple nature of identities, which are constantly negotiated in border zones” (131).

As such, Bibb's *Narrative* uncovers and exemplifies a whole range of dimensions of the slave narrative's Underground Railroad space. His depictions range from moments of a "hermeneutics of freedom" incited through "nature" (e.g. in the memorable scene on the shores of the Ohio River (cf. Chapter I.1)) to the workings of what was conventionally understood as the Underground Railroad or acts of spontaneous help (cf. Bibb, *Narrative* 51-57). Most importantly, however, Bibb's topographical descriptions rarely remain without an emphasis on the role of the non-human, as they constantly expose flight movements as being shaped by non-human environments that sometimes come to function as Underground Railroad space. Whether it is in prairies, in the woods, or in swamplands, Bibb's text never conceptualizes spaces of flight as mere containers to merely move through, but always stresses the potential of human/non-human collaboration which the specific properties of different kinds of regions, places, and environments had to offer. At one point in particular, Bibb becomes most explicit of this sense of a shared agency and collaboration, namely when, in a chapter entitled "Adventure on the Prairie," he describes his flight on a horse:

the horse carried me safely across at the proper place. After I got out a mile or so from the river, I came into a large prairie, which I think must have been twenty or thirty miles in width, and the road run across it about in the direction that I wanted to go. I laid whip to the horse, and I think he must have carried me not less than forty miles that night, or before sun rise the next morning. I then stopped him in a spot of high grass in an old field, and took off the bridle. I thanked God, and thanked the horse for what he had done for me, and wished him a safe journey back home. (*Narrative* 162-163)

The scene, which shows parallels to the passage from Curry's text,<sup>173</sup> attests once more to a twofold involvement of non-human aid as a means of escape and resistance. On the one hand, we see, again, the very practical, material dimension of assistance often provided by a specific setting. Although Bibb's first attempts to catch one of the horses "running at large in a field" are in vain (161), he eventually succeeds in securing a "noble beast" in the "barn-yard" of a plantation (162).<sup>174</sup> Thus spatially cutting his way through a Southern middle landscape, Bibb not only finds practical aid

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<sup>173</sup> At this point, one may also draw attention to the parallels of these two scenes with a well-known 1862 painting by Eastman Johnson entitled *Ride for Liberty* that portrays an African American family of three fleeing on horseback through a rugged prairie. The almost iconic presence of this image across representational forms lends even more weight to the idea of a vital importance of this mode of escape and, by extension, to the claim for a crucial involvement of non-human co-agents in Underground Railroad space and mid-nineteenth-century African American culture more generally.

<sup>174</sup> Scholars have predominantly discussed this moment in terms of the fugitive slave's ethics, which is understandable considering Bibb's own reflections: He assesses that "[s]uch an act [stealing a horse] committed by a white man under the same circumstances would not only be pronounced proper, but praiseworthy; and if he neglected to avail himself of such means of escape he would be pronounced a fool" (Bibb, *Narrative* 163). Cf. for discussions that focus on this aspect e.g. Dixon, 25-27; Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams* 213-214; Swan 26; Diedrich 279; Andrews, *To Tell* 151-152.

when fashioning himself a bridle “cut [from] a grape vine” (161) but thereby eventually also gains hold of a non-human co-agent: “As the horse seemed willing,” he rigorously employs the potential this particular space has to offer in hurrying across a prairie and crossing a “large stream of water,” in which “finally the water came over his [the horse’s] back and he swam over” (162). Thus, Bibb presents a most explicit example of environmentally rendered assistance that stresses how his means of escape emerge out of a specific setting; he roots his resistance in a non-human co-agent belonging to the very materiality of such a space.

On the other hand, the moment also reveals the ways in which Bibb consciously appreciates this dimension by “thanking” the horse and “wish[ing] him a safe journey back home” (163). In addition to Bibb’s use of personal pronouns when referring to the horse (“his”/“him”) and his explicit empathy with his companion (“I know the poor horse must have felt stiff, and tired from his speedy jaunt” (163)), it is especially this last sentence which emphasizes the importance Bibb ascribes to the potential assistance rendered by a co-agency of the non-human. More than merely representing his performance in a “test of wilderness” (Dixon 26-27), the passage suggests that Bibb’s relation to the natural world is not restricted to selfishly employing and exploiting elements of non-human nature in the way the slave system systematically did, but is marked by the development of an ethos of care for the non-human world.

As a whole, Bibb’s text is emblematic of the fugitive slave narrative’s production of the Underground Railroad as a space that includes the non-human as a co-agency. Apart from celebrating human agents, conductors and spontaneous sympathizers, both black and white, many fugitives portray the non-human material world as crucially involved in a fugitive space that was not only perceived as threatening, but also as holding the potential of becoming an Underground Railroad space offering concealment and assistance. Whether in Bayley’s parabolic emphasis on proper readings of environments that could afford the individual some means of resistance, or in Curry’s and Bibb’s horse-scenes, which stress the animals’ role as co-agents, non-human nature itself is often perceived as another Underground Railroad “conductor.” What thus emerges through fugitives’ depictions of forms of collaborative agencies that include the non-human is a de-anthropocentrized version of the Underground Railroad as a space that enabled the articulation of an African American environmental knowledge and ethos.

In summary, the Underground Railroad became a crucial means of “reclaiming (through) space” in a twofold sense. It enabled the fugitive’s own “reclaiming her/himself through space” in the sense of regaining a sense of space and body; and it provided a means of “reclaiming space” in the sense of an Underground Railroad that became a locus for articulating environmental

knowledge. On the one hand, reading the Underground Railroad not merely as a historical but as a literary space reveals the ways in which this space acted as an empowering heterotopia through the fugitive slave narrative. It offered a means of reinterpreting confinement under slavery into empowering concealment within heterotopic spaces that could lead out of the topographies of enslavement. Moreover, African American narrators strategized this newly found sense of resisting through space in the context of a broader antebellum notion of the Underground Railroad. They effectively signified on this popular and widespread notion by simultaneously veiling and unveiling Underground Railroad space through their texts, thereby producing the Underground Railroad through the literary as a “real utopia” that oscillated between the referential/representable and the non-referential/non-representable.

On the other hand, it is precisely at this point that another, from an ecocritical perspective crucial function of Underground Railroad space in the fugitive slave narrative becomes visible. As a *human* Underground Railroad was rendered largely *unrepresentable*, and could only be engaged in strategic games of signifying, many narrators created instead a functionally equivalent *non-human* Underground Railroad space, which was not only a *representable* refuge, but also a discursive one. Turning the Underground Railroad into a literary heterotopia opened up the possibility of re-conceptualizing its space as an African American literary locus shaped by alternative forms of collaboration and assistance that extended beyond networks of (white) abolitionists. Through this process, the Underground Railroad emerged as a de-anthropocentrized space that included forms of non-human agency, as fugitives represented material environs as co-agents in a variety of ways. They engaged in a “hermeneutics of freedom” through a discourse of “nature” that first enabled taking flight, and employed an expanded notion of Underground Railroad space in order to demonstrate their identifications and alliances with non-human, often animated, nature during flights. Thus, slave narratives depict not only a “social” but also an “environmental” underground; their spaces of flight were not merely “containers,” but often functioned as Underground Railroad space that gained its decisive function through the non-human.

This process of strategically articulating relations to the non-human through the discursive refuge of literary Underground Railroad space is foundational to African American environment knowledge. Out of the confined situations of patronized witness-texts, and against the general hyper-separating impulse of the fugitive slave narrative, the Underground Railroad attained the function of a discursive “loophole” for an African American environmental imagination. In a way, the Underground Railroad became not only a “gateway to freedom” (Foner) but also a literary “gateway to nature.”

### 3.3

## Negotiating (through) the Skin: The Black Body, Pamphleteering, and African American Writing against Biological Exclusion

“The blood of the parents in seasoning of this climate becomes changed – also, the food for the mother being the production of this country, and congenial to the climate – the atmosphere she breathes [...] – all are principles which establish and give character to the constitutional principles of the child, among which the blood is an essential constituent; hence every child born in America, even if it be black as jet, is American by birth and blood.”

(Hosea Easton, “A Treatise on the Intellectual Character, and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the United States: And the Prejudice Exercised towards Them” 47-48)

“Now in viewing this wonderful material construction of the human body, where is there any difference but simply in the covering of the body, an effect that classes and distinguishes the human race nationally; but which cannot add or detract from the perfection of their physical construction.”

(John Lewis, “Essay on the Character and Condition of the African Race” 195)

The journey of the term and concept of race into the nineteenth-century U.S. is in many ways the history of its increasing biologization. While “race” can be traced back etymologically to an aristocratic context, a concept of race that linked the “racial” with a discourse of the “natural/biological” took root at least as early as the European Enlightenment.<sup>175</sup> It travelled across the Atlantic as swiftly as the vessels of the colonial slave-trade it helped justify, and became engrained in the practices of a young United States, where a biologized concept of race was rooted in “nature” rather than aristocratic birth. What came to the fore on the other side of the Atlantic was not only what historian Robert Young describes as a by then well-established “cultural pecking order, with those who had most civilization at the top, and those who were considered to have none

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<sup>175</sup> On the long-term history of constructing concepts of race out of dehumanizing stereotypes and images of black Africans, which were already present in some form in medieval Muslim and Iberian cultures of the fifteenth- and sixteenth century, cf. e.g. David Brion Davis (“Culmination” esp. 761-767; *Inhuman Bondage* 48-76); for a recent assessment of this history that focuses on the terms “black” and “white,” see Simon-Aaron 171-190. The idea that modern concepts of race are articulated in terms of “biology” is also present in the work of scholars like Appiah, Cornel West, or Fanon; one general assessment is, as Cavalli-Sforza et al. suggest, that “[r]acism has existed from time immemorial but only in the nineteenth century were there attempts to justify it on the basis of scientific arguments” (19).

[...] at the bottom” (94),<sup>176</sup> but also a set of increasingly elaborate strategies of “biological” justification for this “order.” Out of the broader “entry of life into history” in modernity that Foucault explains in terms of the emergence of “biopower” (*Will to Knowledge* 142), race thus came to mark a foundational paradox of the young United States as the “naturally” justified downside of the principle that “all men are created equal.”

Nowhere, perhaps, is this paradox more clearly recognizable than in Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785). Although the co-author of the “Declaration of Independence,” representing the revolutionary ideology of his era’s intellectual elite,<sup>177</sup> generally condemns slavery in the spirit of American Freedom, the 23 “Queries” of *Notes* are at the same time a manifestation of a discriminatory biologization of race around Jefferson’s notion of blackness. The tract, to use Fanon’s memorable term, “epidermalizes” race (cf. 11). It reads skin color as the single most important marker of physical racial difference and deduces supposedly correlating mental differences along categories such as “memory, reason, and imagination” (Jefferson 149). On the one hand, Jefferson observes “the real distinctions which nature has made” in skin color, arguing that “[w]hether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and the scarf-skin [i.e. epidermis], or in the scarf-skin itself; whether it proceeds from the color of the blood, or the color of the bile [...], the difference is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us” (147).<sup>178</sup> On the other hand, he claims that by “[c]omparing them [Africans] by their faculties [...] it appears to me that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous” (149).

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<sup>176</sup> Young goes on to suggest the merging of the notion of “civilization” with “its quasi-synonym ‘cultivation’” (cf. 95). Gates and Smith agree with Young’s assessment, suggesting that “[b]y 1750, the chain [of being] had become minutely calibrated,” and emphasizing in particular the connection between literariness and civilization/cultivation that emerged out of enlightenment thought: “If blacks could write and publish imaginative literature, then they could, in effect, take a few ‘giant steps’ up the chain of being, in a pernicious metaphysical game of ‘Mother, May I?’” (“Talking Books” xl).

<sup>177</sup> Scholars have thoroughly examined the affinities of Jefferson’s views in *Notes* with the enlightenment philosophy of Friedrich Hegel, Immanuel Kant, and David Hume. Furthermore, some have traced the more immediate circles of influence of what Shuffelton calls “an invisible, informal learned society of [Jefferson’s] own devising, one that answered his needs for both information and friendship” (xiv). Cf. e.g. Jarrett 21-25; Gates and Smith, “Talking Books” xxxviii-xxxix.

<sup>178</sup> Although skin colour figures as the primary “racial marker” in Jefferson’s tract, *Notes* also refers to bodily differences in terms of the “flowing hair” and (supposedly) “more elegant symmetry of form” in white bodies, thus aestheticizing the idea of racial superiority in the white body, and asking why, if “[t]he circumstance of superior beauty, is thought worthy attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man?” (148). Yet another physical distinction is suggested in Jefferson’s idea that blacks “seem to require less sleep” (148) – an assessment that, however, seems to be contradicted by the author himself, when he describes, only a few lines later, “their disposition to sleep when abstracted from their diversions and unemployed in labour” (149).

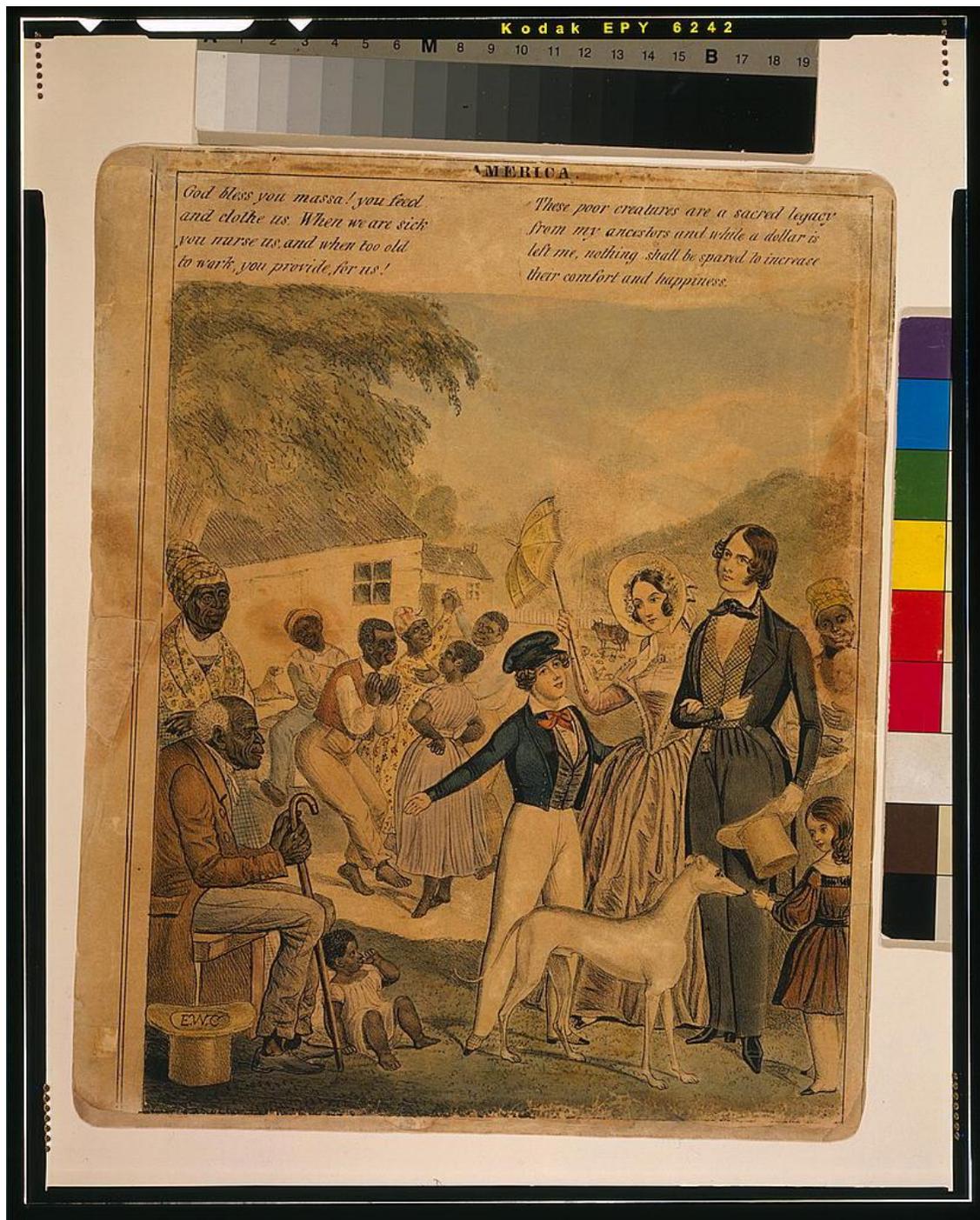
Thus, *Notes* not only encapsulates a foundational paradox of the United States, but also acts stylistically and thematically as a precursor of nineteenth-century racialisms in at least three ways. Firstly, as it articulates and sets up, often in hypothesizing tone (“appears”; “scarcely” (149)), the paradigms of body and what may be called “racial character” along which a biologizing racial science came to develop. Secondly, by participating in a general rhetoric of othering through its constant use of “they/them” with respect to Americans of African descent. And, thirdly, as it employs quasi-scientific language – one scholar speaks of Jefferson as a “natural cum social scientist” (Jarrett 33) – to the end of claiming that blacks are “inferior to whites in the endowments of both body and mind” (Jefferson 153).

In such ways, Jefferson’s reading of blackness as absence and abnormality, as doomed by natural, “scientifically” verifiable deficiencies, prefigures the characteristics of racial discourses of the nineteenth century and beyond. *Notes* plays a signal role in what Young sees as a gradual shift from an “enlightenment universalism” and its “doctrine of human equality” to a mid-nineteenth century “darker aphorism: ‘different – and also different, unequal’” (92); the tract is part of a complex of processes that biologized race around notions of “blackness,” and that undoubtedly reached their climax, for the time being, during the antebellum period. Here, in the context of heightening sectional tensions and heated debate over slavery, it was not merely proslavery arguments but a wide variety of discourses including, for instance, craniometry, phrenology, or physiognomy that produced the “biological truths” of a broad racialization based on a supposedly essential, naturally given distinctiveness of the black body. In this respect, Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens was only stating a by then well-established ‘historical truth’ of his age in 1861, when he claimed “*nature*” to be the foundation of his famous “Cornerstone”: Not only slavery but a thoroughly racialized antebellum episteme as such rested upon the ‘naturalized’ and ‘biologically’ produced “great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man” (721).

### The Black Body: Biological Exclusion and Environmental State of Exception

At the heart of this antebellum biologization of race lay a set of including and excluding processes that constituted the epistemic basis of a variety of discourses, and that crucially shaped the discursive position from which African Americans produced environmental

knowledge. A good starting point for outlining the racializing fabric of such processes is the following 1841 lithograph by Edward Williams Clay, a Northern apologist of slavery.<sup>179</sup>



<sup>179</sup> The hand-colored lithograph was published by A. Donnelly in New York in 1841. The copy used here, which is part of the holdings of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. ("American Cartoon Prints Collection") is a fragment. It represents the left panel of a print item called "Black and White Slavery" that, as the information on the collection suggests, "contrasts the plight of Britain's abused 'white slaves' (actually factory workers, portrayed in the right panel) and America's 'contented' black slaves."

The depiction is, in many ways, typical of antebellum plantation pastoral.<sup>180</sup> It characteristically emphasizes fundamental racial as supposedly “natural” differences between humans; differences that resolve, however, into a seemingly idyllic, harmonious, and mutually beneficent order. To the right, a white family discernible in attire and posture as Southern aristocracy express their “benevolent” attitude, stating that “nothing shall be spared to increase the comfort and happiness” of the “poor creatures” portrayed in the left-hand corner. These “poor creatures,” on the other hand, appear to complement this attitude, as the text above the ensemble suggests: “God bless you massa! you feed and clothe us. When we are sick you nurse us, and when too old to work, you provide for us!” Black slaves are depicted as part of a supposedly benign social contract of the peculiar institution. They are the recipients of a colonial benevolence, whether as grateful, passive and docile elements in the left-hand corner, or as child-like, merrily dancing figures, apparently joyful and full of contentment, in the background.

The lithograph is, however, more than merely an instance of plantation pastoral. It also reveals a particular positioning of the black body that can be grasped more concretely by reading the image in terms of processes of inclusion, exclusion and exception. The latter term, which has gained prominence especially in connection with Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*-project and its concept of a “state of exception,”<sup>181</sup> denotes the paradoxical principle at the heart of a simultaneously excluding and including process. In a state of exception, an exclusion takes place that, at the same time and *thereby*, produces its own inclusion. Thus, the character of a “state of exception” is, in Agamben’s words, the creation of “a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, chaos and the normal situation” (19).<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> See on plantation pastoral generally e.g. Flora and MacKethan 620-622; Outka 85-87; Finseth, *Shades* 210-228. One immediate context for Clay’s lithograph may be seen in the literary genre of plantation romances like John Pendleton Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn* (1832), which celebrated the South and slavery in pastoral terms. For an important reading of Southern pastoral in plantation paintings throughout the antebellum and postwar period see Vlach (2002), who recognizes “statements of power encoded in plantation landscapes” (1). Especially what Vlach identifies as “the chief purpose of a plantation painting,” namely “to present a reassuring, tranquil scene,” is clearly visible in the lithograph (*The Planter’s Prospect* 185).

<sup>181</sup> “*Homo Sacer*-project” refers to a series of Agamben’s works that have appeared since the publication of *Homo Sacer* in 1995. The project’s general aim is to revise and expand Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt’s theories of biopolitics and totalitarianism. Cf. for an overview e.g. Snoek; or Murray 56-77.

<sup>182</sup> Envisioning his work as a continuation as well as a “correction” and “completion” of Foucault’s ideas of the 1970s, Agamben’s argument in *Homo Sacer* (1998) focuses on what he calls the “sovereign exception” and seeks to explain, primarily for a juridico-political context, the fundamental relation between life and politics (cf. 9). Out of the basic distinction between *zoe* (unqualified biological life) and *bios* (politicized life), and taking recourse to the works of the German jurist Carlo Schmitt and his idea of exception, Agamben argues for a paradox that lies at the root of (all) western biopolitics, and that may be seen manifested in a figure of ancient Roman law, the *homo sacer*, a “[l]ife that cannot be sacrificed yet may be killed,” and in the figure of the political sovereign (*Homo Sacer* 82). The paradox thus demarcated is, for Agamben, that of the “exception” as a simultaneously excluding and including process: In the state of exception, *exclusion* takes place (the sovereign *may* kill; the *homo sacer may* be killed), while, at the same

This paradoxical figure of the exception as an “including exclusion” – *not* Agamben’s specific argument as a whole<sup>183</sup> – can be employed in productive ways for rethinking a biologizing antebellum racial politics as the context in which African American environmental knowledge emerged. The lithograph is, in this respect, the symbolic expression of a fundamental constellation that involved processes of an inclusion, exclusion and exception of the black body. To decipher these processes, consider the interplay between the black figures on the left, the white figures on the right, and the hound at the center of the ensemble. On a basic level, the latter simply represents biological non-human life in the animal itself. Reading the constellation as a whole, however, the biologically racializing dimension of the ensemble becomes perceivable, to begin with, regarding the coloring of the animal and its “touchability” in relation to the portrayed members of the white aristocracy. The coloring itself marks the animal as positioned closer to the “superior” race; the white hound symbolizes in this respect a domesticated and “civilized” animality of white humanity. Moreover, the girl’s touch of the animal’s snout, the possibility of tactile contact with this symbol of a domesticated “whitened” animality, further emphasizes the inclusion of this animality into a pastoral harmony, a pastoral framework of the “white human.”

The African American figures, by contrast, are biologically excluded through the lithograph’s symbolism in two ways. First, the image spatially and visually cuts them off from any kind of connection with the “whitened” non-human animality represented in the hound; the slaves are located exclusively amongst themselves, on the left-hand side or in the background. Secondly, the black characters are racialized and excluded through a distorting portrayal of their physiognomy; their facial features and bodily postures echo a variety of biologically excluding stereotypes that dominated discursive formations from the 1830s on. Such stereotypes manifested in a variety of discourses that simultaneously articulated racial and environmental knowledge and that ranged from the works of the “American School” (cf. Chapter 3.1.) to the pamphlets published by proslavery conventions or the “manuals” on the “proper” treatment of slaves that were part of antebellum Southern culture. While the racial scientists, coming from various disciplines, made

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time, an *inclusion* occurs, as the exception retains a constitutive relation to the rule (the sovereign comes to kill what Agamben calls *bare life* (not *zoe*); *homo sacer* must *not* be sacrificed). It is here, Agamben suggests, that “a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, chaos and the normal situation – the state of exception” is created (19).

<sup>183</sup> While borrowing the term and general idea of a “state of exception” as described in Agamben, I am neither suggesting an application of the specific figure of the *homo sacer* to the figure of the (African American) slave, nor am I interested in generally following Agamben’s (bio-)political argumentative line, which appears to be problematic as a highly Eurocentric concept; for recent criticism on Agamben’s Eurocentrism cf. e.g. Fiskesjö; Jarvis. In this sense, my argument in this chapter, while loosely inspired by Agamben’s idea of exception, is certainly not Agambian in nature.

their claims from behind the authorizing veil of scientific objectivity,<sup>184</sup> the open politicization of their ideas across popular antebellum discourses<sup>185</sup> worked more explicitly and graphically towards producing the biological exclusion of the black body that is also visible in the lithograph's black characters. A typical example showing how the assumptions of racist pseudo-scientific knowledge came to permeate antebellum discourse is Richard Colfax's "Evidence against the views of the Abolitionists" (1833), a short text that aimed to demonstrate "to the public, that the physical and mental differences between negroes and white men, are sufficient to warrant us in affirming that they have descended from distinct origins" (8). To this end, Colfax "objectively" compared nerves and brains of both humans and animals to arrive at the biologically deduced racist belief that within "the great zoological chain" (26), "the negroes, whether physically or morally considered, are so inferior as to resemble the brute creation as nearly as they do the white species" (30).

Other proslavery arguments<sup>186</sup> presented additional strategies for conflating slave body and black body into one and the same biologically excluded entity. Apart from producing stereotypes of a black "animality" or "beastliness," which would become even more pronounced in the second half of the nineteenth-century, some sought justification for slavery through the notion that "negro slaves alone are constitutionally adapted to labor in those climates where the great staples of cotton, rice and sugar can be produced" (Shannon 8). Others, such as the Georgian Robert Collins in his "Essay on the Treatment and Management of Slaves," deployed the myth that "[n]egroes are by nature tyrannical in their dispositions [...] so that it becomes a prominent duty of owners and overseers, to keep peace, and prevent quarrelling and disputes among them" (11). The best result, according to such arguments, would be effected through strict discipline (cf. 12-14), and "[a]s long

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<sup>184</sup> Morton, for instance, claimed the "School's" objectivity in an 1842 paper read at the Pennsylvania Medical College, suggesting that "[o]urs is essentially a science of facts. [...] we search into the varied and multiform tissues of the human body" ("Brief Remarks" 110). Morton's style was much less polemical than the rhetoric of many of his peers, even though his work was ultimately just as racializing and eventually racist in its implications as that of, for instance, Nott and Gliddon. Such writers nonetheless likewise claimed to be scientific and objective, e.g. in "that summum of ante-bellum ethnology" (Karcher 424), *Types of Mankind* (1854), in which the aim was supposedly merely to "know what was the primitive organic structure of race? – what such race's moral and physical character?" (Nott/Gliddon 49).

<sup>185</sup> The ideas of polygenist racial science, which, with "the magic wand of science had transmuted racial prejudice into accredited fact" (Karcher 425), became widely popularized verbally and visually in books, magazines and newspapers between the 1830s and 1860s. Cf. on the dissemination of the "findings" of the American School Young 92; Horsman 153-60; and generally Frederickson (1987).

<sup>186</sup> On proslavery arguments and strategies more generally cf. e.g. Genovese, *The World*, esp. "Part Two"; Morrow; Tise; Ericson; Daly; Grant, esp. 76-82; and Etter 86-147. For the crucial role of the Bible and religion in proslavery thought, see Genovese and Fox-Genovese, "Divine Sanction"; and Prud'homme, "Evangelical Ministers"; for proslavery arguments in response to Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, cf. e.g. Gardiner (1977; 1978). The most recent treatments of proslavery ideology include those by Roberts-Miller (2009), who focuses on the 1830s; D. Jones (2014), who treats the peculiarities of Northern proslavery thought; and Burnett (2015), who reconsiders the proslavery novel.

as owners are governed by their own interest,” since only then would “the slaves have good security for a comfortable support” (15).<sup>187</sup>

In this way, the black body itself – not just the slave body – came to be held in a particular position through processes of inclusion, exclusion, and exception that were part of antebellum biologizations of race. This discursive position, which is crucial to tracing African American environmental knowledge, was therefore not only marked by what Patterson has called the “slave’s natal alienation,” i.e. “the slave’s forced alienation, the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations” (5, 7),<sup>188</sup> but also involved, especially in an antebellum U.S. context, the “biological” markedness of the black body. Not just the “natal alienation and genealogical isolation” of a slave body (338), but a *biological exclusion* and an *environmental state of exception* produced the characteristic position of the black body during the age of American racial slavery. If an *exclusion* took place on the level of the *biological*, then the *inclusionary* side of this process becomes visible on the level of the *environmental*. Through (pseudo-)scientific or popular discourses, but also through aesthetic modes such as the pastoral or the sublime, the black body was simultaneously biologically excluded and included, *re-placed*, and thus exceptionalized. In the lithograph, for example, the pastoral, as an aesthetic mode that expresses environmental knowledge, becomes involved in this positioning of the black body as it *environmentally* includes what the imagery as a whole *biologically* excludes. The contact between the white child and a “whitened” non-human nature in the hound marks a white privilege at the expense of the racializing biological exclusion of the black body, while this same exclusion is included through a representational mode – in this case the pastoral – that expresses a dominant environmental knowledge.

Thus reading links between racial and environmental knowledge in terms of processes of inclusion, exclusion, and exception complements recent scholarly arguments that are central to reading African American literature and culture ecocritically, for instance, those by Outka and

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<sup>187</sup> Collins at this point echoes the widely used proslavery argument of the contented slave and of a mutually beneficent, naturally predestined order between white master and black slave – a notion that is also at the heart of the plantation pastoral as it is employed, for instance, in the 1841 lithograph. Examples of this myth abound throughout proslavery literature. As one writer concisely puts it, alluding to Stephens’s Cornerstone-speech, slavery was regarded as “an unmixed good to the Negro, to the master, to the North, to civilization, to the world, [...] the ‘cornerstone of our Republican edifice,’ and [...] the most fortunate conjuncture that has ever happened in human affairs” (J.H. Van Evrie 109).

<sup>188</sup> In his important 1982 study of slavery, Patterson further describes the slave’s position as one marked by several fundamental forms of estrangement that included: an alienation from any personal or familial history (there were “no natal claims and powers of his own, he had none to pass on to his children” (9)); from any rewarding social order as he “usually stood outside the game of honor” as a non-person (9); and from a sense of space as he was kept “from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master” (7). Thus made into “the ultimate human tool” (7), Patterson’s study describes “the slave’s social death, the outward conception of his natal alienation” (8).

Myers. Outka's important observation, on the one hand, that "the conflation of blackness and nature served as the principle 'justification' for chattel slavery in antebellum America" (25), no doubt captures facets of what I have described here in terms of the "biological exclusion" of the black body. It could be expanded, however, through the notion of an "environmental state of exception," to see more precisely how African American environmental knowledge emerged apart from Outka's proposed grand divide between a (white) sublime as opposed to a (black) trauma response to non-human nature.<sup>189</sup> Myers's analogy between racism and (white) environmental estrangement, on the other hand, his idea that "Euroamerican racism and alienation from nature derive from the same source and result in the joint and interlocking domination of people of color and the natural world" (15), can also be reconsidered through identifying processes of biological exclusion and environmental exception. Largely falling short, in my view, of recognizing the complexities involved in the production of racialized environmental knowledge,<sup>190</sup> Myers's perspective ignores, speaking in the symbolism of the discussed lithograph, the ambivalence of the processes symbolized by the pastoralizing touch of the hound, which, in fact, achieves the racist exclusion of the black figures through a Euro-American pastoral *identification* with nature rather than an "alienation" from it. By contrast, fundamentally rethinking the dynamics of a racializing environmental knowledge in terms of processes of inclusion, exclusion, and exception, provides a basis for tracing how African American environmental knowledge developed precisely out of this paradox-ridden constellation, i.e. in response to the black body's entanglements in a *biological* state of exclusion and an *environmental* state of exception.

### The Antebellum Black Writer: Agitating against Biological Exclusion

The biological exclusion and environmental state of exception of the black body crucially marked the discursive position of the black writer, especially with respect to producing environmental

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<sup>189</sup> This is not to disclaim Outka's thesis in *Race and Nature* of a general alignment of the sublime with whiteness and trauma with blackness in the nineteenth century. However, my distinction between "biological exclusion" and "environmental exception" shifts the emphasis in accordance with the present study's focus on African American literature. It enables addressing more concretely the processes and strategies involved in African American literary representations of relations to the non-human material world, and especially, the always paradox-ridden production of environmental knowledge through modes like the sublime, the pastoral, or the picturesque.

<sup>190</sup> Outka likewise criticizes Myers's idea for overlooking the separation of the "human and natural as in fact more marked in African-American culture than in Euroamerican," and suggests that his approach is in many senses the "inverse" of Myers (207).

knowledge. To begin with, the biologizing racialization of the black body fundamentally shaped the relation between the black writer's claims to humanity – to being a “human animal” – and writing as such. The black written word in itself came to function, after all, as an inevitable marker, a “proof,” of humanity, since the central challenge from the very beginnings of the African American (written) literary tradition was, in a sense, that of refuting Jefferson's assessment that “[a]mong the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry” (150).<sup>191</sup> Accordingly, as numerous scholars have pointed out, “the production of literature was taken to be the central arena in which persons of African descent could [...] establish and redefine their status within the human community” (Gates, *Signifying Monkey* 129). African American letters were in this respect, in and of themselves, political acts of resistance.<sup>192</sup>

At the same time, the status of the black written word was characterized by its universalization along the biologically racialized black body. One of the central problems antebellum African American writers, whether free-born or formerly enslaved, had to cope with was that they were generally perceived as “a monolithic group, all slave-classed” (Blockett 116).<sup>193</sup> Being a black

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<sup>191</sup> Gates has emphasized the centrality of Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* in relation to Phyllis Wheatley's poetry, suggesting that the two texts set up the general “political motive” of the African American literary tradition: “Jefferson's comments about the role of their literature in any meaningful assessment of the African American's civil rights became the strongest motivation for blacks to create a body of literature that would implicitly prove Jefferson wrong. This is Wheatley's and Jefferson's curious legacy in American literature” (*Trials* 66).

<sup>192</sup> This is especially true in two senses: On the one hand, for the early decades of the nineteenth century, since the post-revolutionary era and late-eighteenth century had produced a climate where “culture and politics were almost one and the same in the written and social constitutions of government” (Jarrett 23; see also Warner (1990)); on the other hand, for the antebellum fugitive slave narrative in particular since, as has frequently been stressed, “[i]n literacy lay true freedom for the black slave” (Gates, “Introduction” 1). The question here, which has been a point of debate in scholarship, is in how far assuming African American literature of this period to be written from an inherent political position centrally produced in response to Jefferson's tract may overlook dimensions of independence in black letters. While the majority of critics have, to varying extents, emphasized “refuting *Notes* [as] the starting point of African American race writing” (Dain 4; cf. e.g. Gates, who has repeatedly stressed the Wheatley-Jefferson complex; Gates and Smith, “The Literature” 76; “Talking Books” xlili-xl), others are more careful in assigning this – in their view somewhat reductive – centrality to *Notes* (e.g. Jarrett 22-38 (esp. 15-17); Moody 135-137). While some of the latter claims are justified, it seems that overlooking the distinct positionality of the African American written word that was produced not simply out of what Houston Baker calls a “Heideggerian ‘nothingness,’ the negative foundation of being” (31) but also out of a tradition of responses to Jefferson, would be equally reductive to tracing the aims, ambitions and achievements of antebellum black literature, especially when re-reading this tradition from an environmentally oriented perspective. Of course, black writers “did not simply navigate or circumvent the racist modes proffered for the representation of [their] identity and experience” (Moody 136), but by not taking into account the distinct discursive position of the black word created out of the tradition genealogically traceable back to the Jefferson-Wheatley complex, we might miss more than we gain. Incorporating the ways in which the “Negro” had been considered as a “Canaanite, a man devoid of Logos” reveals rather than conflates what emerges in African American letters as an environmental knowledge (David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery* 90).

<sup>193</sup> This is not to say, of course, that this process was one-sided in the sense of an attribution of “slave-classed” by an active white majority to a passive group of black writers. Free (or freed) antebellum African Americans, in most cases, explicitly embraced the opportunity and celebrated the duty and privilege of

writer inevitably meant writing not only *for* but to a certain extent *as* a slave; it meant consciously agitating from a position of the racialized black body and producing environmental knowledge out of a discursive position shaped by biological exclusion and environmental exception.

Fugitives from slavery responded in a variety of ways to this problematic position in their autobiographies, as the readings of the first two chapters have shown. Even though the slave narrative displays an undeniable general impulse towards hyper-separation, as its protagonists often sought to sever the harmfully established ties with non-human nature under slavery in order to become “civilized” as the equivalent of “human,” many texts also engaged in signifying revisions of established Euro-American forms of environmental knowledge or found other means for articulating environmental knowledge. This could happen, for instance, through a double-voiced pastoralism (Chapter 3.1.), a self-reflexive employment of the sublime (Introduction), or by creating a subversive literary space such as the Underground Railroad that enabled an expression of alliances and identifications with the non-human material world (Chapter 3.2).

For another group of antebellum African American writers, Northern free-born blacks, the discursive position from which they raised their voice was in many ways similar. They, too, had to find adequate responses to the delineated position of the black writer that was bound to a biologically othered black body. Therefore, the same constellation of the biologically excluded and environmentally exceptionalized black body must also be taken into account when considering the production of environmental knowledge in the political and literary discourses of free black communities, in particular in the body of texts this chapter turns to: African American pamphlets.

While scholars have traditionally paid great attention to the antebellum period as “the golden age of the slave narrative,” black pamphleteering, with the exception of David Walker’s “Appeal,” has generally remained somewhat underrepresented (Smith Foster 61). Although recently complemented by important online resources,<sup>194</sup> there exist so far only a handful of

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becoming spokespersons for their brethren in chains; many displayed the ethos Frances Ellen Harper expresses when claiming “I belong to this race, and when it is down, I belong to a down race; when it is up, I belong to a risen race” (“A Private Meeting” 128). This also reveals how “racial power” can be read in a Foucauldian sense, namely as a form of power in which domination and resistance were involved in a mutually constitutive, dynamic relationship. Even though being othered and writing *as* a slave was disempowering, writing *for* the slave could become a means of identification and resistance by constructing a common black identity.

<sup>194</sup> An important step towards bringing African American pamphlets more prominently into scholarly focus can be seen in the impressive array of online resources that exist by now. There are two online collections (Daniel A.P. Murray Collection; African American Pamphlet Collection) available through the websites of the Library of Congress. Moreover, the extensive database “Documenting the American South” (University of South Carolina) has digitized not only an impressive number of fugitive slave narratives and historical texts, but also a considerable number of African American pamphlets by now.

printed collections (Porter (1969); Newman (2001); Thompson (2004)) focusing exclusively on such texts,<sup>195</sup> which may broadly be defined as

something between a broadside and a book. Adaptable as an argumentative essay, a short narrative of events, or a bare-bones sketch of an organization's proceedings, the pamphlet could be used by all manner of activists. At the same time the pamphlet offered a media form that promised to preserve words and deeds in a discrete, individual, and long-lived object. (Newman et al. 2)

It was especially the versatility of the medium and the longevity of the written word emphasized here, along with the relative freedom pamphleteering offered in terms of the writer/publisher's control over the production and distribution process (cf. Newman et al. 7), which made this way of raising voice so appealing to free black organizations and individuals from the 1790s on.<sup>196</sup> Apart from its general significance as a shaping force of antebellum culture, this set of texts is also of interest for readings of African American literature from an ecocritical perspective because black pamphleteering came to develop into intertextual webs marked by an impressive thematic diversity and "polyvocality" (Moody 139).<sup>197</sup> Pamphlets, I argue, became another primal place where African American writers developed forms of environmental knowledge; embedded within their more explicit concerns such as abolitionism, emancipation, education, women's rights or (anti-)colonizationism, pamphleteers also addressed fundamental questions of the human in its non-human conditions.

In their encounter with the discursive position of a biologically excluded and environmentally exceptionalized black body, the component predominantly focused on in African American pamphlet literature of the pre-Civil War period was, without a doubt, the question and problem of biological exclusion. The idea of a biologically othered black body was, explicitly and

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<sup>195</sup> Other recent compilations organized along specific themes that also include African American pamphlets are those by Ferguson (2008), which focuses on nineteenth century black women's literary achievements; Simmons/Thomas (2010), which anthologizes African American sermons (often published as pamphlets); or P. Foner/Branham (1998), which organizes its texts around the black oratory tradition. African American pamphlets are also included in some older collections, e.g. in Osofsky (1967); Porter (1971); or in the multivolume works edited by Finkelman (1988); or Ripley (1991).

<sup>196</sup> The pamphleteering discourse under consideration here was only one part of a broader print culture in which African Americans participated throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, a time when "[p]rinted matter became a part of everyday life" (Cohen and Stein, "Introduction" 1). On the shaping power of print mass media and the black press cf. e.g. Squires (for the antebellum period esp. 15-26); on abolitionism and the news media cf. Streitmatter 17-31.

<sup>197</sup> Therefore, a general characterization of antebellum African American pamphleteering seems almost impossible; for discussions of the thematic diversity of antebellum black pamphleteering cf. e.g. Wheelock; or Porter, "Negro Protest Pamphlets" iii; regarding stylistic diversity, see esp. Newman et al. 18-24. Moreover, one must differentiate pamphlets with respect to the occasions out of which they emerged (e.g. whether they came out of church meetings, conventions, court proceedings or other forms of gatherings) as well as regarding the audiences thus engaged (cf. Ernest, "African American Literature" 110).

implicitly, attacked by Northern black pamphleteers, who were by no means less affected by the ubiquitous racialization of the black body than slaves who had fled from the South. After all, as one of the most astute observers of antebellum culture, Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, noted as early as 1835, “race prejudice seems stronger in those states that have abolished slavery than in those where it still exists” (402). Often painfully recognizing the truth of these words in their daily lives and realizing at the same time to be living in the “golden age of Literature” (Whipper, “Address 1828” 107), pamphleteers effectively launched their voices from the fast-developing African American communities in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City. They employed the new opportunities of a transforming mass media in order to turn oral discourse into a more widely and increasingly nationally received written protest<sup>198</sup> that, among other things, aimed to “negotiate (through) the skin” of a biologically excluded black body. Black pamphleteers sought to “see through” the skin, so to speak, and produced environmental knowledge that was meant to “re-position” the human body in order to lay bare a common humanity around and beneath the coloring of the skin. In the following, I will trace three particular strategies of producing environmental knowledge against biological exclusion that were used by antebellum African American pamphleteers. Firstly, pamphleteers articulated their claims through the notions of “birth and blood”; secondly, they “dissected and environmentalized” the black body; and, thirdly, they wrote strategically through the discourse of “nature.”

## Birth and Blood

“Birth” and “blood” are among the earliest and longest-standing themes in black pamphleteering. From the beginnings of the tradition, African American pamphleteers not only recognized both ideas to be central to conceptualizing and articulating their humanity and their rights as citizens, but also connected their claims of “birth” and “blood” with the founding documents of the United States. To pamphlet pioneers like Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, Daniel Coker, Prince Saunders or James Forten, revolutionary rhetoric offered a basic ideological framework, and it

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<sup>198</sup> In most cases, pamphlets were the written versions of previously held speeches, proceedings of conventions, or church sermons; at the same time, these pamphlets were often (re)turned into oral discourse as they were read or performed for (often illiterate) audiences. In this way, the medium “offered more immediacy than books and more depth than the popular broadsides” (Blockett 119). See for discussions of the status of the black pamphlet between the oral and written tradition Blockett 119-121; Newman 21; Ernest “African American Literature” 107-110; on antebellum print culture more generally cf. also Groves; and Casper.

was their resourceful employment of this framework that laid the conceptual basis for antebellum African American pamphleteering and the abolitionism of the 1830s.<sup>199</sup>

For black pamphleteers of the early nineteenth century, a period that was shaped by historical events such as the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), the Denmark Vesey insurrection (1822) or the Great Awakening in the 1820s, the ideology of the American Revolution of which many had first-hand recollections represented both a great paradox and the foundation of their ideas on the meanings of “birth.” On the one hand, there was the undeniable contradiction of slaveholding founding fathers and the fact that a revolution that had also been “the largest slave uprising in American history” paradoxically established a system that justified racial slavery (Nash 57). In this sense, fighting a war for independence had eventually brought even more dependence for many African Americans. On the other hand, the “self-evident” principles articulated through the American Revolution, namely that “all men are created free and equal” or, as the constitution of Massachusetts had it, “*born free and equal*,” made the founding documents an appealing vantage point for making claims against the advancing biological exclusion of the black body that manifested itself as the downside of American Freedom. The “Declaration of Independence” in particular provided early black pamphleteers with a powerful ‘mirror’ to hold up to white Americans in order to show them that their conduct was, as James Forten put it in his “Letters from a Man of Color” (1813), “in direct violation of the letter and spirit of [the] Constitution” (67).

Although often “deferential” in tone and moderate in their claims, early black pamphleteers thus met the challenge of their times as they criticized the double standards American democracy espoused (Newman 21).<sup>200</sup> Most often out of a black church that began to act as the “great engine of moral uplift” (Du Bois, *Negro Church* 208),<sup>201</sup> pamphleteers forged a rhetoric that centrally

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<sup>199</sup> Some scholars have emphasized the strong influence of this early generation of black pamphleteers on abolitionism of the antebellum era. Garrison, for instance, was drawing from the themes, principles and strategies of figures like James Forten when he inaugurated his lifelong struggle with the publication of the *Liberator* in 1831 (cf. Billington, “James Forten” 5-12; “Introduction” 14-18). On the debate over where to pinpoint the beginnings of abolitionism, which is traditionally seen as originating in the 1830s (e.g. by Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*; and Pease/Pease, “Search for Freedom”), cf. D. Jacobs, “Courage”; Rael; Newman “Liberation Technology”; Bay 27-35; and Muelder 7-35.

<sup>200</sup> In fact, African Americans emphasized the hypocrisy of U.S. revolutionary rhetoric from the very start. Lemuel Haynes, for instance, as early as 1776, admonished Americans (including himself) “to turn an eye into our own Breast, for a little moment, and See [sic!], whether thro [sic!] some inadvertency, or a self-contracted Spirit, we Do not find the monster [of inequality] Lurking in our own Bosom [i.e. country]” (qtd. Bay 25). More famously, Benjamin Banneker, the black mathematician, wrote a letter to then Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson in 1791 inquiring how he could oppose British tyranny while not seeking to overcome “that state of tyrannical thralldom and inhuman captivity to which too many of my brethren are doomed” (qtd. A.S. Weber 3).

<sup>201</sup> Considering the impact of rising independent black congregations in the early- to mid-nineteenth century, it was probably not an overstatement when Delany, in a letter to Douglass, called the black church “the Alpha and Omega of all things” (qtd. Glaude 7). The importance of black churches for early pamphleteers

employed the notion of “birth” in order to make their more concrete political claims, for instance for racial equality, voting rights or “uplift.”<sup>202</sup> A rhetoric of “birth” became particularly prominent in the wake of the American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1816 and its object of removing free blacks from American soil.<sup>203</sup> James Forten, for example, the wealthy black Philadelphian sailmaker and activist, became a restless advocate against colonization through the notion of “birth.” An 1833 statement on the subject is particularly revealing as it reflects both Forten’s long personal struggle and a generally prevalent notion among early nineteenth-century black pamphleteers:

My great-grandfather was brought to this country from Africa. My grandfather obtained his own freedom. My father never wore the yoke. He rendered valuable service to his country during the War of Revolution; and I, though a boy, was a drummer in that war. [...] I have since lived and labored in a useful employment, have acquired property, and have paid taxes in the city [...] and have brought up and educated a family. [...] Yet some ingenious gentlemen have recently discovered that I am still African; that a continent, three thousand mile, and more, from the place where I was born, is my native country. And I am advised to go home. (qtd. Billington, “James Forten” 10)

Apart from claiming to have met his responsibilities as an American citizen in war (as a “drummer”) and peace (“lived and labored”), it is in particular his nativity to American soil that Forten foregrounds as entitling him to the common rights of a free American. Birth (“the place where I was born”) is employed as the authoritative principle when it comes to determining humanity, national identity, and citizenship, with skin color de-emphasized as a secondary marker of belonging and identity at most. While Forten at this point employs the simple fact of his nativity to bind himself to a U.S. citizenry, he was joined by the prominent Philadelphian churchmen Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in articulating a more elaborate “nativizing”

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and throughout the antebellum period can hardly be overrated, as these institutions were not only the “spiritual foundation of the black community” but also “the most important and vital instruments of black survival and liberation during their four-hundred-year history in North America” (Simmons and Thomas, Preface). Cf. on the crucial role of black churches in the first half of the nineteenth century e.g. Du Bois’s pioneering analysis of black religious life *Negro Church* (1903); on the importance of the black church to black literacy and the pamphlet tradition, see Sernett, *Black Church* (esp. 136-161); Wilson Logan 15-18, 118-123.

<sup>202</sup> On the considerable variety of themes addressed in early black pamphleteering, cf. e.g. Blockett; Basker vii-xv; or Finseth, “David Walker” 342-343, who identifies three major types of pamphlets of this early period (commemorations of the abolition of the slave trade, speeches on colonization, and sermons for moral uplift). Early pamphleteering often coincided with other forms of activism such as crafting and campaigning for petitions (for an impressive array of examples, cf. Schweninger’s two-volume collection (2001-2008)) or founding institutions such as schools, reading or literary societies.

<sup>203</sup> The American Colonization Society, while anti-slavery, based its stratagem of recolonizing freeborn African Americans on a fundamental belief in racial inequality (cf. e.g. Billington “James Forten”; Horton and Horton 102-103). On the history of the ACS, see Beyan; and Burin.

connection between birth environment and national belonging in 1817. In a pamphlet that published the minutes of a protest meeting against colonization held at Philadelphia's Bethel Church in January that year, the participants, under Forten's chairmanship, ascertained that, since

our ancestors (not of choice) were the first successful cultivators of the wilds of America, we, their descendants, feel ourselves entitled to participate in the blessings of her luxuriant soil, which their blood and sweat enriched; and that any measure or system of measures, having a tendency to banish us from her bosom, would not only be cruel, but in direct violation of those principles which have been the boast of this republic. (qtd. Billington, "James Forten" 8-9)

Thus resolving, in opposition to the schemes of the ACS, that "we will never separate ourselves from the slave population of this country" (9), the pamphleteers make their political claims by articulating an environmental knowledge that centrally involves the notion of birth. They justify their rights to "the blessings of her luxuriant soil" with both the idea that their "blood and sweat" have enriched this soil, and with the argument that they were the "first successful cultivators of the wilds" (8). It is not the mere fact of being born in the New World, but the notion of transforming – and being transformed by – a particular non-human environment ("wilds") that becomes their means of countering the colonization scheme of the ACS. In this sense, even the earliest forms of African American pamphleteering involved an expression of environmental knowledge – an environmental knowledge that shows a remarkable resemblance to the American myth of an individual's transformation through New World soil and that thereby foreshadows what would become articulated much later in Turner's "Frontier Thesis."

The idea of birth as meaningful precisely because of its occurrence under particular environmental circumstances, and as guaranteeing human rights and American citizenship, ran into and through the African American pamphleteering discourse of the antebellum period,<sup>204</sup> where it became increasingly connected with a rhetoric of blood. While "birth" had primarily attained a uniting function, as it enabled meeting racial exclusion through claims of a common humanity and nationality that emerged from being bound to a common native

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<sup>204</sup> One indicator of how central (American) "birth" became to African American claims is the way in which organizations that had once labelled themselves "African" increasingly refrained from this term and renamed themselves. As Fanning demonstrates, the "northern black community began replacing the formerly prevalent 'African' moniker with 'colored' or 'black' in the wake of the ACS's efforts in the late 1810s" (39). Throughout the antebellum period, this trend prevailed, as various examples demonstrate. In 1848, for instance, a pamphlet attacked "the artificial name 'African' applied to us" as "a local evil" ("A Call Upon the Church" 4), and in 1856, John Mercer Langston, a celebrated black orator who worked mostly for the black convention movement in Ohio, noted "a great injustice done us, by refusing to acknowledge our right to the appellation of Americans, which is the only title we desire, and legislating for us as if we were aliens, and not bound to our country by the ties of affection which every human being must feel for his native land" (qtd. Cheek 33).

environment, “blood” had a much more ambivalent rhetorical potential. To recognize this potential, one must only think of the multiple ways in which blood could be “spilled”: It made all the difference whether one claimed, as, for instance, the Rev. Jeremiah Asher of the Shiloh Baptist Church, to have “bled and died for liberty” in a nationally unifying War of Independence or the War of 1812 (18), or whether blood was, as some separatist voices threatened, to be spilled in slave insurrections or race war.

Accordingly, “blood” attained a variety of meanings for antebellum pamphleteers that may best be grasped when read along the general lines of a “separating” and a “unifying” function. The latter was, as Goodman has shown, an integral part of the interracial collaborative efforts of the 1830s and 1840s, since reaching their overall goal of “contradict[ing] the assumptions upon which prejudice rested [...] require[d] white abolitionists and free blacks to show the prejudiced by concrete acts that all were in fact ‘of one blood.’” (247). The former, divisive function of a rhetoric of blood, on the other hand, is particularly strong in early black nationalist works,<sup>205</sup> such as Robert Young’s enraged “Ethiopian Manifesto” (1829) or the most influential piece of African American pamphlet literature of the antebellum period, David Walker’s “Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World” (1829).

Generally recognized as a “milestone” (Finseth, “David Walker” 337),<sup>206</sup> Walker’s pamphlet stands at the center of a cluster of texts, as it both embraces its predecessors and their themes and at the same time inaugurates a more radical tradition that would mark the coming decades. Apart from the stylistic and thematic innovations of Walker’s text, such as its militant voice, its re-evaluation of racial history, or its radical “ethiopianism,”<sup>207</sup> the

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<sup>205</sup> For general discussions of early Black Nationalist narratives see esp. Stuckey, *Slave Culture*; also Fanning; and Moses, *Liberian Dreams*.

<sup>206</sup> Jarrett is representative of the general scholarly assessment of the “Appeal,” when he reads Walker’s text as signaling a “historical threshold between two eras” by singularly standing “at the conclusion of an early national period, when the minds of black authors still tilted toward questions about the Founding Fathers, yet also at the inception of an antebellum period” (30). Traditionally, the “Appeal” has thus been acclaimed as a manifesto that “contains the most all-embracing black nationalist formulation to appear in America during the nineteenth century” (Stuckey, *Ideological Origins* 9). For readings along the lines of black nationalism cf. also Stuckey, *Slave Culture* 98-116; or Hinks; for more recent treatments cf. Levine, *Dislocating* 67-117; Larson/Clere; and Finseth, who offers a more nuanced treatment of the “Appeal” as a “black nationalist text in the sense of calling for, and seeking to create, unity, self-respect, and self-help among all people of African descent [...] [that] nonetheless points up the complications and limits of black nationalism” (“David Walker” 359).

<sup>207</sup> Apart from Black Nationalism, scholars have traditionally identified a variety of dominant themes in Walker’s pamphlet. Among those are Walker’s anti-colonialism (cf. e.g. Shelby; Finseth, “David Walker” esp. 355-357); his engagement with (the hypocrisy of) religion (Pelletier; Jarrett, *Representing* 38-40); Walker’s relation to Jefferson (Hinks 196-236; Jarrett, “To Refute”; M’Baye 122-129; V. Mitchell; Engels; McHenry, “Dreaded”); or the “Appeal’s” revisionist historiography (e.g. Apap; Jarrett 41-42; Newman 25). On the stylistic innovations of Walker’s rhetoric, see e.g. Dinius; Shelby, esp. 197; for readings of the

“Appeal” is also centrally engaging notions of birth and blood. While echoing, in this respect, a by then established argument against colonization (Walker cites Richard Allen (64) and Samuel Cornish (76)), the “Appeal” also employs a separatist notion of “blood” that aims to unite the “Colored Citizens” of the United States and ultimately, “of the World,” under one black nationalist banner. In Article IV, Walker thus claims that

America is more our country, than it is the whites – we have enriched it with our blood and tears. The greatest riches in all America have arisen from our blood and tears: – and will they drive us from our property and homes, which we have earned with our blood? They must look sharp or this very thing will bring swift destruction upon them. The Americans have got so fat on our blood and groans, that they have almost forgotten the God of armies. (73)

In keeping with the general impetus of the “Appeal,” which continuously addresses its audience as “my brethren” and engages in the notion of a common lineage that is visible on the surface of the body in a common skin color, (black) blood becomes, for Walker, a divisive nationalizing factor. It is at this point that the text significantly departs from an earlier rhetoric. In the “Appeal,” it is not anymore a U.S. American environment out of which a rhetoric of being American-born and “American-blooded” emerges, but the traumatic spilling of “black blood” *into* that soil, which becomes the source of inalienable birthrights. Walker’s nationalism thus signifies on an earlier African American environmental knowledge as it revises the notion of “environmentally induced” birthrights, and shifts the source of human rights through his diverging rhetoric of birth and blood to a traumatic connection with the soil. It is not anymore Forten, Allen and Jones’s “blood and *sweat*” of transforming a New World environment, that gives birthrights (qtd. Billington, “James Forten” 8, emphasis mine), but the “blood and *tears*” and “blood and *groans*” of being *forced* to do so through enslavement that entitles Walker’s “brethren” to “[t]he greatest riches in all America” (73, emphasis mine).

The line of tradition that emerges at this point in Walker is thus, as Finseth puts it in his discussion of the “Appeal” as a Black Nationalist manifesto, that of “an epidermalized Africanist ethos uniting the people he [Walker] collectively calls ‘my color,’ but detached from the actual geographical and cultural realities of Africa” (“David Walker” 356-7). The racial pride furnished through a bond construed between blacks primarily plays on *imagining* the spilling of the soil with a distinct black blood, and it is due to this imaginative nature of his common-blood-ideology

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“Appeal” in the context of a rising black press cf. Levine, “Circulating”; on the “Appeal” as part of the American jeremiad tradition cf. D. Hubbard; and Wheelock 75-77.

that Walker ultimately remains an “Americanist” who does not end up promoting colonization – an argumentative move that can be found in a variety of black nationalists.<sup>208</sup>

Despite the significant impact of Walker’s pamphlet across the nation,<sup>209</sup> it would be overstating with respect to articulations of African American environmental knowledge around the ideas of birth and blood, to claim that the separatist principle of Walker’s rhetoric of blood became the sole paradigm along which subsequent black pamphleteering developed. True, Walker did inspire powerful followers who picked up his self-conscious militant style and aggressive rhetoric, and who referred to him explicitly as the founding father of their mission.<sup>210</sup> Yet, it would be misleading to overemphasize Walker in the face of the diversity that generally marks the tradition with respect to engaging notions of birth and blood.

An important example attesting to this diversity and to another strand of thought in the tradition is a pamphlet by Hosea Easton that was published in 1838, nine years after Walker’s tract had first made its appearance. In his lengthy “Treatise” Easton rhetorically employs “blood” in a way that illustrates the continuing presence and the development of pre-Walker ideas by pamphleteers of the 1830s. Easton, for his part, clearly echoes and advances earlier claims respecting birth and blood, when he proposes that:

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<sup>208</sup> The same kind of argument can even be found in Delany, who is, after all, well known for his advocacy of emigration to Africa. Yet, despite his colonization scheme, Delany eventually – like Walker – seems to remain an “Americanist,” who still claimed that “The United States is our Country. We are Americans, having a birthright citizenship – natural claims upon the country – claims in common with our fellow citizens – natural rights, which may by the virtue of unjust laws, be obstructed, but never annulled” (48-49). Cf. for further discussion Ernest, *Liberation Historiography* 125-127.

<sup>209</sup> The “Appeal,” published in three editions by Walker between September 1829 and June 1830, was distributed not only across the North but also in slave territory, and certainly had a decisive impact in both sections (cf. on the history of the text’s distribution e.g. Pease and Pease, “Walker’s Appeal” (1974); Eaton (1936); Wilentz (1995); Leavell (2015)). In the North, while often censured for its aggressive rhetoric, Walker’s tract was also met with praise, e.g. by Garrison, who commented in the *Liberator* on its “many valuable truths and seasonable warnings” (cf. McHenry, “Dreaded” 33; Abzug 147-149). In the South, where Walker was often blamed for triggering Nat Turner’s bloody revolt, the impact was predictably much graver: A price was put on Walker’s head, the mayor of Savannah, Georgia, sent a letter to Boston’s mayor to have Walker arrested, and several Southern states enacted harsher laws restricting “black literacy, including a ban on the distribution of antislavery literature” (Wilentz vii; also cf. Horton and Horton, *Hard Road* 129). In this light, it is no wonder that rumors were running high when Walker was found dead nearby his clothing shop in Boston in 1831 (cf. on the circumstances of Walker’s death e.g. D. Jacobs, “David Walker”; or Hinks).

<sup>210</sup> Pamphlets that deliberately placed themselves in the legacy of Walker are, for instance, Maria W. Stewart’s “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build” (1831) or Henry Highland Garnet’s “Address to the Slaves” (1848). The former, an energetic call to collective action on behalf of antebellum African Americans, suggests that “[t]hough Walker sleeps, yet he lives” (10) and virtually screams that “WE CLAIM OUR RIGHTS. We will tell you [white supremacists], that we are not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that can do no more” (9). Garnet’s pamphlet, the written version of an 1840 speech given in Buffalo, New York, before the National Convention of Coloured Citizens, sounds even more radical than Stewart’s, as it explicitly calls blacks to arms: “RATHER DIE FREEMEN THAN LIVE TO BE SLAVES. Remember that you are THREE MILLIONS!”; “Let your motto be RESISTANCE! RESISTANCE! RESISTANCE!” (229).

The blood of the parents in seasoning of this climate becomes changed – also, the food for the mother being the production of this country, and congenial to the climate – the atmosphere she breathes – the surrounding objects which strike her senses – all are principles which establish and give character to the constitutional principles of the child, among which the blood is an essential constituent; hence every child born in America, even if it be black as jet, is American by birth and blood. (47-48)

Easton's text thus exemplifies a line of tradition in African American antebellum pamphleteering that significantly diverged from Walker's ideas and rhetoric, not only as it does not promote Black Nationalism, but especially also regarding the employment of notions of birth and blood. In Easton's case, it is not distinct, inheritable and "separate" black bloodlines and the traumatic spilling of such blood that mark the entry of African American birthrights. Instead, he makes a radical environmentalism the basis of his racial egalitarianism, his point being precisely that "[i]f blood has any thing to do with it [U.S. citizenship], then we are able to prove that there is *not* a drop of African blood, according to the general acceptance of the term, flowing in the veins of an American born child, though black as jet" (47, emphasis mine). In this respect, Easton's argument stands as an example of those antebellum voices that embraced yet also significantly refined the rhetoric of "birth and blood" of a pre-Walker period into a radical environmentalism. Part of the antebellum tradition's rhetoric of birth and blood was therefore based less on Walker and more on voices like Forten's, who had claimed as early as 1813 that human bodies, whether clothed in a black or a white skin, are "sustained by the same power, supported by the same food, hurt by the same wounds, wounded by the same wrongs, pleased with the same delights, and propagated by the same means" (Letters, qtd. from Billington Intro 14). Thus, a first observation is that a number of diverse arguments emerged around the themes of birth and blood, which most often aimed to merge a national with a natal and environmental belonging. Frequently articulated in terms of fundamental relations between the human and its non-human conditions, these arguments are not just instances of writing against "biological exclusion," but also early articulations of African American environmental knowledge.

### Dissecting and Environmentalizing the Black Body

Among the many influential strategies of Walker's "multifaceted literary act" (Newman 14), one was the way in which the "Appeal" attacked the idea that "nature" or "biology" provided a justification for the oppression and enslavement of Africans and African Americans. In that

well-known part of his argument that launched an explicit assault on Jefferson, for instance, Walker energetically sets the stage for refuting arguments for a biological inferiority of the black body. Against Jefferson's view that the enslavement of blacks in the New World was more benign than ancient Egyptian and Roman slavery due to the fact that the former was justified by "nature which has produced the [master/slave] distinction" (Jefferson, qtd. Walker 18), Walker suggests that no evidence can be found

that the Egyptians heaped the insupportable insult upon the children of Israel, by telling them that they were not of the human family. Can the whites deny this charge? Have they not, after having reduced us to the deplorable condition of slaves under their feet, held us up as descending originally from the tribes of Monkeys or Orang-Outangs [sic!]? (12)

Walker not only claims that American slavery is worse. Rather, his charge is aimed against a host of racist comparisons of African Americans with non-human animals. He rages against those who see blacks marked as "brutes" (8, 15, 19, 28, 35), "talking apes" (68, 69) or "Orang-Outangs" (12), and thereby sets the stage for a more aggressive pamphleteering rhetoric against the developing, biologically othering racialisms of the antebellum period.

At this point, Walker's attack hints at a second major strategy of black pamphleteers' writing against biological exclusion. Beyond reclaiming their rights as humans and citizens through notions of birth and blood, pamphleteers also began writing against biological exclusion by producing an environmental knowledge that employed a strategy of conceptually, politically, and sometimes literally dissecting and environmentalizing the black body. At least from the 1830s on, such strategies that focused more explicitly on the body as such became a necessity in the context of a burgeoning racial science and its increasingly hostile "findings." For while the 1830s were, on the one hand, the decade which saw the emergence of a "relatively high and rising black literacy" (Horton and Horton, *Hard Road* 130) as well as the advent of Garrisonian abolitionism and the black convention movement,<sup>211</sup> the period also witnessed a fervent backlash against this development and the most elaborate "scientific" arguments for an inherent black inferiority so far. Even though precursors of American polygenism such as Charles Caldwell, a Philadelphian

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<sup>211</sup> The two kinds of institutions that are the best indicators of a growing African American literary and political culture can be found in the rapidly developing black press (cf. e.g. Wilson Logan 96-134; Blockett; and Moody, "We Wish") and the spreading African American literary societies, reading clubs and libraries (cf. e.g. Dowling, esp. 147-172; McHenry, *Forgotten* 23-83; and Wilson Logan 58-95). On the rise of the black state conventions, see e.g. Spires.

physician and pioneering phrenologist,<sup>212</sup> had launched attacks on the “environmental” idea that climate alone had produced racial distinctions<sup>213</sup> during the 1820s, it was work by Morton, Nott, Gliddon, and, later, Agassiz, that became instrumental in verifying essentialist racial views on the basis of supposedly different origins of human “types.” Where Jefferson, some decades ago, had still hypothesized on the idea of black inferiority, the “American School” provided seemingly solid evidence and scientific truths which became popular in a cultural climate where, as one of its proponents put it in 1850, “Race [was] everything: literature, science, art – in a word, civilization” (Knox v).

Two antebellum pamphlets, by Hosea Easton (1837) and John Lewis (1852), are particularly revealing as African American responses to this public climate through the production of an environmental knowledge that “dissected and environmentalized” the black body. The relative lack of scholarly attention to both texts so far is particularly surprising with respect to the former, Easton’s “Treatise on the Intellectual Character and Civil and Political Conditions of the Colored People of the U. States,” a rich and more than 50-page tract the author had written only one year before his premature death.<sup>214</sup> Published in 1837, the “Treatise,” although, as noted above, often

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<sup>212</sup> On Caldwell as a (polygenist) proponent of American phrenology and his major work *Thoughts on the Original Unity of the Human Race* (1830), see Horsman 155; Stanton 19-22; and Wiegman 34. On American phrenology more generally, which, although growing in the 1830s and 1840s, was rather marginal when compared to the polygenism of the “American School” that was often held to be the “real” science, see Haller 11-19; Davies; and Stern.

<sup>213</sup> On what has sometimes been called the “environmental” theory of race that had prevailed in the eighteenth century and that was driven by the idea of “race itself as the product of environmental influences” (Harris 83), see Harris 80-107; Young 38-39; and Haller 70-77; on “environmentalism” in anti-slavery rhetoric, see Walters 62-69; Fredrickson 35-42. This discourse is crucial insofar as it is perhaps the most explicit point of intersection between the production of environmental knowledge and conceptions of racial difference. Often, the proposals or refutations of “environmental” or “climate” causes for racial difference were intertwined with the general claims that both pro- and anti-slavery arguments aimed to validate. One could, for instance, argue radically “environmentally” to the end of claiming that circumstances alone produced “inferiority” in slaves (and that these circumstances only had to be ended to end “black inferiority”); or one could propose a “natural” adaptability of black bodies to certain climates to justify black enslavement (polygenism’s ideas of distinct origins of human “types” were crucial in this respect, as they often included essentializing assumptions such as that “the negro reaches the acme of his physical nature, and scorns the precautionary restraints which are necessary to the European [in “rough” climates]” (Morton, “Brief Remarks” 114)). It should be noted at this point that my use of “environmental” in “environmental knowledge” is of course distinct from the “environmental” as it is used with respect to this specific discursive formation, even though “environmental” pro/anti-slavery thought is an important part of racialized forms of environmental knowledge. To avoid confusion, I use quotation marks when referring to the “environmental” or “climate” idea of racial difference and none with respect to environmental knowledge as it has been introduced for this study.

<sup>214</sup> Both texts have rarely been discussed by critics; a search on the *MLA International Bibliography* lists no direct results. With respect to Lewis, this is hardly surprising considering the pamphlet’s brevity and its being a relatively typical exemplar of strategies of refuting scientific racism (it is, however, exactly this representativeness that makes the text an appealing object of inquiry in my view). Regarding Easton’s tract, which has been republished in its entirety only in a collection by Porter (1969) and, more recently, in an edition by Price and Stewart (1999), we find only two elaborate readings (Dain 170-196; Price/Stewart,

referring back to earlier pamphleteering themes, cannot be properly understood without Walker as a context. The relation between the two pamphlets is ambivalent, as Easton's text shares thematic and stylistic similarities with Walker, but also follows a diverging argumentative trajectory. On the one hand, Easton's pamphlet echoes Walker's radical statement both formally and content-wise. The "Treatise" employs the quadripartite structure of the "Appeal" (and by extension signifies on Jefferson), and shares an alternative long-term historicization of racial history and a general emphasis on the constructedness of racial difference.<sup>215</sup> On the other hand, however, there are crucial differences between Walker's and Easton's arguments that make the latter particularly valuable for tracing the production of environmental knowledge against the biological exclusion of the black body. Apart from differences in rhetoric, style, and intended audience,<sup>216</sup> and Easton's disengagement of the idea of imaginatively essentialized "black blood,"<sup>217</sup> the "Treatise" provides a contrast to Walker's Black Nationalist argument and represents one of the most elaborate attempts at refuting biological exclusion through a radically de-racializing "environmentalism" to be found throughout the antebellum period.

Easton's strategy involves two fundamental conceptual "dissections" of the biologically racialized black body: first, a separation of body from mind, and, second, a separation of slave body from black body. Moreover and above all, however, Easton's argument is rooted in a basic

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"Introduction"). In the following, I cite from Porter's reprint, which gives the page numbers of Easton's original publication. According to Price and Stewart, reasons for the lack of scholarly engagement with the "Treatise" are its author's death soon after publication as well as its divergence from a more radical pamphlet tradition (cf. 37-39). Another possible reason may lie in the predominance and popularity of Walker's "Appeal" in the discourse of the 1830s and in the fact that Easton's writing took an opposed direction, being, in Dain's words, "probably less race-minded than any other antebellum American" pamphlet (172). That both Easton's and Lewis's texts are central to African American environmental knowledge, however, lends weight to the general assumption of the present study that reconsidering the black literary tradition from an alternative perspective – such as an ecocritical one – may help recover a so far unrecognized richness of this tradition.

<sup>215</sup> Easton's text, like Walker's, is composed in the style of a political tract, which becomes clear from its title ("Treatise") as well as its overall structure (it likewise consists of four parts entitled "Chapters"). Moreover, Easton echoes Walker as it reveals race as a social construction, and rewrites "the history of Europe and Africa" (cf. 8-21) in order to instill black pride in the African as "a once noble [...] people" (21). Price/Stewart read this aspect in the larger context of 1820s "idealized images of Africa" (cf. 28).

<sup>216</sup> In contrast to Walker, who addresses his "beloved brethren," Easton primarily aims to appeal to a white audience and in this respect diverges from an 1828 "Address" he had delivered in Providence, Rhode Island (the original version of this piece is part of the holdings of the Library of Congress). Thus having changed his overall strategy significantly by 1837, the "Treatise" employs carefully crafted rhetoric that, on the one hand, speaks in the more moderate tone of an established member of a Northern black elite, but that, on the other hand, does not shy away from pointing out the faults and errors of its white addressees with respect to their harmful treatment of African Americans.

<sup>217</sup> As pointed out above with respect to "Birth and Blood," Easton was a proponent of the view that "God hath made of one blood all nations of men" (5). This assessment must also be seen in the light of Easton's own "mixed" lineage that included white, African American, and Native American family members. For an account of Easton's family history, see Price/Stewart 3-10.

notion of “natural variety” that must be considered first. Writing against the epidermalization of race, the “Treatise” first of all aims to show that skin color is an arbitrary racial marker, since “the variety of color, in the human species, is the result of the same laws which variegate the whole creation” (5). To support this claim, Easton repeatedly employs descriptions of non-human material environments, for instance, when he writes that

[w]e need only visit the potato and corn patch, (not a costly school,) and we shall be perfectly satisfied, for there, in the same hill, on one stalk, sprung from one potato, you may find several of different colors; and upon the same corn-stalk you may find two ears, one white or yellow, and the other deep red; and sometimes you may find an astonishing variety of colors displayed on one ear among the kernels; and what makes the observation more delightful, they are never found quarrelling about their color, though some have shades of extreme beauty. [...] If you go to the field of grass, you will find that all grass is the same grass in variety; go to the herds and flocks, and among the feathered tribe, or view nature where you will, she tells us all that we can know, why it is that one man’s head bears woolly, and another flaxen hair. (6)

Easton draws an analogy between the physical variety found in non-human materialities and the physical variety in human bodies, thus conveying, through a discourse of “nature,” the idea of a general law of variety. This law, by extension, is linked with a celebration of the divine, as it was ultimately “God [who] gave nature the gift of producing variety, and that gift, like uncontrolled power every where [sic!], was desirous to act like itself” (5). Physical variety becomes for Easton primarily a reason for celebration, *not* for separating, categorizing or subduing specific forms of – human or non-human – materialities.

From this perspective, which combines the physical with the metaphysical, natural variety cannot be “understood,” as it is eventually rooted in God. After all, “it is impossible for man to comprehend nature or her works. She has been supplied with an ability by her author to do wonders, insomuch that some have been foolish enough to think her to be God. All must confess she possesses a mysterious power to produce variety” (5-6). Exterior, physical distinctions in humans, among which, Easton stresses, the color of the skin is merely one, are to be accepted and revered as expressions of a God-given law of variety in the way humans would accept and revere the “innumerable colors” of “the same species of flowers” (5). This implies that such distinctions cannot be grasped in (pseudo-)scientific terms that produce supposedly true – yet ultimately false, since inevitably arbitrary – assumptions based on bodily markers that lead to the biological, *man*-made exclusion of one part of a (human) species. Easton therefore undoes, from the start, one of the fundamental assumptions underlying the production of the racializing and biologically excluding knowledge of the antebellum period,

namely the idea “that the observed biological traits and social behaviors of various human populations held the key for understanding how those natural processes worked” (Finseth, “Walker” 340). It is exactly not possible, says Easton, to grasp such “natural processes” purely epistemologically; a more egalitarian acceptance and celebration of creation, not the urge to understand it, are central facets of Easton’s environmental knowledge.

The first of the two central “dissections” of the biologically racialized black body that Easton’s text performs on this general basis is the conceptual separation of *physical* variety among the human species from variety in the realm of *mental* differences, i.e. a general separation between body and mind. The latter, i.e. mental, “intellectual differences,” are seen as belonging to an entirely “new field of investigation”:

I call it a new or another field, because I cannot believe that [physical] nature has any thing [sic!] to do in variegating intellect, any more than it has power over the soul. Mind can act on matter, but matter cannot act upon mind; hence it fills an entirely different sphere; therefore, we must look for a cause of difference of intellect elsewhere, for it cannot be found in nature. (6)

Thus denying the immediate correlation between body and mind that was central to the racial sciences, which more or less directly deduced mental inferiority from (supposed) physical inferiority, Easton nonetheless regards the *availability* and the *living out* of the potential of the mind as depending on environmental factors.<sup>218</sup> Here lies a crucial point of his argument: Although Easton ascribes “whatever imperfections there are in the mind” to “its own sphere” (6), he admits that black slaves are marked by “intellectual and physical disability and inferiority” (21), due to differing circumstances that have stunted their mental growth and compromised the *living out* of their originally given potential. Easton’s is therefore a constructivist argument that proposes a radical “environmentalism” with regard to mental facilities since, on the outset, he sees “no truth more palpable than this, that the mind *is* capable of high cultivation; and that the degree of culture depends entirely on the means or agents employed to that end” (7, emphasis mine). Although physical varieties, which are only an expression of nature’s “mysterious power to produce variety,” are treated as separate from

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<sup>218</sup> One should note that Easton, aside from his focus on the “environmental” as explanatory framework, sees the ultimate cause of differences in the mental field (and here, again, he roots his argument within the metaphysical) in the biblical “Fall of man.” Thus, he writes that, although “[o]riginally there was no difference of intellect [...], [a]fter we fell, we immediately find a difference in mind” due to the fact that, from this point on, “evil and good exist in the world, and as the mind is influenced by the one or the other, so is the different effect produced thereby” (Easton 6-7).

mental varieties, both depend in their development, Easton argues, on concretely encountered circumstances (6).

The issue along which Easton illustrates his “environmentalism” with respect to body and mind is primarily slavery. Regarding the slave body, his argument turns to the example of slave mothering and focuses on environmental factors as producing tangible differences in the slave population’s progeny. After giving a description of “a mother that is a slave” (24), Easton goes on to argue that it is not

a matter of surprise that those mothers who are slaves, should, on witnessing the distended muscles on the face of whipped slaves, produce the same or similar distensions on the face of their offspring, by her own mind being affected by the sight; and so with all other deformities. Like causes produce like effects. (24-25)

Often explicitly setting his notions against the fast-developing racial sciences (cf. 21, 23, 24-25, 42), Easton does not deny but is “perfectly willing to admit the truth of these remarks [on a physical and mental inferiority], as they apply to the character of a slave population” (23). Yet, the “Treatise” at the same time attributes the causes of a physical and mental deformity that can be observed in slaves exclusively to the circumstances under which the slave mother can only bring “into the world beings whose limbs and minds were lineally fashioned for the yoke and fetter” (23). Radically prioritizing nurture over nature, Easton goes even further when he reads the “soul-and-body destroying influence” of the peculiar institution as affecting the body and mind of its victims up to the point that the slave is eventually “metamorphosed into a machine, adapted to a specific operation, and propelled by the despotic power of the slave system” (24, 51).

Apart from this idea of multiple influences on the slave body through the physical and mental conditions under which it was held, and through direct inheritance,<sup>219</sup> Easton sees anti-black “prejudice” as originating exclusively in the realm of the mind. That is, although generally claiming, like most of his pamphleteering contemporaries, that “the true cause of this prejudice is slavery” since prejudice was ostensibly drawn from observation of the bodies of the enslaved (38), Easton views prejudice itself as wholly constructed out of that cultural climate in which “race is everything” (Knox v). Evidence for this constructedness he finds in the undifferentiating nature of prejudice, for

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<sup>219</sup> Easton does not exclude himself from this process of (Lamarckian) inheritance. Revealing that his own ancestors had been enslaved, he applies his theory of an inheritable dehumanization that supposedly marked slaves and their descendants, to himself, writing: “I wonder that I am a man; for though of the third generation from slave parents, yet in body and mind nature has never been permitted to half finish her work. Let all judge who is in fault, God, or slavery, or its sustainers” (26).

if color were the cause of prejudice, it follows, that just according to the variegation of the cause, (color) so would the effect variegate – i.e. the clear blooded black would be subject to a greater degree of prejudice, in the proportion he was black – and those of lighter caste subject to a less degree of prejudice, as they were light. (37)

Since this is not the case, Easton concludes that “[c]olor, therefore, cannot be an efficient cause of the malignant prejudice of the whites against the blacks; it is only an imaginary cause at the most” (38).<sup>220</sup> Anti-*black* prejudice as such is produced in the realm of the (public) mind, even if the body and mind of the *slave* have indeed become altered and deformed through circumstance and inheritance.

Hence, Easton’s writing against the biological exclusion of the black body operates not only through the conceptual separation of body from mind that shows the environmental dependencies of both and ultimately suggests the social constructedness of race and prejudice. Moreover, his argument also involves a second major separation between *black* body and *slave* body, which, after all, had been conflated into one entity through a biologizing racism. In this respect, Easton goes further in his response to the racialisms of his day than Walker. Walker, although his “language is indicative of a larger, social tension between ‘scientific’ theories of race largely internalized by blacks and whites and his more subversive argument that the degradation of his race was socially constructed by enslavement” (Blockett 121), did not concretely “dissect” the black body “through the skin”; his Black Nationalism did not deconstruct race at its core. Easton, by contrast, does precisely this by radically environmentalizing black body and mind, as well as by literally proposing to

anatomize him [the black man], and the result of research is the same as analyzing or anatomizing a white man. Before the dissecting knife passes half through the outer layer of the skin, it meets with the same solids and fluids, and from thence all the way through the body. (49)

By dissecting and environmentalizing the black body both on a conceptual, and, here, on a literal level to counter proslavery arguments, Easton wages war on the biological exclusion of the black body through a form of environmental knowledge. His argument crucially demonstrates how such knowledge itself became involved in multi-layered strategies of resistance that included, in Easton’s case, three primary elements: first, conceptually separating

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<sup>220</sup> Easton furthermore bases his argument on a comparison between skin color and “animal color,” and employs an “axiom” according to which “[t]hat which cannot be contemplated as a principle, abstractly, cannot be an efficient cause of any thing [sic!]” (37). Thus, he concludes that skin color as such cannot “be regarded [as anything] other than a passive principle in which there is no power of action” and which is thus not an “efficient” but a purely “imaginary cause” (cf. 37-38).

body from mind and black from slave body; secondly, thoroughly environmentalizing racial difference along these anatomized categories; and, thirdly, ultimately rooting his argument in an authoritative discourse of “nature” as the general source of a God-given variety in the human species that is to be celebrated. If thus, goes Easton’s somewhat naïve conclusion, prejudice and slavery were to end, “nature” would reverse the atrocities committed on African Americans. On the one hand, the environmentally produced features of the slave body would gradually vanish, as “[t]heir foreheads [...] would begin to broaden. Their eye balls [...] would fall back under a thick foliage of curly eyebrows [...] [and] [t]hose muscles, which have hitherto been distended by grief and weeping, would become contracted to an acuteness, corresponding to that acuteness of perception with which business men are blessed” (53). On the other hand, Easton believes the same to be true for the realm of the mind, as “[t]hat interior region, the dwelling place of the soul, would be lighted up with the fires of love and gratitude to their benefactors on earth, and to their great Benefactor above” (53). Eventually, Easton’s optimistic idea is that, in this way, “their whole man would be redeemed” (53).

Another pamphlet that demonstrates how “dissecting and environmentalizing” the black body was used as a strategy of writing against biological exclusion is John Lewis’s much shorter “Essay on the Character and Condition of the African Race” (1852). Published as an addendum to the “Reminiscences” of the life of one of the founders of the “Second Freewill Baptist Church” in Providence, Rhode Island, Lewis’s pamphlet is a typical example of pamphleteers’ explicit challenges to the assumptions of antebellum racial science.<sup>221</sup> While Lewis, like Easton a man of the church, grounds his argument in the first part of the “Essay” primarily in religious discourse, referring to “the cardinal virtues and excellences of bible Christianity” as providing an “unquestionable” power by which to overcome “corrupt public opinions” (194; 192),<sup>222</sup> he devotes the second chapter of his essay, entitled “Physical Condition of the African Race, as compared with the other Races of the Human Family,” entirely to refuting the racial sciences through an environmental knowledge that dissects and environmentalizes the black body.

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<sup>221</sup> A host of antebellum African American pamphlets addresses questions of the racial sciences of their day, even if not always as a dominant theme. Apart from Easton’s and Lewis’s texts, another pamphlet that must be mentioned for its strong engagement with racial pseudo-sciences is David Ruggles’s 1834 “‘Extinguisher’ Extinguished!”, which thoroughly attacks a racist tract, “Dr. Reese’s ‘Extinguisher,’” recognizing that this piece “may do mischief by its pestiferous effect upon the minds of the ignorant and uninformed, and it ought to be answered” (Preface iii).

<sup>222</sup> Lewis argues that, since skin color is a God-given feature of human bodies, “all the base villainy that has attempted to snap the chain of human brotherhood, and involve the human family in hatred [through color prejudice], is without the sanction of the God of Heaven” (193).

Lewis's is essentially an argument for the biological similarities of all human bodies and stands in this respect in the legacy of Easton rather than Walker. The pamphlet attempts to (re-)unite what had been constructed, on the grounds of the "biologisms" of the polygenists "School," as distinct species, i.e. to ground humanity in a "shared biology" beyond, or literally "under" varying shades of skin colour. At the heart of Lewis's "biologically" arguing egalitarianism that explicitly talks back to (pseudo-)scientific claims<sup>223</sup> lie two strategies: first, the demonstration of analogies between human bodies that negotiates through the skin, i.e. that reaches beyond the "surface" of the human body; secondly, the delineation of a resulting analogy with respect to diseases, as they may afflict both white and (often pathologized) black bodies.

With regard to the first strategy, it is crucial to note how Lewis virtually 'zooms' into the human body and what he calls its "mechanical construction":

The frame of bones skilfully put together is a master-piece of Infinite wisdom; this frame covered with muscles, forming a part of his existence, is supplied by a beautiful chemical process in himself, in operating the aliment carried into the stomach as the arrangement of the nerves throughout the whole system [...]; the blood vessels to convey the vital stream which contains animal life to all parts of the system [...]; all fitly and wisely arranged, and this whole system covered with a skin to guard it. (195)

The human body, thus "radiographed," reveals what Lewis conceives as the physical essence of humanity. By moving beneath the outer layers of the human body, claims of supposedly fixed racial distinctions that purported to rely on a verifiable, physical make-up of the body are exposed as groundless, since, Lewis goes on,

in viewing this wonderful material construction of the human body, where is there any difference but simply in the covering of the body, an effect that classes and distinguishes the human race nationally; but which cannot add or detract from the perfection of their physical construction. (195)

Distinctive features visible in external physical makeup are mere superficialities, the skin and its color are a mere "covering" and neither a racial essence in themselves nor hinting at a racially differentiable essence lying inside or beyond the body. Thus, Lewis's rhetorical radiation of the body attacks "epidermalization" as such, since phenotype is unveiled as defining neither the human body physically nor the (worth of) "character" acted out through any particular body: As the "covering consists of three parts, viz: 1<sup>st</sup>, 'The cuticle or scarf-

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<sup>223</sup> The "Essay" explicitly refers to disciplines such as anatomy, physiology or phrenology (cf. 195). Moreover, Lewis sets his argument expressly against polygenism when he refers to contemporary claims that "insist that there must have been more than one Head or Representative of the human race" and that the human race "could not have obtained an existence from one Parental source" (194).

skin; 2d, the *reto mucorscum* and 3d [sic!], the *cutis*,” and as, to Lewis’s knowledge, “[t]he 2d lies between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3d [sic!], and contains the color,” the supposedly physically distinguishing factor between groups of humans is revealed as a false indicator by anatomizing the body. “Color” is exactly not residing in the significant – and significantly *analogically* built – substances of “the flesh, blood bones, or the muscles, of which the human body is composed” (195).

Explicitly quoting passages from the (pseudo-)sciences against which his text revolts,<sup>224</sup> Lewis is thus, on the one hand, able to turn those sciences that proposed a racial essentialism directly against themselves. He explicitly confronts the disciplines involved, for instance when claiming that “the coloring is in the covering of the body, [that] it [therefore] cannot affect those laws peculiar to human beings, for the great principles of physical law, supported by Anatomy, Physiology, and Phrenology, are alike in all human beings,” and ultimately proposes that it was “God, [who] has wisely arranged all this” (195). Thus, he claims, echoing at this point a prominent idea of divine vengeance that had been present in African American letters since Phyllis Wheatley,<sup>225</sup> that “an attack on his [God’s] Infinite prerogative [...] will fix a guilt on [the offenders’] characters which must be answered to at the Judgement” (195).

On the other hand, Lewis suggests, out of his anatomy of the human body, a second analogy with respect to human diseases, which follows his logic of an overall biological similarity of all human bodies. He proposes that “[a]ll human bodies are subject alike to the same disease, and the color of the body does not require any variation in medical treatment, that is, in the same locality” (195). At this point, Lewis not only refutes what Etter calls the “‘medical,’ pathological perspective so salient in proslavery discourse” (87) and its “environmental” arguments for a specific “natural” immunity of the black body to particular diseases and climates.<sup>226</sup> Rather, the way in which Lewis refers to “the same locality” shows

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<sup>224</sup> At times, Lewis employs quotation marks – even though he does not refer to particular authors – when he contextualizes his argument within (pseudo-)scientific claims of black inferiority and polygenism. The anonymity of such “quotes” and the way in which the text sometimes refers more broadly to a harmful “spirit that well might shame the whole range of European Despotism, and aiming to drive the colored man from within the pale of human society” indicate how well-known and deeply enmeshed polygenist thought and its more popular racialisms had become by the time Lewis composed his “Essay” in 1852 (191).

<sup>225</sup> One of Wheatley’s best-known poems, “On Being Brought from Africa,” ends on such a subversive cautioning against divine vengeance: “Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,/ May be refin’d, and join th’angelic train” (13). A similar rhetoric can also be found in the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century black pamphlet tradition, and up to the antebellum period. Walker, for example, invokes the “God of armies” (73).

<sup>226</sup> The biological exclusion of the black body often entailed its (medical or quasi-medical) “pathologization.” Such pathologizations can be traced from Jefferson’s early musings that blacks’ “inferiority is not the effect merely of their condition of life” (151), or incidents such as the yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia in

how he links his ‘snapshot through the skin’ with a broader environmentalization of the racialized body. Although not as elaborate and radical as Easton’s “Treatise” in this respect, Lewis emphasizes that the diseases of the human body are the results of

national or local habits affecting the treatment of the body in its physical condition, [which] will have a controlling influence in the development of the physical man. This united with the geographical locations, subjecting the body to different atmospheric temperatures, gives different character and appearance to the human system. (195)

Hence, Lewis, like Easton, stresses the role of environmental factors in shaping human bodies. Although bodies cannot be distinguished in any sense on the mere basis of their “covering,” since there is no essential difference between a ‘black,’ ‘brown,’ ‘beige,’ or ‘white’ human body in terms of its biological essence, Lewis nonetheless engages in an “environmental” idea as one possible explanation of occurring physical differences among the human species.

Crucially, however, and in this respect the “Essay” seems to be more farsighted than Easton’s earlier radical “environmentalism,” Lewis self-consciously recognizes the dangers that lie in too radical an emphasis on environmental factors as explicating human differences, as they might in turn be interpreted as racial differences that could lead to justifications of racist practices. He admits, knowing that racial scientists have argued that “the African is wholly inferior to the European, as his color subjects him to a hot climate, where a natural imbecility incapacitates him to rank with intelligent beings,” that he does “not” want to be understood as proposing this to be the “whole and sale case of the difference in the complexion of the human race” (195). Thus, instead of diverting into a radical environmentalism as Easton did, and clearly opposed, on the other hand, to a Black Nationalist essentialism based on imagining a bond of black blood of the Walker-kind, Lewis chooses a moderate yet effective strategy of exemplification through an autobiographical move. He inserts a first-hand experience through a self-assertive African American “I”:

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1793 during which (supposedly immune) African Americans were accused of stealing beds (cf. e.g. Allen/Jones, “A Narrative of the Proceedings” (1794); see also for a full account Powell (1949); and R. Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet* 78-104), to the antebellum “medical” explanations of certain medical phenomena supposedly observable in the black body. Perhaps the most telling (and most absurd) example of the latter can be found in the “medical” advices given in “slave manuals,” which sometimes suggested castor oil or red pepper as treatments (cf. e.g. Collins 15-16), or in Samuel Cartwright’s ideas, which included the invention of “drapetomania” and a sickness called “dysaesthesia aethiopica, or hebetude of mind and obtuse sensibility of body” that supposedly caused “rascality” and slaves’ urge to run away (“Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race”; cf. also Karcher 424). On the links between antebellum medicine and the construction of race more generally, see Warner/Tighe 91-124; Simon-Aaron 235-248; and Savitt’s extensive studies (1978; 2007).

I declare this [“environmental” determinism in proslavery arguments] false. I know by experience as a colored man, my physical habits having been formed in a cold and Northern climate, the ability to endure depends on an acclimated life, and if the physical habits of a white and colored man be formed alike in early life, in a tropical climate, they will be equally affected in a frigid climate, and so vice versa. (195)

Lewis’s achievement is thus not only that of undoing a “biologically deduced” racial essentialism by argumentatively “peeling off” the covering of the body in order to show a common human essence, but also that of alerting his readers to the potential effects of particular circumstances and conditions, since only “where man is alike circumstanced irrespective of color, there are the same physical characteristics” (196). That Lewis remains somewhat indeterminate on these points appears to be a strength rather than a disadvantage in his case.<sup>227</sup> Not being as radical in his ascription of human differences to environmental circumstances as Easton gives his argument the edge of a more mediating non-absolutism that hints at the contradictions and risks that had to be taken into account from an African American perspective when producing environmental knowledge as a means of resistance.

The environmental knowledge articulated by pamphleteers such as Easton and Lewis therefore involved more than a rhetoric of “birth and blood” as part of their strategy of writing against the biological exclusion of the black body. Their pamphlets are exemplars of a second major strategy of African American antebellum pamphleteering that emerged in response to the immediate discursive context of the racial sciences – the strategy of conceptually “dissecting and environmentalizing” the black body. Writing in this way against biological exclusion was vital to free black communities, as it directly related to one of their central concerns, namely that of education, or, more precisely, the idea of “improvability.” In this context, it was essential, as William Hamilton, another pamphleteer, noted in 1834, to demonstrate that the black “[m]an is capable of high advances in his reasoning and moral faculties” (113), and texts such as Easton’s or Lewis’s did just that by creating a de-racialized knowledge of the human in its non-human material conditions. Only through the fundamental support of such a broader environmental knowledge that gave weight to the idea of

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<sup>227</sup> One should nonetheless also note the deficits of Lewis’s “Essay.” Apart from the fuzziness that sometimes marks his argument with respect to “environmental” and “essential” factors as determining differences among humans, another flaw in Lewis’s argumentation can be detected with respect to his unreflecting celebration of an inevitable “progress of civilization.” Especially at the end, the “Essay” is very uncritical in this respect, when it ascribes exclusively positive connotations to these terms, arguing that “in the entire history of the human race, [...] the superiority of one class over an inferior one, [is] only the result of improved opportunity in becoming intelligent, in the progress of civilization” (196).

improvability did the many institutions formed during the antebellum period in free black communities, such as literary or reading societies, make sense. Only through this kind of knowledge that fundamentally refuted the ideas of scientific racism would it become possible to effectively “uplift” the race, since only then, as an 1828 pamphlet by William Whipper inaugurating the “Colored Reading Society of Philadelphia” put it, could one reasonably harbor the hope that such institutions “may be destined to produce a Wilberforce, a Jay, or a Clarkson, or give the world a Franklin, a Rush, or a Wistar” (“Address” 119).

### Writing through “Nature”

Nine years later, on August 16, 1837, the same William Whipper delivered another speech turned into a pamphlet, at the first African Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. Just as the city itself, being the home of both William Still’s famous Underground Railroad hub and the world’s largest collection of “crania,”<sup>228</sup> represents the struggle of a nation increasingly polarized over questions of slavery and race, so Whipper’s “Speech,” too, can be read as exposing a fundamental struggle, namely a struggle through the discourse of “nature” that was central to antebellum pamphlet literature. In Whipper’s case, this struggle was acted out through “nature” in the sense of “*human nature*,” which he conceives along an enlightenment tradition, i.e. in terms of a “natural” human capability of reason. Basing his definition of man in the divine and citing an unnamed authority, Whipper puts forward that

[a] very distinguished man asserts ‘that reason is that distinguishing characteristic that separates man from the brute creation,’ and that this power was bestowed upon him by his Maker, that he might be capable of subduing all subordinate intelligences to his will. It is this power when exerted in its full force, that enables him to conquer the animals of the forest, and which makes him lord of creation. (Whipper “Speech” 239)

Thus rooting its general ethos of “non-resistance” and moral suasion in enlightenment thought and a biblical anthropocentrism (238), Whipper’s address represents antebellum African American pamphlets’ tendency to focus on “nature” as “human nature,” and

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<sup>228</sup> The “Academy of the Natural Sciences” held and displayed in the 1840s and 1850s what its librarian J. Aitken Meigs calls a “magnificent Collection of Human Crania” that had for the most part been acquired by Samuel George Morton (3). For information on the collection numbering, according to Meigs, 1035 skulls, cf. Morton’s own catalogues as well as Meigs’s *Catalogue of Human Crania* (1857).

furthermore exposes a general rhetorical principle of antebellum discourses of “nature.” It hints at the way, in which the term became a discursive nodal point where arguments over the interpretation of “divisive” and “unifying” characteristics of certain phenomena or objects clashed. As Whipper delineates the “ruder passions of our nature” (irrationality) as well as the “noblest gifts of our nature” (reason) in the ‘object’ human (“Speech” 240), his text therefore exemplifies a third, fundamental strategy in which antebellum pamphleteers’ wrote against the biological exclusion of the black body, namely the strategy of writing through “nature” as a complex and contested master-signifier. In addition to writing against biological exclusion through a rhetoric of birth and blood, or by dissecting and environmentalizing the black body, “nature” itself became a central discourse around which pamphleteers aimed to write themselves into humanity. This third aspect of pamphleteers’ African American environmental knowledge thus pertains not so much to the particular Romantic or scientific meanings of “nature” or “the natural,” but to a specific *discursive function* that “nature” attained conceptually and rhetorically in antebellum discourse.

One may trace two basic aspects of this function of “nature” with respect to African American pamphleteers’ strategies of writing against biological exclusion. The first and primary one pertains to the way in which “nature” became what could be called a “discursive axis” through which pamphleteers articulated their claims; the second concerns the role of descriptions of non-human natural environments. The basic function of “nature” as “discursive axis” becomes visible in the ways in which arguments ascribed generalized meanings to “natural” objects – those “natural objects,” in most cases, being human bodies – out of observable similarities and differences. “Nature” became, in this sense, the conceptual and discursive “pole” around which similarities or differences in phenomena could supposedly be settled into coherent, absolute, “true” general principles – supposedly, that is, since any seemingly solid grounding of a principle in “nature” most often meant its clash with other, opposing principles articulated through the same master-signifier. If some argument about an object or phenomenon was *rooted* in “nature,” it was simultaneously *unrooted*, as it became part of a contested discursive axis, which cut through various discursive formations, and which materialized through this six-letter word.

Take, for instance, some of the arguments discussed regarding the second delineated strategy of pamphleteering against biological exclusion. One observation was that of an analogy, a “similarity” in an “object,” the human body; pamphlets such as Lewis’s or Easton’s proposed that “the flesh, blood bones, or the muscles” were the same in all “natural” human

bodies (Lewis 195). Claims of this kind conceptually collided with positions arguing for a supposedly racially defining “dissimilarity,” for instance in skin color, that was observable in the same object, i.e. the human body. Crucially, this collision occurred rhetorically *on the same plane*, i.e. that of “nature.” The same authoritative discourse, i.e. “nature/the natural,” referred to within various discursive formations became a means of settling a “truth,” from the point of view of each perspective. A clash occurred, then, in the ascription of meaning to difference *or* equivalence through the master-signifier “nature.” It was not essential that an object such as the human body, as a graspable, material phenomenon was indeed composed of perceivable differences as well as equivalences. What became crucial, however, was attributing distinct, ultimately absolute meanings to *either* a difference *or* an equivalence *through* “nature” in a process that produced this signifier as a discursive axis that fundamentally shaped the position from which African American environmental knowledge could be expressed. The struggle that becomes visible in the term and function “nature” thus marks the general struggle of a racially infused environmental knowledge.

Accordingly, arguments that revolved around “nature” in this way not only played out on the level of what I have called the “dissection” of the racialized black body. As “nature” turned into a contested discursive axis that became a nodal point for a variety of antebellum discursive formations ranging from proslavery, scientific or political, to anti-slavery or Black Nationalist thought, black pamphleteers employed the discursive function of “nature” in a variety of ways. Beyond using “nature” as a discourse pertaining to a general *human* nature that arose out of the reasoning faculties of Man (Whipper), other pamphleteers, for example William Watkins or Nathaniel Paul, used *moral* nature as a sign “of the inherent dignity of manhood” in order to claim that “we are entitled to ALL the rights and immunities of CITIZENS” (Watkins 4, 5), or referred to *divine* nature, a “God of Nature” (Paul 5; 20; 22), according to whose principles “it is the duty of all rational creatures to consult the interest of their species” (20).

Yet others – and here lies the second main aspect with respect to writing against biological exclusion – appropriated the discourse of “nature” through depictions of the non-human material world in order to give further strength to the meanings and principles they sought to root in the master-signifier. Revealing examples of this kind are Whipper’s Philadelphia-“Speech” (1837) and David Ruggles’s “‘Extinguisher’ Extinguished!” (1834). Based on his wishful idea that “peace and quietude” for mankind may be achieved by abandoning “the rude passions that animate them” in favor of “exerting their reasoning powers” (Whipper, “Speech” 242), the

former criticizes the current state of humanity by taking recourse to non-human nature, stating that

[t]here are many species of animals that are so amiable in their disposition to each other, that they might well be considered an eminent pattern for mankind in their present rude condition. The sheep, the ox, the horse, and many other animals exist in a state of comparative quietude, both among themselves, and the other races of animals when compared with man. And if it were possible for them to know [sic!] the will of their author [...] they might justly be entitled to a distinction above all other species of creation, that had made greater departures from the will of the divine government. (242)

Out of his conviction that “[t]he rich bequest of Heaven to man was a natural body, a reasonable soul and an immortal mind,” Whipper thus exposes the unnaturalness of biologically excluding and racially divisive human practices, and roots his ideas in the master-signifier of “nature” that, to him, seems organized along principles of similarity (242). Whipper turns to the non-human as a Romantic mirror exemplary of universal values and a divine will from which (parts of) humanity have departed, and suggests transferring the principle of overwhelming analogies among non-human nature that lead to a God-intended harmony, to human nature. Although non-human animals do not know they are acting in accordance with God’s plan, they nevertheless represent this plan through Whipper’s depiction and thereby set an example for humanity.

Ruggles’s “‘Extinguisher’ Extinguished!,” a pamphlet of considerable length and rhetorical prowess published three years earlier in New York City, which primarily aims to refute a racial tract by one Reverend Dr. Reese,<sup>229</sup> is equally explicit in employing a depiction of non-human environs as a reference point for an argument through “nature.” When defending abolitionists against the charge of promoting “amalgamation” and attacking whites’ repugnance “to marry your sons and daughters to colored persons” (13), Ruggles

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<sup>229</sup> Ruggles thoroughly examines the *Extinguisher*, a book published shortly before the pamphlet, and attacks Reese’s “production of doubtful fame – in showing his absurdities and exposing his sophistry” (iii). He draws attention to Reese’s faulty logic that is according to Ruggles “itself *extinguished*” (16), harshly exposes the doctor’s religious hypocrisy (“yes, Pilate, thou hast written, but tell me, hast thou not written something which ere long you will be glad to efface?” (6)), and counters Reese’s charges of abolitionists as promoting “amalgamation” (cf. 12-17). In terms of writing against biological exclusion, Ruggles clearly stands in the tradition of Easton and Lewis, e.g. when he argues that “we are as a people degraded and ignorant [...], but that there is any thing [sic!] in our anatomical or physical organization to warrant the *charge*, incapable of refinement, literary attainment, or acquisition of knowledge of any kind, is an insult so glaring against the God who made of *one blood* all nations, and such an outrage upon the experience of the colored people when opportunity afforded, that it is very strange indeed, that any man can be found so foolish, apish and wicked as to prefer it” (41, emphasis in original).

reminisces about his childhood to demonstrate that it was essentially a misled “public opinion” that had thoroughly corrupted a “true” human nature:

In *by-gone* days in New England, the land of steady habits, where my happiest hours were spent with my play mates [sic!], in her schools – in her churches – treading my little pathway over her broad hills and through her deep valleys. When we waded and swam her beautiful silver streams – when we climbed her tall pines and elms and oaks – when we rambled thro’ her fine orchards, and partook of sweet fruits – when we followed our hoops and our balls – when we wended our way from the top of the snowy white hills to the valley. When on the icy pond we skated till [sic!] the school-bell would bid us ‘retire!’ Then – then, her morals were rich – she taught us sweet virtue! Then Connecticut, indeed, was the queen of our land! – then *nature*, never, never, taught us such sinful ‘repugnance!’ She was *strong* to the contrary. It took the most powerful efforts of a sophisticated education to weaken her hold (14, emphasis in original)

“Nature” becomes more for Ruggles than merely a rhetorical device in which to root an ultimate truth or general principle, in his case that of racial egalitarianism. In fact, the passage as such strikes as being somewhat out of place, since explicit nature writing may not be expected in a pamphlet primarily engaged in refuting a racist tract. The quote is, however, well embedded in Ruggles’s overall strategy, as it represents his attempt to meet what he recognizes as one of his adversary’s central argumentative concepts, namely “nature”: Reese had charged intermarriage with being “incongruous and unnatural” (16). By producing environmental knowledge through a form of politically motivated nature writing, Ruggles engages “nature” as discursive axis, as he shapes his own meanings of the term. His description of New England’s non-human environment not only creates empathy in his readership through a scene of an innocent encounter with the natural world, but thereby also works to strengthen the meanings he himself ascribes to “nature” as a master-signifier, as that to which to return from an errant public opinion dominated by an unfounded and *unnatural* prejudice. As part of their grander claims through “nature,” depicting non-human materialities thus attains for both Whipper and Ruggles the function of underpinning the universal truths that they root in the contested discourse “nature,” whether those truths are articulated in terms of a divine harmony of creation or through the primal scene of an uncorrupted childhood experience.

Hence, the overall function of “nature” as discursive axis becomes visible especially when juxtaposing African American pamphleteers’ enunciations against those of antebellum racial thought. In contrast to writing through “nature” as part of a strategy of exposing *similarities and equivalences* in creation that is characteristic of black pamphleteering, antebellum racialisms primarily aim to identify *dissimilarities and differences* as general organizing

principles of their objects of inquiry. A remark from New York phrenologist John H. van Evrie is, perhaps unconsciously, most revealing in this respect. In 1853, van Evrie claimed that his science's goal was to find the "simple, though mighty truth" that "[t]he human creation like the animal creation, like all the families or forms of being, is composed of a certain number of races, all *generally resembling* each other yet each *specifically different* from all others" (105, emphasis mine). As this quote implies, those who wrote through "nature" – from whatever perspective – did *not* disagree about the *existence* of both equivalences and differences in the objects or phenomena they observed. What they disagreed about was the ascription of meanings and general truths deduced on the basis of *either* difference *or* equivalence that were then turned into absolutes through the master-signifier "nature." While racialisms focused on the "specifically different" as marks of a biologically verifiable, distinct essence in order to biologically exclude, this perspective was countered powerfully on the same discursive basis by black pamphleteers' notions of equivalence in creation, as they stressed what van Evrie calls the "generally resembling" (105). Thus, writing around the discursive axis of "nature" ultimately depended not so much on observation and more on diverging modes of interpretation within discourse; less on material essence or a clear referent and more on emphasis, position and selectivity. While "the dissimilar" was selected, endowed with meaning, and essentialized through biological racialism, the true meaning of "nature" for black pamphleteers most often lay in equivalences and analogies, in "the similar," and thus in the potential to unify. "Nature" became, in this way, a continuously contested discursive battleground, a discourse on which black writers continued to signify, as will be seen, throughout the tradition of African American environmental knowledge.

By employing discourses of "nature," black pamphleteers thus wrote "symmetrically" against biological exclusion. "Symmetrically" in the sense of continuously engaging "nature" as a signifier that functioned as a central "discursive axis" running through discourses of the antebellum period; and against biological exclusion, as the question was *not* primarily, at this point, that of imaginatively rethinking relations of the human to its non-human material conditions in terms of a "state of exception." The pamphleteers' most pressing concern, after all, was attacking the stereotypes and discursive formations that "biologically" sought to ban the black body from the realm of the human.

In conclusion, this does not mean that antebellum African Americans wrote about non-human material environments merely in terms of a strategic employment of a discourse of "nature." Rather, the first chapters have demonstrated that pamphleteering and antebellum

African American writing generally, involved diverse representations of the non-human material world as part of producing a knowledge of the human in its non-human non-discursive material conditions. Far from neglecting relations to non-human materialities or refraining from depictions of non-human nature, many texts from the period show that describing non-human environments was centrally involved in strategies that sought to shape the master-signifier of “nature” and to resist the biological othering of the black body. For the pamphleteering tradition, on the one hand, this becomes evident in texts ranging from pamphlet pioneers like Forten through Easton’s, Lewis’s, or Ruggles’s productions of a de-racializing environmental knowledge. Writing against biological exclusion through “birth and blood” to articulate claims to nationality and humanity, through “dissecting and environmentalizing” the black body against an emerging racial science, or through a discourse of “nature,” frequently involved depicting non-human nature. For the slave narrative tradition, on the other hand, although marked by a hyper-separating impulse, writing against biological exclusion was accomplished by signifying on literary modes that articulated dominant forms of racialized environmental knowledge such as the pastoral (Chapter 3.1.), or by creating literary spaces like the Underground Railroad as loopholes for expressing alliances and identifications with non-human nature (Chapter 3.2.). In this sense, culturally dominant, racializing environmental knowledge and discourses of “nature” were met by an African American environmental knowledge that sometimes included forms of nature writing.<sup>230</sup>

Nonetheless, it is crucial to bear in mind that African American environmental knowledge of the pre-Civil War era was without a doubt dominated by the impulse to write against biological exclusion; in this sense, racial knowledge crucially shaped African American environmental knowledge. In terms of the general distinction between writing against biological exclusion and writing against an environmental state of exception, the former

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<sup>230</sup> The same seems also true for other parts of an antebellum African American literary tradition that I have not treated here. In this respect, there remains much to be done in terms of exploring environmental knowledge in antebellum African American poetry (cf. for recent treatments of African American poetry from an ecocritical perspective e.g. Dodd; Martin; Lynes; or Dungy), or in the genre of the spiritual autobiography, e.g. in texts by Maria Stewart (1835), Jarena Lee (1836), or Zilpha Elaw (1846). Lee, for example, in “The Life and Religious Experiences of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of her Call to Preach the Gospel,” reflects on and renegotiates what it means to be human by writing on non-human nature, when she muses that “[e]ven the falling of the dead leaves from the forests, and the dried spires of the mown grass, showed me that I must die, in like manner. But my case was awfully different from that of the grass of the field, or the wide spread decay of a thousand forests, as I felt within me a living principle, an immortal spirit, which cannot die, and must forever either enjoy the smiles of its Creator, or feel the pangs of ceaseless damnation” (16). See on the spiritual autobiography as a genre Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit* 1-22; Ferguson xvii-xviii; Peterson 56-87; Pierce; and Bassard 51-66.

became the primary antebellum strategy of resisting the positioning of the black body. This strategy is foundational to African American environmental knowledge, whether we consider the fugitive slave narrative or pamphleteering. Speaking in the symbolism of the 1841 lithograph discussed in the introductory pages of this chapter, one may therefore conclude that the *stereotyping* as well as the general *framing* of the image, in this case the (plantation) pastoral, were tackled by African American writers' strategies of writing against biological exclusion. On the one hand, as demonstrated with respect to the slave narrative and private correspondence such as Douglass's "Note" on Niagara (Introduction), the *frame* of the picture as such was attacked by self-consciously signifying on the very modes of representation (e.g. the pastoral or the sublime) and by re-conceptualizing patronizingly assigned literary space (e.g. the Underground Railroad). On the other hand, the biological othering of the black body was also resisted by "negotiating through the skin," as pamphleteers' strategies of attacking "biologically" produced *stereotypes* through a rhetoric of birth and blood, by dissecting and environmentalizing the black body, or through a discourse of "nature" demonstrate. The move – speaking in the symbolism of the lithograph – *towards* the "white hound," however, which would emblemize a strategy of writing explicitly against environmental exception, is not prevalent at this point; writers were not (yet) attempting to "touch the hound" in order to overcome the othering of the black body through writing against an environmental state of exception. To do this would become a task increasingly taken up by African American writers of the postwar decades and especially towards the twentieth century, who began to transform an environmental knowledge against biological exclusion of their antebellum literary predecessors.

Transformations:  
African American Environmental Knowledge from  
Reconstruction to Modernity

## 4.1

### Nature, Education, Home:

### Charlotte Forten's and William Wells Brown's Spatial Reconfigurations of Environmental Knowledge

“The sweet songs of the birds awoke me. Nature is looking her loveliest on this ‘sweet and dewy morn.’ Went to the woods with the girls, in search of wild flowers. Found the sweetest violets and anemones, and a delicate little white, bell-shaped flower whose name I do not know. After a while, tired of looking for flowers, seated myself on a picturesque old stump, while my little cousins continued their search. Thoroughly enjoyed the sweet, pure air, the glorious clouds, the blossoming trees, the dewy grass, and the perfect, *stillness* that reigned around me.”

(Charlotte Forten, *Journals* 308, emphasis in original)

“The negro will for pay perform any service under heaven, no matter how repulsive or full of hardship, He will sing his old plantation melodies and walk about the cotton fields in July and August, when the toughest white man seeks an awning. Heat is his element. He fears no malaria in the rice swamps, where a white man's life is not worth sixpence.”

(William Wells Brown, *My Southern Home* 246-247)

The slave narrative was not only formative for a postwar African American writing tradition in general but also decisively shaped the development of an environmental knowledge within that tradition. With respect to African American environmental knowledge, the genre established a rich and enabling yet at the same time limiting point of departure, as it circumscribed where, when, and how such knowledge could be expressed. The ways in which the narrative both opened up and simultaneously restricted the articulation of African American environmental knowledge for postwar writers becomes visible, for instance, with respect to literary space: On the one hand, the slave narrative had created the literary heterotopia of the Underground Railroad, which often functioned as a “loophole” for articulating environmental knowledge; on the other hand, this literary other-space was embedded within a host of established literary topoi of a genre primarily driven by an urge toward hyper-separating the black body from “nature.” In this way, the antebellum slave narrative left its postwar literary heirs with a relatively fixed spatial matrix that included, for instance, the surveilled plantation, carceral landscapes of flight, or the bourgeois Southern household – spaces that did not necessarily enable a direct articulation of environmental knowledge. The genre left the tradition that emerged from it with a predestined “map” that largely

determined where (not) to express environmental knowledge.

This literary “map” generated through the fugitive slave narrative did not magically break away with the end of the Civil War and Emancipation, but persisted as the general spatial matrix characteristic of African American writing. One reason of this lies in the slave narrative’s general formative force on the African American literary tradition. As a genre that has generally been seen as “the very foundation upon which most subsequent Afro-American fictional and nonfictional forms are based,” the slave narrative provided the starting point from which African American fiction, poetry, and drama developed (Gates, “Introduction” 5). It is no coincidence that texts identified as pioneering African American fiction such as William Wells Brown’s novel *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter* (1853) or Frederick Douglass’s novella “The Heroic Slave” (1853) not only show a close formal and thematic affinity to the slave narrative, but were in fact written by formerly enslaved writers who had influentially contributed to the antebellum genre.<sup>231</sup> Other parts of the literary tradition, too, such as African American poetry or drama, were rooted in anti-slavery rhetoric and imagery as they drew from a host of themes, tropes and styles first developed in the narrative.<sup>232</sup> Consequently, the slave narrative remained a fundamental shaping force in the postwar decades in a variety of ways, as it fueled a tradition of African American writing that, as Reid-Pharr points out, had always been marked by an “impressive amount of cross-fertilization between different genres” (“Narrative” 140).

A second reason why the discourse of the slave narrative is crucial to postwar African American literature and environmental knowledge is the continued presence of the genre itself

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<sup>231</sup> On the long-noted close relation between the (early) African American novelistic tradition and the slave narrative, see e.g. Furman; Reid-Pharr, “Narrative” esp. 137-140, “Postbellum Race Novel”; McDowell; or Levine, “Early African American Novel.” The above-mentioned pioneering texts and others, such as Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859), Delany’s *Blake* (1859-1862), or Collins’s *The Curse of Caste* (1865), acted as “a sort of bridge venture between slave narrative forms and the presumably more complex and race-conscious kinds of black literature that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century” (Madera 24),

<sup>232</sup> W. W. Brown’s *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858), for instance, which is generally recognized as the first African American drama, is in many ways based on the slave narrative’s central theme of the Underground Railroad. The same is true for Pauline Hopkins’s (Post-)Reconstruction-dramas, especially her 1879 *The Slaves’ Escape* (also advertised as *Peculiar Sam*; cf. L. Brown 108-138).

throughout Reconstruction, Post-Reconstruction,<sup>233</sup> and into the twentieth century.<sup>234</sup> As William Andrews has shown, we find a postwar “proliferation of slave narratives not only across the country but across class and gender lines that had restricted slave narratives before the war largely to male fugitives who fled the eastern and upper South to settle in New England” (*Slave Narratives* xi).<sup>235</sup> Even though what Andrews terms the “slave narrative after slavery” thus transformed into a more autonomous form of life writing that became the vehicle of a more nuanced social critique driven by the conviction that “something positive, something sustaining, could be gleaned from the past,”<sup>236</sup> it was still replicating by and large the old topographies of the antebellum slave narrative (“Reunion” 14). Postwar narratives ranging from those by Goings (1869), Frederick (1869), Williams (1873), Henry (1894), and Bruce (1895), to the most famous ones by William W. Brown (1880) and Frederick Douglass (1892), generally retold their stories using established topoi, thereby tending to reproduce the literary “map” – and environmental

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<sup>233</sup> Despite occasional disagreements on a precise periodization regarding “Reconstruction” and “Post-Reconstruction,” the general consensus is that the former lasted from the end of the Civil War up to the mid-1870s, the time when federal politics, through the influence of the Democratic Party, became more determined to act against black civil rights, when federal troops withdrew from the region, and white mob violence began to erupt with unprecedented intensity. Cf. for instance, Peterson, who sees the “demise of Reconstruction” as “inevitable by 1874” (“Literary Reconstruction” 40); E. Foner, who identifies the end of “radical reconstruction” in 1872 (*Reconstruction*); or Andrews, who marks 1877 as the year that ended the “national experiment in Reconstruction” (*Slave Narratives* ix).

<sup>234</sup> The most impressive evidence of the long-term presence of former slaves’ first-hand accounts of their enslavement is the Slave Narrative Collection of the WPA’s Federal Writers Project. Compiled between 1936 and 1938 in 17 states, the collection comprises over 2,000 interviews with former slaves. While a number of these narratives has been published in Yetman’s *Voices from Slavery* (1970; 2000), the entire collection can now be viewed online via the websites of the Library of Congress and Project Gutenberg.

<sup>235</sup> Andrews notes that, “[b]etween 1866 and the publication of *Up from Slavery* in 1901, fifty-four more book-length narratives by formerly enslaved Americans, 1.5 narratives on average annually, appeared” (*Slave Narratives* viii). This proliferation notably occurs not only in the male but – beginning with Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes* (1868) and continuing in texts by Veney (1889), Delaney (1891), A. Smith (1893), Drumgoold (1898), or Taylor (1902) – especially also in the female African American autobiographical tradition. On Keckley’s text, the first seminal slave narrative after slavery, cf. e.g. Andrews, “Introduction: Behind”; and Fleischner. On black women’s postwar slave narratives, see Andrews, *Sisters* 1-22, *Slave Narratives* xix; and Barthelemy.

<sup>236</sup> Cf. on the transformation of the slave narrative after the Civil War, Andrews, *Slave Narratives*, esp. xi-xxi, and “Representation” 68-80; Blight, *Slave No More* 13-16. According to Andrews, the most significant changes in the genre, apart from the new prominence of women writers, had to do with the ways in which the “standards of exemplary behavior” changed (xi), with the development of a new sense of collectivism as opposed to a rugged individualism of the (male) antebellum narrative (xv-xvi), and with how “working-class men converted the postwar slave narrative into an opportunity to break into print” (xx). The latter seems particularly important, as the diversification within the genre mirrors a diversification within the body of African American writers and the African American population more generally. Beyond well-known authors such as Douglass or W.W. Brown, who further developed their autobiographical styles in the second half of the nineteenth century, there were many “not nationally famous people” who wrote and published narratives, which made the “slave narrative after slavery,” in Andrews’s view, “the most democratic literary genre adopted by African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (ix).

knowledge – of their antebellum predecessors.<sup>237</sup>

Yet, while it is important to note such continuities, there are at the same time profound changes in the ways in which the African American literary tradition came to articulate environmental knowledge in the decades following the Civil War. Black writers of this period engaged not only in “repetition” but also in “revision” of antebellum forms of African American environmental knowledge. The remaining chapters of this study trace instances of such “repetition and revision” with a main focus on signifying revisions *within* the African American literary tradition, i.e. on the ways in which “black writers read, repeated, imitated, and revised *each other’s* texts” (Gates, *Monkey* xxii, my emphasis). This is not to suggest that African American literature stopped being marked by a fundamental “double-voicedness” in the postwar decades – signifying involved both African American and Euro-American traditions. However, what becomes particularly important for this period in terms of a history of African American environmental knowledge are internal signifying revisions, i.e. the intertextual webs that developed within the African American tradition. Whereas writers of the antebellum period established the *foundations* of a distinct African American environmental knowledge largely by signifying on dominant Euro-American traditions, writers of the postwar period increasingly engaged in *transformations* of foundational forms of African American environmental knowledge, even if this often happened to the end of simultaneously signifying on newly developing Euro-American discourses such as, for instance, evolutionary thought. Thus, while continuing to signify on evolving Euro-American traditions, postwar African American literature performed its vital work of developing a distinct tradition of African American environmental knowledge in particular by repeating its literary predecessors “with a signal difference” (*Monkey* 51).

In terms of the three dimensions of African American environmental knowledge, a first major signifying revision can be found with respect to the spatial. As this chapter argues, postwar African American environmental knowledge was often articulated, despite the lasting influence of the slave narrative’s “map,” in literary spaces that reflect two general themes of postwar African America: “home” and “education.” Both home and education have been identified by

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<sup>237</sup> Although many slave narratives after emancipation, such as Keckley’s (1868), Henry’s (1894), or Bruce’s (1895), were written by former slaves who had never run away, there are others like Frederick (1869), Williams (1873), or W.W. Brown (1880), who worked the established literary “map” of flights and a corresponding environmental knowledge into their works. Even members of the former group, however, revising “standards of exemplary behavior” and insisting that “slaves who never took such a risky step [as running away] could still claim a dignity,” repeated many of the topographies established by the antebellum genre, including e.g. the topoi of the master’s garden or the swamp, or the general South/North-divide (Andrews, *Slave Narratives* xi).

literary critics and historians as central to African American literature and culture of the post-Civil War decades. With respect to the former, Tate, for instance, in her 1992 study *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* on the role of the domestic novel for nineteenth-century black women writers, notes that such writers increasingly expressed notions of home by embracing “the tenets of the Victorian American society [...], initially to demonstrate that they too were U.S. citizens and ultimately to counter persistent allegations of their inferiority” (67). In a similar vein, Byerman and Wallinger suggest that ‘home’ and “a strong black family was a theme that many male writers shared with women writers of the time” (183), and C. Peterson stresses the various meanings home-building attained in postwar African American culture, claiming that

[f]or African Americans, emancipation meant the opportunity to create a local place that might truly become home. To do so they continued to rely on many of the same social institutions that had ensured their survival in the antebellum period in both the slave South and the free North: familial and domestic networks, the church, schools, community benevolent societies. But they also stepped onto new terrain opened up by Reconstruction legislation, hoping that the nation itself might become home. (Peterson, *Doers* 197)

Thus, the idea of home arose as a central point of debate among African Americans after the Civil War, especially with respect to those who had been formerly enslaved and who were building on the (unfulfilled) promise of “Forty Acres and a Mule.” In the literature of this period, the importance of home-building is reflected in the autobiographical part of the tradition as well as in magazine contributions and novels, where a domestic sentimentalism became prevalent especially toward the close of the century, i.e. in what has been referred to as “the Black Women’s Era” (Byerman/Wallinger 193).<sup>238</sup> In this multifaceted discourse, home became more than a

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<sup>238</sup> In particular in black women’s fiction of the last decade of the nineteenth century – a period that some scholars, alluding to Harper, term “the Black Women’s Era” (Byerman/Wallinger 193; also Carby) – one finds a brand of African American domestic sentimentalism that focuses on the theme of home and that is characterized by its “didactic elements,” its writing against “prejudices and discrimination,” and its advocating of “a retreat into the private and religious” (Byerman/Wallinger 194). Many of these works, by well-known writers like Harper (*Minnie’s Sacrifice* (1869); *Sowing and Reaping* (1876-1877); *Trial and Triumph* (1888-1889); *Iola Leroy* (1892)), Hopkins (*Contending Forces* (1900)), Dunbar-Nelson (e.g. *Violets* (1895); *The Goodness of St. Rocque* (1899)), or Cooper (*A Voice from the South* (1892)), and lesser-known ones like Johnson (*Clarence and Corinne* (1890); *The Hazeley Family* (1894)), Earle Matthews (*Aunt Lindy* (1893)), Tillman (*Beryl Weston’s Ambition* (1893); *Clancy Street* (1898-1899)), or Foote (*A Brand Plucked from the Fire* (1879)) have been republished in the *Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*-series over the past decades; see for a bibliography of late nineteenth-century women’s writing Yellin/Bond (1991). Cf. on Harper’s serialized novels Rosenthal; Sorisio 79-103; Barrio-Vilar; Campbell Toohey; Griffin; or E. West 95-126; on this period’s African American women’s fiction more generally, see Peterson, “Literary Reconstruction”; Byerman and Wallinger 193-205; McKay, “Reflections”; Foster, “Introduction”; Ammons; on the turn-of-the-century work of the “National Association of Colored Women” (NACW), which is revealing with regard to the predominant idea of home-building, see Blum; and the fifth chapter in Moses, *Golden Age*.

general theme, as it led to the creation of new literary space – space that was also used to express environmental knowledge.

The second theme, education, is perhaps even more central to the postwar decades, or has at least figured more prominently in scholarship on the period through central figures such as Anna Julia Cooper or Booker T. Washington. Post-Civil War concerns for black education must be understood in the larger context of the pivotal status the written word had gained from the very inception of African American letters in the New World. Long before Douglass famously emphasized the importance of gaining literacy as a means of gaining freedom and humanity in his 1845 *Narrative*, education had been of vital concern to African American communities. One indicator of what Stepto calls the “dual quest” for “freedom *and* literacy” (“Distrust” 301), and of African Americans’ longstanding high regard for education can be seen in the ways in which various former slaves and Northern African Americans had begun opening schools in antebellum times. In fact, many of the figures discussed so far, such as authors of slave narratives like Jacobs, Douglass, and Bibb, or the pamphleteers Whipper and Easton, had initiated – or at least planned to carry out – their own education projects in the decades before the war.<sup>239</sup> During and in the decade following emancipation, such individual ventures were complemented on a much larger scale by the founding of schools and colleges for African Americans,<sup>240</sup> and by the rise of the “Freedmen’s School Movement” that sent Northern “schoolmarms” to the South, first under the supervision of the Union Army and, later, the Freedmen’s Bureau.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Although his plans were never realized, Douglass had attempted to establish an industrial college for black youths in the 1850s (cf. Stepto, *Home Elsewhere* 112). Harriet Jacobs also taught school in Washington, D.C., Virginia, and Savannah, Georgia (cf. Archer 54; see also Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs*; Hobson/Foster 88), and Henry Bibb, whose second wife opened a school in Canada (cf. Horton and Horton, *Hard Road* 133), announced in January 1851 that the *Voice of the Fugitive*, his Canada-based newspaper, was to be a venture in which “[t]he cause of education shall have a prominent space” (qtd. Tobin/Jones 103). Like writers of slave narratives, pamphleteers like Whipper, Easton, or Ruggles, too, emphasized the importance of education. Even earlier, Hosea Easton’s father, James Easton, had established one of the earliest manual labour colleges for African Americans, a project “between academic study and vocational training in smithing, farming, and shoemaking” (cf. Price/Stewart 8-9).

<sup>240</sup> About 70 schools and colleges were established in the Reconstruction period, many supported by the church, e.g. by African Methodist Episcopal, AME Zion, or Baptist denominations (cf. Carson 155; Hoffmann 134). In 1870, only five years after the end of the Civil War, the superintendent of education of the Freedmen’s Bureau, John Alvord, noted that “[m]any hundreds of teachers and leading minds have already been sent forth from [the black colleges] to commence a life work” (qtd. Hoffman 134). Cf. generally on the history of African American education during Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction Hoffman 119-140; Anderson 1-32; Morris; McPherson 143-160; Carson; Goldstein 47-65; for a concise recent bibliography on African American education history see Royster 308-310.

<sup>241</sup> On the “Freedmen’s School Movement,” which, in Catherine Clinton’s assessment, “did not revolutionize black education in the South” but nevertheless “provided an important beginning for the first free generation of black children” (125), cf. especially the studies by R. Morris (1981) and J. Jones (1992). On the “Port Royal Experiment” in particular, see Rose (1999); on Northern black women as educators in the South cf. e.g. Perkins.

Such efforts fueled postwar African American literature's general ideology of "race uplift." Education became a primary means of embracing what was usually referred to as the 'progress of the race'; it was recognized as a potent "tool of liberation" (Hoffman 121). As Du Bois observed retrospectively in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), the decades following the war saw how

a new vision began gradually to replace the dream of political power. [...] It was the ideal of 'book-learning'; the curiosity, born of compulsory ignorance, to know and test the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man, the longing to know. Here at last seemed to have been discovered the mountain-path to Canaan; longer than the highway of Emancipation and law, steep and rugged, but straight, leading to heights high enough to overlook life. (13)

Thus, in the postwar "Black World," the black "[t]eacher embodied the ideals of this people, – the strife for another and juster world, the vague dream of righteousness, the mystery of knowing" (57). At the same time, the black writer took up the themes of education and home and employed them in creating new literary spaces that significantly shaped African American literary discourse in the postwar decades, whether in slave narratives, in the tutelary fiction by Harper, Hopkins, and writers of the "Women's Era," or in the didactic articles found in a growing number of African American periodicals.<sup>242</sup>

Turning to two authors of this still understudied period<sup>243</sup> is particularly revealing with

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<sup>242</sup> As the mainstream book-market was virtually inaccessible for African American authors during Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction, periodicals published by African American literary or religious organizations such as the AME or Baptist Churches attained a crucial role in the development of black literature. The importance of this postwar magazine culture can hardly be overrated. Frances Harper, for instance, published much her fiction in the *Christian Recorder* of the AME, and Pauline Hopkins likewise chose various church magazines as venues for her fiction before founding her own publishing company in the early twentieth century. Besides being crucial as an outlet for African American literary production, magazines were also important for creating what Benedict Anderson has called "imagined communities." A comment from the *Christian Recorder* highlights the practice of building such communities: "Fathers and mothers that cannot read, when the day's work is done, press the school children or some friend into service and the *Recorder* is read in the family circle. The sayings of the different writers are commented on, the news is discussed, and pleasant, instructive evenings are spent. It is thus giving food for thought during the day" (qtd. Peterson, "Literary Reconstruction" 44). Cf. on the rise and didactic purposes of African American magazines in the postwar-decades Peterson, "Literary Reconstruction"; Foster, "Introduction"; Levine "African American Novel"; Carson.

<sup>243</sup> Commenting on African American literature of the decades following the Civil War, Peterson has pointed out that, "[a]s literary critics, we have found the task of reconstructing Reconstruction daunting" ("Literary Reconstruction" 39). One reason for this may be the practical difficulties of locating relevant texts of this period, since while the periodical press of the postwar African American community undoubtedly "published various writings that encouraged racial uplift, the number of [independently published] novels written by Blacks during and after Reconstruction was scant" (Barrio-Vilar 405). Furthermore, there is, according to Davis/Gates, the more general problem that "[w]ith the end of slavery [...] the black seems to have lost his great unique theme until Jim Crow racism and segregation recreated it" ("Language of Slavery" xviii). Notwithstanding such observations, it seems true when Peterson claims that "[p]ostbellum American literary history is considerably more complex" than some scholarship may suggest and that one needs to see

respect to how such new literary spaces of home and education affected the articulation of African American environmental knowledge. Bracketing almost two decades, Charlotte Forten's Civil War writings (*Journals*; "Life on the Sea Islands" (1864)) and William Wells Brown's last book (*My Southern Home: Or, the South and its People* (1880)) are not just representative of some of the general developments in postwar African American literature. More importantly, they improve our understanding of how the emergence of literary spaces of education and home entailed a spatial reconfiguration of African American environmental knowledge.

### Charlotte Forten: Education and Home-Building through the "Refuge of Nature"

Charlotte Forten's journals, the most famous part of her work, are in many ways exceptional texts. Apart from the fact that Forten's is one of only a handful of nineteenth-century African American women's diaries recovered so far,<sup>244</sup> the journals are noteworthy, first of all, for their intermediate position. The most important and most detailed part of her journals covers the years 1862 to 1864 and therefore lies at the interstice between the antebellum and Reconstruction period. Although her private records as a whole span almost forty years,<sup>245</sup> I will primarily focus on this period, which details Forten's participation in the Port Royal-Experiment on the North Carolina Sea Islands, and which is particularly illuminating with respect to the transformation of African American environmental knowledge. If the Port Royal experiment could be read, as the title of one study suggests, as a *Rehearsal for Reconstruction* (Lee Rose), Forten's accounts of her involvement may similarly be interpreted as "rehearsing" some of the ways in which African American writing came to express environmental knowledge through literary spaces of education

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more that "African Americans did engage in literary composition during the Reconstruction era" ("Literary Reconstruction" 58). Accordingly, what is necessary is "[o]ngoing and future archival research" on this period – certainly also from an ecocritical perspective – that might "supply much of the missing information" (Peterson, *Doers* 196).

<sup>244</sup> For several decades, Forten's journals were the only published diary by an African American woman of the nineteenth century (cf. Christian 150). Even though, as McKay suggests, "a larger number of nineteenth-century black journals and diaries may exist than have come to light so far" ("Journals" 267), Forten's text was still "one of [only] three such extant documents by nineteenth-century black women" recovered as late as the mid-1990s, the other two being private records by Rebecca Jackson and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. Cf. on African American women's diaries Logan 31-34; McKay "Journals"; Hull.

<sup>245</sup> Technically speaking, i.e. when considering all five books that Forten's journal comprises, her diary-keeping lasted 38 years, namely from the first entry in May 1854 to the last one in July 1892. However, since Forten kept her diary much more sporadically after the Civil War, my focus will primarily be on books two, three, and four, which cover the years 1857 to 1864. Forten's entries appear most regularly and most cohesively in these volumes.

and home over the next decades.

Beyond their intermediate position, the journals are also exceptional because of Forten's privileged social position. The granddaughter of James Forten, the wealthy black Philadelphian sailmaker, and of mixed racial heritage, Charlotte Forten was a member of what historian Joel Williamson has called "the mulatto elite" (cf. *New People* 77-88).<sup>246</sup> Born in 1837 and growing up in her grandfather's home on Lombard Street, a "mecca for abolitionists," Forten came into contact with antislavery and feminist sentiments from the moment she could think; she was "[r]eared in an atmosphere of crusading zeal" in her birthplace and her second home, the Purvis family's Byberry Farm outside Philadelphia (Billington, "Introduction" 19, 12). In addition to literally growing into the (Garrisonian) antislavery movement of the day,<sup>247</sup> Forten enjoyed the rare privilege of a classical education. She learned French and German<sup>248</sup> and gained a profound knowledge of the arts and the literary culture of her age – a fact that has prompted some scholars to wonder why "Forten [...] did not become a more forceful racial activist" (Long 38).<sup>249</sup> No matter in how far the critique that is sometimes voiced in this regard is justified or not, it is certainly true that Forten's childhood was not one of severe material or educational want in a family that "no doubt took some of its cues from 'mainstream' middle-class society [...]. Music, classical literature, gracious but tastefully modest entertaining, and liberal travel extended the horizons of all the Fortens" (Jones Lapsansky 12). In this respect, Forten's experience was

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<sup>246</sup> On the Forten family history cf. Billington, "Introduction" 12-22; J. Lewis (1978); and Oden. On Charlotte Forten's later life and her marriage to the Presbyterian minister Francis Grimké, see Braxton, esp. 95-97; Rodier; K. Davis; or Lerner 268-272. In the following, I will follow Stevenson's example of not using the compound name Forten-Grimké for the period before Forten married in 1878.

<sup>247</sup> A particularly strong influence on the young Charlotte Forten were her aunts, staunch abolitionists to whom Whittier dedicated a poem ("To the Daughters of James Forten"). While Margaretta Forten, the aunt with whom Charlotte held constant correspondence throughout the years covered by the journals, opened her own grammar school, Harriet Forten started a sewing school, and Sarah Forten made a career as abolitionist poet and essayist. Moreover, Sarah and Margaretta organized the national convention of black women abolitionists. See on the Forten-sisters and their work Sumler-Edmond; Wilds; and Oden.

<sup>248</sup> Forten's achievements in this respect can be seen in her work as a translator of German and French literature after the Civil War. Her best-known translation is that of M.M. Erckmann-Chatrian's *Madame Therese; or, the Volunteers of '92* (1869) (cf. K. Davis; Billington, "Introduction" 37).

<sup>249</sup> Some critics have been very critical of Forten's elitist position; as Long notes, she has "again and again" been "paternally ensconced in the folds of the powerful Forten-Purvis clan" (40). In what is perhaps the most negative treatment, Jones Lapsansky reads the Forten women as "pampered and protected from the harsh realities of fending for themselves," and as drinking "greedily from the Forten wells of privilege" (9-10). Against such assessments that criticize Charlotte Forten's seeming inactivity despite her privileged position, C. Peterson argues that one possible explanation for Forten's only moderate publishing success may lie in the fact that the "social ideology of her class [...] discouraged female public self-expression and sought to contain women within the domestic circle of true womanhood" (*Doers* 178). Other factors that have to be taken into account when evaluating whether Forten's (minor) publishing career counts as a "success" are her financial problems (cf. Long 38; Charters 132) as well as her chronic illness (cf. esp. Koch; also Cobb-Moore 148-149; Long 45-46).

strikingly different from that of the majority of African Americans of her time, whether enslaved or not, on behalf of whom she came to agitate.

Her privileged position did not mean, however, that Forten's life was unaffected by deep-seated troubles. She had never known her mother, who had died of tuberculosis when she was but three years old, and was sent to Salem, Massachusetts, at the age of sixteen by a father from whom she became more and more estranged.<sup>250</sup> The most aggravating and disheartening influence over her young life, however, seems to have been the cruel race prejudice she repeatedly laments in her journals from 1854 on, the year she moved in with the Remond family in Salem to avoid the segregated Philadelphian school system and attend Salem Normal School. In her first journal, Forten describes her social experience as an adolescent as follows:

I wonder that every colored person is not a misanthrope. Surely we have something to make us hate mankind. I have met girls in the schoolroom – they have been thoroughly kind and cordial to me, – perhaps the next day met them on the street – they feared to recognize me; these I can but regard now with scorn and contempt, – once I liked them, believing them incapable of such meanness. Others give the most distant recognition possible. – I, of course, acknowledge no such recognitions and they soon cease entirely. These are but trifles, certainly, to the great, public wrongs which we as a people are obliged to endure. But to those who experience them, these apparent trifles are most wearing and discouraging; even to the child's mind they reveal volumes of deceit and heartlessness, and early teach a lesson of suspicion and distrust. (*Journals* 140)

Perhaps it was such constant “lessons of suspicion and distrust” that turned Forten into the introspective, overly self-critical character readers discover in the pages of her journal and as which she has often been read by scholars.<sup>251</sup> Although some contemporaries such as the poet John Greenleaf Whittier describe her as a “young lady of exquisite refinement, quiet culture and ladylike and engaging manners and personal appearance,” her private voice most often bespeaks quite

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<sup>250</sup> The issue of her mother's death is frequently broached in Forten's journals and in her poetry, in particular in the poem “The Angel's Visit” (1860), which imagines a mother-angel's return as an inspiration, and which has been praised by W.W. Brown “for style and true poetical diction” (*Rising Son* 468). On this poem and Forten's relation to her lost mother, see Braxton 89-90; Peterson, *Doers* 182-183; Harris 133-134; Sherman 93-96. Forten's relation to her father, too, was complicated. Robert Forten, who in Peterson's assessment “seems to have been much less self-assured than his father in both his occupation and his social activism” (*Doers* 177), remarried after he had sent Charlotte to Salem, and moved with his second wife and family to Canada and later England. These relocations as well as disagreements over Charlotte's stay in Salem apparently estranged him from his daughter so much that she at one point confesses to her journal to “have known but little of a father's love” (*Journals* 252).

<sup>251</sup> Most readers have seen Forten's character as marked by a “natural pessimism” (Goldstein 49). Vaught, for example, reads her as haunted by “[d]isillusionment, anger, despair” and finds that “[h]er anger was not always righteous” (62); Xavier sees her as expressing “enormous self-doubt in her compositions” (449); and Jones Lapsansky regards Forten as a “highly disciplined woman [who] frequently flagellated herself for her lapses of discipline” (18). Similar characterizations can also be found in Billington, “Introduction” 7; Peterson, *Doers* 178; Stevenson, “Introduction” 33; and Braxton 86.

another disposition (qtd. Stevenson, “Introduction” 32). She admits, for example, to have “mingled feelings of sorrow, shame and self-contempt,” or bemoans her insecurity in fulfilling the role of a sociable middle-class woman: “I do not know how to talk. Words always fail me when I want them most. The more I feel the more impossible it is for me to speak” (*Journals* 315, 433).

Such passages hint at one of the major functions of Forten’s journals, namely that of acting as a refuge from a harsh reality marked by soul-crushing racism. Forten at times explicitly emphasizes this function, for instance, when she burst out “To thee, alone, my journal, can I say with tears how *very* hard it is,” or addresses the leather-bound booklets in which she was writing as “ami inconnu” or “faithful friend, my comfortee!” (*Journals* 252, 362, 214, emphasis in original). At points, she seems to engage in ‘dialogues’ with her diary, e.g. when she admits, “[m]y conscience reproaches me for neglecting thee so long,” or names her journal “dear A” (153, 362). Thus, several scholars have identified the creation of a refuge as the primary aim of Forten’s diary keeping. Braxton, for instance, reads the text as “a retreat from potentially shattering encounters with racism and a vehicle for the development of a black and female poetic identity, a place of restoration and self-healing” (85),<sup>252</sup> Logan sees the journal as “a safe space” (33), and C. Peterson suggests that Forten “sought to construct a social space for herself in which she could work out definitions of self and the relationship of self to the larger community” (*Doers* 184).

Despite such observations, readings have tended to overlook the central role that depictions of non-human material environments play in Forten’s *creation* of this refuge. A partial reason of this – and of the general omission of an environmental dimension of Forten’s texts – may be seen in the editorial and publication history of the journals. Kept safe after Forten’s death in 1914 by her friend Anna Julia Cooper, who made typescripts of Forten’s handwritten records, the journals first made their way into the general public through the hands of historian Ray Allen Billington, who published *The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten* in 1953.<sup>253</sup> Billington’s abridged edition of the journals spawned a rather one-sided scholarly discourse, as he had identified race as the single

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<sup>252</sup> Furthermore, Braxton differentiates between the function of diary-keeping for the “young Charlotte Forten” for whom the “diary becomes a private (and therefore defensible) ‘territory’ of the mind,” and an older Charlotte Forten, whom Braxton sees as continuing “to use her diary for restoration and self-healing, a tool for readjusting her psychic balance” (87, 99).

<sup>253</sup> After her death, Forten’s husband Francis Grimké gave her manuscripts to Anna Julia Cooper, the famous principal of Washington D.C.’s M Street High School. Cooper, who had organized “salon-style weekend evenings” at the Grimkés’ home in D.C. (cf. Rodier 115), made typescripts and collected material in her volume *Life & Writings of the Grimke Family*. The material can be found in the *Anna Julia Cooper Papers* and the *Grimke Family Papers*, which are located today at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University in Washington, D.C. More archival material on Charlotte Forten can be found at the Salem State College archives, the Peabody Essex Museum, and the archives of the Penn Center; cf. also Royster 300; McKay, “Journals” 266-267; and Loewenberg/Bogin 285.

most important subject matter of Forten's writing, and had made extensive editorial changes in accordance with this idea. In the introduction to the 1953 edition, Billington thus stated that "no other influence was so strong in shaping Charlotte Forten's thoughts" as that of race prejudice, and that "her race was always uppermost to Charlotte Forten's thoughts. The color of her skin determined her attitude toward her fellow humans, toward her country, and toward her God" ("Introduction" 7, 8).

As true as this may be and as valuable as Billington's book has been in first bringing attention to Forten, a variety of scholars have by now assessed this edition as a "mutilated text" (Braxton 84); Long goes as far as to suggest that it "hindered efforts to study Forten" (37). Accordingly, more recent scholarship has sought to overcome a one-sided perspective focused solely on race on the basis of a complete edition published by Brenda Stevenson in the *Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Women Writers*-series (1988).<sup>254</sup> Even with the availability of this edition, however, and although critics have by now dealt with various aspects of the text,<sup>255</sup> one still finds a general omission of the environmental dimensions of Forten's writings. On the one hand, the reasons of this lie in the decade-long unavailability of the complete text and in Billington's far-reaching editorial changes in the first edition, which obscured the qualities that make Forten's an "environmental text" (Buell). That the editor had chosen to delete precisely those passages that are significant for an environmentally oriented reading, but which, according to his assessment, merely "describe the weather, family affairs, the landscape, and other matters of purely local interest," is in itself a telling act that reveals how environmental issues were largely ignored during the recoveries of African American texts in the 1960s and 1970s (Billington, "Introduction" 40). On the other hand, reasons for a general disregard of the environmental dimension of Forten's journals even after the appearance of Stevenson's edition may be seen in the fact that Forten has never been an overly well-studied author, and that she belongs to an intermediate period in African American literary history that has not attracted as much attention as, for instance, the antebellum period. Thus, even though more recent readings of the journals routinely refer to Forten's appreciation of non-human nature, there is so far no in-depth treatment of Forten's environmentalism from an African American studies let alone an ecocritical

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<sup>254</sup> In the following, references will be to this edition.

<sup>255</sup> Among those are e.g. Forten's feminism (Stevenson, "Introduction"; Jones Lapsansky; Vaught), her chronic illness (Koch; Long) and family history (Oden), the style and rhetoric of the journals (Xavier; Eldred/Mortensen), and their status as "private records that have become public documents" (McKay, "Journals" 267; Peterson, *Doers* 176, 183-5; Cobb-Moore). Scholarly bibliographies on Forten can be found in Yellin/Bond 71-77; and Sherman, "Afro-American Women Poets"; a bibliography of Forten's own writings is given in Stetson 304.

perspective.<sup>256</sup>

Depictions of non-human nature are, however, central to Forten's journals, which, on the one hand, repeat antebellum forms of environmental knowledge, and, on the other hand, foreshadow postwar African American environmental knowledge. When reading the texts as "repetition with a difference," it is crucial to recognize, first of all, how Forten constructs "Nature" as a multilayered refuge. If previous scholarship has generally read the journals as a "safe place" (Logan) or as a "retreat" (Braxton), then depicting non-human material environments became Forten's primary means of acting out this retreat. She devised, through her journals, a *spiritual*, *aesthetic*, and *ethical* "refuge of nature."

A *spiritual* "refuge of nature" is almost omnipresent, as descriptions of non-human environments populate virtually every page of the text. Admittedly, some of these appear to be what Billington once deemed trivial and negligible descriptions of landscapes and the weather. Others, however, express a deeper, more meaningful understanding of the non-human material world, especially when Forten inscribes herself into environs that are presented as holding the power to restore her downcast spirit. Through a discourse of "nature/the natural," the text envisions non-human materiality as a space of renewal – a space where Forten's diary-self finds a spiritual connection to both this materiality and to itself. The following passage, left out in the Billington-edition, is exemplary of this pattern in Forten's writing, as it recalls taking a

pleasant walk in the pastures with S.[arah Remond] and Mr. P.[utnam] – Looked in vain for the delicate yet brave Hepatica, but enjoyed perfectly the beauty of the hill, the moss-grown rocks, – the sky – the waters, – and the delicious songs of numberless little brooks, whose sparkling waters and picturesque windings gladden the eye, even as their music does the ear. Our walk was, indeed, a *delightful* one. Returned home, from the holy peace and beauty of Nature [...]. (*Journals* 208, emphasis in original)

Forten celebrates this "holy peace and beauty of Nature," experienced via the visual and auditory senses ("eye" and "ear"), throughout her journals. Capitalizing the word "Nature" in the above

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<sup>256</sup> None of the ecocritical monographs on African American literature mentions Forten; furthermore, there are so far no articles on Forten from an ecocritical perspective. In African American studies, some interpretations fleetingly comment on Forten's depictions of non-human nature. Peterson, for instance, notes that Forten's writings are "shot through with picturesque descriptions of landscapes" and reads these primarily as functioning for Forten "as an indirect strategy of self-expression that would allow her to write the self without going insane" (*Doers* 190, 187); Koch, focusing on Forten's chronic illness, sees "attempts to escape physicality by evoking the rich descriptive language of the romantic poet and by projecting her embodied self onto the natural landscape" (61); and Cobb-Moore reads Forten as "a romantic visionary," who impresses her readership with her "saturation in Nature as manifested by her descriptions of landscapes" (143). Braxton 92-93; Harris 131; Rodier 109; Loewenberg/Bogin 284; and Eldred/Mortensen 191-192, briefly mention Forten's relation to non-human nature, but none of these readings focuses on non-human environments as a major aspect of her texts.

quote and in many other cases highlights the centrality of the concept to her creation of a refuge. From the first to the very last entry, Forten gives countless descriptions of “delightful walk[s]” (*Journals* 94), “rides” that were “perfectly beautiful,” or days “to be marked with a white stone” (245) – instances that let her feel touched by the “warmer love of dear Mother Nature” and “its soothing, and delightful power” (260, 72). In this respect, Forten’s writings read like the rambles of a romantic nature-lover who “could *live* out of doors,” and who was not just superficially viewing non-human environments as mere picturesque background but cultivated an amateur scientific interest (210, emphasis in original). She apparently acquired considerable knowledge on flora and fauna, was interested in phenomena such as solar eclipses (cf. 61), and visited scientific institutions such as the Essex Institute (cf. 78).<sup>257</sup> In this way, “Nature” becomes the conceptual thread that binds together the journals as a retreat; it acts as a trigger of “peaceful, happy thoughts, sweet remembrances” that “gave me a feeling of perfect peace” (103, 114). There is the constant sense of an uplifting power of “Nature” as a source of spiritual strength. Depicting moments of enjoying “the sweet, pure air, the glorious clouds, the blossoming trees, the dewy grass, and the perfect, *stillness* that reigned around me” produces Forten’s own discourse of “Nature” that helps her diary-self build up a stronger sense of self (308, emphasis in original).

At the same time, Forten’s “refuge of Nature” has an *aesthetic* dimension, as the spiritual relief she finds in the non-human world is communicated through the artistic frameworks and values of her day. Forten was no doubt familiar with the aesthetics of the pastoral, the picturesque, and the sublime, since she was not only an excessive reader in search of literary role models, but also literally grew into the Philadelphia and New England literary elites, which led to many first-hand encounters with a variety of the great (nature) writers and poets of her time.<sup>258</sup> The influences of this impressive literary education and Forten’s creation of a link between an experience of the non-human material and an endorsement of the arts become visible in the

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<sup>257</sup> Forten’s journals are full with instances that show her interest in non-human nature from a scientific perspective. She frequently visited not only gardens, but also “Hortical Exhibitions” (101) and “greenhouses” (206), or enjoyed the view “from the Observatory at Mt. Auburn” (232). Moreover, she attentively listened to lectures by natural scientists like Louis Agassiz (cf. 115).

<sup>258</sup> According to a list attached to one of the journals, Forten read over one hundred books in one year (cf. Billington, “Introduction” 8). Being on a “quest for literary models” (Braxton 87), her favorite authors included Blake, Keats, Wordsworth, Hawthorne, Emerson, and the Brontës. Moreover, this “quest” was enhanced by her personal acquaintances that included a “Who’s Who in nineteenth-century America” (Cobb-Moore 155). She met leading abolitionists of the day, such as William Lloyd Garrison, Robert Purvis or Charles Lenox Remond, as she went to lectures and Antislavery fairs collecting autographs and admiring her “stars,” and was fortunate enough to encounter major American authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lydia Maria Child, Henry Ward Beecher, Charles Sumner or William Wells Brown.

journals' descriptions in two ways. Firstly, there are various moments that depict the enjoyment of the arts while being immersed in the non-human world. Forten recalls, for instance, how, on a "pleasant walk" through "harmony grove," Miss Shephard, a teacher she befriended in Salem, begins to "read several exquisite poems written by the sister of Mrs. Hemans," or how she glories in listening to an orchestra while seated "among the trees" (*Journals* 83, 240). In such moments, experiencing non-human environs and art literally merge.

Secondly, and more importantly, the aesthetic dimension of her "refuge of Nature" is revealed in the ways in which Forten stylistically inscribes her literary preferences and artistic ideals into her depictions of the non-human material world. At times, she becomes explicit in claiming an essential connection between art and nature, for example, when commenting on the New England "pastures":

I enjoyed the novelty of wandering over the hills, and ascending some of the highest of them had a fine view of the town and harbor. It seemed like a beautiful landscape; and I wished for the artist's power or the poet's still richer gift to immortalize it.  
(*Journals* 70)

For Forten, encountering, grasping, and describing non-human materialities as "Nature" is inextricably connected with aesthetic stances that she derives from a handful of literary heroes whom she regarded as possessing that "poet's still richer gift to immortalize" such materialities (70). Accordingly, she frequently employs her considerable literary expertise when offering her depictions: Upon seeing a "rocky island" on one of her carriage rides, for instance, Forten notes that "[i]t was just such an island as I imagined 'Monte Christo' must have been" (88); she praises literary characters such as the hero of Craik's novel *John Halifax* as "'Nature's nobleman' in every sense of the word" (211) and ponders admiringly over poetic descriptions of European nature by Clarke and Coleridge (cf. 188). Above such writers and literary figures stood, however, the poetic voices of Emerson and Whittier, both of whom Forten met face-to-face and deeply revered. While she seems to have admired Emerson from a distance<sup>259</sup> as "one of the truest of Nature's interpreters" and fantasizes about taking a walk with him that "would be intensely yet silently delightful" (279, emphasis in original), Whittier became a much closer, life-long

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<sup>259</sup> Forten describes Emerson in her journal as a "fine lecturer, and a very peculiar-looking man" (130), but does not engage in direct contact with the poet. Instead, she reads Emerson's works admiringly, commenting: "I cannot quite understand everything that he says; but I understand enough to admire and enjoy, and be benefitted by. He has taught me many a good and noble lesson, for which I thank him with all my heart" (287).

acquaintance and patron with whom Forten *did* take long walks.<sup>260</sup> Apparently, she came to regard Whittier himself as the epitome of a Romantic connection between art and non-human materialities. He was, to Forten, “the poet [who] was also a farmer”, and Whittier’s as well as Emerson’s celebrations of agriculture, country life, and the non-human world in general, fuse into an aesthetic framework in Forten that is marked by a brand of descriptive language that merges the picturesque with the pastoral and, at some points, the sublime (247). In this respect, Forten endorses the dominant Euro-American literary modes and models of her day.

That Forten moreover also employs and repeats an African American environmental knowledge becomes visible when turning to her writing as creating an *ethical* “refuge of Nature.” For Forten – as for many African American pamphleteers – depicting non-human nature became also a vehicle for articulating her abolitionist morality and a means of underpinning her critique of race prejudice. An instance of this can be found in the early pages of the journals that describe the infamous court case of Anthony Burns, a fugitive slave who had run away from Virginia to Boston, was taken in by authorities in 1854, and sent back into bondage under the Fugitive Slave Law. In her portrayal of the incident, Forten repeatedly employs a strategy of contrasting the freedom visible in non-human nature with the fugitive’s fate. In the entry of June 3, 1854, she writes:

A beautiful day. The sky is cloudless, the sun shines warm and bright, and a delicious breeze fans my cheek as I sit by the window writing. How strange it is that in a world so beautiful, there can be so much wickedness, on this delightful day, while many are enjoying themselves in their happy homes, not poor Burns, but millions beside are suffering in chains. (66)

Less than two weeks later, on June 16, 1854, Forten reiterates such sentiments in allegorical terms:

Another delightful morning; the sky is cloudless, the sun is shining brightly; and, as I sit by the window, studying, a robin redbreast perched on the large apple tree in the garden, warbles his morning salutation in my ear; – music far sweeter than the clearer tones of the Canary birds in their cages, for they are captives, while he is free! I would not keep even a bird in bondage. (71)

The non-human natural world becomes an allegory of freedom. The robin redbreast representing a natural state of being is contrasted with an emblematic caged-in “bird in bondage” representing

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<sup>260</sup> Forten saw Whittier as “one of the few men whom I truly reverence for their great minds and greater hearts” and was “filled [...] with joy and astonishment” whenever she received his letters (*Journals* 246, 173). Whittier was Forten’s life-long friend and benefactor, who acted as her unofficial literary agent and helped her secure positions, e.g. for her engagement on the North Carolina Sea Islands or, after the war, for a position at the Boston public library. Forten’s admiration for Whittier can also be seen in her essay “Personal Recollections of Whittier,” published in the *New England Magazine* in 1893.

an unnatural one. For Forten, writing “Nature” at such points becomes also a means of expressing and underwriting her conviction that slavery is not only morally false but also *unnatural*.

This strategy of employing “Nature” as the source of an ideal of freedom from which the corrupt morals of the nation’s slaveholding and racist practices have painfully departed is repeatedly utilized in the journals, and becomes visible, in particular, in Forten’s descriptions of the sea, a part of the natural world she was most impressed with. When considering her portrayals of the Atlantic, which is most often presented through the lens of the sublime as “most strange and beautiful” yet giving “constant enjoyment,” one regularly encounters the idea of an ethos of freedom innate to the non-human world (*Journals* 386).<sup>261</sup> Whenever describing the sea, Forten recalls a deeply felt “grandeur,” a “sublimity of Old Ocean, as he thundered forth his mandates to the solitary rocks” (97). While watching this part of the non-human world, “many mingled feelings rose to my mind. But above all others was that of perfect happiness. For liberty, glorious, boundless liberty reigned there supreme!” (88). In such moments, “Nature” as a *spiritual* refuge that triggers a “perfect happiness” becomes at the same time an *ethical* refuge where the concept of a “glorious, boundless” liberty is rooted, and which fuels Forten’s arguments for abolition and against prejudice (88).

In this respect, Forten’s rhetorical strategy is much closer to the strategies of antebellum African American pamphleteers like Whipper or Ruggles than to those of the fugitive slave narrative. This becomes visible especially when contrasting her employment of the pastoral with the slave narrative’s two-eyed pastoralism. Due to her privileged social position, Forten was able to experience and portray “a delightful ride on the sea shore” in pastoral terms unmarked by the double vision of the slave. She could pastoralize and describe “a steamboat [...] gliding rapidly over the calm, and deep blue water of the bay, [which] seemed like a single white cloud in the azure sky” (Forten, *Journals* 82-83) in ways that were denied slave narrators like Douglass or Bibb.<sup>262</sup> Moreover, the pastoral contrast between city and country runs, in Forten, decidedly in

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<sup>261</sup> Forten refers in various (exclusively positive) ways to the ocean. Sometimes she praises the pastoral delightfulness of the New England coast, describing a “delicious breeze that was stirring, laden with the fragrance of locust and sweetbriar” (*Journals* 74). At other times, depictions shift to the mode of the sublime, as when Forten witnesses a “veritable grand storm at sea” on her trip to the coastal Islands (384). However, even in this situation, and no matter how “terribly sea-sick” she became as “the sea broke upon the boat with thunderous roars,” her attitude towards the ocean does not change; it remains, in its “glory and grandeur” a constant reminder of a freedom expressed in “Nature” (383, 384, 386).

<sup>262</sup> The double vision that involved a pastoral and a slave’s eye (3.1), which marked the discourse of the fugitive slave narrative and found expression, for instance, in Douglass’s iconic Chesapeake Bay apostrophe and Bibb’s Ohio River-scene is not involved in Forten. In conjunction with the somewhat surprising fact that Forten does not mention Douglass once in her journals (cf. Cobb-Moore 154), this observation not only underpins Forten’s elitist position, but also attests to the diversity of African American social and

favor of the latter. For her, the city, Philadelphia in particular, is not a safe haven on the way to freedom that it was to Henry Box Brown or the Crafts, but the place where she and her kin were refused service in ice-cream parlors (cf. *Journals* 230). The countryside, by contrast, emerges as a place where pastoral renewal from the corrupt forces of the city might be found and picturesque communions with non-human nature be imagined. Thus, although constantly arguing on behalf of the fugitive slave, Forten's journal writing does not engage the forms of environmental knowledge of the fugitive slave narrative. Rather, her *spiritual*, *aesthetic* and *ethical* "refuge of nature" is based on strategies found in the pamphleteering tradition and on literary modes and models of mainstream American Romanticism. In this respect, the journals attest to the diversity of the African American environmental literary tradition even before emancipation.

While Forten's writings therefore in some respects echo antebellum traditions, they also prefigure new facets of postwar African American environmental knowledge, as they begin to articulate such knowledge through literary spaces of home and education. Forten does not simply "repeat," but "repeats with a difference," as her intermediate texts become indicative of a broader development. More than merely creating a spiritual, aesthetic, and ethical "refuge of Nature" that expresses Forten's personal appreciation of non-human nature, which is important in its own right, the journals also foreshadow new forms of expressing African American environmental knowledge through the postwar themes and literary spaces of education and home.

Both home and education are central to Forten's journals. The idea of home emerges in passages that articulate Forten's personal longing for a family and in her negotiation of a gendered mid-nineteenth-century cult of home. The journals express, on the one hand, a sense of homelessness of an individual deprived of a mother's love and a father's care, which becomes visible, for instance, when Forten, watching her school peers "going home," laments that this "made me feel rather home-sick [...] as I cannot go to either of my homes" (144).<sup>263</sup> On the other hand, Forten's text, often critically, reflects on the values of what Barbara Welter has described as the "Cult of True Womanhood," which centrally involved middle-class conceptualizations of

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environmental experiences in the mid-nineteenth century. Moreover, Forten's case, too, strongly suggests that African American literature was far from being exclusively antipastoral.

<sup>263</sup> Throughout the journals, one finds Forten's shifting allegiances to her various homes. She starts out with Philadelphia as birthplace and home and is, especially in the mid-1850s, pained by bouts of homesickness, e.g. when claiming that she "should be lonesome were not my time so constantly occupied," when she writes that she "should like to know what they are doing at home at this moment," or when she describes listening to an account of Mrs. Putnam's journey to "visit my home [Philadelphia]" (*Journals* 180, 69, 73). Later on, her allegiance shifts to New England as a place of belonging, which also finds expression in one of her published pieces, the 1858 essay "Glimpses of New England," and to a sense of home with respect to the North Carolina sea island.

home.<sup>264</sup> In this respect, her idea of what was supposedly a “good” home converges with her fondness of literature and her high regard for certain authors and literary role models. She takes carriage rides to gaze admiringly at the homes of New England authors or becomes absorbed in watching the engravings in *The Homes of American Authors*, a popular volume of the time that shows “the beautiful homes of Irving, Longfellow, Bryant, Hawthorne, Lowell, and many other distinguished writers and orators,” finding that “[t]he ‘Homes’ are all very beautiful, fit residence for their gifted inmates” (72). Thus participating in a mid-nineteenth-century discourse on domesticity and home, Forten often articulates a sense of duty, expressed here by her use of the term “inmates” instead of “inhabitants,” with respect to creating proper homes, especially for African Americans.

Crucially, Forten’s idea of home-building involves not only the creation of appropriate interior spaces for the “angel in the house,” but also the exterior surroundings of such houses as parts of a home. Accordingly, the journals give more than just an “insight into the expectations of the proper uses of time in [...] [a middle class] antebellum Afro-American household,” as Jones Lapsansky suggests (3), as they often expand the idea of home beyond the household, thereby also articulating environmental knowledge. The text presents Forten’s changing homes within the broader landscapes she encounters, for example, by extensively describing the long walks and rides as part of her experience of each new home, or by literally “opening up” the space of the domestic household to its surroundings – a move that is frequently symbolized by (self-)portrayals of the diarist writing next to opened windows.<sup>265</sup> Moreover, the journals depict out-of-doors-work as an integral part of home-building. Forten relates, for instance, how she “adopted ‘Bloomer’ costume and ascended the highest cherry tree” to “[o]btain some fine fruit” (86), and embraces a cult of flowers.<sup>266</sup> To “beautify our homes” (68), flowers are gathered, taken

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<sup>264</sup> “True Womanhood,” a phrase frequently used in magazines, gift annuals or religious literature throughout the nineteenth century, included, according to Welter, “four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (152). The idea of home was intimately linked with this dominant bourgeois model, since a women’s primary task was regarded as making the home “a cheerful place, so that brothers, husbands and sons would not go elsewhere in search of a good time” (163).

<sup>265</sup> The image of Forten next to an opened window recurs throughout the journals. She is frequently portrayed as sitting “by the window with Wordsworth [or some other writer] before me, but looking oftenest at the beautiful blue sky, itself a glorious poem” (128), or as standing “by the window – from which the water was plainly seen, sparkling beautifully in the moonlight, and convers[ing] until after midnight” (137). Such descriptions and their frequent occurrence emblematically hint at the ways in which Forten envisions “home” not as closed-off domesticity, but as a permeable space that literally ‘inhales’ the materiality of its non-human surroundings.

<sup>266</sup> At countless points, the journals praise the beauty of flowers, those “most delightful companions” (225). Particularly revealing in this respect is Forten’s poem “To a Beloved Friend” (1858), cf. Zboray/Zboray 50-53. On a mid-nineteenth century cult of flowers and its interaction with the “Cult of True Womanhood,” cf. Seaton.

care of, and given as presents (cf. e.g. 215-218221, 256-257), and act, thereby, as another facet of the general link between the house itself and its environs that is at the heart of Forten's place-based idea of home. To her, home essentially means being rooted in a larger habitat and a specific locale.

The second theme, "education," is equally important to Forten's text. On the one hand, the diarist presents the education of *herself* as a process that is marked by strong ambitions as well as self-doubts. She reassesses her achievements from birthday to birthday and from New Year's Day to New Year's Day, expressing the hope that her "knowledge of my *want* of knowledge be to me a fresh incentive to more earnest, thoughtful action, more persevering study" (96, emphasis in original)," yet at the same time frequently laments her "unworthy self" (153). On the other hand, Forten expresses a strong will to educate *others*. After all best remembered today for her work as a teacher, we find her educational ideas throughout her writings, especially in her poetry. In a poem composed for the 1856 graduation ceremony of Salem Normal School, for example, Forten demands of herself and her classmates to "toil unwearied./ With true hearts and purpose high" (Forten, "Poem" 23). Later on, she repeats the same sentiments in "The Two Voices" (1858), proposing her life's "higher destiny" to be to educate and "live for others," so that it seems only logical that Forten began her education mission as the first black teacher in Epes Grammar School and Salem Normal School in the late 1850s, and went on to become the first Northern black woman to teach former slaves in the South (44).

The most revealing part of the journals regarding environmental knowledge is the portion that gives an account of the latter teaching engagement, i.e. of Forten's participation in what is generally known as the "Port Royal Experiment." The major aim of this "experiment," initiated after the Union Army had seized the North Carolina Sea Islands in 1861 to cut off Confederate supply lines, was to "prove to a sceptical public that Negroes were worthy of freedom" (Jacoway xiii).<sup>267</sup> In a letter from September 16, 1863, to the Board of Tax Commissioners for the District of South Carolina, Abraham Lincoln had given his authorization "to establish such schools, and to direct the tuition of such branches of learning as you in your judgment shall deem most eligible, subject nevertheless to the general direction and control of the Secretary of the Treasury" (qtd. Royster 145). In accordance with this order, one month later Edward L. Pierce, the

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<sup>267</sup> The objectives of the Port Royal Experiment were both educational and economic. While the mission of education and uplift has generally been emphasized, another reason for initiating the project lay in "the fact that there was an especially valuable variety of cotton, which could be grown only on the islands and was the highest-yielding variety of cotton in the Americas" (Royster 144). For general accounts of the "Port Royal Experiment" cf. Rose (1999); or Royster 144-152.

superintending government agent of the project, began to call for educators, whose

“teaching will by no means be confined to intellectual instruction. It will include all the more important and fundamental lessons of civilization – voluntary industry, self-reliance, frugality, forethought, honesty and truthfulness, cleanliness and order. With these will be combined intellectual, moral and religious instruction.” (qtd. Goldstein 48)

Charlotte Forten responded to this call in the late summer of 1862, sensing an opportunity to work towards her life-long mission of “changing the condition of my oppressed and suffering people” (*Journals* 67), and, with Whittier’s help, eventually made it to the islands on October 28, 1862, as the first black agent of the Port Royal Relief Association of Philadelphia.<sup>268</sup> Her engagement in teaching the North Carolina contraband, which lasted for almost nineteen months interrupted only by a short absence for health reasons, has overwhelmingly been evaluated as a success story. The period that Forten herself referred to as “a strange wild dream” (390) has been read as providing “a partial solution to her predicament of isolation, a reconciling of intellect, and a sense of Christian duty, with the so-called cult of true womanhood” (Braxton 91), as a moment when she “successfully fulfils her goal of becoming a visible activist” (Long 42), or as the story of a heroic “soldier in Canaan” and “Daughter of the Regiment” of Robert Gould Shaw’s black “Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteers” (Cobb-Moore 143, 152).

Moreover, Forten’s account of her “strange wild dream” is revealing with respect to an articulation of environmental knowledge through spaces of education and home (390). Her educational work on the Sea Islands took place in a school founded by Laura Towne and Ellen Murray and based in a one-room Baptist Church.<sup>269</sup> The official aim of this institution was, in accordance with Pierce’s scheme, to provide a broad education that sought to instill ‘civilization’ and that included such basic issues as “teach[ing] modern habits of sanitation

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<sup>268</sup> The story of Forten’s application for a teaching position on the Sea Islands and the fact that she was the first of relatively few black northern teachers venturing into the South at that time reveal the kind of racism encountered by African Americans in the North. As Hoffman notes, there is much “evidence that teachers of color had a more difficult time finding work in freedpersons’ schools than did white teachers, despite the African American community’s stated preference for a less educated African American teacher over a better educated white one” (129). Forten herself, though armed with references from Whittier, was initially rejected by the Boston Educational Commission in August 1862, before succeeding in her plan to help the freedmen through the Port Royal Relief Association of Philadelphia.

<sup>269</sup> “Penn School,” established in September 1862 and named in honour of Quaker activist William Penn, became a home to its founders, Laura Towne and Ellen Murray, who worked there for several decades. Later, the school became part of Armstrong’s Hampton Institute and was renamed “Penn Normal, Industrial, and Agricultural School.” In 1974, “Penn Center” became a National Historic Landmark District. Cf. on the school’s history e.g. Royster 152; or Charters 131.

and personal hygiene” (Goldstein 50). Beyond this official task, however, Forten pursued a more personal mission of giving “lessons meant to supplant memories of slavery with those of racial pride” (51) that also included an idea of education as extending beyond the narrow confines of a classroom. This impulse becomes apparent from the very first portrayal of the schoolhouse, when she notes upon her arrival:

It [the freedmen’s school] is kept by Miss Murray and Miss Towne in the little Baptist Church, which is beautifully situated in a grove of live oaks. Never saw anything more beautiful than these trees. It is strange that we do not hear of them at the North. They are the first objects that attract one’s attention here. They are large, noble trees with small glossy green leaves. Their beauty consists in the long bearded moss with which every branch is heavily draped. This moss is singularly beautiful, and gives a solemn almost funeral aspect to the trees. (*Journals* 391)

In this passage, it is the surroundings, the situatedness of the schoolhouse in a specific non-human environment, which takes up most of the space. Not the church or its interiority lie at the center of attention, but the “oaks” first “attract attention.”

The convergence of representations of her educational efforts with depictions of non-human materialities highlighted in this scene is characteristic of the journals’ account of the Port Royal experiment. Forten continuously describes her educational work as extending beyond the confines of a regular classroom, as she visits families living in the vicinity in the afternoons, takes walks with “the larger children [...] into the woods in search of evergreens to decorate the church” and to have “a delightful ramble and get a quantity of greens,” or holds her lessons “out-of-doors – in the bright sunlight” (*Journals* 423, 436). In the entry of January 12, 1863, she writes that working in this way “was delightful. Imagine our school room, dear A. – the soft brown earth for a carpet; blue sky for a ceiling, and for walls, the grand old oaks with their exquisite moss drapery. I enjoyed it very much. Even the children seemed to appreciate it, and were unusually quiet” (436-437). Thus, the text broadly inscribes Forten’s teaching activities into the Southern landscapes she encounters and which she often compares with those more familiar ones of New England.<sup>270</sup> As she takes walks and carriage rides to and from schools or churches, and performs a considerable portion of her teaching outside, Forten’s educational mission spatially moves

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<sup>270</sup> Forten frequently reads the Sea Islands against the Pennsylvanian and New England landscapes, which she had extensively described in her journals of the 1850s. She notes, for instance, that “[t]he country is very level – as flat as that in eastern Penn[Sylvania],” that “[t]here are plenty of woods, but I think they have not the grandeur of our Northern woods,” or that the trees “have not the general brilliant hues of the northern woods” (392, 396). In other moments, she compares the flora of the islands with an (imagined) Southern European countryside. Cf. on Forten’s exoticization of the Sea Islands as an expression of her longing for Europe and her general wanderlust Koch 42.

away from the Baptist church and a narrow curriculum, and becomes intertwined with the non-human environs of the Sea Islands.

This transformation of her “classroom” into a broader educational space that allows for the expression of environmental knowledge also intersects with the notion of home. Generally, Forten’s efforts of building homes for the freedmen correspond with the idea of instilling “civilization” that is characteristic of the Port Royal experiment at large. They are in many ways expressions of mid-nineteenth century middle class values, whether we consider Forten’s embroidering of the freedmen’s quarters with flowers as symbols of domesticity (cf. e.g. 459-460), or the furnishing of her own “new home” in an abandoned plantation house by using “prints” and “roses” to make “home [...] look homelike” (394). Additionally, however, the journals also convey a more fundamental sense of home, as Forten’s experience at the islands turns into an act of spiritual home-building. On the one hand, she finally gains an opportunity of finding “my highest happiness in doing my duty” in teaching; on the other hand, this tutelary activity enables an identification with non-human environs, which are thereby turned into a home (376). Both her home-building and education activities merge with expressing environmental knowledge in a process that helps turn the Sea Islands into a personal space and that becomes especially visible in those moments in which Forten reads herself into Southern non-human surroundings that act as sheltering sanctuaries. She depicts herself, for example, in bosky places where “the branches of the live oak formed a perfect ceiling overhead” (401), or envisions non-human materialities as her sacral refuge where “[t]he whole swamp looks wonderfully like some old cathedral, with monks cloaked and hooded, kneeling around it” (457). Literary space, furnished along the themes of home and education, becomes the locus where environmental knowledge, in Forten’s case most often in the sense of a “refuge of nature,” can be expressed.

Through this articulation of environmental knowledge via literary spaces of home and education, the journals also hint at a liberating transformative potential of such knowledge with respect to mid-nineteenth century gender roles and spheres.<sup>271</sup> The Port Royal account in particular involves ideas of home and education that, by merging with an expression of environmental knowledge, emphasize the need for middle-class women to overcome the boundary between the “inside” and the “outside” of the house. In an inscription on the inside

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<sup>271</sup> The idea of “separate spheres” – the “private” one, in the nineteenth century, being primarily reserved for women and the “public” one for men – is intertwined with the cult of true womanhood, especially its “cardinal virtue” of domesticity (cf. Welter), and has been widely discussed, especially from a feminist perspective, since the 1960s. On gendered spheres in the nineteenth-century U.S., see e.g. Cott; M. Ryan; Kelley; D. Nelson; on African American women in gendered spheres, see Brody.

cover of the fourth diary, Forten becomes most explicit in this respect, when she notes that “[t]his is what the women of this country need – healthful and not too fatiguing outdoor work in which are blended the usefulness and beauty I have never seen in women” (qtd. Braxton 91). Expanding the private sphere of the house promoted through the cult of true womanhood via experiencing, relating to, and expressing a knowledge of non-human material environments is seen as an appropriate step to take for middle-class women. Thus, although Forten’s embracing of a cult of flowers could also be read as suggesting an incorporation of both this element of the natural world and of women generally *into* a confining space of a narrowly conceptualized home and as adhering to dominant ideas about “woman’s sphere,” her environmental knowledge also suggests a move *out of* the confined domestic space of the household that could lead to a more empowered position of an “angel beyond the house.”

Despite this potentially liberating effect of environmental knowledge with respect to mid-nineteenth century gender norms, it is just as crucial to see how the public/private dichotomy central to such norms acted as a force that significantly shaped the articulation of environmental knowledge for an African American woman writer like Forten. In this regard, it is revealing to compare the journals with the published accounts of Forten’s Civil War experience in the South, which consist of two letters from December 12 and 19, 1862, published in Garrison’s *Liberator*, and the 1864 article “Life on the Sea Islands,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly*.<sup>272</sup> In terms of their status, it is difficult to draw clear lines between these published texts and Forten’s journals. On the one hand, the publication of the former was a patronized process that did not exactly start out with the intention, on Forten’s behalf, to enter the public sphere.<sup>273</sup> On the other hand, the journals are – despite explicit statements by Forten that claim their privacy<sup>274</sup> – commonly regarded as quasi-public documents due to their eloquence, style, and literary value.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> For the sake of completeness, one should mention the existence of yet another account of Forten’s Port Royal experience, “New Year’s Day on the Islands of South Carolina,” published in Lydia M. Child’s *The Freedmen’s Book* (1865), which, however, hardly diverges from the *Atlantic Monthly*-essay. This essay, “Life on the Sea Islands,” is generally regarded as Forten’s most important publication.

<sup>273</sup> The letters to Garrison were apparently not written with the explicit intent to be published, although it seems reasonable to assume that Forten at least suspected their publication in the *Liberator*. The same is also true for “Life on the Sea Islands,” which was edited and recommended to the *Atlantic Monthly* by Whittier. Since Whittier had previously acted as Forten’s literary patron and had helped her publish her poetry, she must have been aware that sending this text might well lead to its publication.

<sup>274</sup> A pencil inscription in the second book of the journals reads “[t]o be burned, in case of my death immediately. He who dares read what here is written, Woe be unto him” (qtd. Braxton 83).

<sup>275</sup> Against Forten’s own claims for the privacy of what she wrote down in her booklets, most scholars have identified a public dimension of the diaries. Peterson, for example, notes that Forten uses rhetorical strategies that “give her private writings a peculiarly public voice” (*Doers* 185); Xavier claims that Forten’s is “an audience-directed text” (445); Braxton proposes that Forten’s “autobiographical act relates to the development of a public voice” (85); and Koch more generally draws attention to the fact that in the

Nonetheless, whether Forten's journals are indeed to be categorized as what Bloom calls "private diaries as public documents" (cf. 28-33), and no matter how patronized the processes of publishing her texts may have been, a close reading of both published and private texts gives an impression of how significantly the production of environmental knowledge could be affected by the public/private-sphere model of the age.

The major difference between the private and the published accounts of her experience on the Sea Islands is that the latter are marked by the creation of a specific outsider position and voice that also significantly affects Forten's expression of environmental knowledge. This is not to suggest that Forten's position in her journals is not also marked by an in-between-ness due to her liminal status as highly educated, middle-class black woman.<sup>276</sup> She was, after all, as Laura Towne, the headmistress of the school, describes in her own diary, "dat brown gal" to whom the freedmen only gradually opened up after hearing her play the piano, and seems to have encountered racist sentiments from her white colleagues (qtd. Rose 161).<sup>277</sup> Yet, her published texts, especially "Life on the Sea Islands," display something more than the general racial in-between-ness of Forten's diary-self, as they involve the creation of a public literary voice that celebrates and draws strength from consciously creating an outsider-position. Catering to her readership's taste by celebrating abolitionist sentiments and her commitment to the Union, Forten, in her published accounts, strongly emphasizes her position as a philanthropic Northerner, who, as Peterson has pointed out, embraces "a cultivation of the ethnocentrically familiar" (*Doers* 193). Going public, Forten evidently realizes the importance of broadcasting the Port Royal experiment as a success. She emphasizes, for instance, that the freedmen are "certainly not the stupid, degraded people that many at the North believe them to be," and concludes her *Atlantic*-essay by optimistically claiming that "[d]aily the long-oppressed people of these islands are demonstrating their capacity for improvement in learning and labor. What

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nineteenth century "diaries often had audiences," as "[p]arents and siblings would read and discuss entries, and future generations would turn to journals to learn of their ancestry" (61).

<sup>276</sup> Most scholars have noted Forten's liminal status. On the one hand, the highly educated, middle-class Forten could not identify with the freedmen she meant to help, and experienced a "cultural gap between educated women and ex-slaves [that] was not easily bridged" (D. Sterling 277); cf. also on Forten's relation to the contraband Braxton 91-93; Stevenson 44; and Royster 146. On the other hand, Forten was never an entirely accepted part of the group of (white) schoolmarms either, which left her, in Cobb-Moore's words, with "the paradox of her unique place in a society where her color gave offense and connected her irremediably to the unprivileged and illiterate slaves" (140-141).

<sup>277</sup> At one point, Forten hints at the racism she had to cope with on the Sea Islands, when she describes that living together with the other teachers was marked by an atmosphere of "[k]indness, most invariable," but laments that "congeniality I find not at all in this house" (*Journals* 403). Another hint at the covert racist sentiments Forten probably had to face can also be seen in the fact that she has only "a minimal presence" in Laura Towne's diary (Royster 151; cf. also Charters 132).

they have accomplished in one short year exceeds our utmost expectations” (“Interesting Letter” 295; “Life” 189).

Furthermore, Forten’s creation of an outsider-position via speaking with a “Union-voice” entails the adaptation of a particular gaze. By claiming that her Port Royal experience gives “an excellent opportunity here for observing the negroes,” she adopts a perspective that roots its truth-value in an in-between witnessing position and that is structurally reminiscent of the slave narrative’s rhetoric of visibility (“Interesting Letter” 295). Instead of speaking from an actual “insider”-position as was the case in the slave narrative, however, Forten exerts an intermediate gaze on the freedmen that shares similarities with a tourist gaze – Peterson calls her published writings “vacation arts” (“Literary Reconstruction” 52) – and that becomes formally visible through her changed use of pronouns in the published texts. Here, Forten endorses a communal “we/us” to signal her belonging to the middle-class schoolmarms and to distance herself from the contraband by referring to this group exclusively in the third person (“they/their”). Moreover, and this gives Forten’s public writing an ethnographic quality, she extensively describes the freedmen’s culture, especially their songs, from a detached perspective that simultaneously observes and exoticizes.<sup>278</sup> Forten’s public literary persona therefore emerges as a distancing one with respect to the formerly enslaved population, a Northern, de-personalized ethnographic voice that meant, first and foremost, to be a part of the “educational missionaries,” to belong to that group of schoolmarms referred to as “us – strangers in that strange Southern land” (“Life” 181, my emphasis).

The dominant lens employed in her published texts to familiarize her Northern readership with this “strange Southern land” is the picturesque, an aesthetic mode that had developed by the time Forten was writing into what Hussey, in his classic study on the picturesque, identifies as the prevalent “nineteenth century’s mode of vision” (2).<sup>279</sup> Although the picturesque was also

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<sup>278</sup> Among those who have read Forten as an ethnographer are Wish, who sees her as “a keen observer of the process of emancipation and the African speech and customs of the Sea Island Negroes” (87); Peterson, who regards the published accounts as involving “traditional ethnographic models” (*Doers* 193); and Rodier, who claims that Forten observed the freedmen “with an ethnographer’s eye” (112). In the journals as well as in “Life on the Sea Islands,” Forten records “shouts,” and becomes an early collector of folklore. It is no surprise, therefore, that she was asked to review the pioneering folklore collection *Slave Songs of the United States* (1864); cf. e.g. Harris 138; or Charters 132-133, 172.

<sup>279</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, the idea and terminology of “the picturesque” had become deeply engrained in European and U.S. American cultural and artistic traditions. Originally, the term had entered the English language as a synonym for the French “pittoresque” and the Italian “pittresco,” meaning “as in a picture or painting” – a facet of the term’s meaning that survives in today’s colloquial use of the adjective, especially in the context of tourism. Crucially, however “the picturesque” was also turned into an “aesthetic concept of bewildering contentiousness” by eighteenth-century European theorists like William Gilpin, Uvedale Price, Richard Payne Knight, or Edmund Burke, which also gained wide currency in nineteenth-century American discourses on painting, (travel) literature, and landscape art (M. Andrews viii). See on the general history of the concept e.g. the classic studies by Hussey; or Manwaring; and more recent ones by M.

involved in Forten's articulation of environmental knowledge in her journals, which are ripe with picturesque imagery as they conceptualize her "refuge of Nature," it takes a different shape in the published pieces. Especially in "Life on the Sea Islands," which was introduced by Whittier to the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* as "graceful and picturesque description" ("Life" 163), Forten's use of the mode, due to her adoption of an outsider's perspective, becomes both more formulaic way and explicitly connected to a political stance. This shift in the picturesque crucially affects the articulation of environmental knowledge.

To clarify this difference between the published and private accounts, consider first the following passage, which exemplifies the kind of picturesque typically encountered in the journals:

The sweet songs of the birds awoke me. Nature is looking her loveliest on this 'sweet and dewy morn.' Went to the woods with the girls, in search of wild flowers. Found the sweetest violets and anemones, and a delicate little white, bell-shaped flower whose name I do not know. After a while, tired of looking for flowers, seated myself on a picturesque old stump, while my little cousins continued their search. Thoroughly enjoyed the sweet, pure air, the glorious clouds, the blossoming trees, the dewy grass, and the perfect, stillness that reigned around me. (*Journals* 308, emphasis in original)

Here, the voice is a personal, private one of an individual's contemplation and communion with non-human "Nature." The picturesque is primarily employed to the end of communicating the idea of "Nature" as an intimately private space, i.e. the mode becomes a means of furnishing what seems like an authentic confession of a nature-lover who values the non-human material world highly as a spiritual, aesthetic, and ethical refuge. Similar descriptions, sometimes involving typical picturesque symbols like the elm-tree,<sup>280</sup> are part and parcel of Forten's journal writing, and are central to the text's account of the Sea Island experience as well – especially in those passages that describe Forten's romantic walks with Seth Rogers, a physician and close

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Andrews; and Walter 40-83. On the U.S. history of the picturesque, cf. R. Nash, esp. chapters 3-4; Pohl's chapter on "Nature and Nation"; Cregan esp. 81-82. Forten was thus writing in the context of a widely established discourse in which "[p]icturesque scenes and objects appealed to everybody who aspired to the reputation of being 'artistic'" (Hussey 2).

<sup>280</sup> Forten's frequent references to the "elm" in her journals hint at her engagement with aesthetic theory of the picturesque (e.g. 78, 88, 254). The elm not only "symbolizes the spiritual core of a community" in American literature (Peterson, *Doers* 187), but is also traditionally deemed the 'most' picturesque tree (as compared, e.g. to the poplars), e.g. by William Gilpin's *Forest Scenery* (1791), one of the most influential theoretical tracts on the picturesque. Although I have not been able to verify whether Forten's extensive reading included this work, her repeated mentioning of the "elm tree" in particular supports the thesis that she was intimately familiar with aesthetic theories of the picturesque.

friend she had already known prior to her time at Port Royal.<sup>281</sup>

The depictions of non-human materialities in Forten's published texts differ significantly from those in the journals, although they employ the same aesthetic mode of the picturesque. Consider, for instance, the following two passages, one from "Life on the Sea Islands," the other from one of the letters sent to Garrison:

Then we entered a by-way leading to the plantation, where we found Cherokee rose in all its glory. The hedges were white with it; it canopied the trees, and hung from their branches its long sprays of snowy blossoms and dark, shiny leaves, forming perfect arches, and bowers which seemed fitting places for fairies to dwell in. How it gladdened our eyes and hearts! It was as if all the dark shadows that have so long hung over this Southern land had flitted away, and, in this garment of purest white, it shone forth transfigured, beautiful, forevermore. ("Life" 183)

Perhaps it may interest you to know how we have spent this day – Thanksgiving Day – here, in the sunny South. It has been truly a 'rare' day – a day worthy of October. Cool, delicious air, golden, gladdening sunlight, deep-blue sky, with soft white clouds floating over it. ("Interesting Letter" 291)

In both quotes, Forten portrays her experience of non-human environments through the mode of the picturesque: "Cherokee roses," "snowy blossoms and dark, shiny leaves, forming perfect arches," a "deep-blue sky" and "soft white clouds" are typical elements of what Bryan Wolf calls a picturesque "middle ground" between the Burkean categories of the "terror and limitlessness" of the sublime and the "closed perfection" of the beautiful (Wolf qtd. Pohl 147). Formally, a major difference to the journals becomes visible in Forten's changed use of pronouns. The individualizing "I" of the journals is replaced by a communal "we" explicitly addressing a readership—"you" in the published accounts, which signals not only the general shift to the schoolmarm's position, but also a move away from conveying an individual experience of non-human nature to a more generally representative, formulaic one. As Forten, shifting from private to public, depersonalizes her Port Royal experience to validate herself in the position of an (ethnographic) observer, that position in turn also affects her articulation of environmental knowledge. Her use of the picturesque becomes both more formulaic and explicitly connected to a political stance. The published texts employ the picturesque not to articulate an individual's idea of nature as refuge but to inscribe a Northern perspective and ethos of freedom into a

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<sup>281</sup> Forten had known Rogers prior to her stay on the Sea Islands from a water cure in Worcester, took moonlight rides with the (married) physician while at St. Helena, and, according to her journal, planned to accompany him on a mission to Florida. Several scholars suggest – with some justification, if we can trust the journal entries – that Rogers and Forten may have been adulterously involved (cf. Rodier 113; Peterson, Doers 190-191; Koch 42-43).

Southern landscape, where “all the dark shadows that have so long hung over this Southern land” – i.e. slavery – have “flitted away” (“Life” 183). Forten becomes even more pronounced in turning the picturesque into a means for articulating a Northern political stance in the letter, when she claims that “the sunlight is warm and bright, and over all shines gloriously the blessed light of freedom, freedom forevermore” (“Interesting Letter” 295). The act of morally redeeming the South from the atrocities of human bondage that becomes a decisive factor in the published accounts is therefore also realized through an altered use of the picturesque. Read against each other, Forten’s texts thus demonstrate how the racialized and gendered social norms of mid-nineteenth century America interacted with the articulation of African American environmental knowledge. The act of expressing the relation of the human to its non-human material conditions is transformed as the private turns into the public voice of this black woman writer.

What appears problematic in this strategy, however, is the way in which Forten’s changed use of the picturesque becomes at the same time complicit in racially othering the freedmen. In “Life on the Sea Islands,” for example, Forten reports being

awakened by the cheerful voices of men and women, children and chickens, in the yard below. [...] On every face there was a look of serenity and cheerfulness. My heart gave a great throb of happiness as I looked at them, and thought ‘They are free! so long down-trodden, so long crushed to the earth, but now in their old homes, forever free!’ And I thanked God that I had lived to see this day. (“Life” 165)

What may seem at first glance to be another positively connoted, innocent moment that inscribes freedom into a now slavery-free Southern landscape through a picturesque frame is, in fact, racially charged. Although in this passage, too, the picturesqueness of the scene is connected to an ethos of freedom given to the former slaves, the freedmen at this point become objectified as parts of that scene. Even if this apparently happens in benevolent terms – and not in racist language as, for instance, in Laura Towne’s diaries<sup>282</sup> – the portrayal is more problematic when read in the context of Forten’s general convergence of the picturesque with an exoticization of the freedmen in their “semi-barbaric splendor” that is characteristic of her published texts (179). The above quote, for example, not only enumerates black “men and women” and “children,” but simultaneously equates them with “chickens,” thereby to some extent perpetuating a racist

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<sup>282</sup> Laura M. Towne, the physician and headmistress of Forten’s school on the Sea Islands, also kept a diary that gives an account of her experiences as a Northern teacher in the South. This diary, however, judged by our standards today, uses overtly racist language. Towne often seems pained by her work, describing that “it certainly takes great nerve to walk here among the soldiers and negroes and not be disgusted or shocked or pained so much as to give it all up,” and refers to the freedmen as “darkies” living in “nigger houses” (7, 11, 87). See also Royster 150-151; Peterson, *Doers* 192; Hoffman 129.

conflation of the black body with the non-human that also lay at the core of the peculiar institution. In a sense, the distance thus created between her and the freedmen is, of course, a necessary side effect of Forten's urge to write herself into a valid observer position that had to involve a detached gaze on the observed human and non-human elements of a Southern landscape she encountered and sought to portray. Yet, it is crucial that the chasm thus opened up between Forten and the freedmen is also played out through a shift in her environmental knowledge that occurs when her voice moves from the private to the public. What becomes ultimately visible, then, is how the public/private dichotomy itself was involved in producing racialized positions that also affected the articulation of environmental knowledge in the African American literary tradition. Reading Forten in this sense demonstrates how writing publically inevitably entailed normative pressures of a thoroughly racialized episteme, which could crucially shape the production of environmental knowledge.

To sum up, Forten, even though a minor literary figure in many respects, is thus a particularly revealing case for an environmentally oriented reading of the African American literary tradition for at least two reasons. On the one hand, comparing her published and private texts draws attention to the ways in which raising voice in the private and/or the public sphere could affect articulations of environmental knowledge in the black literary tradition. In this sense, the texts hint at the ways in which the production of environmental knowledge cannot be thought apart from other social norms, models, and categories. Forten's texts are thus revealing the broader cultural interactions of African American environmental knowledge; they show that "white privilege" also included the privilege of a (seemingly) unmarked position for articulating environmental knowledge and that publically expressing environmental knowledge was by no means a neutral, but always also a politically charged act for African American writers.

On the other hand, Forten's writings, especially the journals, can be seen as a signifying revision of antebellum African American environmental knowledge. They not only generally attest to the presence of diverse forms of environmental knowledge in African American writing but also draw attention to the ways in which authors began to "repeat" each other's environmental knowledge "with a difference" – in Forten's case in the sense of building on the pamphleteering tradition, yet developing new literary space for expressing environmental knowledge. With respect to the larger argument of this study, Forten's journals hint at the manner in which the literary space for expressing environmental knowledge began to transform in postwar African American writing through home and education. Even if Forten's writings are certainly not representative in the way in which slave narratives by Douglass or Bibb are, they are a valuable

indicator of processes that begin to shape a tradition of African American environmental knowledge in the decades following the Civil War. They highlight a development towards an environmental knowledge that was increasingly articulated through literary spaces of home and education.

### William Wells Brown: Environmental Knowledge between Nostalgia and Critique

Another text that participates in this development is William Wells Brown's *My Southern Home: Or, the South and its People* (1880). Brown is, in many ways, an antipode to Forten. As a well-known antislavery orator and prolific professional writer, he was precisely what Forten once wished to be but never became. Moreover, Brown had been a slave, had fled from bondage in 1834, and was in this respect a much more representative public figure than Forten in her more secluded, privileged position.<sup>283</sup> In terms of their treatment in scholarship, too, Brown and Forten are on opposite ends. While Forten has attracted comparatively little attention until today, Brown has been recognized since the 1960s<sup>284</sup> as a central figure of the nineteenth century and as a pioneer of African American literature and historiography.<sup>285</sup>

Despite such differences between Forten and Brown, who met each other on several

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<sup>283</sup> Butterfield's assessment in this respect is exemplary, when he finds Brown to be much more representative and dismisses Forten as lacking the specific qualities of a "black self" and the "literary value of the slave narratives" (200). Others who have stressed Brown's representative status for the nineteenth century are e.g. Redding 25; Andrews, "Introduction: From Fugitive Slave" 1; or Sekora, who claims that "he was more than representative of his time; he was its very ticking" ("Brown" 44).

<sup>284</sup> After Brown's books went out of print during the Jim Crow era, his name was little remembered in the first half of the twentieth century (a notable exception can be seen in Redding), which only changed in the 1960s and 1970s, when he was finally recovered and a seminal biography appeared (Farrison (1969)). Since then, scholars like Andrews, Stepto, Yellin, Ernest, Greenspan and Levine have written about Brown, critical editions and compilations of his works have appeared (e.g. Garrett/Robbins (2006); Greenspan (2014)), and Brown has been included in major anthologies, all of which has helped to re-establish the image of Brown as an important literary figure. On the history of Brown's reception, cf. e.g. Ellison/Metcalf (1978); Sekora "Brown"; Carter 58-59; Andrews, "Introduction: From Fugitive Slave"; or Madera 25; for a bibliography of Brown-scholarship cf. Woodard 69-72.

<sup>285</sup> In importance for nineteenth-century African American literature, Brown is often ranked second only to Frederick Douglass. He has been credited with having published the first African American novel (*Clotel* (1853)) and drama (*The Escape* (1858)), one of the pioneering books of African American history (*The Black Man and His Antecedents* (1863)), and the first military history of African Americans (*The Negro in the American Rebellion* (1867)). Although works by Douglass (1852), Webb (1857), and Delany (1859-1861), and the recoveries of works by Wilson (1859), Crafts (written in the late 1850s) and Collins (1865), have somewhat blurred his image as "unique" pioneer of the African American novel, Brown retains until today the status of "the most widely published African American author of the [nineteenth] century" (Greenspan, *Brown: A Reader* 388). Cf. Levine, "Early African American Novel"; Ernest, "African American Literature"; Andrews/Kachun xxxi-xxxviii.

occasions in the 1850s,<sup>286</sup> *My Southern Home* can be read as a negotiation of the same major themes found in Forten's writings. Brown's last book is another instance that demonstrates how these themes – home and education – came to shape the construction of literary space in ways that opened up new ways for postwar black writers to articulate environmental knowledge. Published by subscription from 1880 on,<sup>287</sup> *My Southern Home* emerged, as Andrews notes, at

a transitional point in southern literary history – the early 1880s – when ‘the southern quest for literary authority’ (to use Lewis P. Simpson's phrase) confronted major black and white writers with a common problem: how to authorize a brand of first-person narration largely alien to the southern literary tradition at a time when the South's own authority, indeed, its very identity, lay very much in doubt. (“Problem of Authority” 3)

Responding to this moment of crisis, which saw the failure of Reconstruction and a strident resurgence in racism and racist violence, Brown forged a text that drew from both his personal experience of slavery and from book-knowledge and trips he had taken into the South in the 1870s.<sup>288</sup> Merging all of this into what Greenspan has called a “Janus-faced memoir that looked back to the antebellum plantation society and forward to the emergent postbellum, postplantation South” (Greenspan, *Brown: A Reader* 384), Brown thus faced a challenging situation. With *My Southern Home*, he was not only writing against the vision of white new Southern writers such as George Washington Cable, Joel Chandler Harris, or Mary Boykin Chesnut, but also had to cope with an “audience of black and white readers [...] [that] had changed dramatically since the 1850s, when he had put slavery on trial in *Clotel* and *The Escape*” (Greenspan, *Brown: An African American Life* 497).

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<sup>286</sup> Brown and Forten not only met in Salem while she was living with the Remonds and he was lecturing nearby in the mid-1850s, but also mention each other in their writings. Forten, on the one hand, gives what Ernest finds to be “a fairly apt description not only of Brown but of his many publications” when she describes him in her journals as telling “such ridiculous stories, that although I believe as little as I please – I can't help being amused” (*Liberation Historiography* 333; *Journals* 330). Brown, on the other hand, shows his respect for Forten in *The Rising Son* (cf. 468-469) and in *The Black Man*, claiming: “Were she white, America would recognize her as one of its brightest germs” (199).

<sup>287</sup> Advertised in the *Christian Recorder* of the AME as “the great inside view of the South” and briefly reviewed in the *Boston Sunday Herald* of May 16, 1880, *My Southern Home* was published by A.G. Brown (A.G. referring to Brown's wife, Anna Gray) and went through four editions until 1884; there is no surviving manuscript. Cf. for more details Greenspan, *Brown: A Reader* 388-389; and Farrison 446.

<sup>288</sup> Brown made four journeys to the South during Reconstruction. The trip that most immediately influenced *My Southern Home* was his winter tour of 1879-1880, which took him to Tennessee, Alabama, and Virginia. According to Greenspan, “he made inquiries among local inhabitants and officials, visited local families, read the local press, attended festivities and services, and surveyed living conditions,” most of which he worked in some form into his 1880 book (Greenspan, *Brown: A Reader* 388). Cf. also Greenspan, *Brown: A Reader* 386-388; Farrison 448; and Madera 29.

It is crucial to note the basic generic hybridity and complexity through which Brown's last book responds to these challenges. On the one hand, *My Southern Home* is part of what J. Saunders Redding once praised as Brown's "more reasonable and most ambitious works" (25), namely the historiographic part of his *oeuvre*.<sup>289</sup> In this respect, it stands in the immediate context of Brown's historical studies (*The Black Man* (1862), *The Negro in the American Rebellion* (1867), and *The Rising Son* (1873)), and has repeatedly been read as high point of his historiographic writing and as his "best" work.<sup>290</sup> On the other hand, *My Southern Home* is also a "slave narrative after slavery"; it was, in fact, included as a typical example of the genre in Andrew's recent compilation (2011). Brown's text certainly falls under this category, as it extensively deals with the subject matter of slavery – roughly the first half of the book is set in the antebellum South – and "recycles" many scenes and plots from Brown's *Narrative* (1847) and other antebellum works.<sup>291</sup> Furthermore, there are visible traces of the slave narrative's rhetoric. The "Preface" to *My Southern Home*, for instance, is highly reminiscent of the antebellum genre when Brown clarifies that "incidents were jotted down [...] as they fell from the lips of the narrators, and in their own unadorned dialect," thus echoing the voice and role of an authenticating amanuensis.

Recognizing the palimpsestic nature of Brown's text is important for deciphering the basic structure of Brown's argument and, by extension, for understanding how *My Southern Home* expresses environmental knowledge through education and home. In Brown, environmental knowledge becomes visible not so much in concrete literary topoi and more in the book's broader

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<sup>289</sup> Scholars of African American historiography often mention Brown in one breath with historians such as William C. Nell or George W. Williams. His role in this context has been described by Ernest as that of "a transitional historian, working to bring African American identity and experience into the theatre of authoritative history but still very much a practitioner of the poetics of the discourse of distrust" (*Liberation Historiography* 333). On Brown and historiography, cf. also D. Mitchell 93-126.

<sup>290</sup> Andrews, for instance, sees *My Southern Home* as "Brown's most finished book, a fitting capstone to the literary monument he built for himself" ("Introduction: From Fugitive Slave" 5); Ernest regards the text as "Brown's most significant and challenging" one ("Maps the South" 88); and Candela is convinced that it "is the best single example we have of his various strengths as a writer and collector" (30). Although others (e.g. Sekora, "Brown" 48; Greenspan, *Brown: A Reader* 384; and Woodard 65) are just as positive in their assessments, *My Southern Home* has traditionally been the least-studied of Brown's texts (cf. Andrews, "Toward a Poetics" 87-88; Sinche 83). Only recently, scholars like Ernest (2008), Hooper (2009) and Sinche (2012) have begun to focus more extensively on Brown's last book.

<sup>291</sup> As various critics have noted, Brown's technique in *My Southern Home* and in many other texts is one of "bricolage" and "literary pastiche" that draws from both his own and other sources (Levine, "Introduction" 6). On Brown's technique, which has sometimes been criticized as "near-plagiarism" (Ellis 102), and which has especially been discussed regarding *Clotel*, where Brown explicitly admits that "[s]ome of the narratives I have derived from other sources" (208), see Raimon 63-87; Cohen; DuCille, "World"; Ernest, *Resistance and Reformation* 20-54. On the intertextuality of *My Southern Home*, which employs textual and graphic material Brown had previously used, see e.g. Sinche, esp. 85-87; Farrison 446-452; Greenspan, *Brown: An African American Life* 494-497, *Brown: A Reader* 384-388; Ernest, "Strategic Performances" 71-73, "Introduction"; on the particularly revealing example of "Negro dentistry," which recurs throughout Brown's works, see Garrett/Robbins 461-470.

argumentative structure. That is, rather than on a diegetic level, i.e. through the construction of concrete, recurring literary spaces that function as spiritual refuge or expanded classrooms as in Forten's case, Brown's environmental knowledge can be traced when considering his narrative strategy. This strategy, in *My Southern Home*, is that of a trickster-narrator and has two characteristic facets: On the one hand, Brown's text is characterized by nostalgia; on the other hand, it articulates a social critique that also involves expressing environmental knowledge.<sup>292</sup>

The nostalgic impulse of *My Southern Home* becomes visible from the very start. The book's title and the first paragraphs set the stage in this respect, as a detached narrative voice<sup>293</sup> begins describing a Missouri plantation called "Poplar Farm." The home of the Gaines family, this setting of the first, antebellum part of the book, is portrayed in soothingly picturesque terms:

Ten miles north of the city of St. Louis, in the State of Missouri, forty years ago, on a pleasant plain, sloping off toward a murmuring stream, stood a large frame-house, two stories high; in front was a beautiful lake, and, in the rear, an old orchard filled with apple, peach, pear, and plum trees, with boughs untrimmed, all bearing indifferent fruit. The mansion was surrounded with piazzas, covered with grapevines, clematis, and passion flowers; the Pride of China mixed its oriental-looking foliage with the majestic magnolia, and the air was redolent with the fragrance of buds peeping out of every nook, and nodding upon you with a most unexpected welcome. (Brown, *My Southern Home* 1)

Complemented by an engraving on the left-hand side subtitled "Great House at Poplar Farm" that fittingly adds to the suaveness of the passage, there is not much that would hint at the traumatic experience that such a "welcoming" place would have meant for the slaves who kept it running. Instead, Brown creates a comforting historical distance from the Gaines plantation for

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<sup>292</sup> In suggesting this basic pattern, I am building on the work of others, who have likewise recognized Brown's tricksterism and identified a basic twofold pattern in their readings of *My Southern Home*. Greenspan, for instance, notes that "[t]he book pulls in opposite directions, as it attempts to make sense of the past from the point of view of the present" (*Brown: A Reader* 388-389); Candela sees a "split between his [Brown's] almost clinical point of view and the heartrending melodramatic content" (26); Sekora emphasizes a tension between "[h]umor, irony, understatement, and other devices" that, in his view, became the means of ensuring that a critique was in "the reformer's grasp" ("Brown" 51-52); and Andrews notes that it is "difficult to read into *My Southern Home* a consistent and verifiable socio-political message" or "[t]he narrator's identity and purpose" ("Introduction: From Fugitive Slave" 11). Although indebted to such interpretations, the reading of this chapter goes beyond previous studies in connecting the often identified general strategy with an environmental dimension of Brown's text.

<sup>293</sup> On the shiftiness and detachment of Brown's trickster-narrator in *My Southern Home*, cf. e.g. Sinche, who sees a "racially indeterminate narrator" who "himself appears and disappears without accounting for his own movements or actions" (83); Andrews, who reads the narrative voice of *Home* as that of "a genial, elderly white Missourian," and Brown's narrative tricksterism in general as the "traditional rhetorical strategy of antebellum black autobiography" ("Introduction: From Fugitive Slave" 10; *To Tell* 165); or Hooper, who claims (against Andrews) that "Brown's literary tricksterism" is "a declaration of moral interdependence rather than moral independence" (30).

his readership and for himself (“forty years ago”) that enables him to emphasize “the lavish beauty and harmonious disorder of nature” that marked this place “in the sunny South” (1).<sup>294</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that most of Brown’s contemporaries perceived his book as a nostalgic memoir by a former slave turned famous author. A review in the *New York Times*, for instance, described *My Southern Home* as the work of a “colored physician, who began life on a farm near St. Louis as a slave, [and] gossips very acceptably about the old days of coon hunts, negro jollifications, whippings, and trackings with blood-hounds, which form a staple of slave reminiscences” (qtd. Greenspan, *Brown: An African American Life* 495). Other contemporary reviewers, too, read the book rather superficially as carrying an obvious idealizing message about the past, and as “the most graphic and racy work yet written on the South and its people” or as “a racy book, brim full of instruction, wit, and humor, which will be read with delight” (qtd. Andrews, “Introduction: From Fugitive Slave” 5). That the nostalgia of *My Southern Home* was so readily recognized and emphasized is understandable considering both the cultural climate of the 1880s and the fact that Brown’s text does indeed provide ample ammunition for such interpretations. On the one hand, it was in vogue to reminisce about the olden times in general and the South in particular at a time that saw a “shift in the national mood toward a politics of reconciliation” and a corresponding “wave of popular nostalgia for romanticized images of life on the plantation before the Civil War” (Greenspan 494; Andrews 7).<sup>295</sup> On the other hand, Brown’s text lends itself well to such readings due to its humorous tone and its use of a cast of characters that must have been familiar to a broad audience. As Andrews summarizes, the figures populating *My Southern Home* include “a number of southern types – the indulgent master, the pompous preacher, the witty slave, the beautiful quadroon, the hypocritical slave trader, and

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<sup>294</sup> The creation of this distance is even more significant when taking into account that the Gaines plantation may have been modelled after Brown’s own memory of slavery, a question at times disputed by scholars. While Farrison, for instance, suggests that the Gaines plantation of *My Southern Home* was modelled after the place owned by Dr. John Young nearby St. Louis, where Brown himself had once been held in bondage (cf. 446), Andrews notes striking differences that might speak against this thesis (“Problem of Authority” 20-21). Greenspan also disagrees with Farrison and proposes instead that the depiction of the Gaines plantation stems “not from the author’s direct recollections of the Youngs’ property outside St. Louis but from his description nearly thirty years earlier of Clotel’s conjugal cottage near Richmond, Virginia – a description that he had lifted and reformatted from Lydia Maria Child’s 1842 short story, ‘The Quadroons’” (Greenspan, *Brown: African American Life* 496).

<sup>295</sup> *My Southern Home* was therefore by no means alone in reminiscing about a South that was emerging as the distinct place Leigh Ann Duck has called “the nation’s region” (2006), and which was constructed as such through both Euro-American and African American writing. The immediate context for Brown’s book are thus numerous other African American “post-Reconstruction works [that] retain a focus on the South, with its landscape, idioms, religions, rituals, and historical connections to slavery,” and that “portray the South as a complex, multifaceted place” (McCaskill, “Novel” 484; cf. also Greenspan, *Brown: A Reader* 386; and Fox-Genovese 160-163). Two works that fall under this category are Harper’s *Sketches of Southern Life* (1891) and Cooper’s *A Voice from the South* (1892).

others – along with some of the more picturesque elements of traditional southern local color, such as slave songs, corn-shucking verbal games, and hoodoo practices” (8). Combine this with Brown’s at times overly reconciliatory gestures towards an old Southern aristocracy, and it is not difficult to see why contemporaries assessed *My Southern Home* the way they did. A former slave claiming in the 1880s that “there was considerable truth in the oft-repeated saying that the slave ‘was happy’” could hardly expect to be taken as anything other than compromisingly nostalgic (Brown, *Home* 91).

Readings that stop here nevertheless gravely misread Brown. The picturesque descriptions – often accompanied by equally nostalgic visual illustrations – that seem to be striving for a mere simplifying harmony are only one side of Brown’s twofold strategy. The other side, a critique that undermines and ironizes the nostalgic impulse and articulates African American environmental knowledge through home and education can best be illustrated by considering the two main sections of Brown’s book separately. While the first part of *My Southern Home* (chapters I.-XV.), set in the antebellum South, offers a subversive critique, the second part (XVI.-XXIV.) contains Brown’s more explicit arguments as a political activist.

In the second part, one finds Brown’s most concrete arguments concerning education and home. Regarding the idea of “home,” Brown becomes particularly outspoken in Chapter XX., when he argues that “[t]he moral and social degradation of the colored population of the Southern States, is attributable to two main causes, their mode of living, and their religion” (*My Southern Home* 188). With respect to “their mode of living” Brown identifies deficiencies in creating proper homes as one of the major flaws standing in the way of post-Reconstruction race progress. He diagnoses an “entire absence of a knowledge of the laws of physiology, amongst the colored inhabitants of the South [that] is proverbial. Their small unventilated houses, in poor streets and dark alleys, in cities and towns, and the poorly-built log huts in the country, are often not fit for horses” (189). Furthermore, Brown criticizes the hygienic situation and problems of malnutrition, when he notes that “[n]o bathing conveniences whatever, and often not a wash dish about the house, is the rule,” and claims that “these people have no idea of cooking outside of hog, hominy, corn bread, and coffee” (189). Brown’s conclusion is therefore that “[l]ecturers of their own race, male and female, upon the laws of health, is the first move needed” (190), since, for him, an adequate home is not only the space where healthy black bodies must be produced, but also the

source of industriousness and an upright morality.<sup>296</sup>

Moreover, Brown's suggestion of "lecturers of their own race" and his critique of "religion" hint at the ways in which education becomes an equally central concern in the second part of *My Southern Home*. Brown criticizes the preposterousness of many black clergymen, among whom he sees "the prevailing idea that outward demonstrations, such as shouting, the loud 'amen,' and the most boisterous noise in prayer" are more important than actual piety, and claims that "[t]he only remedy for this great evil lies in an educated ministry" (193, 197). Additionally, he puts forward more general ideas about education, realizing that "[t]he education of the negro in the South is the most important matter that we have to deal with at present, and one that will claim precedence of all other questions for many years to come" (213). In chapter XXIV., for instance, Brown therefore proposes to install African American teachers across various educational institutions, since "all the white teachers in our colored public schools [and other institutions] feel themselves above their work" (215-16). Moreover, his aim is to establish "institutions [...] in every large city" to save and protect "the colored young women of the cities and towns at the mercy of bad colored men, or worse white men" (218). Eventually, Brown thus arrives at a radical advice to the black population of the South, in case such measures of education and home-building fail. He suggests that "[t]he South is the black man's home; yet if he cannot be protected in his rights he should leave," and explicitly urges "Black men [to] emigrate" at the close of *My Southern Home* (245, 248).

At first glance, this concluding imperative seems to be a glaring contradiction of the book's very title. Turning to the first part of *My Southern Home* to reconsider Brown's take on home and education, however, helps not only to unravel this conflict, but also shows the ways in which Brown's overall argument involves environmental knowledge. In this respect, it is crucial to note first how the antebellum part of Brown's work introduces the notion of slavery as a "school" through its seemingly nostalgic renditions of the old South. For Brown, this notion, first introduced into African American writing by Elizabeth Keckley and later prominently put forward by Booker T. Washington,<sup>297</sup> primarily meant that slaves gained an ability to engage

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<sup>296</sup> In this respect, Brown presents a biopolitical vision of managing the African American population that converges with his temperance activism. A proper conceptualization of home, for Brown, is largely a means of protecting blacks from "the immoderate use of wine, or its habitual indulgence, [which] debilitates the brain and nervous system, paralyzes the intellectual powers, impairs the functions of the stomach, produces a perverted appetite for a renewal of the deleterious beverage, or a morbid imagination, which destroys man's usefulness" (*Home* 241), and thus of overcoming both the physical and mental deficiencies that, in his view, marked the Southern black population.

<sup>297</sup> In *Behind the Scenes* (1868), Keckley blesses the peculiar institution despite "all the wrongs that slavery heaped upon me," since it taught her "to rely upon myself, and to prepare myself to render assistance to

effectively in tricksterism and power plays with whites. According to *My Southern Home*, “[s]lavery has had the effect of brightening the mental powers of the negro to a certain extent” and has produced in slaves a “[w]it with which to please his master, or to soften his anger when displeased” (28, 52). The slave became, in Brown’s view, a witty trickster who often used his skills to “get rid of punishment” and to mask his true intentions in power plays with the white master – a hypothesis that *My Southern Brown* substantiates through a variety of characters such as Cato, Pompey, Nancy, or the conjurer Dinkie (91).<sup>298</sup>

While the centrality of such power plays has often been noted,<sup>299</sup> it is crucial to see that Brown’s notion of a “school of slavery” not only involves trickster skills but also an articulation of the formerly enslaved population’s relation to Southern non-human material environments. Brown’s tricksters express not only black verbal skills but also a place-based, agrarian form of environmental knowledge. Consider, for instance, the anecdote of a “Coon Hunt” (*Home* 8-11): The story of a city man’s mishap relates how one of the Gaines’ visitors, a Mr. Sarpee from St. Louis, who “had never seen anything of country life” eagerly goes on a “coon hunt” with “Ike, Cato, and Sam; three of the most expert coon-hunters on the farm” (9). As the dogs pick up a scent, Sarpee, ignoring the slaves’ warning (“polecat, polecat; get out de way” (9)), moves forward in an attempt to shoot his prey, which attacks him “in a manner that caused the young man to wish that he, too, had retreated with the boys” (9). Covered in “an odor he had never before inhaled” that forces him to sleep in the barn, the incident triggers “a hearty laugh” (10) among the slaves on the Gaines plantation; in fact, Brown’s narrator claims that “[n]o description of mine [...] can give anything like a correct idea of the great merriment of the entire slave population on ‘Poplar Farm,’ caused by the ‘coon hunt’” (11).

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others” (19). Washington, in *Up from Slavery* (1901), uses the same idea, suggesting that “notwithstanding the cruelty and moral wrong of slavery, the ten million Negroes inhabiting this country, who themselves or whose ancestors went through the school of American slavery, are in a stronger and more hopeful condition, materially, intellectually, morally, and religiously, than is true of an equal number of black people in any other portion of the globe” (13).

<sup>298</sup> In this context, it is also important to note that Brown had presented *himself* as such a witty trickster in his antebellum *Narrative* (1847); he himself had gone through the “school of slavery.” As his autobiographical “I” disappears in *My Southern Home*, and is replaced by the characters mentioned above, a crucial shift occurs: Where, in his slave narrative, Brown’s author-narrator had expressed regret for some of his morally questionable actions, and had stressed “that slavery makes its victims lying and mean” (57), the tricksterism of the characters in the 1880 book – although involving precisely the same moral dilemmas – is constantly celebrated, with a twinkle in Brown’s eye. In this sense, one may argue that he revises not only his own texts, but also his own persona as a narrator.

<sup>299</sup> Andrews, for example, emphasizes a “subversion and unmaking of mastery,” as “the slaves profanely redefine the very language of authority” (Andrews, “Authority” 6, 12; cf. also “Introduction: From Fugitive Slave” 8-9); and Sinche notes that “Brown’s depictions of performance and entertainment in *Southern* highlight the power and ingenuity of black characters” (87).

The episode thus, as humorous and nostalgic as it may seem, also writes the slaves into the position of skilled countrymen. Ike, Cato, and Sam are revealed as “experts” who not only work the Southern soils, but who at the same time appropriate and enter into their own relation to the land, as the use of their vernacular suggests. If one reads the name of the “city man” Mr. Sarpee not as “sharp” but in the sense of “sapientia” (knowledge), the scene becomes recognizable as Brown’s juxtaposition of two forms of knowledge. A supposedly ‘civilized’ white man, who “did talk French to hissef when de ole coon peppered him,” is contrasted and made the ridicule of the knowledgeable black farmer and his vernacular. Sarpee’s ‘civilized’ knowledge is defeated by the agrarian environmental knowledge of the slaves of the land; he escapes neither the attack nor the subsequent laughter that expresses a reversal of power relations and that “fitted the young man for a return home to the city” (11). Thus, even though formally disempowered, Brown’s slaves are empowered through their environmental knowledge.

Another instance that demonstrates the ways in which such knowledge became crucially involved in the slaves’ tricksterism may be found in Chapter V. This chapter describes the events that unfold after the Gaines return home from a trip to the North, “filled with new ideas which they were anxious to put into immediate execution” (46). One of their new acquisitions is a “plow, which was to take the place of the heavy, unwieldy one then in use,” but which turns out to be an utterly useless tool and is “broken beyond the possibility of repair” by the ones who actually have the skills and knowledge to run the place, the enslaved farmers (46, 48). Another “new idea” concerns the making of “some new cheese” the Gaines had tasted at a Northern farmhouse (49). After Aunt Nancy, “the black *mamma* of the place” (49, emphasis in original), purports to be able to fabricate such a product, a cheese-press is ordered and a process worth remembering begins under Nancy’s supervision. First she demands a sheep to be killed as a “runnet,” then she ‘discovers’ that, in fact, a calf was needed instead, which is slaughtered the next day. As this process triggers a good laugh among the slaves, Nancy reveals her true scheme: “You niggers tink you knows a heap, but you don’t know as much as you tink. When de sheep is killed, I knows dat you niggers would git the meat to eat. I knows dat” (50). Her knowledge of making produce off the land, of living within and off her material surroundings, becomes part of a power play with the Gaines. She effectively combines her skills to work with what the Southern land has to offer with a trickster knowledge that helps her secure an at least slightly better life for her fellow-slaves. Thus, both incidents hint at the ways in which Brown’s slaves, by becoming the true people of the land they worked, often came into much more complex power relations than the term “oppression” would suggest. What Brown demonstrates is not only how a certain

amount of social power could be drawn from acquiring an environmental knowledge that coincided with a trickster's wit, but ultimately also what bell hooks suggests in "Earthbound," namely that "[w]e were indeed a people of the earth" (68).

This is not to suggest that Brown's depictions of power plays that involved environmental knowledge omit the complicity of non-human materialities in the trauma caused by the peculiar institution. He draws attention, for instance, to the hardships experienced during flights through a threatening wilderness, and gives one particular example at the beginning of *My Southern Home* that emblematically expresses how social relations under slavery were acted out by harnessing non-human nature as an oppressive tool (cf. 4-6). The episode describes how one of the Gaines' visitors mistakes a young, fair-skinned slave named Billy – possibly modelled after Brown himself<sup>300</sup> – as Dr. Gaines' son. After the stranger has departed, Billy is forced to undergo a procedure in which he "was seen pulling up grass in the garden, with bare head, neck and shoulders, while the rays of the burning sun appeared to melt the child" (5). This "roasting" of Billy, as Brown calls it, and the episode as a whole symbolize the ways in which non-human materialities were made complicit in the suffering of the slave population and moreover emphasize the moral faults of those masters who fathered enslaved children. Despite the fact that slaves were holding a valuable environmental knowledge that could be empowering in some ways, Brown therefore also stresses the negative, traumatic side that conflating the black body with the non-human entailed.

Nonetheless, Brown's overarching goal in describing an environmental knowledge gained under slavery is to reconnect a postwar black population of the South with their "Southern Home." The nostalgic but at the same time very nuanced picture Brown draws of the antebellum South and its social relations, superstitions, and customs, entails a celebration of the black farmer and his agrarian environmental knowledge, and seeks to recreate this section as the black man's home. For Brown, African American Southerners are powerful "hewers of wood, and drawers of water" (91); they are the people of the land, "the manual laborer[s] of that section" (246). It is their intimate agrarian environmental knowledge, first gained under slavery, that has transformed this section into their home, and which, he suggests, they can and must live off after emancipation

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<sup>300</sup> Greenspan traces the history of this scene through Brown's *oeuvre*, suggesting that it "presumably derives from Brown's personal experience. A decade later he recounted a variation of this farce of racial misrepresentation in *The Negro in the American Rebellion*, in which it was he who was mistaken for his master's son [...]. Not yet done, he returned to it a third time in his final book, *My Southern Home*, in a probably fictional scene" (Brown: *A Reader* 219; cf. also Candela 20). Thus, the episode is another example that demonstrates the collage-like character of Brown's work as a whole and the difficulties of determining the boundaries between Brown's own experience and his borrowings.

as well. Accordingly, the second part of Brown's book has its most positive moments in the lengthy depictions of those who "sell their cotton or other produce," and who "do their trading" and earn their living with the help of working the southern soils (167, cf. esp. chapter XVIII.). In this respect, Brown's environmental knowledge, like Forten's, is clearly marked by a pastoral, not an antipastoral impulse.

Against this background, the meaning of Brown's statement on leaving or staying in the South that seems to be standing against the title of his book can be re-evaluated. If it is in any way possible for Southern African Americans to live their country life in this section, Brown suggests, they should stay. If not, he sees the only way to exert pressure against the backlash against emancipation during post-Reconstruction in "starving" the South, since

[t]wo hundred years have demonstrated the fact that the negro is the manual laborer of that section, and without him agriculture will be at a stand-still.

The negro will for pay perform any service under heaven, no matter how repulsive or full of hardship, He will sing his old plantation melodies and walk about the cotton fields in July and August, when the toughest white man seeks an awning. Heat is his element. He fears no malaria in the rice swamps, where a white man's life is not worth sixpence.

Then, I say, leave the South and starve the whites into a realization of justice and common sense. Remember that tyrants never relinquish their grasp upon their victims until they are forced to. (*Home* 246-247)

Read against Brown's celebration of an agrarian African American environmental knowledge in the first part of *My Southern Home*, Brown's "black men, emigrate" (248) does therefore not necessarily contradict his idea of a "Southern Home" for himself and his brethren. The most important part of his advice is, after all, that "[w]hether the blacks emigrate or not [...] [they should] keep away from the cities and towns. Go into the country. Go to work on farms" (247). Thus, he proposes that the environmental knowledge blacks have gained through the "school of slavery" is not only their most valuable starting capital through which they may exert pressure on a re-ascending Southern white supremacist aristocracy, but also that which may provide African Americans with an identity even if they leave the South. Ultimately, Brown seeks to create a *sense* of home, a new *relation* to a partly traumatic space, by recovering a common history of environmental knowledge that can provide rootedness, mobility, and racial solidarity. Only by recovering a common history will there be a unified African American identity, will there be the cooperation that may "*unite* the race in their moral, social, intellectual, and physical improvements" (252, emphasis in original), and it is, in Brown's view, reclaiming a common Southern home and environmental knowledge that is crucial to writing such a history.

If Forten's reconfiguration of literary space for expressing environmental knowledge worked in terms of creating specific literary topoi on the level of *histoire*, Brown's environmental knowledge is therefore primarily articulated through the interplay between the two parts of his book, i.e. on the level of *discours*. Forten expresses environmental knowledge through diegetic literary space by merging the spaces of the household and the classroom with non-human material environments that are described in terms of the picturesque and the pastoral. Brown, by contrast, rewrites an agrarian environmental knowledge as part of a historiography that is supposed to give Southern African Americans a sense of home. Both texts, however, are thereby representative of a transformation that becomes crucial to postwar African American literature more generally: They express their environmental knowledge through spaces of home and education. In this sense, a knowledge of the human in its relation to the non-human non-discursive material is not anymore confined to a "loophole," as was the case in the patronized genre of the antebellum slave narrative with respect to the Underground Railroad. Rather, African American environmental knowledge gains the potential to move to the center of attention through literary space, as its articulation converges with that of the two most prominent themes of postwar African America.

## 4.2

### **Rewriting the Pastoral: Booker T. Washington's Autobiographies, the African American Georgic, and Evolutionary Thought**

“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 can 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 big world.”

(Washington, *Up from Slavery* 121)

“Our pathway must be up through the soil, up through the swamps, up through forests, up through the streams and rocks; up through commerce, education, and religion!”

(Washington, *Working with the Hands* 29)

On the eve of the U.S. Civil War, British naturalist and geologist Charles Darwin published a book that was destined to shape European and American thought for the rest of the century and beyond. Although the idea of evolution as such was not new by the time *On the Origin of Species* (1859) appeared,<sup>301</sup> Darwin's treatise was instrumental in establishing the scientific respectability of evolutionary biology and played a leading role in popularizing evolutionism in the next decades. Through numerous editions of *Origin* and the works of many others, for instance Darwin's contemporary Herbert Spencer, a new knowledge spread into various discursive formations on both sides of the Atlantic. This knowledge involved not only the notions of a common descent of life and a universal law of “natural selection,” which Spencer described in

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<sup>301</sup> Evolution, as the general idea of changes in species over time, has a history that extends back to antiquity. The nineteenth century, in particular, saw influential forms of evolutionism before Darwin's rise to prominence, e.g. in Lamarck's theory of inheritance, according to which once acquired useful traits were transmitted across generations within species in a process that ensured that ever more perfect forms of life would inevitably occur. Spencer, often using Lamarckian ideas, further popularized evolution in the 1850s, in essays like “The Development Hypothesis” (1852) or “Progress: Its Laws and Causes” (1857). The dominance of evolutionism prior to the appearance of *Origin* can also be seen in the fact that Darwin was in a rush to publish his book, as another naturalist, Alfred Russell Wallace, was about to announce similar ideas on evolutionary biology (cf. e.g. Jackson/Weidman 67).

his catchphrase “the survival of the fittest,”<sup>302</sup> but also offered an alternative narrative of human life. In the concluding chapter of *Origin*, Darwin gives his take on this new narrative as follows:

As all living forms of life are the lineal descendants of those which lived long before the Cambrian epoch, we may feel certain that the ordinary succession by generation has never once been broken, and that no cataclysm has desolated the whole world. Hence we may look with some confidence to a secure future of great length. And as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.” (*Origin* 425)

The optimism that reverberates through this text passage, the idea of a fundamental law guiding all creation, the materialism of evolutionary processes, and the notion of a continual and ongoing progress, expressed in *Origin* primarily with respect to non-human organisms, had profound implications for an understanding of the human in relation to its non-human material conditions. Inevitably, new, fundamental questions arose: Was the idea of evolution after Darwin compatible with that of a divine creator? Were humans merely organisms like any other – was man a “freak of nature” that had evolved like other animals and that was therefore not endowed with an intrinsic character or value that placed him above the rest of creation? Had humankind simply been the “fittest” over the course of the ages to adapt, evolve, and survive, and if so, in what ways had this happened? As these questions imply, the general turn to evolutionism that Darwin fueled through the field of biology was more than just a scientific revolution. It also meant the emergence of an influential set of ideas of modern “evolutionary thought” that entailed a shift to new forms of environmental knowledge.<sup>303</sup>

In the United States, evolutionary thought took root somewhat belatedly, yet forcefully. It rose to dominance during radical Reconstruction, in the form of a “Darwin-Spencer blend” (Jackson/Weidman 84), and was endorsed by the 1880s, after the death of the last major opponent of evolutionism in the U.S., Louis Agassiz, by most major American scientists across the life and human sciences. The theologian Lyman Abbott was therefore probably right when he claimed, in 1892 that “[a]ll scientific men to-day are evolutionists” (1). Adopted in various scientific fields

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<sup>302</sup> Spencer, inspired by Darwin’s treatise, first used the phrase in *Principles of Biology* (1864). In the fifth edition of *Origin*, published in 1869, Darwin in turn acknowledged the affinity between their ideas, and claimed that his own term “natural selection,” meaning “this principle, by which each slight variation, if useful, is preserved,” was not just synonymous with Spencer’s “survival of the fittest” but that the latter was in fact “more accurate” (Darwin, *Origin*, fifth edition, qtd. M. Harris 128).

<sup>303</sup> In the following, I use the term “evolutionary thought” to refer broadly to discursive formations that involve evolutionary ideas after Darwin, Spencer and others in the last third of the nineteenth century and beyond. The unifying and reductive terms “Darwinism” or “Spencerism” will not be used (except when referring to the work of one of those thinkers in particular) in order to stress that “evolutionary thought” cannot be easily traced back to any one thinker, but must instead be understood as a broader, heterogeneous form of knowledge that also expressed a broader shift in environmental knowledge.

and in popular and political discourses, evolutionary thought increasingly extended beyond Darwin's original focus on non-human biology in *Origin*, and attained the role of a general explanatory framework for a variety of social questions. In this respect, American evolutionary thought, especially towards the progressive era, to some extent paralleled developments in Europe, where, as Foucault remarks,

evolutionism, understood in the broad sense – or in other words, not so much Darwin's theory itself as a set, a bundle, of notions (such as: the hierarchy of species that grow from a common evolutionary tree, the struggle for existence among species, the selection that eliminates the less fit) – naturally became within a few years during the nineteenth century not simply a way of transcribing a political discourse into biological terms, and not simply a way of dressing up a political discourse in scientific clothing, but a real way of thinking about the relations between colonization, the necessity for wars, criminality, the phenomenon of madness and mental illness, the history of societies with their different classes, and so on. (*Society* 256-7)

The “and so on,” in a U.S. context, translated primarily into questions of controlling immigration and what was called the “race question” or the “negro problem.” With respect to the latter, American evolutionary thought became a new point of convergence where environmental knowledge and ideas about race intersected. Not only did the emerging environmental knowledge of evolutionary thought merge, with seeming ease, with the polygenism of the “American School”; it also travelled into discursive formations that sought to justify the “Black codes” and the disenfranchisement of African Americans in the South during the 1870s, became part of the language of Jim Crowism and, in some instances, fueled the rhetoric of the (first) Ku Klux Klan. Evolutionary thought, in short, came to function as the language of the “negro problem.”

This is not to suggest that evolutionary thought was a homogeneous set of ideas, a notion that has sometimes (falsely) been implied by the term “social Darwinism.”<sup>304</sup> Although the

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<sup>304</sup> Although fashionable for some time and still frequently used, scholarship of the past decades has also rigorously attacked the term “social Darwinism” that generally refers to the application of evolutionary principles to questions of human society. While some have suggested its usefulness and the widespread presence of social Darwinist ideas in the last third of the nineteenth century (cf. e.g. Stark; C. Shaw; R. Williams; G. Jones), a revisionist historiography has argued that the term is a “misnomer” and the concept flawed (Bohannon/Glazer xiv). In their view, it overemphasizes Darwin's impact, since many supposedly social Darwinist ideas were in fact (neo-)Lamarckian or Spencerian, erroneously exaggerates the impact of such ideas, and has been a retrospective construction rather than a reality in the period considered (cf. e.g. Kelly; Leeds; Bannister, *Social Darwinism*, “Survival”; Bellomy; for a work that critically ‘revises the revisionists,’ see M. Hawkins). Such critique offers additional reasons for using the term “evolutionary thought”: Rather than suggesting a homogenous form of evolutionism in the last third of the nineteenth century – which would have to be the investigated and verified by historical and sociological analyses – I will treat “evolutionary thought” for the purposes of this study as a broad epistemological background that was negotiated by some of the literary texts turned to.

terminology of evolutionary thought was widely used, and although an existential struggle was increasingly read in “every sphere of life” by many late-nineteenth-century Americans (M. Harris 107), there was often no deeper coherence beyond an (over-)use of catchphrases such as “natural selection” or “survival of the fittest.” Underneath this seemingly unifying surface, the idea of evolution was employed in various ways and to diverse ends across numerous discursive formations, so that it would be erroneous to assume an overall pragmatic or ideological coherence in the ways in which evolutionism was deployed. Nonetheless, I want to suggest for this chapter that there was some regularity in evolutionary thought pertaining to the “race question.” If in the antebellum period, as Rogers claims in her study on Agassiz, “the natural history of human beings became the science of slavery” (59), then, for the late nineteenth-century, a new natural, an *evolutionary* history of human beings turned into the science of Jim Crow. The “bundle of notions” (Foucault, *Society* 256) of evolutionary thought emerged as a new point of intersection between racial and environmental knowledge. It provided a general spirit and vocabulary, and thus reads as a crucial epistemic background interacting with an environmental knowledge developing in African American literature, for example in the authors treated in this and the next chapter, Booker T. Washington and Charles W. Chesnutt.

Booker T. Washington, a writer clearly influenced by evolutionary ideas remains until today one of the most controversial figures in African American history. Although celebrated in his own time as an educator and as the new national “Negro leader” succeeding Frederick Douglass, Washington did not attract much scholarly attention until he was re-introduced into the critical canon in the 1960s and 1970s through the work of scholars such as August Meier and, especially, Louis Harlan.<sup>305</sup> Since then, Washington has been received as a more complex figure. He has been the subject of various studies,<sup>306</sup> and has gained a prominent status in scholarship and in the American public mind, especially over the past decade, as some have drawn comparisons

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<sup>305</sup> There are a few biographies of Washington in the early- to mid-twentieth century (e.g. Scott/Stowe (1916); Mathews (1949); S. Spencer (1955); cf. also for early criticism H. Hawkins (1962)), yet one finds no systematic scholarly treatments up to the studies by Meier and Harlan in the mid-1960s and 1970s. At a moment when Washington’s reputation came under attack from voices in the Civil Rights movement, both scholars drew a much more nuanced picture of him that has been authoritative until today. Meier argued that Washington “surreptitiously engaged in undermining the American race system by a direct attack upon disfranchisement and segregation” (114), while Harlan exposed Washington’s “secret life” of fighting for racial justice on the basis of the Booker T. Washington Papers, which he published in fourteen volumes between 1972 and 1989 (cf. “Secret Life”; “Biographical Perspective”; *Making; Wizard*).

<sup>306</sup> Historians have often focused on Washington’s biography and his role in the history of education (e.g. Anderson 33-109; Sherer 45-58; A. Jones; Spivey, esp. 45-70). Literary critics have read Washington’s autobiographies, primarily *Up From Slavery* (1901), in the context of the slave narrative as well as in relation to Horatio Alger’s novels. For a general overview of scholarly work on Washington, cf. the bibliographies in Andrews’s critical edition of *Up from Slavery* 261-262; and in Dudley, “Washington” 371-372.

between Washington and 44th President of the United States Barack Obama (cf. Steele). Throughout the decades, Washington and his work have been both praised and excoriated. From the criticisms that had been waged against his education policies during his lifetime – most famously in the controversy with W.E.B. Du Bois<sup>307</sup> – up until today, he has, in the words of his most recent biographer, kept “returning to haunt some and inspire others” (Smock 14). Washington has been “hero as well as villain” (4), as some have lauded him as extraordinarily skilled educator and “builder of a civilization” (Scott/Stowe), while others have chastised him, politically, as an “accommodator” instrumental in establishing Jim Crow, and, literarily, as a “buffoonish teller of ‘darky stories’ to condescending whites” (Moses, *Creative Conflict* xiv).

### Signifying Revisions I: The Visual and the Biopolitical

Apart from the general debate over his political and historical legacy, Washington, as a writer, plays a significant role with respect to the tradition of environmental knowledge in African American literature. As two of his autobiographies, his most famous work, *Up from Slavery* (1901), and its sequel *Working with the Hands* (1904) demonstrate,<sup>308</sup> Washington’s writing signifies on environmental knowledge of both his African American literary predecessors and turn-of-the-century evolutionary thought. Reconsidering Washington in this way is, in part, a response to Andrews’s observation, two decades ago, that many of his themes “such as his idea of the natural, his concept of the agrarian life, his notion of what a fact is, his sense of what is inherently African or Negro, his obsession with order, cleanliness, and self-control [...] all need unpacking” (“Preface” xi). To some extent, this work of “unpacking,” with respect to the “idea of the natural” and the “concept of the agrarian life,” has been done by now in readings of Washington as a pastoralist and in ecocritical contributions. Hicks (2006) and Grabovac (2015),

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<sup>307</sup> Years before the controversy over education between Washington and Du Bois erupted, Washington’s ideas had already been subject to critique by black leaders like Alexander Crummell, Harry Smith, or Calvin Chase (cf. Anderson 65). The Washington-Du Bois-debate, which is not central to my reading of Washington in this chapter, will be taken up with respect to Du Bois (chapter 4.4).

<sup>308</sup> Washington’s autobiographical writings include, besides *Up from Slavery* and *Working with the Hands*, *The Story of My Life and Work* (1900) and *My Larger Education* (1911), which contains extensive information on his trips to Europe. Furthermore, Washington’s *oeuvre* consists of numerous articles and several books (e.g. *The Future of the American Negro* (1900); *Character Building* (1902)) dealing primarily with questions of self-development, education, and the “negro problem.” Cf. generally the *Booker T. Washington Papers*, published by Harlan (1972-1989); archival material is also located at the Library of Congress. I have chosen the two texts mentioned above for this chapter, as they are most pronounced in terms of articulating Washington’s ideas on the pastoral and agrarianism.

for instance, have proposed to include him in the ecocritical canon, the former by identifying Washington as a representative of “an early twentieth-century ecocriticism of color” (Hicks 203); the latter by reading him more broadly in the context of the environmental humanities, suggesting that “Washington’s denigration of the liberal arts as a kind of fetishism [...] still resonates in the different context of today’s neoliberal university” (Grabovac 4).<sup>309</sup>

Reassessing Washington as part of a history of African American environmental knowledge reveals additional facets of his environmentalism, as it shows how his texts participate in transforming such knowledge in various ways. In one sense, Washington’s writing can be read as continuing a broad revision of literary space. Like Forten and Brown, he centrally deals with the themes of education and home in ways that potentially opened up new literary space for expressing environmental knowledge. On the one hand, Washington, the personification of African American “industrial education,” employs ideas and spaces of education in virtually all of his writings, sometimes linking them with depictions of non-human material, especially agrarian, environments. On the other hand, he frequently makes the building of appropriate homes that interact with the non-human materialities of the South his explicit theme. In *Working with the Hands*, for example, Washington claims to teach “Lessons in Home-Making,” and aims to create “homes that are worthy [of] the name” by incorporating “courses in Domestic Science into the regular curriculum” of Tuskegee (98, 100). Thus, literary spaces of home and education are just as central in this writer as in other authors of the postwar decades like Forten and Brown, or in writers of the “Black Women’s Era” like Harper, Dunbar-Nelson, and Hopkins (Byerman/Wallinger 193). Washington’s texts, in this respect, provide additional evidence for a broad transformation of postwar African American environmental knowledge through reconfigurations of literary space.

At the heart of Washington’s articulation of environmental knowledge lies, however, another kind of signifying revision, namely, his rewriting of the pastoral of the fugitive slave narrative. To trace this transformation and the ways in which it became entangled in Washington’s response to evolutionary thought it is necessary to understand first how his texts signify not only via the spatial, but also via the biopolitical and the visual. Regarding the latter, his writing revises both

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<sup>309</sup> Studies that focus on Washington’s pastoralism are E. Jones, who reads Washington as “pastoralist whose approach fitted the Negro for freedom” (48); and Bone, who pits Washington against Du Bois as someone who “eschews the high ground of epic [Bone identifies in Du Bois] for the humbler strains of pastoral” (50). The few ecocritical engagements with Washington include, apart from the articles by Hicks and Grabovac mentioned above, readings by K. Smith, who considers Washington in the context of a black agrarianism (cf. *Thought* 75-87; “Black Agrarianism”); and by Ruffin, who mentions him in her chapter on George Washington Carver (cf. 77-85).

the portrayal of southern visual regimes and the rhetoric of visibility of the antebellum slave narrative; it involves a fundamentally altered network of looks that changes the relation of the narrating observer to a depicted visual regime. While the antebellum, formerly enslaved observer-narrator primarily showed how the “visual violence” of a disciplining and punishing gaze of the master was acting on the African American slave’s body – and thereby on her/himself – as an *object*, Washington’s observer-narrator becomes the *subject* of a black disciplinary gaze within a portrayed visual regime. There is, in this sense, a twofold shift: First, Washington’s slave narratives after slavery observe an (at least formally) free instead of an enslaved population; secondly, they represent a shift from looking and *describing* a panoptic disciplinary regime to looking as *performing* a panoptic disciplinary observation. Where, in the antebellum slave narrative, the black observer had first emerged, Washington’s postwar narratives represent the emergence of a black *disciplinary* observer.

At points, *Up from Slavery* and *Working with the Hands* read like the work of an ethnographer who examines, registers, and meticulously documents the development of the population of the Black Belt. Both texts repeatedly emphasize the need to “get a farther insight into the real life of the people,” to explore their habits, customs and conditions (*Up* 62). Accordingly, Washington makes excursions through rural Alabama, “visiting towns and country districts in order to learn the real conditions and needs of the people,” and aims “to investigate at closer range the history and environment of the people around us” (*Working* 12, 15). He focuses on diet, living conditions, and homes (cf. e.g. *Up* 54-54; *Working* 13, 37, 162), and often portrays himself as an embedded observer who “ate and slept with the people, in their little cabins,” thus engaging in ethnographic fieldwork (*Up* 54). In this lies the performance of a basic shift with respect to the antebellum observer of the fugitive slave narrative. The formerly enslaved fugitive, a witness who had portrayed the atrocities of a visual regime of the peculiar institution on the slave body, is replaced by an observer who becomes himself the bearer of an analytical, objectifying gaze on the freedman’s body.

This shift in Washington’s “literary eye,” from observing an antebellum disciplinary visual regime that sought to make the black body of the observer her/himself into an object and a property, to acting as the observing subject of an educational, ethnographic gaze of a postwar African American disciplinary visual regime, also alters what I have called the slave narrative’s “rhetoric of visibility.” In contrast to the “eye of the slave,” which was largely circumscribed by the patronizing influence of abolitionists in the antebellum genre, Washington’s gaze on the emancipated population of the South becomes more independent as the “eye of the black

educator.” Although formally starting out as a slave narrative with the stock “I was born a slave,” *Up from Slavery* and *Working with the Hands* can be more self-confident in their way of looking than their literary predecessors (*Up* 7). Especially in *Up from Slavery*, Washington plays with black autobiographical conventions,<sup>310</sup> and appropriates the eye of the once enslaved black eye-witness in a determined way. *Up* is therefore not only, as Stepto has argued, an “authenticating narrative” that has a self-reliant voice as it plays with the fugitive slave narrative tradition, i.e. a text “in which the various authenticating texts [e.g. letters or reviews] are controlled and manipulated by the author” (*Behind* 35). Moreover, it also transforms the antebellum genre by both rhetorically breaking the “white envelope” that surrounded the “black message” of the slave (cf. Sekora, “Message”), and by fundamentally altering what was once the linguistic means of authenticating the slave’s visual experience, the rhetoric of visibility. The “I have seen” of the slave narrative, legitimized through the patronizing influence of abolitionists, re-emerges in Washington as the disciplinary “I have observed, documented, examined” of a black educator’s gaze on emancipated African Americans, legitimized through the project of race uplift.

Connected with this revision of the visual is Washington’s biopolitical idea regarding the object of his educational gaze: the African American population. Washington’s biopolitical agenda can be traced along the two general lines Foucault has identified with respect to the emergence of biopower in the nineteenth century (cf. *Will* 139). It involves, first, disciplinary techniques that focus on the individual black body, and, secondly, pertains to the body of the black population as a whole.<sup>311</sup> Regarding the former, the individual black body, it is revealing to consider the techniques of power that characterize the system Washington sets up at Tuskegee, which is based on meticulous examination and documentation. In *Up from Slavery*, Washington describes how

the organization [at Tuskegee] is so thorough that the daily work of the school is not dependent upon the presence of any one individual. The whole executive force, including instructors and clerks, now numbers eighty-six. This force is so organized

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<sup>310</sup> Various readings have turned to *Up from Slavery* as a rewriting of the fugitive slave narrative, see e.g. S. Smith 30-44; H. Baker, *Journey* 46-52; or Cox. *Working with the Hands*, by contrast, which has generally received much less critical attention, has rarely been read in this sense.

<sup>311</sup> Several scholars have identified discipline as a core organizational principle of Tuskegee Institute. H. Baker, for example, sees Tuskegee as a disciplinary institution where Washington marshalled “the black body to attention, discipline, regimentation, rudimentary craft, and agricultural skills” (*Turning* 58, cf. esp. 58-60, 96-97); Schmidt speaks of Armstrong’s and Washington’s “disciplinary regimes of Jim Crow colonialism” (104-125); and Spivey reads Washington as the “black overseer of Tuskegee,” drawing attention to the potential of resistance and struggle he encountered on the part of his students. While such studies have therefore examined the *disciplinary* side of Washington’s Tuskegee scheme, my reading focuses primarily on the *biopolitical* implications of his ideas.

and subdivided that the machinery of the school goes on day by day like clockwork.  
(Up 118)

Tuskegee functions like a Foucauldian disciplinary institution. It works like “machinery,” is spatially compartmentalized and subdivided, temporally regulated as it runs like “clock-work,” and is marked by the decentralization of modern power epitomized in panopticism, as it is “not dependent upon the presence of any one individual” to function smoothly (118). It is no coincidence that Tuskegee and Hampton, the school that Washington had first attended and after which his own “Institute” was modeled, were run in a quasi-military spirit, considering that the founder of Hampton and its education model, General Samuel C. Armstrong, was a man of the military.<sup>312</sup> Although the aim was not, as Henry Romeyn, another former soldier who worked at Hampton between 1878 and 1881, stated, “to make soldiers of our students, nor to create a warlike spirit,” military techniques were used to “create ideas of neatness, order, system, obedience” (qtd. Anderson 58). In this sense, the Tuskegee-Hampton complex is a prime example of a broader process Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* (cf. “Part Three”), through which the military techniques of drill and examination spread into educational institutions that aimed to produce “docile bodies.” In Washington’s case, the techniques were meant to produce docile *black* bodies and to control and foster their usefulness to the end of solving the “negro problem.” Tuskegee, read in this light, was not only a “machine” in the sense in which Du Bois later referred to it, meaning the powerful conglomerate of Washington and his allies (cf. *Dusk* 36-41), but also a prototypical “disciplinary machine” that sought to take control of the freedmen.

Washington’s disciplinary gaze and methods, however, strove not simply for the production of useful and docile black individuals but ultimately did so to the end of manufacturing a productive black population; after all, he meant to perform the “uplift” of an entire “race.” Washington’s writing therefore also expresses a biopolitical scheme driven by the idea of “taking control of life and the biological processes of man-as-species and of ensuring that they are not [only] disciplined, but regularized” (Foucault, *Society* 246-247). In this respect, his strategies include primarily measures pertaining to health and hygiene; his aim regarding the freedmen was,

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<sup>312</sup> See on Hampton and its ideology e.g. Watkins 43-59; P. Schmidt 120-125; Anderson 33-78; and Eng’s biography. An impression of the rapid spread and success of Armstrong’s education model may also be gained considering a map of Virginia, West Virginia, North and South Carolina, Maryland and Delaware that demonstrates “the Situation in these States of Schools taught by Graduates of the Hampton Normal & Agricultural Institute” between 1871 and 1876. The map is part of the holdings of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; a copy is included in the appendix (Figure 5).

in H. Baker's words, to "*clean them up*" (*Turning* 58, emphasis in original).<sup>313</sup> From Washington's first employment by a wealthy white family in Malden, Virginia, to the sweeping of a floor that earned him his entry into Hampton (cf. *Up* 29), and the excessive hygienic policies at Tuskegee, his texts are obsessed with a cleanliness that he regards as a necessity for uplift. One of the most telling examples in this respect is what he calls "The Gospel of the Toothbrush," which was an integral "part of our creed at Tuskegee" (80). Washington adamantly insists on

[t]he effect that the use of the tooth-brush has had in bringing about a higher degree of civilization among the students. With few exceptions, I have noticed that if we can get a student to the point where, when the first or second tooth-brush disappears, he of his own motion buys another, I have not been disappointed in the future of that individual. Absolute cleanliness of the body has been insisted upon from the first. The students have been taught to bathe as regularly as to take their meals. (*Up* 81)

The regularities of (self-)discipline are envisioned as a means of ensuring the health of both individual bodies and an entire population body. Military-style drill converges with notions of cleanliness and health at Tuskegee, whereby Washington ultimately seeks to ensure the production of a functioning, physically, mentally and morally sound, and economically productive black population. The crucial question for him is eventually, to rephrase Foucault's famous aphorism on biopower (cf. *Will* 141), that of an 'entry of *black* life into history' and into modern biopolitics, when he asks his (white) audience to "decide within yourselves whether a race that is thus willing to *die* for its country [in war] should not be given the highest opportunity to *live* for its country" (*Up* 116, emphasis mine).

In this way, Washington's autobiographies signify not simply on visual regimes and a rhetoric of visibility of the fugitive slave narrative but also revise its body politics and the disciplinary regimes of the peculiar institution. Where writers of slave narratives described surveillance regimes and disciplinary forces as connected with the iconic and destructive bodily punishments characteristic of southern slavery, Washington appropriates principles of discipline and control into a less archaic, more modern and productive scheme for uplifting a free black population. He aimed to establish and exert new kinds of disciplinary forces on the black body, the productive

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<sup>313</sup> Many have commented on the importance on health and hygiene in Washington. Lamothe, for instance, suggests that his excessive hygienic policies indicate "his shared understanding with Bacon and Armstrong that the goal of an industrial education should be the figurative 'whitening' of the school's Black students, both morally and socially" (25-26); and Kowalski proposes that he "transforms dirt from filth and rags into the bounty and richness of the Black Belt" (182). Rusert has traced the connection between Washington's excessive hygienic policies at Tuskegee – his setting up of a kind of "laboratory" investigating the black population – and the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiments that took place between the 1930s and the early 1970s.

potential of which he constantly exemplifies in his own person. Consider, for instance, the description of his first employment for a white family in Malden. Washington claims that

the lessons that I learned in the home of Mrs. Ruffner were as valuable to me as any education I have ever gotten anywhere since. Even to this day I never see bits of paper scattered around a house or in the street that I do not want to pick them up at once. I never see a filthy yard that I do not want to clean it, a paling off of a fence that I do not want to put it on, an unpainted or unwhitewashed house that I do not want to paint or whitewash it, or a button off one's clothes, or a grease-spot on them or on a floor, that I do not want to call attention to it. (*Up* 25)

The drudgery at Mrs. Ruffner's may technically speaking not be less menial than that in some antebellum master's household, yet freedom offers, Washington suggests, the opportunity to appropriate discipline for freed individuals and the African American population as a whole. The idea was, as he put it in a 1903 essay in the collection *The Negro Problem*, that of moving from "being worked" to "working" ("Industrial Education" 9). Before the war, discipline inevitably meant *being* disciplined through another, since the black (slave) body was the property of that other. After emancipation, Washington suggests, an empowering *self*-discipline became possible, which is stressed in the above quote through the parallelism, i.e. when he emphatically repeats "want to," implying his *own* will. The claim is that even though postwar labor itself may often not look much different than it did before emancipation, the relation between work and the willful, disciplined black body could become more productive and governable.

Thus, Washington replaces relations of domination in which the black body was locked via the antebellum master-slave property relationship with relations of disciplinary power for the post-emancipation generation. His strategy is to appropriate the freed black body by inducing (self-)discipline to the end of producing a healthier, more useful population. An anecdote of Washington's trickster play with clock time while working in Malden is emblematic of this strategy: Because his work shift in the coal furnaces ends at nine o'clock, yet school begins at precisely the same hour, Washington "morning after morning" moves "the clock hands from half-past eight up to the nine o'clock mark" (*Up* 20). The face of the clock, upon which "all the hundred or more workmen depended [...] to regulate their hours of beginning and ending the day's work" comes to represent not a white disciplinary regime, but Washington's appropriation of it (20). Accompanied by his *captatio benevolentiae* that "I did not mean to inconvenience anybody," the appropriation of time itself in order to gain his education in this scene epitomizes the ways in which his scheme generally seeks to adopt time and space for new forms of discipline (20). The old, *white* disciplinary regimes must be broken to create his own education model at

Tuskegee, where time and space are by no means less rigidly structured through a *black* disciplinarily gaze. At the heart of Washington's signifying revision lies therefore eventually both the establishment of a new vision, a black gaze that seeks to discipline individuals, and the notion of a black population as the center of a new biopolitical vision.

## Signifying Revisions II: The Georgic and the Pastoral

In the passage from *Up from Slavery* describing his experience at the Ruffners', Washington also refers to his task of cleaning up a "filthy yard" and repairing dilapidated "fences" (25). His portrayal of the garden at this point not only foreshadows his later obsession with hygiene and cleanliness, but also hints at the ways in which he envisions relations between the human and the non-human material environment through the pastoral. In this respect, the account of the scene given in *Working with the Hands* is much more detailed. Here, Washington writes:

My task, as I remember it, was to cut the grass around the house, and then to give the grounds a thorough 'cleaning up.' In those days there were no lawn-mowers, and I had to go down on my knees and cut much of the grass with a little hand-scythe. [...] I am not ashamed to say that I did not succeed in giving satisfaction the first, or even the second time [...] But I kept at it, and after a few days, as the result of my efforts under the strict oversight of my mistress, we could take pleasure in looking upon a yard where the grass was green, and almost perfect in its smoothness, where the flower beds were trimly kept, the edges of the walks clean cut, and where there was nothing to mar the well-ordered appearance. (*Working* 8-9)

This depiction exemplifies the two main elements of Washington's revised form of African American environmental knowledge. First, there is the idea of a "well-ordered" yard that suggests both a pastoral harmony and, crucially, the *accessibility* of this pleasurable pastoral harmony to African Americans. Secondly, one finds the notion that achieving the pastoral requires hard bodily labor and precisely that which Washington centrally celebrates in his biopolitical vision, namely strict self-discipline, in this case "under the strict oversight of my mistress" (*Working* 9).

Regarding the first idea, Washington presents a revision of the "double vision" characteristic of the pastoral in the fugitive slave narrative. The antebellum genre was marked by a self-conscious visualizing of pastoral landscapes that, on the one hand, acknowledged pastoral beauty ("pastoral eye"), and, on the other hand, simultaneously highlighted its inaccessibility to the slave due to her/his unjustly dehumanized position ("slave's eye"). The slave narrator sensed and appreciated the value of the pastoral, yet stressed that s/he was not allowed to participate in it as

a human. Washington's texts, by contrast, base their pastoral on the idea that it becomes accessible as a "reward"; *Up from Slavery* and *Working with the Hands* leave the "slave's eye" behind, as they suggest that a pastoral experience is possible for emancipated African Americans under certain conditions. In this respect, it is illuminating to compare Washington's experience at the Ruffners' with Douglass's description of Colonel Lloyd's garden in his 1845 *Narrative*. Douglass portrays the Colonel's "large and finely cultivated garden" as

afford[ing] almost constant employment for four men, besides the chief gardener, (Mr. M'Durmond.) The garden was probably the greatest attraction of the place. [...] Its excellent fruit was quite a temptation to the hungry swarms of [enslaved] boys, as well as the older slaves, belonging to the colonel, few of whom had the virtue or vice to resist it. [...] The colonel had to resort to all kinds of stratagems to keep his slaves out of the garden. The last and most successful one was that of tarring his fence all around, after which, if a slave was caught with any tar upon his person, it was deemed sufficient proof that he had either been into the garden, or had tried to get in. In either case, he was severely whipped by the chief gardener. (Douglass, *Narrative* 20)

In Washington's description of his toil in Mrs. Ruffner's yard, by contrast, such corporeal punishments of the slave body that had traumatized the plantation pastoral for the experiencing slave's eye have fallen away, and a pastoral beauty becomes potentially available to the emancipated black observer. To be sure, the Ruffners' garden in *Working* echoes the antebellum plantation pastoral when Washington writes that "the orchards around the house bore heavy yields of the finest fruits," and the apparently menial labor in which he does "not succeed in giving satisfaction" evokes the traumatic memory of the slaves' experience epitomized in Colonel Lloyd's garden (*Working* 8). Moreover, his scene repeats elements of the strict discipline and panoptic surveillance of Douglass's portrayal, when he recalls working "under the strict oversight of my mistress" (8). Crucially, however, Washington is not anymore entirely excluded; the tarred fences are gone, and when he claims that "we could take pleasure" in looking at the well-ordered, domesticated garden, his use of the pronoun marks his own inclusion in enjoying the pastoral (9, emphasis mine). Although leaving open whether he gains access to the fruit of the yard, the pastoral is thus not categorically denied. Instead, it opens up through Washington's toil inside the garden and becomes available as a "reward" for hard labor.

This idea of an availability of the southern pastoral to the emancipated population and to the black writer is primarily expressed through Washington's depictions of gardens in both *Up from Slavery* and *Working with the Hands*. In the former, the idea of the "pastoral-as-reward" for individual and collective development and as a sign of race uplift is most pronounced. In accordance with his general merit principle, one finds depictions of Washington's own garden at

Tuskegee only towards the end of the book. In chapter XV, he claims that not only “the woods, where we can live for a while near the heart of nature,” but especially his own yard becomes a

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 can 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 big world. I pity the man or woman who has never learned to enjoy nature and to get strength and inspiration out of it. (*Up* 121)

The quote and its position at the close of Washington’s story of his individual development point to the pastoral’s function as a sign of leisure. After all, the above statement is part of his response to the question, often posed by Washington’s interlocutors, how he “can find time for any rest or recreation, and what kind of recreation or sports I am fond of” (119); it talks about the garden as a place where to gain “strength for the many duties and hard places” of the “big world” (121). Read in this context, the passage reveals more than that Washington was “capable of slipping into a highly Emersonian rhetoric of nature as a recuperative retreat,” as Willis suggests (116), and is not just an example of what Guha/Martinez-Alier have called a “full-stomach”-environmentalism (cf. Grabovac 14). Instead, Washington’s garden, when taking the progressive structure of his narrative into account, functions as a “reward.” His “nature” is neither solely an Emersonian or Thoreauvian retreat nor a refuge from racism as in Charlotte Forten’s journals, but the “price” for the self-discipline that Washington has mustered. In a first sense, Washington therefore transforms antebellum African American environmental knowledge by disconnecting the pastoral from the “slave’s eye” and re-inscribing it as accessible into his texts. Contrasted within his own text with the uncleanness of the slave huts of his childhood and the coal-furnaces of his youth, and set more broadly discursively against the double vision of the antebellum slave narrative, Washington’s pastoral turns into an environmental reward.

His revision of African American environmental knowledge, however, goes further. While both autobiographies emphasize the idea of the pastoral as a reward, Washington’s environmental knowledge includes a second central element that concerns the process leading to this reward. In this respect, he presents what could be called an “African American Georgic,”<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> I am using the term “Georgic” in its general meaning as “the generic name for writing that primarily details rural work” (Gifford, *Pastoral* 20); on the Georgic tradition generally, cf. Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 108-120; Wilkinson; or Fantham. Therefore, this chapter does not propose that Washington is reworking or explicitly alluding to ancient Ur-texts of the Georgic, such as Hesiod’s *Work and Days* or Virgil’s *Georgics*. Rather, the aim is to highlight that Washington’s writings, especially *Working with the Hands*, often employ a ‘Georgic element,’ becoming thereby a “literature of farming” that is related to the grand American Georgic

which becomes visible especially in *Working with the Hands*, a text that reads almost like a farmer's manual. Viewing "agriculture" as the most "fundamental industry" to be taught at Tuskegee, Washington declares that the aim of this book is "to awaken in its entire student body a keen interest in farming, farm life, the farm-house and farm society" (57, 118). Furthermore, *Working*, by exposing the Tuskegee creed not merely in terms of an ideology but by providing concrete information on the "right methods" of proper farming and the efficient use of the Southern soils, becomes itself a practical instrument of Washington's mission, a Georgic manifesto on "the affairs of the farm" (163, 93). In this way, it is part of the larger Hampton-Tuskegee-strategy of creating "clusters" of education throughout the South. If the general idea was to produce a group of teachers that distributed its disciplinary techniques and biopolitical schemes all over the Southern states, so that "[w]herever our graduates go, the changes which soon begin to appear in the buying of land, improving homes, saving money, in education, and in high moral character are remarkable" (*Up* 144), then *Working with the Hands* is the literary agent of this idea. It is a "graduate" with two covers that contains the knowledge to be dispersed, and that Washington meant to be read and turned into practice by the black population of the South for the purpose of uplift.

Washington's African American Georgic can be characterized along its two central features: first, the celebration of the local and communal, and, second, Washington's strive towards regaining what he called throughout his works the "dignity of labor." The former can be seen, for instance, in one of the most famous phrases of Washington's 1895 Atlanta Exposition Address, "Cast down your bucket where you are" (*Up* 99-100). While this sentence has often been read as aiming to stop migration to the (Northern) cities, and therefore as accommodating to the interests of the Southern planter class,<sup>315</sup> it can also be understood in a more fundamental way in terms of working where you are and with what non-human, non-discursive material conditions are available. Since, as Washington realizes, "[t]he South is not yet in any large degree manufacturing territory, but is an agricultural section and will probably remain such for a long period," this means for a Southern African American population working in precisely that local soil, that non-human materiality, which was marked by the trauma of slavery (*Working* 108). It

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ideal of the Jeffersonian farmer (Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 108). This "Georgic element" is the second crucial facet of Washington's reworking of the pastoral of the fugitive slave narrative.

<sup>315</sup> On Washington's rhetoric in his famous speech at the 1895 Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition, which has often been read as prime example of his "accommodationism," see e.g. Harlan, "Secret Life"; Cummings; or Heath. More recent interpretations of the (still) controversial Atlanta Address are those by M.R. West 51-60; Leverenz; Kilson; Norrell; Vivian; and Menson-Furr, who emphasizes the long-term value of Washington's black agrarianism.

is telling in this respect that Washington chose a place that was also the prime symbol of the old system to begin his education project near Tuskegee, namely “an old and abandoned plantation,” and therefrom begins to develop his re-interpretation of the rural (*Up* 61). Despite the trauma that marked the Southern land, Washington’s Georgic ethos seeks to root his population in a local rurality instead of in cities or factories that he sees in Ur-pastoral – not antipastoral – fashion as unclean, unhealthy and morally corrupt. It is therefore essential to Washington’s Georgic to “be careful not to educate our students out of sympathy with agricultural life, so that they would be attracted from the country to the cities, and yield to the temptation of trying to live by their wits” (60).

Moreover, it is crucial to Washington’s Georgic what *kind* of labor African Americans should live off instead of their “wits” in the rural locales where they had to “cast their buckets down.” Out of his ethnographic observations of the “everyday life of the people” and of the devastating and unproductive forms of agrarian toil and vicious circles of peonage and sharecropping, Washington seeks to employ disciplinary techniques to the end of introducing a new, more productive relation of the population to the land through a reevaluation of labor (*Up* 54). While an agrarian vision as a means for uplift was not new among black theorists by the time Washington was proposing his elaborate scheme,<sup>316</sup> his particular kind of education, known as “industrial” or “vocational” training,<sup>317</sup> is most radical in terms of being set against the stereotype of the “educated Negro, with a high hat, imitation gold eye-glasses, a showy walking-stick, kid gloves, fancy boots, and what not – in a word, a man who has determined to live by his wits” (57). Washington recognized the potential hindrances for race uplift that lay in this (stereo)type of the “educated Negro,” both with regard to the antipathy it triggered in a white Southern aristocracy that feared the loss of its main workforce to the cities, and regarding the ways in which such education could lead African American farmers into harmful agricultural practices. He saw, in this respect, the danger of monocultures, in which black farmers’ “one object seemed to be to plant nothing but cotton,” that could further destroy the soils as well as lead into new forms of quasi-slavery (54).

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<sup>316</sup> Apart from the fact that there had been agrarian and vocational education projects, e.g. by pamphleteers like Whipper, H. Easton, and Ruggles, and slave narrators like Bibb and Douglass during the antebellum period (cf. also chapter 4.1, note 239), black agrarianism is a prominent theme in some African American leaders after emancipation as well. W. W. Brown’s works, for instance, are expressions of this; and Douglass, too, turned to agrarianism as a means of uplift in the 1870s and 1880s, praising black farming, lamenting the exodus to the cities, and proudly suggesting that “we are related to the first successful tillers of the soil” in an 1873 address in Tennessee (288). Cf. generally on the history of nineteenth-century black agrarianism K. Smith, “Black Agrarianism,” *Thought* 75-87; J. Green et al.; or B. Reynolds.

<sup>317</sup> On Washington’s industrial education model, see Anderson 33-109; Sherer 45-58; or Spivey, esp. 45-70; on the history of black education after the Civil War, cf. also chapter 4.1, notes 240, 241.

Consequently, his agrarian vision seeks to give value to agricultural labor as such – a difficult task in a section where such labor had been cursed over decades through the peculiar institution. As de Tocqueville had noted as early as 1835, physical labor was traditionally “degraded” in the South as it was “confounded with the idea of slavery” (363), and it was Washington’s explicit aim to work against this notion of labor as marked by “a badge of degradation, of inferiority,” as “something that both races on the slave plantation sought to escape” (*Up* 14). Eventually, however, Washington’s Georgic neither simply meant to teach that a productive rural life “out in the sweet, pure, bracing air” was superior to urban life, nor solely sought to discipline the black body into being a valuable worker (*Working* 116). At the core, it also aimed to establish a more fundamental, altered relation of African Americans to non-human non-discursive materialities by echoing a Jeffersonian ideal that centered on a transformation not only of the body but also of the mind through working the land. Washington ultimately strives for the large-scale establishment of the black yeoman farmer, when he claims for his own experience that through “a creation of my own hands, my whole nature began to change. I felt a self-respect, an encouragement, and a satisfaction that I had never before enjoyed or thought possible” (9). Working with the land offers, in Washington’s Georgic vision, not just the possibility of economic survival for the black population of the South, but also a spiritual and moral uplift that comes from “a feeling of kinship between the man and his plants” (153).

Washington thereby arrives at a conclusion that, in some respects, echoes Brown’s in *My Southern Home*, when he puts forward the “notion that the great body of the Negro population must live in the future as they have done in the past, by the cultivation of the soil, and the most hopeful service now to be done is to enable the race to follow agriculture with intelligence and diligence” (*Working* 135). Washington’s ultimate aim, however, as opposed to Brown’s call for migration to exert pressure on a re-ascending Southern aristocracy, is to have African Americans stay in the former slave states but improve the methods and techniques of agriculture. *Working with the Hands* catalogues what new black southern agricultural labor should look like, as Washington presents an impressive array of concrete suggestions ranging from course descriptions of experimental agricultural classes to planting schedules and drawings of fields, as they should be cultivated in more productive ways (cf. e.g. 107-118, 135-150, 165-172). In all this, he never forgets to stress the spiritual and ethical effects that come from working in such ways with non-human materialities, for instance, when he cites poetry written by students about brooms they had crafted out of material grown at Tuskegee (cf. 67-69), or when he refers to the work of the most famous teacher at Tuskegee beside himself, the botanist and agriculturist

George Washington Carver. More than anybody else, Carver, the “Director of our Agricultural Department” is presented, in *Working*, as an example of a Washingtonian Georgic that values highly both the land and the black body working it (27).<sup>318</sup> His experimental agricultural work on soil improvement, crop rotation (cf. 165-171), and most famously the use of the peanut, becomes symbolic of Washington’s own conviction that “[o]ur pathway must be up through the soil, up through swamps, up through forests, up through the streams and rocks; up through commerce, education, and religion!” (29).

Accordingly, he states his wish that “by some power of magic I might remove the great bulk of these people [in the cities] 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” (*Up* 44-45). In this way, Washington rewrites the pastoral in a second important way, as he not only makes it accessible as a reward, but also proposes a scheme for attaining this reward through his Georgic. If antebellum writers of slave narratives like Bibb, Douglass and many others had pointed out that Southern rural topographies were the place where slaves had been “toiling under their task-masters without pay” in “field[s] of blood and blasphemy,” Washington, by contrast, seeks to dignify such fields as well as labor in those fields through his agrarian ethos (Bibb 170; Douglass, *Narrative* 17). The plantation house itself, after all the heart of Tuskegee Institute, was reinterpreted. Washington’s texts move the ‘Big House’ from being the symbol at the center of a field of blood and blasphemy to becoming the root of a new “cultivation of the land” and of “the students training in agriculture,” all with the objective to lift the land and labor “up from mere drudgery and toil” and give them back “beauty and dignity” (*Up* 65, 69). Thus, Washington both reclaims the pastoral-as-reward, thereby disengaging the “slave’s eye,” and furnishes an African American Georgic-as-process that meant to lead the way to this reward through disciplined, dignified labor not only *on* but also *with* the land.

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<sup>318</sup> Carver was trained at Iowa Agricultural College and taught at Tuskegee Institute for more than four decades. He was passionate especially about gardening (which he suggested should be taught at primary school), and conducted scientific agricultural work that stressed not only the economic or productive potential but also the beauty of non-human nature. In the twentieth century, Carver has gained wide popularity as the “Peanut man”; in an ecocritical context, he has been identified as an important “African American Ecological Ancestor” (Ruffin 77-85). Cf. especially Hersey’s environmental biography on Carver (*My Work*); also Hersey, “Hints and Suggestions”; G. Kremer; K. Smith 92-93.

## Washington's Environmental Knowledge and Evolutionary Thought

Beyond being a “repetition with a difference” of environmental knowledge of the antebellum slave narrative, Washington's texts also signify on dominant contemporary discourses. Through his revised environmental knowledge, his autobiographies interact with an evolutionary thought that L. Baker describes as the “ideological cement that fused capitalist development, imperialism, scientific progress, racism and the law into a rock solid edifice within US society” around the turn of the century (“Location” 112). As suggested in the beginning of this chapter, evolutionary thought was by no means homogenous, even if it was in many ways “the great organizing principle of the late nineteenth century” (62). In the U.S., this “principle” shaped various discursive formations as it not only diffused into scientific disciplines as diverse as biology, (physical) anthropology, anthropometry, ethnology, sociology, history, and economics, but also gained a foothold in American public, popular, and literary discourses, thus influencing immigration and race politics.<sup>319</sup> Simultaneously, a new form of environmental knowledge took root via evolutionism, which envisioned a fundamentally altered place for the human in its non-human, non-discursive material conditions. Through the Darwinian “view of life with its several powers” and the scientifically articulated hypothesis that “whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms [of life] most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved,” the human was problematized in a new way (*Origin* 426).

One may grasp the heterogeneity of U.S. evolutionary thought towards the close of the century not only by considering how various (pseudo-)scientific disciplines interpreted and deployed evolutionary ideas, but especially also by examining the convergence of ideas about race with evolutionism. The way in which this happened becomes visible in the “American School,” the body of racial knowledge that had offered a (pseudo-)scientific rationale for slavery, and its adaptation of evolutionary thought. At first glance, fundamentally monogenistic post-Darwinian evolutionary thought hardly seems to fit the assumption of different types of humans as distinct species that was characteristic of the work of Morton, Nott, or Gliddon. Darwin, in

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<sup>319</sup> U.S. evolutionary thought has primarily been read under the heading “social Darwinism.” See for general accounts e.g. Hofstadter's classic study (1944), which has, however, been widely criticized for its definitions and generalizations; Gossett 144-174; Frederickson 228-255; Tucker 25-36; Bannister, *Social Darwinism*, “Survival”; M. Hawkins 104-122; the most recent treatments are those by Boeckmann 18-25; and Jackson/Weidman esp. 84-85. S. H. Washington gives a reading of U.S. social Darwinism in the context of the history of environmental racism (17-44).

*The Descent of Man* (1871), the book in which he extended his idea of evolution to the human species,<sup>320</sup> claimed that “[t]he most weighty of all the arguments against treating the races of man as distinct species is that they graduate into each other” (226). At other points, he was even more explicit in rejecting polygenism, e.g. in an 1860 letter to Charles Lyell, in which he criticized “Agassiz&Co” for their idea of man as different species, arguing that “[a]ll races of man are so infinitely closer together than to any ape that [...] I should look at all races of man as having certainly descended from a single parent” (378). It was nevertheless one of American polygenism’s foremost proponents, Josiah Nott, who, as early as the mid-1860s, hinted at a way for conjoining evolutionism with polygenist theory. In the first issue of the *Popular Magazine of Anthropology* (1866), he stated that it is true that “Darwin and other naturalists, have contended for the gradual change or development of organic forms from physical causes,” but at the same time claimed that “even this school requires millions of years for their theory” and therefore did not “controvert the facts and deductions” he and others had previously “laid down” (108). Thus, staunch American polygenists like Nott (and many evolutionists in Europe<sup>321</sup>) played the ‘trick of time’ with regard to questions of race. Man may be, evolutionarily speaking, one species, but the changes that were visible in the different racial “types” as they existed had taken place so long ago and were therefore so fundamentally fixed that stable racial characteristics could well be discerned, which became recognizable not only physically but also in terms of mental capabilities and moral faculties. The process of racial evolution, from this point of view, had ended, so that post-Darwinian evolutionism could conceptually merge with older forms of essentialist racial knowledge. As Henry Hotze, a Confederate propagandist, put it in 1862, there was the polygenists’ reassuring conviction that “[s]o long as the world of which we know has existed, the Negro has been a Negro, the Asiatic an Asiatic, the Caucasian a Caucasian; and we must conclude, therefore, that these distinctions will continue as long as the races continue to

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<sup>320</sup> With *Descent of Man*, Darwin turned to the unavoidable question of what evolution, which he had examined in *Origin* almost exclusively with respect to non-human organisms, meant for man. Thus, one should not generally exculpate Darwin from racism, as it has sometimes happened in the past because of his initial focus on non-human nature. Even though he was opposed to slavery and polygenism, Darwin, too, proposed human racial hierarchies and turned to supposedly “lower” and less developed races as in-between-stages between non-human animals and “civilized” men. The tendency of exempting Darwin from racism that has sometimes prevailed, especially through the term “social Darwinism” as implying that a ‘scientific’ Darwinism had been perverted by social theorists, has by now been thoroughly criticized (see e.g. Young, “Darwinism”; Moore). See on Darwin’s *Descent of Man* and his turn to human evolution e.g. Graves 55-73; and Glick; or Jackson/Weidman 67-72.

<sup>321</sup> In Britain, Germany, and France, too, evolutionists generally clung to racial hierarchies established prior to the ascent of evolutionary thought. See, on such social Darwinist traditions in Germany Weikart; Gasman; Kelly; Hawkins 132-148; in France L. Clark; Hawkins 123-132; in Britain Stepan 47-110; G. Jones. For overviews of different national traditions, cf. Glick; or Jackson/Weidman 84-92.

exist” (414).<sup>322</sup>

Despite the diversity of U.S. evolutionary thought in general, there are nevertheless some specific features that marked evolutionary thought as it was employed with respect to the “negro question.” Virtually all of the participants who engaged in evolutionism as an explicatory framework, among them such leading scientists as sociologist William G. Sumner, Harvard paleontologist Nathaniel S. Shaler, or geologist John Wesley Powell, expressed their views by engaging with three fundamental ideas. First, there was the notion of (hierarchical) “stages of development” between types of humans; second, the question of the permeability of the assumed boundaries between such stages, i.e. the question of the “improvability” of what were regarded as “lower” racial types; and, third, the question whether one should actively interfere in “racial progress.”

First, evolutionary thought, based on the premise of developments over extensive periods of time, interpreted racial difference in terms of a difference in advancement through evolutionary “stages.” Evolutionism’s basic idea of an “ordinary succession by generation [that] has never been broken” meant the assumption of distinct, most often hierarchically and teleologically understood stages of long-term development (Darwin, *Origin* 426). This new mode of differentiation converged with old racial hierarchies in late nineteenth-century American discourse on the “negro question,” and was most often adapted to produce trajectories ranging from “lower” to “higher” racial types that echoed the “great chain of being” or older polygenist models.<sup>323</sup> In an article published five years before Washington delivered his famous Atlanta Cotton Exhibition address, paleontologist Nathaniel Shaler gave a blatant expression of this idea, when claiming that

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<sup>322</sup> Evolutionary thought, in this sense, continues what Hovenkamp has identified as a longstanding Western position on race; there was still the widely held assumption that there exist innate, fixed differences between groups of man and that the “distinguishing features of each group were part of its permanent nature” (634). In the second half of the nineteenth century, evolution thus helped “to overhaul, rather than overturn, many older ideas that now took on a new scientific respectability” (Jackson/Weidman 75), as one still finds across disciplines an ever-present “research paradigm of Anglo-Saxon, Teutonic superiority” (Graves 4). Cf. on the merging of polygenism and evolutionism e.g. Glick 225-231; Jackson/Weidman 72-76; Stocking 42-68; Stepan 83-110; or M. Harris 93-94.

<sup>323</sup> This is not to say that, at the outset, evolutionary thought necessarily implied this hierarchization. One could, at least in theory, simply have taken up the general notion that “[t]he same laws that govern the growth and multiply the plant also govern society and multiply it,” and even, as Yale sociologist Graham Sumner suggested in 1881, that “biology and sociology” were investigating the same “forces [...] acting on different fields” (Woodhull 48; Sumner, “Sociology” 14). It was, however, a small step from *noting* differences in developmental stages of human social groups to *hierarchizing* them, and one that few resisted. Sumner, for instance, an unalloyed Spencerian, adapted the Englishman’s ideas of laissez-faire and progress to the United States’ “race question”; Woodhull eventually turned to eugenics, aiming to erase the “unfit”; and others, like the historian John Fiske, interpreted history exclusively in Spencerian terms (cf. M. Hawkins 107). In effect, an old racial hierarchy was perpetuated that was based on the agreement that, in Abbott Lyman’s words, “all life proceeds, by a regular and orderly sequence, from simple to more complex forms, from lower to higher forms” (1).

[t]he negro is not as yet intellectually so far up in the scale of development as he appears to be; in him the great virtues of the superior race, though implanted, have not yet taken firm root, and are in need of constant tillage, lest the old savage weeds overcome the tender shoots of the new and unnatural culture. To those who believe that the negro is only a black white man, who only needs a fair chance to become all that the white man is, these pages are not addressed. (Shaler, "Science" 42)

Here, the racial difference that American society had long established through physical racial markers such as skin color or hair form becomes articulated along an evolutionary "scale of development." Crucially, this happens in Shaler and in many others along a differentiation in terms of attributing value: There were those that were "superior" and those "inferior" ones whose inferiority could be explained by their being not (yet) "so far up" the ladder of evolution that supposedly led to civilization. In this respect, one finds an old hierarchization through a new, evolutionary biologization of race.

This hierarchization was articulated in increasingly elaborate ways, for instance, via the notion of "the negro's" being arrested in a stage of childhood, or in terms of a fixed racial character. Especially Spencer, who had at least as much influence on U.S. evolutionary thought as Darwin, continuously compared the children of the Caucasian race to adults from 'lesser' races, pointing out that "[t]he intellectual traits of the uncivilized [...] are traits recurring in the children of the civilized" (*Sociology* 89-90 qtd. Gould 146). Many late-nineteenth century American scientists willingly took up this notion in debating the "negro problem" that vexed the U.S., thereby helping to scientifically justify an already widely established set of stereotypes of African Americans as child-like.<sup>324</sup> Moreover, this idea was connected with the broader construction of "racial character" that becomes visible in various discursive formations towards the close of the century (cf. Boeckmann). Biologist Joseph LeConte's (1892) claim, for instance, that there was a characteristic "instinct necessary to preserve the blood purity of the higher race," or senator Henry C. Lodge's (1896) suggestion of a "soul of a race" which represents "something deeper and more fundamental than anything which concerns the intellect," were prominent ideas that attest to the essentializing of racial difference via the notion of a "racial character" (LeConte 365; Lodge qtd. Lofgren 98, 99). What becomes clear at this point is that the articulation of racial difference in terms of evolutionary stages had taken root as an underlying knowledge that lent itself well to large-scale, scientifically legitimized interpretations of the workings of race in

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<sup>324</sup> On late-nineteenth century racial stereotypes, which included e.g. the child-like "Coon" or "Sambo" characters, the lascivious black woman ("Jezebel"), the "black mammy," the "Tom," or the "black brute," see, for instance, Boskin esp. 65-94; A. Davis 172-201; on representations of these stereotypes in blackface minstrelsy, cf. Nowatzki; Meer, *Uncle Tom*.

society. One crucial effect was that moral questions concerning the exploitation of certain racial groups, most prominently African Americans, became obsolete via this new biologization of race, since one could rely more than ever before on (evolutionary) “nature” as dictating the reassuring truth of their inevitable inferiority. Exempting white elites from any responsibility for the black population was possible, because, in the words of another senator, John T. Morgan, “[t]he inferiority of the negro race” became “so essentially true, and so obvious, that to assume it in argument, cannot be justly attributed to prejudice” (386).

With the establishment of a trajectory from “inferior” to “superior” stages as the basis of U.S. evolutionary thought on the “negro problem,” the most pressing question, secondly, became that of the possibility and means of progress. The question was, in other words, that of the “permeability” of the boundaries supposedly separating simultaneously existing racial forms of human life, or, in the language of the time, of the “improvability of the negro” in terms of his striving towards what was unanimously pronounced the highest stage of social progress, civilization. To some, especially those who essentialized racial difference, the answer to this question was evidently negative, even if they believed in long-term evolutionary developments. Whether in terms of a by then supposedly fixed and virtually unchangeable mental or moral “racial character,” or referring to physical properties that lay at the heart of a burgeoning number of studies in anthropometry and physical anthropology that continued the American School’s obsession with crania,<sup>325</sup> many concurred with what the Presbyterian pastor Henry M. Field’s claimed in his travelogue *Bright Skies and Dark Shadows* (1890), namely that after slavery “[t]he whole race has remained on one dead level of mediocrity” (144). From this perspective, some construed evidence to the end of demonstrating that African Americans were simply not fit – and never would be – for uplift and civilization, and claimed, as one common thesis went, that the black population was inevitably facing extinction.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> The latter decades of the nineteenth century saw an unprecedented turn to measurements and statistics on the human body (cf. generally Hacking, *Making Up*), which was inextricably intertwined with evolutionary thought in Europe and the United States. Driven by the belief that “to explain man’s physical structure was to explain mankind” (Hovenkamp 652), European anthropologists like Broca, Topinard, or Vogt, and American scientists like Daniel G. Brinton or Frederick Hoffman relied on measuring bodies and skulls and weighing brains in ways that by far outweighed the antebellum work by e.g. Morton in his *Crania Americana* (1839). Cf. on physical anthropology and anthropometry of the period e.g. Haller 3-39; Jackson/Weidman 72-76; Stepan 83-110; Hedges 226-228.

<sup>326</sup> Among those who drew this conclusion were Spencer and Darwin themselves, the latter claiming that the “civilized races” would ultimately supersede the “savage races throughout the world” (qtd. Feagin 84). In the U.S., some predicted an eventual dying out of “lower” races based on the idea of a biological inferiority, e.g. Brinton, who claimed that the “black, the brown and the red races differ anatomically so much from the white [...] that even with equal cerebral capacity they could never rival its results by equal efforts” (*Proceedings* 12). Others, also in literature, focused more on a supposed “unfitness” of “the negro” in terms

A large number of participants in the debate, however, did not categorically deny the possibility of a (social) evolutionary change in “the negro,” even if many would see such a change only in the far future. The idea in this respect often was, as historian John Fiske wrote in his *Cosmic Philosophy* (1874), that “men cannot be taught a higher state of civilization, but can only be bred into it” (344). Yet another group were those thinkers Lamothe identifies in *Inventing the New Negro* (2008) as “environmentalists” and pits against “evolutionists.” She describes that

by 1880 another group of scientists was developing yet another theory of racial formation. This group, the environmentalists, argued for the influence of historical, geographic, and social factors in determining racial patterns and cultural behaviors. [...] while the environmentalists might have shared with evolutionists the idea that Black communities fostered severe pathologies, they differed from them in that they considered their weaknesses to be caused by environmental factors. (Lamothe 22)

While Lamothe’s term “environmentalists” for the folklorists at Hampton (cf. 21-32; also Lee D. Baker “Research”) is well chosen in the sense that it draws attention to their taking into account environmental factors instead of relying on an assumed innate inferiority, it is doubtful whether these scientists and collectors of folklore, and especially Armstrong himself, were not “evolutionists” as well. True, Armstrong “argued that Blacks had an innate capacity for social and intellectual improvement” and, in this respect, differed from the bulk of social evolutionists of his time (Lamothe 28). However, reading Armstrong more closely makes clear that his education model was not therefore opposed to evolutionary thought. He embraced, after all, the fundamental trajectory from lower social forms to higher “civilization,” especially with regard to questions of character, for instance, when claiming that African Americans were marked by “low ideas of honor, and morality” yet that the Caucasian race, by contrast, was strongly developed in terms of “moral strength, in guiding instincts” (qtd. Anderson 39). In this sense, Armstrong has the same evolutionary stages of development in mind, even if he negates an innate or long-term incapacity of blacks for improvement. He thinks of his students as “docile, impressible, imitative and earnest, and com[ing] to us as a *tabula rasa* so far as real culture is concerned,” yet his aim is always that of moving them towards this “real culture,” meaning Euro-American civilization, and out of ‘lower’ forms of barbarism and savagery (qtd. Anderson 45, emphasis in original). Thus, Armstrong’s approach is, at the core, that of an evolutionist, even if he takes a different,

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of moral and mental faculties. Thomas Nelson Page, for instance, wrote in *The Old South* (1892) that “the negro race has failed to discover the qualities which have inherited in every race of which history gives the record” (315), and Thomas Dixon, in *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902), expressed the idea that African Americans “have shown no power to stand alone on the solid basis of character” (308). Cf. on this position more generally e.g. Glick; and Gossett 245-246.

more optimistic position regarding the question of improvability.

Thirdly, like the question of improvability, the question of what measures (not) to take regarding the “negro problem” became another central point of debate that was often discussed in terms of evolutionism. In this respect, too, Armstrong’s Hampton ethos presents one extreme end of the responses. The General and his followers’ solution was to render large-scale assistance in uplifting the African American population through Hampton’s quasi-military disciplinary model. At Hampton, African American and Native American students were to learn and acquire the traits of civilization, which was, in Armstrong’s eyes, without a question the highest stage of the social evolutionary ladder. His assimilationist scheme was one of “whitewashing” non-white population bodies, sometimes in a literal sense, through the Hampton-Tuskegee-machine.

Others, primarily those who believed in an innate or at least, for the time being, rigidly fixed superiority of whites, were far more reluctant about educating “the negro” and suggested instead the opposite, namely non-interventionism. Inaction, a Spencerian laissez-faire, was often their answer, either to the most radical end of leaving the black population unassisted (while exploiting them) in order to die out as a race due to their supposed “natural” inferiority, or with the cynical idea in mind that they should in this way show their own capacity to survive. In this sense, some believed that laissez-faire would give African Americans a fair chance to evolve on their own, by “natural” means, through the struggle of life. Such a perspective can be found not only in prominent academic figures like LeConte, Fiske, Shaler, or Sumner, who drastically demanded that “[s]ociety needs first of all to be freed from these medlars [sic!] – that is, to be left alone” (120), but also in politics. Republican senator Lodge, for instance, in 1896, saw the potential for “the slow growth” of the “negro race” in laissez-faire politics (cf. Lofgren 98-99), and feminist presidential candidate Victoria Woodhull’s social evolutionary idea that “[t]he same laws that govern the growth and multiply the plant also govern society and multiply it” eventually led her to propose the elimination of the “unfit” (48).

The questions thus raised through evolutionary thought and the tensions they produced across discursive formations were vital in shaping the cultural climate of the “nadir” of American racial history,<sup>327</sup> and reveal another facet of Washington’s environmental knowledge. While he was not

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<sup>327</sup> The period of the latter decades of the nineteenth century through the turn of the century is sometimes referred to as the “‘nadir’ of African American history” (Litwack xiv), a term coined by Logan in *The Negro in the United States* (1954)). The “racist 1890s” (Gillman, “The Mulatto” 221) were a period in which “the ‘morning’ song of joy and resurrection has been converted again into a song of ‘mourning’ and despair, as a new slavery of racism and economic oppression once more subverts true freedom for black Americans” (Sundquist, *To Wake 2*). Politically, the decade saw the white South’s “floundering attempts to build a new racial order” (Hale 21), the erection of such “roadblocks to democracy as disfranchisement and racial

alone among African American writers of the late nineteenth century in responding to racist evolutionism,<sup>328</sup> Washington's negotiation of evolutionary thought is crucial because it is closely intertwined with his environmental knowledge, his revised pastoral. This is not to say that his pastoral-as-reward and Georgic-as-process were only a means to the end of commenting on evolutionism of the day. The revised pastoral is important in its own right as Washington's way of interacting with a tradition of African American environmental knowledge and as his attempt to write blacks into the human family and to overcome the traumatic relation of the black body to non-human non-discursive materialities that resulted from slavery. In this respect, his use of the pastoral continues a line of tradition already visible in Forten's aim to ameliorate the freedmen's relation to a Southern landscape free of "the dark shadows" of slavery (cf. "Life" 183), and in W. W. Brown's nostalgic yet critical attempt to heal a black southern population's ties to the land.

Unlike those writers, however, Washington is also forcefully participating in the turn-of-the-century discourse of evolutionary thought on the "negro question," his pastoral and Georgic being one crucial means of responding to such thought. This response is complex, as it endorses some but rejects other dominant ideas of evolutionary thought on the "negro question." Generally, Washington's autobiographies are written from a fundamentally (social) evolutionist point of view. At many points, he emerges as a post-Darwinian monogenist, who proclaims that we find "[h]uman nature [...] to be very much the same the world over" (*Up* 119). This position echoes that of many scientific men of his day; it embraces the idea that, in Brinton's words, evolutionism's "discovery is that of the physical unity of man, the parallelism of his development everywhere and in all time; [...] the absolute uniformity of his thoughts and actions, his aims and methods, when in the same degree of development, no matter where he is or in what epoch living" (qtd. Pöhl 8). Washington moreover reads differences between races in terms of evolutionary stages of development, speaking about white America as "the very highest civilization that exists," which "got thousand [sic!] of years ahead of the Negro in the arts and sciences of

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proscription laws" (Pickens 125), and a wave of excessive violence publically exercised on the black body in lynching practices.

<sup>328</sup> Other African American writers of the latter decades of the nineteenth century such as Frances Harper, Maria Stewart, Jarena Lee, Elizabeth Keckley, Pauline Hopkins, Peter Randolph, or Paul Lawrence Dunbar referred to and signified on notions of evolutionary thought in writing for uplift (cf. e.g. Ferguson xiii-xxxiv; Japtok). They did so in diverse forms, often implicitly but also explicitly. An early example is Harper's 1869 "The Mission of the Flowers" – the story of a well-intentioned rose that turns all other flowers of "a lovely garden" into roses but eventually realizes the importance of individuality – which can be read as an allegorical critique of an assimilationist ethos and the social evolutionary trajectory supposedly leading up to "civilization." Another case in which (Spencerian) evolutionary thought becomes an explicit context for an African American writer's articulation of environmental knowledge will be discussed in the next chapter on Charles W. Chesnut.

civilization” (*Working* 233, 231). This way of thinking in terms of “relative stage[s] of racial development” (*Working* 64) is characteristic of his writing and has been, together with his often apologetic gestures towards former slaveholders, a major point of critique in readings of Washington as an accommodationist. Such critique is no doubt also justified, to some extent, regarding Washington’s relation to evolutionism. When H. Baker, for example, reads Washington’s autobiographies as featuring “narrators drawn into the linguistic prisons – the confining public discourse – of the white world,” the same also holds true, to some extent, with respect to the “linguistic prison” of evolutionary thought (*Journey* 47). Washington is often drawn into a framework of divisive social evolutionist language that sought clear demarcations between “negro” and “white” in terms of developmental stages, as becomes clear especially in his Atlanta address. Here, his urge to define racial groups figures not only in the (in)famous suggestion that “[i]n all things purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress,” but also in a vocabulary that in itself emphasizes and constantly redraws the “color line” (*Up* 100). Washington’s use of pronouns, his dichotomous “we vs. you,” is, even if he aims for “friendship” between the races, the outward sign of a potentially segregating classification in social evolutionary terms.<sup>329</sup>

Through such divisive language that seems at least tacitly complicit in further inscribing a racializing caesura into the U.S. population, the groups marked as different are described and hierarchized in terms of their supposed stages of development. Echoing voices like Brinton’s, one of Washington’s basic ideas is that there must be a “natural process of development” for African Americans (*Up* 69); there must be a social evolutionary “process which means one step at a time through all the constructive grades of industrial, mental, moral, and social development which all races have had to follow that have become independent and strong” (*Working* 245). Crucially, this implies not simply a *process* but a (Spencerian) *progress* that inevitably had to move in the direction of attaining an ideal that, for Washington, too, was Euro-American “civilization.” There was, for him, no satisfying alternative path, which becomes clear, for instance, when he describes teaching a class of Native Americans at Hampton. Conducting the “experiment [...] of educating Indians” as a “home father” to this group, he strictly seeks to instill “civilization” in a process that, next to learning English and learning a trade, included primarily “to have their long hair cut, to give up wearing their blankets, and to cease smoking” (*Up* 47, 48).

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<sup>329</sup> In this respect, it is also revealing that Washington was involved in a life-long struggle for capitalizing the “N” in the word “Negro.” Besides being a sign of the pride Washington took in his people, this also suggests how deeply racialized his own thinking was. Cf. e.g. Harlan, *Papers* Vol. 1, 207.

Thus, Washington embraces not only Armstrong's model but also the fundamental hierarchies of dominant evolutionary thought. He shares the belief that no "race is wholly civilized until he wears the white man's clothes, eats the white man's food, speaks the white man's language, and professes the white man's religion" and thus expresses both the evolutionary idea of developmental stages and the Spencerian notion of a progress towards civilization (48).

Washington's pastoral-as-reward and Georgic-as-process are connected with this point of view. It seems only logical to use the (white) mode of an idealizing pastoral as a sign of reward for achieving (white) civilization, and to embrace a Georgic working relationship with the land that is in accordance with the stage thinking of evolutionism. If all races supposedly had to follow the same path from savagery to barbarism to civilization and if the pastoral was a sign of civilization, it was appropriate to use that mode to mark one's achievements. Likewise, if one endorsed the notion of an evolutionarily-biologically prescribed law whereby anyone who "is kept employed in one place, [...] will begin to build a home, consisting of a number of huts; [...] will clear a farm or plantation, and stock it with cattle, sheep, pigs, and fowls" in order to move up towards civilization, then it was logical that African Americans had to begin "at the bottom of life" by cultivating the soil (*Working* 227-228; *Up* 100). The Hampton-Tuskegee system was thus conceptually based on an evolutionary Georgic, in which "the Negro, like any other race in a similar stage of development, is better off when owning and cultivating the soil" (205). The "Georgic-as-process" therefore becomes, when read as an expression of both Washington's environmental knowledge and his evolutionism, also a "Georgic-as-progress." In this respect, at least, Washington's pastoral and Georgic are clearly in line with evolutionary thought of his age. His environmental knowledge, at this point, is a means to an end, as it does not so much "revise" as "repeat" and adapt to the assumptions of evolutionism of his day.

With respect to questions of an improbability of the black population and of interventional social policies, however, Washington goes beyond repeating a dominant, racializing evolutionism and forms his own, alternative position through his revised notions of the pastoral and the Georgic. Regarding the physical, mental, and moral improbability of the African American population, his autobiographies express an infallible optimism that sets Washington in stark contrast to leading scientists like Fiske, Sumner, or Shaler, and authors like Page or Dixon. His message is, as he declares at the end of *Up from Slavery*, "one of hope and cheer" (146), and he does not tire to emphasize the various ways in which African Americans have already moved up the social evolutionary ladder after emancipation, for instance through improvements in the ministry and

education (cf. e.g. 40-45, 104-106).<sup>330</sup> The strongest proof of the improvability of “the negro,” is, however, the progress of the author-narrator of *Up from Slavery* himself. Washington presents his person as the epitome of moving “up from slavery” – the title itself capturing the evolutionary stage thinking that is so fundamental to his texts. In rags-to-riches fashion, Washington sees himself as moving through progressive social evolutionary stages. Sleeping on the floor under slavery, toiling in the dirty coal furnaces of Virginia, sleeping under a sidewalk in Richmond, Virginia, and ultimately becoming the head of Tuskegee and a planter in his own thriving pastoral garden, are the steps through which not only Washington, but, the book implies, potentially any black person in America can progress. Moreover, Washington celebrates the idea of moving up the social evolutionary ladder through his much-criticized concept of the “school of slavery” (cf. 13-14), suggesting that slavery placed “black people” in a “stronger and more hopeful condition” (13). Thereby, he to some extent circumvents addressing the injustice of unequal chances for African Americans in a white-dominated world, e.g. when he claims to have “learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed” (23). It is important, in this respect, that this comes retrospectively and out of a (pastoral) position of relative safety and success. His take on such questions would certainly not have been as positive in the days of slavery, even if he takes this start at the very bottom as a proof for showing the possibility of development as such. Washington’s confession in *Working*, too, that as an enslaved child he found the roots of a pastoral in “many close and interesting acquaintances with animals,” seems euphemistic (151). Although the suggestion that relations to non-human nature could help to survive under the peculiar institution is important and valid and interacts with the tradition of African American environmental knowledge, Washington often omits pointing out the trauma connected with toiling under slavery and refrains from admitting that only his position in the pastoral-as-reward makes such utterances possible at all.

Crucially, however, the way in which Washington presents his individual development, smoothed into universality through an assumed inevitability of evolutionary progress, acts not only as demonstration of the success of his disciplinary and biopolitical agenda, but also signifies on widely held assumptions about “the negro’s” inability to progress and his inevitable extinction. Therefore, even if Washington has rightly been criticized for his belief in his own

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<sup>330</sup> While Washington is enthusiastic when assessing the fairing of the freedmen after emancipation throughout both *Up from Slavery* and *Working with the Hands*, his most outspoken work in this respect is the two-volume *The Story of the Negro* (1909). Tracing this story through the history of Africa, of enslavement in the New World, and of African Americans after the Civil War, this work primarily aims to show “what the Negro himself has accomplished in the way of attaining to a higher civilization” (v).

representative status (he was the exception, *not* the rule), for the perversion of elevating slavery into a useful “school,” or for his unrealistic belief in meritocracy, his drastic presentation of a black man who *did* move from rags to riches powerfully signifies on claims that denied the black population’s potential to improve. In many other respects a son of his time who endorses the stage-logic and hierarchical trajectory of contemporary evolutionary thought, Washington also criticizes some of the racist assumptions of his contemporaries. He sets his own person as a powerful example in order to disprove the idea that “men cannot be taught a higher state of civilization, but can only be bred into it” (Fiske, qtd. M. Hawkins 109).

Another way in which Washington’s texts engage in a critique of evolutionary thought can be found regarding the question of (non-)intervention in social progress. His emphasis in this respect lies on collective efforts, specifically on two ideas: intraracial combination and interracial collaboration. The former, “combination,” had been a theme in African American writing long before Washington’s autobiographies appeared, especially in antebellum pamphlets and in postwar texts like Brown’s *My Southern Home*.<sup>331</sup> In Washington’s autobiographies, intraracial combination can be found primarily with regard to his efforts of making Tuskegee a self-sufficient agrarian enterprise, a “community unto itself,” and in his biopolitical idea of a racially unified African American population body (*Working* 70). The second idea of interracial cooperation, articulated memorably in the Atlanta Address’s argument for “mutual progress” of the races, pertains to both the local and the national level. On the one hand, Washington sought local cooperation between Southern blacks and whites, recognizing the need of both groups to add “something to the wealth and comfort of the community” as a whole (*Up* 71). An instance that exemplifies this idea is the episode describing the establishment of a brick trade at Tuskegee. Here, Washington emphasizes the intersection of local economic interests: “Our business interests became intermingled. We [Tuskegee Institute] had something which they [local whites] wanted; they had something which we wanted” (71). Such forms of local cooperation are vital to Washington’s Georgic vision of working and living off the land, also because they are connected to his optimistic belief that anybody, collective or individual, “who can do something that the

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<sup>331</sup> In nineteenth-century African American writing, the term “combination” primarily refers to economic forms of intraracial cooperation among blacks and most often expresses an idea of unity and racial pride. W. Hamilton’s 1834 “Address to the National Convention” is one of the earliest texts explicitly using the term. The author refers, on the one hand, to “a strong combination against the people of color,” and, on the other hand, urges “the free people of color [...]to] combine, and closely attend to their own particular interest” (112). *My Southern Home* presents another example of the term’s usage in the bourgeois economic sense that can also be found in Washington. Brown criticizes that “[c]olored lawyers, doctors, artisans and mechanics, starve for patronage, while the negro is begging the white man to do his work,” and suggests that “[c]ombinations have made other races what they are to-day” (239).

world wants done will, in the end, make his way regardless of his race” (72).

On the other hand, he turns to large-scale cooperation between the races on the national level when he praises the donations off which Tuskegee thrives as an expression of the idea that those who give freely for a good cause are exhibiting the highest qualities of what he sees at the top of the social evolutionary ladder, “civilization.” If one does something “that would cement the friendship between the races and bring about hearty cooperation between them,” i.e. if one expresses an ethos of help, this becomes in itself a proof of one’s being civilized (*Up* 99). In this respect, the autobiographies subversively signify on contemporary evolutionary thought, as they deploy a Darwinian idea to counter arguments for laissez-faire Spencerism. In the chapter on moral faculties in *Descent*, Darwin turns to moral-ethical values as a factor of “natural selection” and a means of survival for human groups. Imagining a tribal Ur-scene, he writes that

[i]t must not be forgotten that, although a high standard of morality gives but a slight or no advantage to each individual man and his children over the other men of the same tribe, yet that an advancement in the standard of morality and an increase in the number of well-endowed men will certainly give an immense advantage to one tribe over another. There can be no doubt that a tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to give aid to each other and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection. (Darwin, *Descent* 404)

Although Darwin’s idea could also have been interpreted by Washington’s contemporaries as supporting the idea of neglecting whichever group was (racially) different, there is at the same time an unmistakable emphasis on “sympathy” and “giving aid to each other” as qualities necessary for human survival in the struggle of life. Washington’s writing picks up this idea in its own way. On the one hand, Darwin’s passage generally corresponds with his scheme of morally improving the black population; on the other hand, his texts appropriate the idea of “sympathy” as a marker of civilization as such, which enables him to make a powerful claim for benevolent interventions through charity and education.

To grasp this strategy, it is crucial to note that Washington constantly stresses that the African American population is an undeniable reality that will not simply vanish, as some of his contemporaries believed. Therefore, the “negro” and the “white” population of the United States were, despite their presumed difference, in fact *one*. They were parts of the same (population) body, inevitably intertwined – as the metaphor in the Atlanta-speech suggests – as the “fingers” of *one* “hand” (*Up* 100). In Darwinian terminology, Washington therefore reads the *entirety* of the U.S. population as one “tribe,” to the effect that Darwin’s notion of “sympathy” as “one of

the most important elements of the social instincts” becomes usable for Washington in his own strategic way (*Descent* 393). Thus, when he stresses that civilized individuals “lift themselves up in proportion as they help to lift others,” his interpretation of the American population as a whole combines with the Darwinian notion of sympathy to justify and demand interracial cooperation and assistance for the African American part of the population (*Up* 48). It is true that his strategy appears submissive in many respects, as his revised pastoral is subsumed to a social evolutionary idea of progress towards (white) “civilization.” After all, he thereby suggests that African Americans should begin “at the bottom of life,” through a Georgic cultivation of the soil, in this sense succumbing to the interests of the planter-class of the South who feared the emigration of its main workforce (100). However, evolutionary thought becomes at the same time empowering, as Washington subversively employs not a sentimental but a Darwinian, evolutionary concept of “sympathy” for his own goals. By simultaneously segregating but biopolitically unifying the American population, and by signifying on a Darwinian notion, he strengthens his claim for cooperation and introduces an obligation to white “civilization.” If white Americans want to be recognized as civilized, they *must* assist in uplift, since sympathy, cooperation, and assistance are “natural,” because evolutionarily acquired traits of a stage of “civilization.”

To sum up, Washington’s texts are therefore important within the tradition of African American environmental knowledge for two main reasons. First, they rewrite the pastoral of the antebellum fugitive slave narrative, as they overcome the double vision that included a traumatized “slave’s eye” by celebrating an accessible pastoral-as-reward and introducing an African American Georgic that could lead to this reward. Washington’s signifying revision appropriates disciplinary and biopolitical means not only to furnish a productive work force, but also to reconfigure the black body’s relations to non-human materialities in order to assert the humanity of African Americans. Although there still is an urge towards hyper-separation characteristic of the Ur-genre, since being “human” for Washington still primarily meant being “civilized,” his pastoral and Georgic became crucial elements of an altered African American environmental knowledge that allowed for new forms of expressing relations to non-human material environments. Secondly, Washington’s autobiographies are also crucial as examples of how such revised forms of African American environmental knowledge were involved in writing against newly emerging discourses that continued the racial and environmental othering of the black body, such as (large parts of) evolutionary thought. In this respect, *Up from Slavery* and *Working with the Hands* demonstrate the intricate ways in which African American environmental knowledge continued to interact with dominant forms of racial and environmental knowledge through forms of signifying.

### 4.3

## Writing Against an Environmental State of Exception: Charles W. Chesnutt's Julius Stories, the Trans-corporeality of the Black Body, and Epistemological Resistance

“Dey’s so many things a body knows is lies, dat dey ain’ no use gwine roun’ findin’ fault wid tales dat mought des ez well be so ez not. [...] Hit’s monst’us square. But dis is a square worl’, anyway yer kin fix it”  
(Chesnutt, “The Conjuror’s Revenge” 31)

“All things are metamorphosed.”  
“The modifications mankind have undergone, and are still undergoing, result from a law underlying the whole organic creation; and provided the human race continues, and the constitution of things remains the same, those modifications must end in completeness.”  
(Spencer, *Social Statics* 45, 80)

In “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt,” the sixth story of *The Conjure Woman* (1900), Charles W. Chesnutt inserts a long quote from Herbert Spencer through one of his main characters. When a rainy gray and “awfully dull” afternoon finds John and Annie, the Northern couple who have moved to North Carolina, seated on the piazza of their new home, John begins to read out “with pleasure”:

The difficulty of dealing with transformations so many-sided as those which all existences have undergone, or are undergoing, is such as to make a complete and deductive interpretation almost hopeless. So to grasp the total process of redistribution of matter and motion as to see simultaneously its several necessary results in their actual interdependence is scarcely possible. There is, however, a mode of rendering the process as a whole tolerably comprehensible. Though the genesis of the rearrangement of every evolving aggregate is in itself one, it presents to our intelligence – (“Ha’nt” 80)

At this point, Annie interrupts John, bidding him to stop reading “that nonsense,” thus clearing the way for the entrance of Uncle Julius, the formerly enslaved narrator of the embedded tales that lie at the heart of Chesnutt’s stories (80). Scholars have generally taken the passage from Spencer as Chesnutt’s playfully ironic comment on John’s rationalistic frame of mind. Hemenway, for instance, reads the quotation as ironizing John’s inability “to deal with conjure as something other than the abstractions of a philosophical tract” (“Folklore” 299), J. Peterson thinks of the episode as “a complex case of sociolinguistic

irony” that pits a standard English against a vernacular treatment of the same topic (442), and Trodd suggests that the excerpt plays with “the broad philosophy behind Chesnutt’s collection” (124). While readings therefore recognize a thematic link between the “transformations” that are described in the quote and the metamorphoses at the heart of Julius’s tales, they rarely pay attention to where precisely the passage stems from. Without mentioning the name Spencer,<sup>332</sup> the quote is usually taken as a general example of Western science and as an expression of John’s presumptuousness and sense of superiority over Julius, whose tales he finds quaint and entertaining but does not take seriously.

That Chesnutt chose to quote Spencer, and this passage in particular, is, however, significant for several reasons. Firstly, it shows that Chesnutt satirizes John as a Spencerian “armchair anthropologist.” When John refers to the citation and his own scientific rationality as “philosophy” (“Ha’nt” 80) – a term that echoes what Spencer called his “synthetic philosophy”<sup>333</sup> – the scene becomes nothing less than a parody, a caricature. After all, we find John lodging on a piazza (probably in an armchair) “for a quiet smoke” (80), while delighting in what sociologist Albion Small, in 1897, criticized as the popular “fashion of semi-learned [Spencerian] thought” that allowed anyone to deal, supposedly with scientific authority, with the grand questions of life in terms of evolutionism (741).<sup>334</sup> John’s quotation

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<sup>332</sup> Although most interpretations take the quote as a comment on the transformations depicted in Julius’s embedded narratives, they do not generally focus on Chesnutt’s negotiation of Spencer’s philosophy. Hemenway, for instance, reads the passage as a “philosophical tract” without mentioning Spencer (“Folklore” 298); J. Peterson sees it as a contemporary “scientific explanation of the fantastic reality that Julius has so vividly described” (442); and for Trodd, the quote universally represents the “broad philosophy” of Western science (124). An exception is McWilliams, who draws attention to the irony of quoting Spencer, “one of the nineteenth-century’s most ambitious system builders,” and (briefly) points out that “Julius’s voice in these stories contradicts Spencer on virtually every point” (*Fictions* 91, 92). Others who mention the excerpt but not Spencer are H. Baker, *Modernism* 45-47; Wonham, *Chesnutt* 37-38; Werner 357-358; Scott 58-59; Gidden; Dixon, “Teller” 194-195; Gilligan 205; and Selinger 679.

<sup>333</sup> Between 1862 and 1897, Spencer published ten volumes on the *System of Synthetic Philosophy*. He employs the term “synthetic philosophy” in a broad sense to describe his application of evolutionary principles to the study of human societies; for him, evolution “was only peripherally talking about the fittest animals; he was focusing on the fittest social and cultural institutions” (Bohannon/Glaser xiv). On Spencer’s “synthetic philosophy” and evolutionism, see e.g. Carneiro/Perrin; Francis; Harris 108-141; M. Hawkins 82-103; Jackson/Weidman 76-84; Haller 121-152; and Stocking 110-132.

<sup>334</sup> Spencer’s “capacious and highly adaptable philosophy” was particularly well received in the U.S. (Jackson/Weidman 79). Some commented favourably on his ideas during the Civil War, e.g. the founder of *Popular Science* magazine, Edward L. Youmans, who foresaw a general development when he claimed in an 1863 letter to Spencer, that “there is no other man whose thoughts are so valuable to our [American] needs as yours are” (qtd. Fiske, *Youmans* 169). In the following decades, Spencer’s popularity rivalled that of Darwin, as his ideas fit well with an emerging progressivism, and as his “science became an instrument which verified the presumptive inferiority of the Negro and rationalized the politics of disenfranchisement and segregation into a social-scientific terminology that satisfied the troubled conscience of the middle-class” (Haller x). John, in Chesnutt’s stories, is in many ways an example of this conscience-stricken middle-class. On Spencer’s influence in the U.S., cf. Graves 74-85; M. Hawkins 104-122; Gossett 145-175; also

therefore represents not just any form of Western scientific rationality, but Spencerian evolutionary thought of the period, which existed, as contemporaries like Small realized, in a dubious “semi-learned” form across various discursive formations. By extension, if one takes the passage as a characterization of the one reading it out, the often-noted irony of the scene does not simply target John’s rationalistic frame of mind per se, but his taking a popular Spencerian perspective that is mocked as unscientific.

Secondly, not only the act of quoting as such, but the specific content of the excerpt, too, must therefore be reassessed. It must be read more carefully in its original Spencerian context and in its corresponding meaning in Chesnutt’s texts. The text passage is taken from the chapter on “The Instability of the Homogeneous” of Spencer’s *First Principles* (1862), the first volume of his monumental *System of Synthetic Philosophy*, and expresses the idea of a universal law of evolution when it speaks of “a mode of rendering the process [of life’s development] as a whole tolerably comprehensible”; moreover, it focuses on material “transformations so many-sided” and on “the redistribution of matter and motion” (Chesnutt, “Ha’nt” 80 = Spencer, *Principles* 401). Chesnutt’s choice of quoting Spencer was thus no doubt deliberate, as both share a general theme: transformations of matter. If Spencer, in “The Instability of the Homogeneous,” centrally broaches the issue of ways in which “any homogeneous aggregation” of matter is “necessarily exposed to different forces” by which “they are of necessity differently modified,” the same is also true for Chesnutt’s stories and, in particular, Julius’s embedded narratives (*Principles* 404). In the tale that follows the introductory frame narrative in “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt,” and in the embedded tales generally, it is after all Julius who unfolds before John and Annie’s, and the reader’s eyes a world where human and non-human materialities merge and metamorphose, where both are marked by what Spencer calls the “inter-dependence” between “matter and motion” (401).

Chesnutt’s quotation thus not only explicitly suggests that his texts can be read as parodying negotiations of Spencer’s evolutionary thought, but also highlights one of the central issues at stake in the Julius stories: transformations of matter. The “Instability of the Homogeneous” is Spencer’s chapter title, but it is also an underlying theme of Chesnutt’s texts.<sup>335</sup> The following explores this theme with respect to the transforming materiality of the

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Hofstadter’s classic study (1944), which at many points (over-)emphasizes Spencer’s role in popularizing “social Darwinism” in the United States.

<sup>335</sup> It seems significant in this respect that Chesnutt inserted the Spencer-quote in a story written specifically for the *Conjure Woman*-collection at a time when he had already written and published Uncle Julius stories for more than a decade. Being published by a renowned house like Houghton Mifflin meant Chesnutt’s

black body and demonstrates that the stories can be read as expressions of an African American environmental knowledge that writes against an environmental state of exception. On the one hand, this will be seen by reading Chesnutt's stories through Stacy Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality"; Julius's embedded tales are narratives of the trans-corporeality of the black body that repeat and revise the traumatic relations of the black (slave) body to non-human materialities. On the other hand, Chesnutt's problematization of the trans-corporeal black body interacts with evolutionary thought of the late-nineteenth century. His texts, in this respect, are instances of "epistemological resistance" that not only criticize Spencerism but also reflect on the possibilities and limits of a human knowledge of the non-human non-discursive material world as such.

### The Trans-corporeality of the Black Body

While scholarship on the Julius stories has thoroughly addressed major issues such as race, space, memory, or Chesnutt's use of the vernacular,<sup>336</sup> the most prominent theme has always been conjuration. Most literary critics have read conjuration as an expression of resistance to slavery, as "the ally of slaves whose most deeply felt emotions and relationships, whose essential dignity

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widespread national reception, something of which he was clearly aware (cf. on the production process and correspondence between Chesnutt and his editor Walter Hines Page e.g. Keller 147-159; McElrath/Leitz, esp. 95-129). Moreover, as the sophisticated, ambitious and clear-sighted writer he was, Chesnutt must have been aware of Spencer's popularity and the ways in which citing Spencer through John might alter not only the perception of this character but also the general meaning of his previous texts. Therefore, I take his explicit adaptation of Spencer's philosophy in this story as signalling the significance of this body of thought for other stories as well. If "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt" has been read as "Chesnutt's finest conjure tale" for exhibiting his "essential theme" of penetrating "the disguises of the demon, Slavery" (Bone 93), it must also be read as suggesting an essential – but so far largely unnoticed – context, Spencerian thought.

<sup>336</sup> Traditionally, scholars have read Chesnutt's Julius stories in the context of the plantation fiction of his contemporaries Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page (e.g. Andrews, *Literary Career* 39-73; Sundquist, *To Wake* 323-359; Shaffer; M.R. Martin; G. Martin; Meer, "Passing"); in terms of Chesnutt's use of dialect (e.g. C. W. Foster; Minnick 77-98; H. Baker, *Modernism* 42-47; Redling); or Julius's tricksterism (e.g. Dixon, "Teller"; Britt; Farnsworth; Lundy). The past two decades have seen a general reappraisal of Chesnutt's work, as he has been recognized as a "strikingly modern writer," especially regarding his take on questions of language and race (McWilliams, "Introduction" ix); cf. Finseth, "How Shall"; Wonham, *Chesnutt* xi-xii; and Duncan, "Introduction" esp. xvi-xvii; as well as the collections by Izzo/Orban (2009) and Prothro Wright/Pickens Glass (2010). This has also led to new readings of Chesnutt's Julius stories, e.g. in terms of place and terrain (Ingle), memory (Molyneaux; Trodd), and architecture (Gleason 67-104). Moreover, there are by now some poststructuralist (McWilliams, *Fictions*; Werner) and ecocritical interpretations (Myers, "Other Nature"; Outka 103-126). For a general overview of scholarship on Chesnutt, see e.g. the "Essays and Articles"-section in McElrath, *Critical Essays*; the reference guide by Ellison/Metcalf (1977); or the bibliography in Guzzio 77-79; for biographical information on Chesnutt, see Keller; or Render.

and human identity are threatened by the inhuman slavery system” (Andrews, *Literary Career* 59-60); others have identified African roots in Chesnutt’s use of the concept.<sup>337</sup> Ecocritics who have turned to Chesnutt, too, have been drawn to conjuration, as a theme that shows links between the natural world and the plight of the African American population. They read conjure, for instance, as an expression of “a way of inhabiting the South that is humanly and ecologically sustainable” (Myers, “Other Nature” 7), or as involved in the repression and reworking of the (environmental) trauma of slavery (cf. Outka 103-126).<sup>338</sup>

What such readings tend to overlook, however, is that not all of Chesnutt’s Julius stories involve the trope of conjuration.<sup>339</sup> Considering the corpus of the texts as a whole, from the 1887 “The Goophered Grapevine,” the story that made Chesnutt the first African American fiction writer recognized by the white literary establishment, to the climactic publication of *The Conjure Woman* in 1900,<sup>340</sup> one also finds stories that do not feature conjure men and women bewitching

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<sup>337</sup> It is only logical that conjuration has figured as the most prominent issue in interpretations, considering that all of the seven stories in *The Conjure Woman*, the volume that has traditionally been the focus of scholarship, involve the concept of conjure. As Outka points out, it was the “intrinsic fluidity” of this concept that has allowed Chesnutt’s “stories to accommodate a wide range of readings” (106). Readings of conjuration as a form of resistance are e.g. those by H. Baker, *Modernism* 42-57; McWilliams, *Fictions* 76-99; Sollors; or J.S. White, who describes conjuring as “a means of survival for the hapless slaves who had little else to sustain them” (85). Interpretations that focus on African(ist) elements can be found e.g. in Sundquist, *To Wake* 323-406; or Lundy; other readings have examined the ethics of conjure (Jaskoski) or read its workings in terms of the Gothic (Hemenway, “Gothic Sociology”).

<sup>338</sup> Chesnutt is one of the more prominent writers in ecocriticism on African American literature; one scholar even aligns him with Thoreau and Muir (cf. Myers, “Other Nature” 15-16). Ecocritical readings of Chesnutt have primarily turned to *The Conjure Woman*. Myers, for example, sees Julius as a kind of conservationist trickster who presents “African-American culture as an ecological as well as egalitarian alternative to the dominant culture” (“Other Nature” 6); Outka suggests that, as a “trauma narrative,” *The Conjure Woman* serves as a critique of mainstream nature writing by providing a “devastating intervention on the white fantasy of a plantation pastoral” (106, 104). Other ecocritical treatments of Chesnutt can be found in Myers, *Stories* 87-110; K. Smith, *Thought* 137-138; Wagner-McCoy; and Mondie. A reading that turns to another set of short stories in the context of the nineteenth-century animal protection movement is given by Mason 119-156.

<sup>339</sup> Exceptions in this respect are Wonham, who notes that in several Julius stories “the conjure element has been replaced by a harrowing psychological realism” (“Plenty” 142); and McWilliams, who observes that “not all of these stories include conjuring,” and therefore chooses to speak of “John and Julius stories” instead of “conjure stories” (*Fictions* 76). While the latter – somewhat misleading – term has widely been used, others have referred to the texts as “dialect stories” (Andrews), “John/Julius narratives” (Duncan), or by the term employed in the present chapter, “Julius tales” (Wonham; Render).

<sup>340</sup> The publication of “The Goophered Grapevine” in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1887 made Chesnutt the first African American fiction writer to gain a nation-wide audience. Chesnutt’s publishing record is in many ways revealing regarding the ideological climate of the late-nineteenth century. Although he had written in 1889 to his writer colleague Albion Tourgée that he had “about used up the old Negro who serves as a mouthpiece” (“Letter to Tourgée” 44), he continued to write and publish Julius stories throughout the difficult 1890s, as this seemed to be the only way to gain a foothold in a racist U.S. literary marketplace. Thus, it is not surprising that such stories, through *The Conjure Woman*, were his first major publication, after which he turned to more serious works of fiction (*The House Behind the Cedars* (1900); *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901)) during the “brief heyday” of his literary career (Andrews, “Introduction Chesnutt” xix). Today, *The Conjure Woman* is widely recognized as one of his “path-breaking publications” (McWilliams, “Introduction” ix), and Chesnutt himself seen as one of the first major African American fiction writers,

the diegetic worlds they inhabit. Several stories involving Julius as storyteller, written in the 1880s and 1890s, such as “Dave’s Neckliss” (1889), “The Dumb Witness” (1897), or “Lonesome Ben” (1897), omit such characters and overtly supernatural elements, but nonetheless centrally present exchanges and transformations between human and non-human matter. What binds the stories together, rather than a unifying trope of conjuration, is a thematic focus on the black body as metamorphosing matter. Therefore, Chesnutt’s Julius stories will be understood in the following not as “conjure stories” but primarily as stories of the materiality and “trans-corporeality” of the black body.

In *Bodily Natures* (2010), Stacy Alaimo employs the term “trans-corporeality” to refer to “material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world” (2). Trans-corporeality describes a “movement across bodies” and “interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures,” thus drawing attention to the porous materiality of the human body (2).<sup>341</sup> Such trans-corporeal “interchanges and interconnections” are central to Chesnutt’s texts, whether the trope of conjuration is involved or not. Whether characters are magically turned into birds, bears, foxes, or frogs, or transformed into “mulattoes” because they eat too much yellow clay from a riverbed, the exchanges between human and non-human matter lie at the heart of Julius’s tales. The stories therefore do not simply play with the question of the human in relation to dehumanizing discourses of race – something that was, after all, central to African American literature from its inception – but do so in a characteristic way through the theme of metamorphosing bodily matter. Chesnutt’s environmental knowledge thus involves a much more radical turn towards the body than that which can be seen in Washington’s disciplinary appropriation of the body of the freedman, as it writes against the environmental state of exception of a black body trans-corporealized in “a world of biological creatures, ecosystems, and xenobiotics” (115).

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something that had always been his goal, as he aspired to be the first “American with acknowledged African descent to [publish] purely imaginative literature” (“Letter to Houghton” 75). On the publication history of the Julius stories, see Gleason, who identifies three phases (67-71). On Chesnutt’s *oeuvre* more generally, which includes more than two dozen essays and speeches, another collection of short fiction (*The Wife of His Youth* (1899)) and three less successful novels (*The Colonel’s Dream* (1905); *Paul Marchant, F.M.C.* (written 1921); *The Quarry* (written 1928)), cf. the studies by Andrews, *Literary Career*; Duncan, *Absent Man*; Pickens; McWilliams, *Fictions*; or R. Simmons.

<sup>341</sup> Alaimo’s argument in *Bodily Natures* builds on various theorists from the fields of the new materialisms and ecocriticism, and envisions trans-corporeality as a critical model that re-aligns human bodies with the non-human material world. Structured into two main parts, her work focuses, on the one hand, on environmental justice, and, on the other hand, on environmental health, arguing for a trans-corporeal model that recognizes “flows of substances [...] between people, places, and economic systems” (9). For the purposes of this chapter, I employ “trans-corporeality” in a broad sense as a concept that helps describe Chesnutt’s new vision of the black body’s materiality.

It is important to note that a trans-corporeal vision of the black body was in itself highly problematic for an African American writer of the late-nineteenth century like Chesnutt. Julius's tales are therefore not simply narratives but *problematizations* of the trans-corporeal black body. They reveal Chesnutt's awareness of the difficulties that lie in writing about links between African Americans and the non-human world in the postwar decades, as they draw attention to the ways in which any notion of a trans-corporeal black body was still inevitably haunted by the traumatic conflation of this body with the non-human under slavery. Chesnutt's Julius faces a legacy of discourses negotiating the status of African Americans through the signifier "nature" that had either racially othered, i.e. biologically excluded and environmentally exceptionalized the black body by equating it with non-human nature, or that had agitated against this othering by writing against biological exclusion (cf. chapter 3.3). The former is the history of the long-term commodification of the black body, of the pseudo-scientific "biological" justifications of colonialism and racial slavery, and of the slave body's reduction to economic capital through what Sundquist describes as "the elision between human and animal, or human and 'thing,' in the philosophy of chattelism" (*To Wake* 373). The latter is the discourse of abolitionism and the antebellum fugitive slave narrative that wrote against this biological exclusion of the black body and for its recognition as human. When Douglass, for example, described in his 1845 *Narrative* how "[m]en and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine," he raised his voice against the processes of biological exclusion he depicts (35). Likewise, when antebellum African American pamphleteers like Easton or Lewis invaded and "dissected" the black body to show its anatomical analogies to the white body, they followed the same basic abolitionist logic that to demonstrate a common biological humanity, while showing "that slaves were ranked with animals, was to show that slavery was unnatural" (Mason 124). Both pamphleteers' "dissections" of the black body and the urge towards hyper-separation characteristic of the slave narrative were in this sense antebellum answers to the conflation of the black body with the non-human under slavery that placed it in a state of biological exclusion and environmental exception.

Chesnutt's texts are attempts to give a new answer by repeating and revising the trans-corporeality of the black body as it emerged out of the history of slavery. This means, first, that they do not forget or omit the trauma that stems from the biological and environmental othering of the black body under the peculiar institution. On the contrary, Julius's tales signal that a trans-corporeal vision of the black body is problematic, as they centrally recall the slave's harmful conflation with the non-human that lay at the core of racial slavery. In this respect, Julius's voice

becomes a powerful instrument of reworking the trauma of slavery, and, as many scholars have noted, a means of setting a counterpoint to the nostalgia of the popular plantation fiction of Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, who romantically glossed over the atrocities of the peculiar institution with stereotypes of happy slaves and benevolent masters.<sup>342</sup> Chesnutt, by contrast, presents tales set in the antebellum period that emphasize the haunting atrocities of slavery – atrocities that still complicated the representation of a trans-corporeal black body at the time he was writing. In many of Julius’s tales, therefore, black slave bodies, whether trans-corporealized through conjure or otherwise, figure as reminders of the traumatic legacy of the peculiar institution. In “The Goophered Grapevine,” “Po’ Sandy,” and “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” for instance, three of the stories included in *The Conjure Woman*, all enslaved characters whose bodies merge with non-human matter through conjure, are eventually harmed. In “Po’ Sandy,” Sandy, who wishes to “be turnt inter sump’n w’at ’ll stay in one place,” is transformed into a “big pine-tree” that is eventually cut down and made into lumber for the plantation’s new kitchen (17). In “The Goophered Grapevine,” Henry unknowingly eats grapes from a bewitched vineyard, which lets his body live through the seasonal cycles of the fruit until he dies with it. Finally, in “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” Primus, after stealing a piglet, becomes the victim of a conjure man’s viciousness as he is transformed into a mule and turned back “‘cep’n’ one foot,” which leaves him a club-footed, “metamorphosed unfortunat” (28, 30, 32).

Apart from revealing the joint destruction of the black body and non-human matter under the peculiar institution, Julius’s tales also stress the avariciousness and immorality of masters who exploited the slave’s body *as* non-human matter. Primus is bought and sold, whether he is a man *or* a mule (cf. 26); Sandy remains a commodity, whether he figures in the story as (human) materiality of a slave who is handed around by his master’s children like a toy *or* as (non-human) materiality of a tree which is uprooted and turned into lumber “‘fer ter buil’ ‘im [his master] a noo kitchen” (19); and Henry, because of his seasonal metamorphoses, is not only repeatedly sold to other farmers as his rapacious owner realizes that “he could make mo’ money out’n Henry,” but is eventually the one who must pay the price for his master’s greed with his life (10). Chesnutt’s planters are not the benevolent patriarchs of Page and Harris, but full of avarice, and make use

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<sup>342</sup> Chesnutt’s daughter Helen, for instance, has suggested that the Julius stories can be contrasted with the nostalgic plantation fiction of the time (Harris, Page), which, in the 1880s and 1890s, did the “cultural work [...] [of] justifying the political and economic repression of African Americans” (Wilson xii). She (and many others) have noted that, in the stories, “[t]here was no glossing over the tragedy of slavery; there was no attempt to make the slave-master relationship anything but what it actually was” (H. Chesnutt 110). On Chesnutt’s relation to the nostalgic plantation tradition, cf. Andrews, *Literary Career* 39-73; Gilligan 196-203; Petrie 116-120; M.R. Martin; G. Martin; T. J. Smith; and Outka 104-105.

of the socially constructed racial demarcations, the “biological-type caesuras” (cf. Foucault, *Society* 255) drawn between the human and the non-human for a single purpose: maximizing their economic profit.

Chesnutt presents his most drastic deconstructive statement regarding the arbitrariness of drawing demarcating lines between human and non-human matter in “Mars Jeems’ Nightmare,” the third story of *The Conjure Woman*. This text is remarkable for breaking with a general pattern, as “Aun’ Peggy, de free-nigger conjuh ‘oman down by de Wim’l’ton Road,” temporarily transforms a cruel master into a slave (94). While Chesnutt’s stories otherwise exclusively present transformations of *black* bodies into non-human animals, conjuration in this tale is used to transform a *white* body into a black one to teach a cruel master, Jeems McLean, a lesson. Thus, the tale can be read as an ironic comment on how arbitrary the “caesura” dividing the (white) human and the (black) non-human was, as McLean is not turned into non-human matter, as is generally the case through Chesnutt’s conjurers, but into another form of human materiality that is, however, socially *constructed* as non-human. The narrative thereby, through the master’s transformed body, unfolds its deconstructive potential in two ways. In terms of biopolitics, it points out the arbitrariness of racial distinctions; in terms of a “caesura” between the human and the non-human more generally, it involves an ecopolitics that stresses potential flows between all kinds of matter. In unsettling the “naturalness” of biopolitical, racializing “caesuras” by stressing their construction out of power struggles and economic interests, Chesnutt also demonstrates a general awareness of the convergence of racial distinctions with distinctions between the human and the non-human. His texts are, in other words, conscious of the intertwinement between racial and environmental knowledge, and identify the roots of the trauma marking the trans-corporeality of the black body precisely within this intertwinement. Thus, the stories reveal that the combination of the peculiar institution’s claiming the black body as non-human property with the avaricious practices of the masters left African Americans with an ambivalent legacy of the trans-corporeal, in which the link between the black body and the non-human material became both a source of degradation and a potential means of resistance. Chesnutt stresses, however, that, under slavery, conjure-induced trans-corporeality provided an at best *temporary* means of resistance.

The same is also true for those cases of trans-corporeality where conjuration is not involved. “Lonesome Ben,” for instance, a text published in the *Southern Workman* in 1900,<sup>343</sup> does not

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<sup>343</sup> “Po’ Lonesome Ben,” as the original title of this story went, was first rejected by the *Atlantic Monthly*, which, as Chesnutt ironically remarked in an 1897 letter to Walter Hines Page, made his text’s title “only the more appropriate” (97). The story has predominantly been read in the context of the alienation involved

feature conjure, yet shares many themes, including trans-corporeality, with other stories. Here, too, one finds traditional abolitionist themes of family separations and iconic corporeal punishments, as the plot unfolds when Ben decides to run away at the threat of an imminent “cowhidin” (53). The black body’s trans-corporeality, in this case, however, is not expressed through the work of a conjure man, but via (mal)nutrition and digestion. As he repeatedly eats yellow clay from a riverbed, Ben turns into a lonely, “mis’able lookin’ merlatter” outcast (“Ben” 56), who ends up lying on the shore of the creek

’til he died, an’ de sun beat down on ’im, an’ beat down on ’im, an’ beat down on ’im fer th’ee or fo’ days, ’til it baked ’im as ha’d as a brick. An’ den a big win’ come erlong an’ blowed a tree down, an’ it fell on ’im an’ smashed ’im all ter pieces, an’ groun’ ’im ter powder. An’ den a big rain come erlong, an’ washed ’im in de crick, ’an eber sence den de water in dat crick’s b’en jes’ as yer sees it now. (“Ben” 58-59)

By becoming first a “brick” and then a “powder” that gives the stream its peculiar color, Ben, like enslaved characters in other stories, not only turns into a commodity, but also becomes part of the traumatized landscape in which the frame narrative is set. As in those stories that involve conjuration, Chesnutt thereby presents the slaves’ pain as permanently inscribed into the land. The Sandy-lumber, too, is still present in a small frame house, the “goophered grapevine” from which Henry once supposedly ate still exists and is bought by John, and Primus still has a club-foot; the frame narrative, in short, is “teeming with the ghosts of dead slaves, victims of the cruelties perpetrated by the slave system” (K. Smith, *Thought* 137). Beyond unveiling the trauma of slavery against the nostalgia that prevailed in much late-nineteenth century plantation fiction, trans-corporeality therefore attains an additional crucial function in Chesnutt’s texts, namely that of creating the landscape itself as a body that remembers. Julius’s narratives of the trans-corporeal black body act against the nostalgic forgetfulness of a post-Reconstruction plantation pastoral not only by recalling the lasting trauma of slavery that resided in the antebellum links between the black body and the non-human, but also by employing the trans-corporeality of the black body to create material monuments against forgetting the slaves’ fate.

Although the Julius stories thus problematize an African American vision of trans-corporeality, they are at the same time attempts to renegotiate the meaning of the material relations of the black body. On the one hand, Chesnutt *repeats* the harmful conflation of the black body with the non-

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in a mixed race identity (cf. e.g. Sundquist, *To Wake* 404-406; Wonham, *Chesnutt* 51-55, “Plenty” 142-145) and in terms of Ben’s geographical – and metaphorically African Americans’ social – disorientation (cf. e.g. Ingle 162-163). Gleason gives a spatial reading of “Lonesome Ben” as “detailing the crushing self-annihilation that the forfeiture of home can produce” (82).

human under slavery and creates a monument to the humanity of those who lived through it. On the other hand, however, the texts go beyond recalling the victimization as well as the potential of (temporary) resistance inscribed into formerly enslaved bodies and the land, as they articulate an environmental knowledge that involves a *revised*, more positive version of the trans-corporeality of the black body. This can be seen, first, in the ways in which Julius's tales suggest an intimate local knowledge and an empowering emotional attachment of African Americans to the land, and, secondly, in Julius's role as a co-narrator of the land in the frame narratives.

To begin with, there is the idea that African Americans possess an intimate and empowering local knowledge of the non-human material world. In "Po' Sandy," for instance, only the slaves realize a change in the environs after Sandy is transformed into a part of the landscape surrounding the plantation. Only they know the forest well enough to recognize "a tree w'at dey did n' 'member er habbin' seed befo'; it wuz monst'us square, en dey wuz bleedst ter 'low dat dey had n' 'membered right, er e'se one er de saplin's had be'n growin' monst'us fas'" (17). Chesnut's conjure men and women, too, can be read as emblems of an intimate African American knowledge of the non-human world. They employ birds and other animals as spies and allies, or make use of non-human material phenomena such as storms or floods, thus representing their power as one based on the collaboration between the human and the non-human rather than merely the domination of the former over the latter.<sup>344</sup> Moreover, the character of Julius himself at times betrays an intimate African American local knowledge of the non-human world. In "Hot-Foot Hannibal," for example, the last story of *The Conjure Woman*,<sup>345</sup> Julius and the mare Lucy team up as tricksters to settle a quarrel between Annie's visiting sister Mabel and her lover, the young Southerner Malcolm Murchison. Here, it is not so much Julius's tale, but the manner in which he places it in the framing story that reveals his intimate local environmental knowledge. As John, Annie, and Mabel take a "drive to a neighbour's vineyard,"

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<sup>344</sup> In "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," for instance, a conjure man "sont dis jay-bird" to find out where a "life-cha'm" is hidden, and conjures up strong winds and rain to "wash' Dan's life-cha'm inter de ribber" (84). Similarly, the conjure woman in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" not only repeatedly turns one of the characters into a bird, but also uses a "sparrer" (sparrow) and a "hawnet" (hornet) as allies in her trickster scheme to reunite a mother with her little son (108). The idea that non-human animals are central to conjure is also expressed in Chesnut's essay on "Superstition and Folk-Lore of the South" (1901). Here, he stresses the prevalence of the anthropomorphizing Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox stories that "the old mammies would tell," and the ways in which stories of "the more gruesome phases of the belief in conjuration" involved non-human animals such as "lizards and snakes" (871, 866, 867).

<sup>345</sup> This story, although specifically written for the collection, first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in January 1899. For interpretations of this particular text, which has sometimes been taken as "a signal of Julius's failure as a subversive voice" (Wonham, *Chesnut* 43), see e.g. Andrews, *Literary Career* 57-59; Wonham, *Chesnut* 40-44; and Selinger.

Julius arranges a meeting between the estranged couple by organizing a delay and detour seemingly caused by Lucy's disobedience (121). That they have to stop "about half-way" to their destination and take another route, supposedly due to the mare's fear of a haunt roaming the land, has two effects. First, it places Julius in the position to tell his story, which subversively urges Mable to re-join her bonds with Malcolm and, secondly, arranges the two temporally estranged lovers' meeting on the alternative route that the party have to take. Julius's tricksterism therefore significantly involves a non-human agent, Lucy, who apparently joins him in his scheme. Although he alleges that the otherwise compliant mare's disobedience is "a cu'ous thing ter me," one is convinced by the end, that she has been involved in his plan all along in ways the reader is not allowed to decipher. Through Julius's conspiring with Lucy, both together achieve the reunion of the couple, who are eventually "walking arm in arm" again (130). Chesnutt expresses, in such instances, a basic idea that also runs through Brown and Washington. Like the former, who repeatedly suggested the slaves' agrarian knowledge of the land, and the latter, who claimed that black freedmen, by going through "school of slavery," were enabled to act out an African American Georgic, Chesnutt, too, implies an intimate and empowering local environmental knowledge of African Americans as experts of the land.

Moreover, Julius's narratives of the trans-corporeal black body suggest an emotional attachment of African Americans to the land that could ensure survival under the peculiar institution. This attachment involves a way of reading and understanding the non-human world that is quite different from a Washingtonian Georgic vision that focuses primarily on the agrarian usefulness of the land, as it endows the surroundings with spiritual meaning. Moments in which reading non-human nature in a particular way provides an empowering emotional attachment can be found, for example, in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," another story written specifically for *The Conjure Woman*. Once again, Julius's tale begins by recalling the traumatic conflation of the black body with the non-human: An enslaved woman, Becky, is traded by her master for a race horse named "Lightnin' Bug," and separated from her child, little Moses (cf. "Becky" 104-105). In the course of the story, however, the work of a conjure woman is exceptionally successful in reuniting mother and son, in part because the mother is able to find an emotional attachment to non-human matter that helps her survive. When Moses is turned into a "hummin'-bird" and flies to Becky's far-off plantation, the text describes how the mother is able to hear "sump'n hummin' roun' en roun' her, sweet en low. Fus' she 'lowed it wuz a hummin'-bird; den she thought it sounded lack her little Mose croonin' on her breas' way back yander on de ole plantation" (107). Subsequently, when he is turned into a "mawkin'-bird," she feels him "stayin' roun' de house all

day, en bimeby Sis' Becky des 'magine' dat mawkin'-bird wuz her little Mose crowin' en crowin', des lack he useter do w'en his mammy would come home at night fum de cottonfiel'" (107). In such moments, Becky's ability to find a connection to the non-human material world through her senses and her imagination in a way that acknowledges a spiritual presence in non-human matter allows her the emotional solace necessary to endure her hardships. It is not important at this point that this involves superstition and not rationally acceptable knowledge, since, Chesnutt's story suggests, her form of knowledge has a 'true effect' – something that Annie realizes, too, when she empathically remarks after Julius has finished his tale that "the story bears the stamp of truth, if ever a story did" (110).<sup>346</sup> The text as a whole thus self-reflexively celebrates the empowering potential that lies in (literarily) imagining the black body as trans-corporeal, and simultaneously signifies on what I have called, in the context of the Underground Railroad, a "hermeneutics of freedom" (cf. chapter 3.2). Chesnutt's story echoes this process of finding meaning and spiritual solace in the "book of nature," but combines the idea with imagining a trans-corporeal black body.

Ultimately, "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" furthermore hints at the lasting strength that African Americans may draw from imagining a trans-corporealized bond of the black body with the non-human. In the end, Moses, having been turned into a variety of birds,

could sing en whistle des lack a mawkin'-bird, so dat de w'ite folks useter hab 'im come up ter de big house at night, en whistle en sing fer 'em, en dey useter gib' 'im money en vittles', en one thing er ernudder, w'ich he alluz tuk home ter his mammy; fer he knowed all 'bout w'at she had gone th'oo. ("Becky" 110)

Here, Chesnutt suggests that connecting spiritually to non-human matter has an empowering potential and offers a more permanent means of survival. Moses, through his temporary transformation, has acquired skills and gained character traits that, to some extent, alleviate his fairing under slavery. If taken at face value, Chesnutt's suggestion at this point is no doubt radical, as it emphasizes through Julius's tales a fluidity not only of matter but also of knowledge *through* matter. The embedded tales repeatedly express this notion by presenting traits that persist between human and non-human forms of matter. Primus, for example, in "The Conjuror's Revenge,"

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<sup>346</sup> This remark and Annie's "settled melancholy" (102) in the frame narrative of "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" have been read, for instance, as resulting from her condemnation of Julius's tale in the previous story in *The Conjure Woman*, or as indicating her suffering from depression, perhaps in connection with a miscarriage. The internal story in "Becky," by contrast, is one of the most optimistic tales Julius ever relates, and reveals the healing power that not only African Americans but also emphatic white listeners like Annie may draw from the painful past. Cf. for readings of this tale e.g. S. Wright; Wonham, *Chesnutt* 33-37; Baker, *Modernism* 46; Dixon, "Teller" 192-193; Hewitt 944-945.

continues to have a fondness of tobacco and wine, whether he is a mule or a man, and – as a mule – tries to fend off the advances of another suitor of his wife (cf. 26-28). Likewise, Tobe’s desultoriness in wanting “ter git free too easy” in “Tobe’s Tribulations” is also visible while he is transformed into a bear, a fox, or a bull-frog (115, cf. 116-119). Although the outcome of this fluidity of knowledge and character traits across different forms of matter therefore rarely has effects that are as beneficent as in the case of “Sis’ Becky’s Pickaninny,” such moments highlight Chesnutt’s revision of the problematic trans-corporeal relation of the black body to non-human materialities. Representing more than merely anthropomorphizations of animals, the characteristic fluidity of Chesnutt’s notion of trans-corporeality, as it is expressed through Julius’s tales, involves transmissions of knowledge from human to non-human matter and vice versa. If one follows this thought through into its most radical form, this implies that all materialities, whether human or not, remember, know, and live in the same way. Taken less literally, however, it may also be read as another assault on the biopolitical, racializing “caesura” between the human and the non-human. In this respect, Chesnutt’s trans-corporeal environmental knowledge proposes the empowering potential that can lie in a co-agency of the human and the non-human, which may be acted out if African Americans recognize not only the trauma but also the strengths that lie in their intimate local knowledge and in their emotional attachment to the non-human material world.

Such a co-agency between human and non-human materialities is primarily represented through Julius’s relation to the land in the frame narrative. The empowering potential of Chesnutt’s trans-corporeal environmental knowledge therefore becomes visible not only in the embedded tales, but also in their interaction with the frame narrative that involves Julius, John, and Annie. As noted, Chesnutt’s texts, through Julius’s narratives of the trans-corporeal black body, turn the landscape into a locus of memory.<sup>347</sup> Beyond connecting the antebellum diegetic world of Julius’s tales with that of the frame narratives, however, the land also marks Julius’s *own* trans-corporeality within the act of narration. The texts suggest that a common knowledge resides in Julius and the land itself, and that both join in relating the stories that Julius turns into intelligible discourse. Thus, he emerges in the frame narratives not simply as an inventor of stories, but as an interpreter of a memory and knowledge shared by the black body and the non-human materiality of the land, which becomes a co-agent in a narrative process in which both the human and the non-human create meaning as partners.

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<sup>347</sup> On memory and the ways in which the landscape is involved in acts of remembrance, see e.g. Molyneaux; or Trodd. The geographic locations depicted in the Julius stories have also been compared with the actual North Carolinian locales Chesnutt was familiar with, cf. e.g. Ingle.

Evidence of this can be found when considering how phenomena such as changes in the weather or the sensual experience of the surroundings in the frame narrative correspond with Julius's tales. In "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," for instance, after Julius has told his story of two lovers, Mahaly and Dan, and the malignant work of a conjurer that leads to the permanent transformation of the latter into a wolf who supposedly stays around Mahaly's grave "howlin' en howlin' down dere" in the swamp ("Wolf" 89), the frame narrative ends with a gothic moment:

The air had darkened while the old man related this harrowing tale. The rising wind whistled around the eaves, slammed the loose window-shutters, and, still increasing, drove the rain in fiercer gusts into the piazza. As Julius finished his story and we rose to seek shelter within doors, the blast caught the angle of some chimney or gabel in the rear of the house, and bore to our ears a long, wailing note, an epitome, as it were, of remorse and hopelessness. (89)

Julius's response may not come as a surprise. He reads this "long, wailing note" in the context of his own story: "Dat's des lack po' ole Dan useter howl" (89). Connecting the storm, a non-human material phenomenon, with his tale, he interprets a facet of the land as a form of communication and translates it into a language intelligible for his listeners and Chesnut's readers. The question here and in other tales is not so much whether we believe in the tale as such and, in this case, its supernatural elements; whether we dismiss it as superstition or celebrate an ethos of resistance of the slaves expressed through conjure. Instead, the crucial point is that Chesnut presents Julius as a skilful interpreter of non-human material phenomena. He reveals his storyteller not only as possessing a particular local knowledge of the land, but also places him in a relation of co-agency with the non-human materialities within the act of narration. As Julius opens up the memory of slavery as the concealed knowledge of the land, African American environmental knowledge emerges, in Chesnut, as a knowledge of interpretation.

Similar observations can be made regarding "Tobe's Tribulations" and "Lonesome Ben." The former presents Julius's tale about Tobe, who attempts to escape slavery with the help of a conjure woman, but ends up permanently transformed into a frog in a marsh that John, in the framing story, plans to use as a "food-supply" (112).<sup>348</sup> The non-human material phenomenon Julius interprets in this case is the supposed lament of Tobe among the nightly "chorus from the

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<sup>348</sup> "Tobe's Tribulations" has, for instance, been read as an allegory of the failures of Reconstruction (cf. e.g. Ingle), or as a story that comments on the inability of (John's) white culture to "hear" the voice of the bull-frog and, by extension, of an African American plight and culture (cf. Sundquist, *To Wake* 313-317, 385-388). See for other readings e.g. Wonham, *Chesnut* 49-51; and Molyneaux.

distant frog-pond,” which, according to his tale, is a remnant of the peculiar institution (112). Here, too, the landscape is revealed as remembering, “knowing,” and expressing the traumatic experience of the black body. As he relates his tale, and connects his narrative with the non-human material, Julius and the land become co-agents in telling the same story. Both the non-human materiality of the bullfrog and its cry, and the human voice and body of the former slave are presented as spiritually invested matter that creates meaning in a reciprocal process fundamental to Chesnut’s environmental knowledge, in which Julius and the land do not simply share memory but become co-narrators. In this sense, Chesnut’s environmental knowledge is highly self-reflexive, as it emphasizes how the land shapes the production of a human environmental knowledge, and how human interpretations and narratives, in turn, shape relations to the land. As both the body of the former slave and the body of the land link two timeframes and levels of narration, the stories suggest more generally that the ways in which we *read* rain, thunder, the sound of frogs, or any other non-human material phenomenon, and the ways in which we *narrate* this, shape our relation to non-human material environs.

“Lonesome Ben,” the story in which the clay-eating Ben pines away and eventually dies, being transformed first into a brick and then into a powder that supposedly gives a creek’s water its peculiar hue, also demonstrates Julius’s role as co-narrator of the land. Julius’s tale is not just a fanciful attempt to explain the color of the stream, which has “an amber tint to which the sand and clay background of the bed of the stream imparted an even yellower hue” (“Ben” 55). Instead, the materiality of the water itself becomes the representation of a trans-corporeal memory and knowledge that connects the narrative levels of the story; Julius’s explanation stresses the lasting effects of interactions between different kinds of matter, human and non-human, that once made the water “yaller lak it is now” (55). Just like human constructions such as the frame house that is supposedly built out of Sandy’s lumber, or non-human material phenomena like thunderstorms or the croaking of bullfrogs, the coloring of the stream, too, functions as a way of revealing the land as a memorizing trans-corporeal entity, the meanings of which can be co-narrated through narrators like Julius.

In conclusion, trans-corporeality is therefore crucial to Chesnut’s stories in two main ways. On the one hand, Julius’s embedded tales can be read as narratives of the trans-corporeal black body that reveal the black body’s relation to the non-human material as simultaneously haunted and empowering. On the other hand, the act of narrating the tales itself marks Julius’s own trans-corporeal relation to the materiality of the land, a relation in which both matter and knowledge appear fluid. Chesnut, in this way, articulates African American environmental knowledge as a

knowledge that realizes its own perspective in a world of uncertainties – a knowledge that self-consciously implies that any attempt to *relate* a story of the land is at the same time a means of *relating to* the land. Since, as Julius suggests, “dey ain’ no tellin’ w’at ’s gwine ter happen in dis worl’,” narration itself becomes essential to Chesnutt’s form of environmental knowledge (“Sandy” 18). Reading the Julius stories in this way not only highlights their importance in the history of African American environmental knowledge, but also more generally reveals Chesnutt as a far-sighted environmental writer. He is not just “strikingly modern” with respect to his views on race as a social and linguistic construction (Williams ix), but also intriguing as a theorist of a racially shaped history of the American environmental imagination, who provides, with the Julius stories, “environmental texts” par excellence (L. Buell). With respect to the tradition of African American environmental knowledge, however, the stories’ crucial contribution is that they move from writing against biological exclusion to writing against an environmental state of exception. They refrain from repeating the slave narratives’ urge towards hyper-separation and do not reiterate antebellum pamphleteers’ move inside the body to argue for a sameness of the black body on “biological” or “anatomical” grounds, but move towards trans-corporealizing the black body as a means of overcoming its racially produced state of exclusion and exception. Although the texts acknowledge the problems of a trans-corporeal vision of the black body, building literary monuments to the slaves who were harmed by the conflation of their bodies with the non-human through discourses of “nature,” they environmentalize the body in a way that neither romanticizes the relation between African Americans and the non-human through a sentimental or picturesque concept of “nature” nor interprets that relation as one of a mere Georgic usefulness. Instead, Chesnutt trans-corporealizes in a more fundamental way that seeks to show the power that lies in imagining and narrating the black body in its interaction with non-human materialities.

### Epistemological Resistance

Furthermore, Chesnutt’s texts are another example that demonstrates how a revised African American environmental knowledge could signify on newly emerging, often racist discourses. Chesnutt’s environmental knowledge, like Washington’s, interacts with contemporary evolutionary thought, yet also provides a more general and fundamental reflection on narration, knowledge, and interpretation, as they shape relations of the human to non-human non-discursive materialities. In this respect, it is necessary to realize first that a trans-corporeal African American

environmental knowledge is not the only form of environmental knowledge presented in the Julius stories. Another, competing knowledge of the human in its non-human material conditions negotiated through the texts is that of evolutionary thought, more precisely, as Chesnutt's quote in "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt" explicitly suggests, of Spencer's "synthetic philosophy." Like Washington, Chesnutt therefore not only revises a tradition of African American environmental knowledge, but simultaneously signifies on a culturally dominant form of racialized environmental knowledge – one that theorized about transformations of matter in terms of an "instability of the homogeneous" (Spencer, *Principles* 401).

Unlike Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Spencer's extensive writing, comprising his multi-volume *Synthetic Philosophy* and numerous books and essays published from the 1840s on, focused primarily on human society. Calling Spencer "the apostle of social *Darwinism*" is therefore misleading, since his central framework was not that of Darwinian biology, but one that used biology indiscriminately as a metaphor to articulate a biopolitical vision that imagined the social body itself as 'naturally,' quasi organically evolving towards perfection (Gould 146, emphasis mine). His major concepts, including "the survival of the fittest" and the notion of a society's tending towards an ultimately purified state of "equilibration," broadly influenced U.S. discourse and were popular at the time Chesnutt was writing; they fit a late-nineteenth-century American view of society that rested on a tradition of biologizing conceptions of race. At the heart of Spencer's "philosophy" lay his conviction that evolution was the driving force *within* human societies and not just what had first brought about humankind as a whole. Furthermore, there was his concomitant unwavering belief in the inevitability of progress in human societies as something that was "naturally" guaranteed. Progress was

not an accident, but a necessity. Instead of civilization being artefact, it is part of nature; all of a piece with the development of the embryo or the unfolding of a flower. The modifications mankind have undergone, and are still undergoing, result from a law underlying the whole organic creation; and provided the human race continues, and the constitution of things remains the same, those modifications must end in completeness. [...] So surely must the things we call evil and immorality disappear; so surely must man become perfect.  
(*Social Statics* 80)

Exhibiting a Lamarckian optimism,<sup>349</sup> Spencer thinks of social evolution not simply as a biological process but as progress from an unordered, chaotic state of savagery or barbarism

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<sup>349</sup> Spencer's philosophy (unlike Darwin's) is firmly rooted in the Lamarckian idea of inheritance and the concomitant conviction of the perfectibility of humankind. See on Lamarck's influence on Spencer e.g. Harris 110-114; Stocking 239-242; Hofstadter 39; Jackson/Weidman 79; Graves 81; Gossett 152, 163.

towards ever more complex stages of civilization. In this respect, he epitomizes two central notions of U.S. evolutionary thought that have been outlined in the last chapter (4.2): the idea of a developmental difference in simultaneously existing human (racial) groups, and that of a hierarchical trajectory as an adequate way of describing the relation between those groups.

Spencer conceived of societies as “organisms” that tended towards perfection; different racial groups were thought of in terms of body parts that were either beneficent to or holding back the progress of the social body as a whole. There were, according to this view, elements that had been evolutionarily left behind, that were yet in “lower,” child-like stages of (social) evolution and that would ultimately perish if they did not evolve, since society *had* to progress towards ever more perfect forms of civilization.<sup>350</sup> Spencer’s evolutionary scale was “a unilinear one. Mankind was a unity, not because all human beings were the same, but because the different human groups stood at different steps in the same process” (Jackson/Weidman 80). Even if this did not necessarily imply taking active measures against those ‘deficient’ elements of the social body that were supposedly evolutionarily left behind in the way the eugenics movement proposed, it provided, for Spencer and many of his American followers, a justification of laissez-faire policies that included opposition e.g. to public education or sanitation laws. In order to evolve, it was deemed essential for the social body to “excret[e] its unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating, faithless members to leave room for the deserving” by letting ‘nature’ take its course (Spencer, *Social Statics* 355). In the late-nineteenth century U.S., Spencer’s “synthetic philosophy” thus lent a cold ‘scientific’ rationale to explicitly racist policies, as it suggested that the “poverty of the incapable, the distresses that come upon the imprudent, the starvation of the idle, and those shouldering aside of the weak by the strong [...] are the decrees of a large, far-seeing benevolence” (354).

If this was the form of evolutionary thought that Chesnutt alluded to by quoting Spencer, the more specific idea he invited his readers to take into account in relation to African American environmental knowledge was Spencer’s take on transformations of matter. The part of *First Principles* from which the quote in “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt” stems is concerned, as I have pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, with how matter rearranges itself over long stretches of time in accordance with the law of evolution. On the one hand, Spencer suggests that all matter

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<sup>350</sup> Since Spencer saw evolution as synonymous with progress, it seemed logical to him to conceptualize the supposedly “lower” races as stuck in a state of childhood – an idea that his American followers, e.g. Sumner and Fiske, willingly took up in their work on the “negro problem.” See on Spencer’s conceptualization of a childhood-stage in certain racial groups e.g. Jackson/Weidman 80-83; Gossett 144-148; on the idea of a childhood-stage in evolutionary thought generally, cf. chapter 4.2, note 326.

evolves and metamorphoses, that therefore “the condition of homogeneity is a condition of unstable equilibrium,” and that “to grasp the process of redistribution of matter and motion [...] is scarcely possible”; on the other hand, he simultaneously puts forward that “the process as a whole [is] tolerably comprehensible” through evolution as the all-embracing, “natural” law of progress (*Principles* 401). His deductive reasoning is based on the premise that

Nature in its infinite complexity is ever growing to a new development. Each successive result becomes the parent of an additional influence, destined in some degree to modify all future results. [...] As we turn over the leaves of the earth’s primeval history – as we interpret the hieroglyphics in which are recorded the events of the unknown past, we find this same ever-beginning, never-ceasing change. We see it alike in the organic and the inorganic – in the decompositions and recombinations of matter, and in the constantly-varying forms of animal and vegetable life. [...] With an altering atmosphere, and a decreasing temperature, land and sea perpetually bring forth fresh races of insects, plants, and animals. All things are metamorphosed [...]. (*Social Statics* 45)

He goes on to suggest that the same is also true for humankind, since “[s]trange indeed would it be, if, in the midst of this universal mutation, man alone were constant, unchangeable. But it is not so. He also obeys the law of indefinite variation. His circumstances are ever changing; and he is ever adapting himself to them” (46). In this respect, Spencer’s evolutionary thought itself may be read as involving a concept of trans-corporeality based on the notion that “[a]ll things are metamorphosed” (45). His idea of the “material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world” (Alaimo 2), however, is one that racializes social bodies through biological metaphors, suggests changes only over extensive periods, and premises an inevitable progress towards perfection.

Read in this context, the Julius stories, beyond introducing a trans-corporeal vision of the black body, become instances of an “epistemological resistance.” As an additional element of Chesnut’s African American environmental knowledge, epistemological resistance in the Julius stories works in two senses. In one sense, the texts satirize Spencer’s philosophy, primarily through the character constellation in the frame narrative. In another, they provide a more radical, deconstructive critique of the possibilities and limits of a human knowledge of the non-human material world as such.

The character constellation of the framing story that involves Julius, John and Annie not only allows Chesnut to play with a range of possible responses to Julius’s reminiscences that

correspond with those from the various audiences he imagined for his texts,<sup>351</sup> but also to juxtapose competing epistemologies. The triumvirate who convene on piazzas and in carriages in North Carolina to discuss Julius's tales has usually been read as involving two opposing poles, John and Julius, with John's wife Annie covering an alternative, middle ground. The constellation centrally involves, as Hemenway points out, a "tension between John and Julius [that] is the tension between two systems of thought which operate throughout *The Conjure Woman*" ("Folklore" 298).<sup>352</sup> This basic pattern is also crucial with respect to Chesnutt's epistemological resistance, if one takes Julius to represent a trans-corporeal vision of African American environmental knowledge, and John as a representative of Spencer's evolutionary thought. Not just in "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," but throughout the stories, John is depicted as an evolutionist. He stands for a 'scientific' Western perspective, as his responses to Julius's tales as "absurdly impossible yarn" and as "plantation legend[s]" reveal, is sometimes aligned with an exploitative attitude reminiscent of the slaveholders of Julius's tales,<sup>353</sup> and represents characteristically Spencerian ideas ("Sandy" 22, "Revenge" 24). In "Sis Becky's Pickaninny," for instance, he proclaims, after Julius exposes his belief in a "rabbit-foot," that "your people will never rise in the world until they throw off these childish superstitions and learn to live by the light of reason and common sense," thus echoing the notion of a child-stage to describe supposedly evolutionarily less developed groups (103). Similarly, he views him, in "Tobe's Tribulations," as someone who "had seen life from what was to us a new point of view – from

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<sup>351</sup> Chesnutt himself made clear that he meant to reach both a black readership among whom, he believed, his works "sold very well" (qtd. H. Chesnutt 120), and a white readership that he meant, as noted in his journal on May 29, 1880, to lead "on imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step, to the desired state of [unprejudiced] feeling" (qtd. Brodhead, *Journals* 140). Accordingly, Hemenway and others have pointed out that his Julius stories, too, "address two audiences simultaneously. John's audience are rationalistic nonbelievers in the conjure phenomena; Julius's audience are participants in the folkloristic process whereby conjure is dignified by belief and transmitted from author to reader" ("Folklore" 299). On the question of multiple audiences, cf. also Molineaux 175; T. J. Smith; and Petrie 120-135.

<sup>352</sup> Readings of the character constellation of the framing story usually emphasize this polarity: McWilliams, for example, identifies in John and Julius "two narrators, two languages, and two views of the world" (*Fictions* 76); and Church suggests that John stands "for those with cultural power" against whom Chesnutt, through Julius, launches a thorough critique (124). Annie, as the character, who, on the one hand, sees some of the stories as "ridiculous nonsense" ("Revenge" 24), yet, on the other hand, shows some understanding of the deeper truths Julius conveys (e.g. in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny"), is often read as emotional complement to John's rational frame of mind (cf. e.g. Callahan 40-41; Bundrick 56-58), or as a middle ground, an "almost ideally responsive reader for a racially mediatory fiction" (Petrie 126, cf. 126-135).

<sup>353</sup> John, who regards himself as having a "somewhat practical mind" ("Ben" 112), is usually planning some sort of business scheme that involves making profit off the North Carolinian land he has bought. Although he is certainly not depicted as negatively as the greedy slaveholders of Julius's tales, the stories suggest some parallels, e.g. when, in "The Goophered Grapevine," a *Northerner* proposes methods of 'improving' the grapevines that are the cause of Henry's death; or when, in "Lonesome Ben," John's brickmaking enterprise is connected with Ben's terrible fate of turning into a "brick."

the *bottom*, as it were” (113, emphasis mine); and, in “Dave’s Neckliss,” refers to “his curiously undeveloped nature [that] was subject to moods which were almost childish in their variableness” (33). John thus thinks of Julius in a Spencerian way as exhibiting the “intellectual traits of the uncivilized,” in the sense of “traits recurring in the children of the civilized” (Spencer, *Sociology* 89-90, qtd. Gould 146). The African American storyteller, although seen as quaint and entertaining, is frequently reduced by John’s perspective, to being a specimen of a left-behind “Negro intellect” (“Tobe” 113); he stands for those supposedly at “the bottom, as it were,” of an evolutionary trajectory that should in time progress towards “the light of reason and common sense” (113, “Becky” 103).

As John represents Spencerian evolutionary thought, ridiculing him in the frame story becomes at the same time a way of satirizing Spencer’s ideas. John is mocked not only when he is depicted as an “armchair anthropologist” in “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt,” but also through Julius’s repeated trickster schemes. As one of those memorable Chesnuttean “confidence men” who are sometimes “shown to be the equal, often more than a match for his once-superior victim” (Andrews, *Literary Career* 15), Julius often subversively fools his Northern listeners, especially John, as he frequently pursues more profane goals through telling his tales.<sup>354</sup> In “Po’ Sandy,” for example, one purpose of relating the story about a slave who turned into lumber that has supposedly been worked into the “old schoolhouse,” is to scare off Annie from using this lumber for her new kitchen, so that the building may be used as a new meeting place for Julius’s Baptist congregation (22). In “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt,” the practical goal of Julius’s storytelling is to conceal his beekeeping enterprise in the “neck of woods down by the swamp” that John plans to clear (81); in “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare,” one effect of recalling a harsh master’s punishment is that John lets a non-satisfying servant recommended by Julius keep his position; and in the first story of *The Conjure Woman*, Julius’s tale aims at preventing John from buying the vineyard in the first place, since he had “derived a respectable revenue from the product of the neglected grapevines” (“Grapevine” 13). That John is, to some extent, aware of Julius’s ulterior motives, but seems benevolent enough to let it pass, does not mean that he escapes a mockery that, at the same time, ironizes Spencerism. Although he claims to recognize, from the start, “a shrewdness in his [Julius’s] eyes [...] which, as we afterwards learned from experience, was indicative of a corresponding shrewdness in his character”

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<sup>354</sup> Among those readings that examine power plays and Julius’s tricksterism, are e.g. Dixon, “Teller”; Bundrick; Britt; Farnsworth; and Lundy.

("Grapevine" 6), he is drawn into – and sometimes loses – in the power plays acted out through Julius's storytelling.

If Chesnutt's stories thus urge readers "to beware of one-sided visions of the play of power" (Brodhead 18), the strategic games that are acted out in the texts between John and Julius are also crucial for an environmentally oriented reading. In this respect, the two characters are a means of juxtaposing two forms of environmental knowledge, and enable Chesnutt to express epistemological resistance against evolutionary thought. Not only are there opposing ethical views towards the land in the sense of "mastery" (John) versus "kinship" (Julius), or a racism on the part of John that involves "viewing Julius as part of the farm," as other ecocritical readings have suggested (cf. Myers, "Other Nature" 8; Outka 108). Moreover, the stories also epistemologically resist Spencerian discourse, as may be seen, for instance, in "The Conjuror's Revenge." The framing story of this text, like many others, begins with John's proposal of a new scheme for making economic profit off the land. His plan is to "set[...] out scuppernong vines on that sand-hill, where the three persimmon-trees are," a task for which he intends to acquire a mule, because it "can do more work, and doesn't require as much attention as a horse" (23, 24). Julius, in turn, playing with John's practical mind, argues for a horse as the more useful "creetur" and seeks to lend weight to this claim with his tale about the club-footed Primus, a former slave who supposedly "was oncet a mule" (24). Even as the nonbelieving John is, in this case, backed up by his wife, who finds that Julius's story is plain "nonsense" (31), the storyteller proposes that he is "tellin' nuffin but de truf" (31) – and a useful and strategic if not factual "truth" his tale is, if one measures it along the outcome of Julius's deeper scheme. The tale, in conjunction with his casual mention that he "knows a man w'at's got a good hoss he wants ter sell" is effective, as John eventually buys a "very fine-looking" but defective horse instead of a mule, and Julius – apparently deeply involved in the bargain – gains a "new suit of store clothes" (31, 32).

The story, apart from presenting a power play and Julius's skill as a trickster, is revealing with respect to Chesnutt's strategies of "epistemological resistance." To see this, one has to consider closely the relation between John's Spencerian evolutionary thought and Julius's African American environmental knowledge, and trace how the text plays with their competing ideas about transformations of matter. "The Conjuror's Revenge" both satirizes Spencerism and problematizes a knowledge of non-human materialities in general by showing that absolute truth about such materialities will ultimately remain inaccessible to human sensual experience – in this case primarily vision – whether it is through John's supposedly objective, scientific, rational eye, or through Julius's view on the non-human world.

In a first sense, the story epistemologically resists by mocking John's abstract and deductive evolutionary thought. The fact that John does "remember *seeing*" Primus, the man with the clubfoot that is invested with a deeper meaning through Julius's tale, but does not believe in the storyteller's explanation, demonstrates his scepticism towards the deeper meaning of matter (24, emphasis mine). He is, of course, justified in this, as Julius's tale is highly unlikely from a rational perspective, and something few readers, back then and today, would take seriously as a factual truth, since it explicitly involves the magic of conjuration. However, the story at the same time crucially exposes the hypocrisy of a rational Spencerian position John adopts, when it presents his being fooled into buying a sick horse. On the one hand, John *sees* Primus's clubfoot yet does not believe in the trans-corporealizing knowledge that attributes meaning to this phenomenon. On the other hand, he also *sees* and buys yet does not believe in the sickness of a horse, which "appeared sound and gentle" and "very fine-looking" but turns out to be blind and has "developed most of the diseases that horse-flesh is heir to" (31-32). The process of being tricked into buying a sick horse thus turns into a mockery of his deductive logic, which abstractly assumes and deductively reasons, but does not necessarily arrive at the meaning of matter, whether in the case of Primus's clubfoot or in the case of the horse. John professes to theorize about material "transformations so many-sided" yet his theory does not grasp a true meaning of the non-human material when it is right in front of him. No matter how rationally justified and common sensical his rejection of Julius's tale may be, the *process* of evaluating the material on the basis of abstract rationality as well as visual perception itself is therefore radically criticized. Chesnut's text, in this respect, reveals the flaws, arrogance, and blindness of a deductive Spencerian evolutionism, which it unmasks as epistemologically unreliable.

Beyond being another example of Chesnut's mocking of John's abstract Spencerism, however, the story is also crucial with respect to a more radical form of epistemological resistance, as it points out that Julius and John make precisely the same mistake. After he has told his tale, Julius begins disputing the idea that the earth is moving around the sun. He claims that "I sees de yeath stan'in still all de time, en I sees de sun gwine roun' it, en ef a man can't b'lieve w'at 'e sees, I can't see no use in libbin' – mought 's well die en be whar we can't see nuffin" (31). Thereby, he articulates a notion that not only goes against John's scientific knowledge, but also exhibits the same simple but flawed logic John applies to Primus's clubfoot and the horse. Julius, too, attempts to arrive at a true knowledge of the non-human material through sensual, visual experience, suggesting that it must be possible to "b'lieve w'at 'e [a man] sees" (31). Therefore, as Julius cannot disprove that the earth *is* moving at the

moment in which he makes his claim, and John cannot disprove conclusively that Primus was *not* indeed “oncet a mule,” Chesnutt reveals that both knowledges are prone to the same ultimate failure. Both epistemologies ultimately rely on belief and produce, as discourse, a fractured knowledge but never deliver ultimate truths. If a first form of epistemological resistance lies in the ways in which Chesnutt’s texts mock the established “science” of Spencerism, one therefore also finds, at this point, a second form, namely a broader, deconstructive critique of human knowledge of the non-human material as such. When John, at the end of “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” laments the “deceitfulness of appearances” (31), the story arrives at the core of both Julius’s mocking of John and of this fundamental critique of the possibility and limits of an environmental knowledge in general.

Chesnutt’s radical epistemological resistance involves not only, as in “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” a deconstruction of the link between supposedly true knowledge and (visual) perception, but can also be read more generally in the changing representations of the trans-corporeal black body throughout the stories. In this respect, it is crucial to recall that these texts are not to be understood as “conjure stories” but as “stories of the trans-corporeal black body.” The majority of transformations through *conjunction*, on the one hand, may be clearly differentiated from Spencerian transformations of matter. The character of John allows readers to adopt a logic that makes it justifiable to believe in evolutionary notions of trans-corporeality and reject the magical forms of trans-corporeality involved in conjunction, since the former supposedly involves long stretches of time while the latter seems scientifically impossible as happening within seconds. The magic of conjunction or “goopher” does to human and non-human matter in the blink of an eye what, according to evolutionism, could happen only over extensive stretches of time across generations of living species. Where Spencer, in his idea of evolving societies, emphasized the “unchanging habits” and the “greater rigidity of custom” that marked certain (racial) human groups and that he saw as proof of a *slow* progress of evolution (qtd. Jackson/Weidman 81), Julius’s metamorphoses of man into non-human animal and back require only that a conjure man or woman begins, *in an instance*, to “work his roots.” With respect to transformations through conjure, one may therefore discern clear boundaries between the two epistemological models. Readers are offered, in other words, a seemingly solid ground through John’s rational perspective in those moments in which the trans-corporeality of the black body is expressed through conjunction.

In those cases where the trans-corporeality of the black body does *not* involve conjure, on the other hand, the question of metamorphosing matter becomes much more problematic. In such

moments, Chesnutt's texts cunningly begin to deconstruct a fundamental epistemological ground. A story like "Lonesome Ben," for instance, does not involve magic, but nonetheless interacts with the concept of conjuration present in the majority of the stories through a shared notion of trans-corporeality. The text crucially presents not only Julius's tale about how poor, lonesome Ben is transformed through (mal)nutrition and digestion, but also depicts bodies in the frame narrative that are physically metamorphosed by the same process. The people in the neighbourhood are "of a rather sickly hue" (51), and John and Annie, during a carriage ride, see with their own eyes the trans-corporeal changes Julius problematizes with respect to Ben. They can experience and verify a form of trans-corporeality of the black body, as they observe "a greater sallowness among both the colored people and the poor whites thereabouts than the hygienic conditions of the neighbourhood seemed to justify" (51), and witness how a "white woman wearing a homespun dress and slat-bonnet" gathers a "lump of clay in her pocket with a shame-faced look" for later consumption (52).

Reading this scene in the larger context of Chesnutt's "stories of the trans-corporeal black body" makes clear that Chesnutt's radical epistemological resistance also plays out precisely through the tension that exists across the texts between the trans-corporealizations of black bodies through conjuration and those through other means. *That* bodies are trans-corporeal entities that interact with their surroundings, none of the characters in the frame narrative disputes. In fact, the idea is a premise for the set-up of the stories in the first place, since readers learn, in the very first paragraph of the lead story, "The Goophered Grapevine," that the reason for John and Annie's moving to North Carolina is that Annie "was in poor health" and needed "a change of climate" (3). In this sense, the possibility of trans-corporeal relations of human bodies is the cause for the existence of the stories as such; it is the otherwise sceptical John, who acknowledges that "[t]he ozone-laden air of the surrounding piney woods, the mild and equable climate, the peaceful leisure of country life, had brought about in hopeful measure the cure we had anticipated" ("Becky" 102). What is then problematized by Chesnutt is the truth-value of a human knowledge of the non-human material – whether this means the truth-value of evolutionary or African American environmental knowledge. Although the texts do not categorically deny the usefulness or effectiveness of such knowledge, they refrain from suggesting any kind of "capital-T-Truth."

In this respect, Chesnutt points out the arrogance of any deductive interpretation of the material world. The prime example of such an interpretation is, of course, an evolutionary thought that, on the one hand, claims that "the total process of redistribution of matter and motion [...] is scarcely possible," yet, on the other hand, proposes to know "a mode of rendering the

process as a whole tolerably comprehensible” (Chesnutt, “Ha’nt” 80 = Spencer, *Principles* 401). Thus, it is enlightening to return once more to Chesnutt’s quote from Spencer and especially to Annie’s key role as the character who cuts off both Julius and John. She uses the same word, “nonsense,” to interrupt Julius’s tale in “The Conjuror’s Revenge” (31), and John’s recitation of Spencer in “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt” (80). It is crucial *how* and *where* the latter happens, namely in the middle of the quoted sentence that begins: “Though the genesis of the rearrangement of every evolving aggregate is in itself one, it presents to our intelligence—” (“Ha’nt” 80). Beyond its obvious mocking of Spencer’s “synthetic philosophy,” the act of interrupting is significant as it marks the scene as a moment of Chesnutt’s self-conscious reflection on his own environmental knowledge. This becomes clear when considering how the interrupted line may go on. While Selinger claims that “we can in fact finish John’s paragraph in quite a satisfactory fashion” with the words “an appearance of multiplicity: a variety of histories or processes in which transformation occurs” (679), it seems more logical to trace how the passage actually finishes in a perhaps less “satisfactory” but more meaningful fashion in Spencer’s original.<sup>355</sup> In *First Principles*, Spencer goes on: “it presents to our intelligence several factors; and after interpreting the effects of each [evolving aggregate] separately, we may, by synthesis of the interpretations, form an adequate conception” (401). The part of the sentence *actually* (and not in a scholar’s fantasy) cut off and left out in Chesnutt therefore highlights not a “variety of histories or processes in which transformation occurs” (Selinger 679), but stresses, once more, a central idea of Spencer’s philosophy. According to him, although there is an “instability of the homogeneous” that implies an impossibility of absolute interpretation of single “aggregates,” an absolute principle – evolution – from which everything derives exists, due to which “an adequate conception” and interpretation may be formed (Spencer 401).

When considering this process of interpreting “every evolving aggregate” that describes Spencer’s way of reading evolution’s work against the single representations of trans-corporeal black bodies – the “aggregates” of the Julius stories – it becomes clear that Chesnutt suggests a fundamental difference between his and Spencer’s modes of interpretation. Where Spencerian evolutionary thought contended to be unable to grasp the meaning of every existing particular

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<sup>355</sup> Selinger’s imagined ending goes on: “Thus, while complete and deductive interpretation may be almost hopeless, partial and inductive interpretations, rendered in the mode of narrative under the auspices of the imagination, are certainly possible” (679). Hence, he suggests a reading that may well fit Chesnutt’s *own* take on interpreting the material world, but that seems problematic in at least two ways. On the one hand, it does not realize that there is an original version from which Chesnutt quotes (Selinger does not mention Spencer); on the other hand, it therefore ignores that Chesnutt’s act of quoting and cutting off the quote at precisely this point meaningfully interacts with Spencerian evolutionism.

materiality but pretended to know the ultimate, underlying “Truth” (evolution), Chesnutt cuts off ultimate truths of the materialities presented in his own tales through the changing forms of trans-corporealized black bodies. His use of conjuration in some, and of other strategies of trans-corporealizing the body in other stories unsettles the clear boundaries between the two opposing epistemologies of John and Julius, and ultimately cuts off an absolute truth from any form of knowledge of the human in its non-human materialities. His environmental knowledge does not pretend to know, in other words, a “capital-T-Truth,” but instead emphasizes the power of narration and interpretation within producing useful and effective, as well as harmful and destructive knowledges about human and non-human materialities.

This does not mean that he denies or reduces the empowering potential of an African American environmental knowledge that Julius articulates. On the contrary, the stories emphasize that imagining the black body trans-corporeally was an important means of remembering the humanity of those harmed by the peculiar institution, and that recognizing links between the black body and the non-human world could be crucial for recovering from the trauma of slavery and moving the black body out of a racially produced environmental state of exception. Yet, Chesnutt at the same time leaves no doubt that he does *not* presume that any knowledge of the human in its relation to non-human materialities – no matter by whom it is articulated – arrives at an absolute truth; the texts “epistemologically resist” this idea that drives evolutionary thought. Just as Spencerian evolutionary thought is interrupted at a significant point mid-sentence in “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt,” namely before it introduces a principle from which an ultimate meaning of the material may be deduced, the stories as a whole interrupt a link between knowledge and an absolute truth about the non-human material world. Where Spencerism provides the reassuring notion that a general true principle exists and is known, Chesnutt, via conjuration and other means, turns the black body into “epistemological quicksand.” Instead of proposing definite truths, the stories use the trans-corporeal black body to focus on the production of environmental knowledge through narration and interpretation. Beyond using trans-corporeality to agitate against an environmental state of exception of the black body, Chesnutt therefore thoroughly problematizes the possibilities and limits of environmental knowledge itself. His stories show the perspectivalism of narratives and discourses about non-human materialities, their involvement in power struggles, and their productive as well as destructive potentials. In this sense, too, the stories are rich “environmental texts” (Buell) that provide insights through which much may be learned, perhaps even about competing environmental narratives that exist today.

## 4.4

### Claiming the Wilderness Narrative: W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, the Swamp, and the Opening of the African American Frontier

“When the rabbits tried the tender plants she watched hours to drive them off, and catching now and then a pulsing pink-eyed invader, she talked to it earnestly: ‘Brer Rabbit – poor little Brer Rabbit, don’t you know you mustn’t eat Zora’s cotton? Naughty, naughty Brer Rabbit.’ And then she would show it where she had gathered piles of fragrant weeds for it and its fellows.”

(Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* 92)

“Before sunrise, tools were in the swamp, axes and saws and hammers. The noise of praise and singing filled the Sabbath dawn. The news of the great revival spread, and men and women came pouring in. Then of a sudden the uproar stopped, and the ringing of axes and grating of saws and tugging of mules was heard. The forest trembled as by some mighty magic, swaying and falling with crash on crash. Huge bonfires blazed and crackled, until at last a wide black scar appeared in the thick south side of the swamp, which widened and widened to full twenty acres.”

(Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* 290)

W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) is in several ways an in-between text. To begin with, the novel, part realist critique of the cotton industry and the sharecropping system of the turn of the century South, part sentimental romance revolving around the fate of its two main protagonists Bles Alwyn, a gifted young man who comes to Alabama to attend school, and Zora, the “child of the swamp,” has a special status within Du Bois's *oeuvre*, being his first attempt at fiction (*Quest* 27). The book has therefore often been taken as Du Bois's fictional treatment of themes he had first introduced in earlier works, e.g. in sociological studies like *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), essays such as “The Study of the Negro Problems” (1898) or “The Talented Tenth” (1903), or in his seminal *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), the book in which he had famously claimed that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” (5).<sup>356</sup> Read against such writing, which was primarily concerned with questions of

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<sup>356</sup> Especially Du Bois's groundbreaking *The Souls Black Folk*, a book that, in the words of Du Bois-biographer D.L. Lewis, “redefined the terms of a three-hundred-year interaction between black and white people and influenced the cultural and political psychology of peoples of African descent” throughout the world (277), has often been read as the basis of Du Bois's first venture into fiction. Rampersad, for example, suggests that *Quest* “renders in novel form the essence of *The Souls of Black Folk* and the knowledge and insights

education, the role of a black elite, or “double consciousness,” *Quest* represents, as Rampersad suggests, an “audacious departure” (ix).<sup>357</sup>

Apart from this exceptional status within Du Bois’s own work, the publication of *Quest* falls into an in-between period framed by “two booming eras” within African American literary history (A. Davidson 108; cf. also Whitlow 53-70). The novel appeared after the “nadir” of American race relations (cf. chapter 4.2, note 327), and following a first major phase in African American fiction writing around the turn of the century, but falls not yet into the time of the Harlem Renaissance, though some scholars suggest that the text can be read as a forerunner.<sup>358</sup> *Quest* was published roughly a decade after African American fiction writers like Chesnutt (*The House Behind the Cedars* (1900); *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901)), Griggs (e.g. *Imperium in Imperio* (1899); *Overshadowed* (1901)), or G. Langhorne Pryor (*Neither Bond nor Free* (1902)), and various “women’s era”-writers of the 1890s had published their works (cf. Byerman/Wallinger; Carby; DuCille, *Coupling* 30-47). Although not belonging to either set of texts, Du Bois’s novel is clearly influenced by the latter, as it follows a tradition of employing sentimental “romance plots as a means of exploring the problem of the color line and its solution” that is also characteristic of the turn of the century domestic fiction by women writers like Pauline Hopkins or Frances Ellen Harper (A. Davidson 170; cf. also chapter 4.1, note 238).<sup>359</sup> This sentimentalism has earned *Quest* negative assessments from some literary critics, who lament the novel’s minor aesthetic quality.<sup>360</sup> Others have passed a more positive judgment on Du Bois’s text, taking it as a fictionalized sociological tract, i.e. a critique of large-scale capitalism and sharecropping, or as a discussion of education models and theories of “uplift.”<sup>361</sup> One minimal

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gained by Du Bois about white Americans, black Americans, himself, and life since 1903” (xi); on the interconnections between the two works, see also Lemons.

<sup>357</sup> Du Bois’s turn to fiction was nonetheless logical, if one takes into account that, though “[a] historian and sociologist by training, he loved the arts, especially music and literature. He clearly valued the novel as a form” (Rampersad xiv-xv). Du Bois continued to write fiction after *Quest*, including *Dark Princess* (1928) and the *Black Fame* trilogy (1957-1961); he is best remembered, however, for his powerful nonfiction prose.

<sup>358</sup> Hardwig, for example, suggests that *Quest* exhibits “a nascent sense of black consciousness that would dominate the Harlem Renaissance” (157-158); and when K. Smith stresses the novel’s celebration of “folk culture” as something that “provides inspiration and the basic themes and images that inform great works of art,” she hints at a primitivistic element that will become crucial a decade later (*Thought* 140).

<sup>359</sup> Another literary context for *Quest* has been seen in the wheat-novels by Frank Norris (*The Octopus* (1901); *The Pit* (1903)). Cf. e.g. Rossetti; Lee; Rampersad xii; Oliver 32; and Bone, *Negro Novel* 43.

<sup>360</sup> Critics who have lamented the qualitative deficits of Du Bois’s “melodramatic, dated, and unsuccessful foray into fiction by a sociologist” (Hardwig 144) are, for instance, Schmidt 193-194; Hardwig; and D.L. Lewis 447. Among Du Bois’s contemporaries, by contrast, the novel was moderately well received (cf. Hardwig 153); his writer colleague Chesnutt praised *Quest* as “well conceived and beautifully worked out” (qtd. Keller, *Crusade* 253).

<sup>361</sup> Readings that emphasize a (partial) success of *Quest*’s anti-capitalist critique are, for instance, those by Byerman; van Wienen/Kraft; Rampersad esp. xi-xiii; Lee, who claims that Du Bois’s realism effectively

consensus in scholarship has therefore been that the text does not easily fit into African American literary history, that it generically “defies neat categorization” (108), and that it is aesthetically “a bale mixing together weevil-damaged and good cotton” (Schmidt 193).

Notwithstanding such assessments, a third context in which *Quest* attains an important status as in-between text is the tradition of African American environmental knowledge. Although Du Bois is one of those writers that ecocritics have most frequently turned to over the past decades, his cotton-novel has somewhat surprisingly rarely been treated. Recognizing instead that “*Souls [of Black Folk]* is an obvious starting point for dialogue between ecocriticism and African American literary studies” (Raine 322), environmentally oriented scholars have predominantly turned to Du Bois’s most famous work, reading it as involving environmental justice claims (Beilfuss; Feldman/Hsu), as an African American form of nature writing (Hicks, “Ecocriticism of Color”), or as employing a “racial picturesque” as a means of social critique (S. Lloyd). The only ecocritical readings that have turned to *Quest* so far are those by K. Smith, who interprets the novel as a fictional analysis of “the economic, social, and political forces that prevented black farmers from acquiring land or competing in the marketplace” (*Thought* 83), and by Preston-McGee, who claims that Du Bois deploys a revised pastoralism.<sup>362</sup>

Nevertheless, the novel is crucial within the tradition of African American environmental knowledge, especially if considered as a signifying revision through the “spatial.” As the previous chapters (esp. 4.1 and 4.2) have demonstrated, postwar African American environmental knowledge moved away from the literary “loophole” of the Underground Railroad and became increasingly expressed through spaces of education and home. A concept of wilderness, originally part of this “loophole” in the fugitive slave narrative, has therefore a particular history within the African American literary environmental tradition; it was incorporated in a distinct way into the black literary tradition from the start but was subsequently suppressed after Emancipation, as other modes of writing moved to the fore. While mid-nineteenth century mainstream American Romanticism wrote the individual into the wilderness, creating a U.S. tradition of nature writing that is influential until today, African American

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“condemns Northern industry and Southern mythology” (393); or Elder, who sees, despite qualitative deficits, a “crowded and complex work” (358). Moreover, Du Bois’s negotiation of education models (Schmidt 195-197; A. Davidson 106-129) and his depiction of non-human nature have been positively evaluated (Mootry, *Black Pastoral* 55-56; K. Smith, *Thought*; Preston-McGee).

<sup>362</sup> Other articles that consider Du Bois – but not *Quest* – from an environmentally oriented perspective are those by Clark/Foster; Leonard; and Claborn, who focuses on *Darkwater* (1920). Apart from such work, there are some (earlier) readings of the novel that emphasize the centrality of non-human nature, cf. e.g. Mootry, *Black Pastoral*; or Elder.

literature began its written tradition of relating to the non-human material spaces in response to which this “white” wilderness narrative formed in terms of developing a literary “loophole” within the slave narrative tradition, in order to articulate identifications, alliances, and a co-agency with the non-human. In the decades after the war, however, literary expressions of environmental knowledge in African American literature shifted away from this locus, and thus from a focus on wilderness, turning instead to widely established frameworks like the picturesque (Forten, Brown) or the pastoral and the Georgic (Washington) to articulate environmental knowledge. African American literature of this period thus expressed such knowledge neither by simply embracing an antipastoral nor by employing the sublime as a means of creating psychic distance to the tainted pastoral in the way Outka, in *Race and Nature*, suggests with respect to the white Romantic tradition. Instead, postwar black writers predominantly wrote environmentally by adopting and signifying on the domesticizing, taming, “civilizing” lenses through which mainstream nineteenth-century U.S. writers articulated concepts of “nature.” This development, which entailed the suspension of literary spaces of wilderness that had previously been present through the Underground Railroad heterotopia, can therefore also be read as a form of a continuing hyper-separation. If, in order to become “civilized” in the sense of becoming “human,” antebellum slave narrators generally refrained from identifications with a non-human “nature” to which they were counted by dominant racist ideologies, postwar writers increasingly began to write in the “civilized” modes of the pastoral or the picturesque to express their own “civilized” relation to non-human materialities. To write in a domesticized way about tamed, cultivated “nature” could, at this point, also become a sign of a writer’s own “civilization,” and, therefore, a way of affirming her/his humanity.

Even though Du Bois’s novel is not a complete departure from this tradition, since it continues in many ways a postwar African American environmental knowledge by focusing on themes and spaces of home, education, and black agrarianism,<sup>363</sup> *Quest* nevertheless represents

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<sup>363</sup> If, as McCaskill proposes, post-Reconstruction African American novelists usually aimed “to articulate their people’s struggle for race uplift – for political enfranchisement, education and economic opportunities, and pride in African heritage and ancestry,” *Quest* can be read as a representative case (“Novel” 485). Du Bois himself was deeply involved in educational work, acknowledged the importance of the “home” through several (partially lost) studies (cf. Farland 1017-1018), wrote seminally on uplift, and depicted the South in a typical way as “a complex, multifaceted place” (484). Moreover, he promoted black agrarianism, popularized also by major black writers of the post-Reconstruction period like W.W. Brown or Douglass, in order to agitate against the devastating sharecropping system of the South. Ecocritics K. Smith and Raine have read Du Bois in this context, the former suggesting that a tradition of black agrarianism informs *Quest*, which aims “to make the wilderness more hospitable to human purposes” (*Thought* 141); the latter claiming that Du Bois strives for “an organic connection between ‘the souls of black folk’ and the landscape they inhabit” (327).

a significant moment within the tradition as it re-introduces a wilderness first found in the Underground Railroad heterotopia of the fugitive slave narrative. The novel is an instance that attempts to rewrite relations to wild, untamed non-human materialities; it returns to the Underground Railroad heterotopia of the fugitive slave narrative in order to rework that space and claim an African American “wilderness narrative.” Rather than treat Du Bois primarily as an influence on later writers (which he no doubt was),<sup>364</sup> the following reading therefore seeks to show that his first novel is also crucially engaged in signifying on a *previous* African American tradition of environmental knowledge. *Quest* is, in this sense, an example of how nineteenth-century African American environmental knowledge continued to shape twentieth-century African American literature; Du Bois keeps up a tradition of signifying on environmental knowledge that involves internal signifying revisions within the black literary tradition as well as African American writers’ signification on their respective contemporary discourses. To show this, I will, first, turn to Du Bois’s “swamp” as a repetition and revision of the literary heterotopia of the Underground Railroad, and, secondly, conclude with tracing the novel’s relation to Turner’s “Frontier Thesis.”

### The Swamp: Signifying on the Literary Heterotopia of the Underground Railroad

The swamp has long been recognized as a central theme of Du Bois’s writing, especially in *The Souls of Black Folk*.<sup>365</sup> With respect to *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, too, ecocritics and others have noted the centrality of the swamp, which is frequently read as a representation of Zora’s

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<sup>364</sup> As one of the major black intellectuals of the twentieth century, Du Bois has often been read for his influence on subsequent writers in the African American tradition, therein being seen either as “an untouchable, irreproachable saint” or as “an embarrassment, an elitist snob, who from pure spite joined the Communist Party and apologized for the butchery of Joseph Stalin” (Moses, *Conflict* xiv); cf. on Du Bois’s legacy generally e.g. H. Baker, *I Don’t Hate the South* 33-51; or Dudley, “Du Bois” esp. 116-117. While this is not to suggest that there have been no analyses of influences on Du Bois himself, ecocritical readings have so far predominantly read Du Bois’s work as a starting point, as “inaugurat[ing] a canon of distinctively African American environmental writing” (Raine 339). In this chapter, I do the reverse, asking not “how Du Bois’s work has shaped environmental thought and practice” in subsequent traditions, but primarily how his novel emerges from a nineteenth-century tradition of African American environmental knowledge (339).

<sup>365</sup> In the chapter “Of the Black Belt” in *Souls*, Du Bois turns to the swamp as a place of historical significance and stresses the sublimity of its nature. Here, one finds a “treacherous swamp” (82) that is nevertheless characterized by a mystical, sublime beauty that lies in its “prodigal luxuriance of undergrowth,” the “great dark green shadows [that] fade into the black background,” and the “tangled semi-tropical foliage, marvellous in its weird savage splendor” (81). Ecocritics have read the swamp in *Souls* as “a place for alternative lifestyles and heroic resistance” (Beilfuss 501, 488), or as Du Bois’s “picturesque of ruin” (Raine 335); Hicks identifies the swamp as “Du Bois’s Tintern Abbey” (“Ecocriticism of Color” 210).

character or as representing African(ist) elements.<sup>366</sup> The swamp, in the novel, has been identified as including both negative and positive aspects; it is “a romanticized land of mystery, wonder, and fertility, as well as a harrowing and howling landscape of fear and danger” (Beilfuss 497). In the context of a tradition of African American environmental knowledge, however, the swamp has yet another crucial function. Beyond being a symbol or a representation of a literary character, the space becomes an expression of African American environmental knowledge that signifies on the foundational heterotopia of the Underground Railroad. Du Bois’s swamp in *Quest* not only evokes positive (“romanticized”) as well as negative (“harrowing”) associations (497), but thereby at the same time reflects on a long-standing tradition of environmental knowledge that has its roots in the antebellum autobiographical tradition. To trace this signifying revision, one must, first, identify how the swamp in the novel echoes Underground Railroad space of the fugitive slave narrative, and, secondly, examine how it functions, like this space, a literary heterotopia.

Underground Railroad space had two primary qualities in the antebellum fugitive slave narrative. On the one hand, it was marked by a haunting presence that included both human and non-human elements; on the other hand, the liberating potential of the Underground Railroad was represented through the ways in which this space *itself* materially offered means of resistance and empowerment, among other things through non-human animals as co-agents. Both facets are discernible in *Quest*’s depiction of the swamp. The characteristic haunting and threatening dimension of the wild environs encountered within Underground Railroad space becomes visible in the novel from the very start. In the first scene, Bles Alwyn, in search for the school in Toomsville, Alabama, that he wishes to attend, finds himself lost in the swamp. The text describes how a “tear wandered down his brown cheek” as he thinks of the family he has left behind for that purpose, how he struggles without orientation through the swamp, and experiences “loneliness, the fear and wild running through the dark” (1, 3), thereby beginning to signify on a threatening potential of the wild space of the Underground Railroad. One can get hopelessly lost in the swamp’s non-human materiality, in its “gray and death-like wilderness” (53), and the potential danger that Bles experiences upon his first arrival in Tooms County never

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<sup>366</sup> The swamp in *Quest*, generally recognized as a complex and multifaceted location, has been read as a symbolic representation of Zora’s conflicted psyche (cf. Rossetti; Schmidt, esp. 199); as the (utopic) place where to build a “possible domestic Black nation” (A. Davidson 111; cf. also K. Smith, *Thought* 141; Mootry, *Black Pastoral* 58-59); or as a locus where to find a future pastoral relation to the land (Preston-McGee 71). Moreover, scholars have identified the swamp as part of Du Bois’s symbolic topography of a “Plantation-Swamp dichotomy” (cf. Elder), and have pointed to its African(ist) elements (Raine 335; K. Smith, *Thought* 143).

completely disappears from Du Bois's depiction of the swamp. The "horror of the swamp" becomes a continuing presence, and the fear and disorientation its wilderness evokes in *Quest* echoes the fear and disorientation that once marked many fugitive slave narratives' portrayals of flights through unsettled territory (276-277).

In descriptions of the Underground Railroad in fugitive slave narratives, however, the non-human wilderness was not depicted as the most frightening element of that space. Instead, the more threatening feature of spaces of flight was a human one emanating from slave hunters and slave patrols. As Henry Bibb and others emphasized in their narratives, they found their chances "by far better among the howling wolves in the Red river swamp, than before Deacon Whitfield [Bibb's master]" or the slave patrols that were then roaming the South (*Narrative* 131). *Quest*, in its depiction of the swamp, repeats this element in a modified form, as it identifies the "horror of the swamp" as lying not merely in its non-human materialities, in the beasts roaming the wilderness, but also in the human cruelties that have come to mark this space (276-277). The primary symbol of this cruelty in the novel is the cabin of Elspeth, Zora's mother, a "short, broad, black and wrinkled [woman], with yellow fangs, red hanging lips, and wicked eyes," who is the local conjurer and a "witch" (*Quest* 52, 28). A place of drinking, gambling, sexual exploitation and rape, her home represents the same kind of unrestrained human wildness that was expressed in the fugitive slave narrative's depictions of the slave hunters. It is significant that Du Bois chose a "cabin" to represent this haunting human element of Underground Railroad space, as it echoes the abuse expressed through the topography of the fugitive slave narrative. In many narratives, e.g. those by Jacobs and Douglass, it is precisely the cabin in the woods that is used to highlight some of the worst facets of the peculiar institution. In *Incidents*, Dr. Flint wants to build a cabin for Linda, Jacobs's alter ego, to pursue his scheme of sexual exploitation (cf. 45), and in Douglass's *Narrative*, one episode recounts how the narrator's grandmother was banned to live – or rather be left to die – in a "little hut" in the woods (cf. 37). Du Bois, in this respect, deploys an established icon of the African American literary tradition to emphasize the haunting human dimension of an Underground Railroad wilderness. He recognizes and stresses that a "cabin," in the African American literary tradition, was not a Waldenesque hut in the woods, where an individual could find that "in wildness lies the preservation of the world" but that such an abode was often marked as an "evil place" (Du Bois, *Quest* 157). Being "a rendezvous for drinking and carousing," and for the abuse of black women (157), the cabin in *Quest* is, after all, the root of Bles and Zora's estrangement after he learns of her impurity due to being abused by the local plantation owner as a child. Eventually, Elspeth's home thus represents, in a modified way, the

same human wickedness that haunted fugitive space in slave narratives, the wildness and viciousness that enabled the exploitation of blacks under slavery and – as Du Bois continuously stresses – beyond.

If these are facets of the swamp through which Du Bois signifies on the threatening elements of an Underground Railroad space, his depiction also stresses the potential for empowerment that could lie in its wilderness. While, in *Souls*, Du Bois emphasizes this potential by historicizing the swamp's crucial role within a tradition of interracial resistance to white exploitation,<sup>367</sup> *Quest* presents a version of resistance that more specifically signifies on literary Underground Railroad space as it was represented in fugitive slave narratives. The central element in this respect is Zora and Bles' growing of cotton, the "silver fleece," in the swamp, since the novel thereby suggests that the space itself, as evil and haunted as it may be, at the same time offers the means to enact forms of resistance. Due to Zora's intimate knowledge of the swamp, the protagonists discover

a long island, opening to the south, on the black lake, but sheltered north and east by the dense undergrowth of the black swamp and the rampart of dead and living trees. The soil was virgin and black, thickly covered over with a tangle of bushes, vines, and smaller growth all brilliant with early leaves and wild flowers. (*Quest* 54)

The soil itself, the non-human materiality of the swamp, provides a means to resist the system surrounding its wilderness. Because it offers "virgin and black" grounds, not a soil exhausted by the exploitative monoculture organized by the Cresswells, the local white patriarchs, the swamp may lead the way to overcoming the devastating sharecropping practices. It provides not only a retreat, but materially holds the potential to change the conditions under which African Americans labor in the South, which may also be seen from the fact that Elspeth herself – the character who epitomizes the haunting elements of the swamp – holds the key to success, namely the magical, "small, but smooth black [cotton] seeds" that Bles and Zora sow to grow their cotton (71). In the novel, Du Bois therefore not only alludes to a history of marooning, in which the "woods and swamps" had offered slaves "opportunities for small measures of autonomy beyond the fields" (Stewart, "Muir" 202), but also evokes a dimension of resistance through wilderness

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<sup>367</sup> In *Souls*, Du Bois claims that the Chickasawhatchee swamp is "full of historic interest" and likens it to "some vast cathedral, - some great Milan builded [sic!] of wildwood" (81), which had once been the place where Seminoles and African Americans fought together in war against their white oppressors. Scholars have read the swamp in *Souls* as "the symbol of Africa and of the potential for Black effort" (Mootry, *Black Pastoral* 58-59), or as "an early expression of a rehabilitation and recognition of the Southern swamp landscape as a locus of self-determination and defiance for racial others in a rigidly white-dominated society" (A. Wilson 125). Cf. also the (ecocritical) contributions by Hicks, "Ecocriticism of Color"; Raine; or Beilfuss.

that was rooted in the slave narrative's Underground Railroad. *Quest* offers an updated version of collaboration with the wilderness, suggesting that just as slaves had become maroons or fugitives who hid under stones, bushes, in trees, or ate what nature had to offer them to survive and attain freedom, post-Reconstruction sharecroppers, too, could begin to resist by relying on the materiality of a wild space, the swamp.

Furthermore, *Quest* repeats another crucial facet of Underground Railroad space that was prominently depicted in some fugitive slave narratives, namely the idea of a co-agency of the non-human. One scene in particular appears to be an intertextual reflection on the fugitive slave narrative, an updated version of this element of Underground Railroad space: When their work of clearing the island in the swamp requires additional means, Zora resorts to temporarily abducting a mule from one of the Cresswells' plantations. After nightfall, she chooses "a big, black beast" that she guides "through the labyrinthine windings of the swamp" (*Quest* 65, 66), and seeks to drive the animal through the "black lagoon" to her cotton-island:

By subtle temptings she gave him to understand that plenty lay beyond the dark waters, and quickly swinging herself to his back she started to ride him up and down along the edge of the lagoon, petting and whispering to him of good things beyond. Slowly her eyes grew wide; she seemed to be riding out of dreamland on some hobgoblin beast. (66)

Thus "penetrat[ing] into the dark waters" and eventually succeeding in the task together, as the mule "rose in one mighty plunge and planted his feet on the sand of the island" (66), the passage echoes a scene from Bibb's *Narrative*, in which the fugitive uses a horse that "carried me safely across [a river] at the proper place" (162). The novel at this point signifies not only on the co-agency of the non-human that marked Underground Railroad space in the slave narrative, but also on an ethos towards non-human animals that was openly expressed by some narrators. While parallels between the two texts with respect to this scene abound, for instance, as both human protagonists proclaim a basic moral right to steal a quadruped, the most striking similarity lies in the novel's repetition of an ethical relation to the non-human co-agent. While Bibb "thanked God and thanked the horse for what he had done for me" (163), Zora likewise exhibits an empathy that extends beyond her mere use of the animal, when she suggests "by subtle temptings" and by "petting and whispering," that there are rewards and "good things beyond" (66). Thus, *Quest* signifies on Underground Railroad space by emphasizing both characteristic (human and non-human) threats and an empowering potential of the swamp's wilderness, which also lies in entering into ethical relations to non-human materialities. The swamp functions not merely as a symbolic representation of the conflicting facets of Zora's character or as a symbol of African(ist)

elements. It is also a repetition with a difference of a foundational space of African American environmental knowledge.

Crucially, however, Du Bois's portrayal of the swamp not only signifies on the Underground Railroad by echoing its hauntedness and potential of resistance, but also by creating the swamp as a heterotopic space. The swamp, in other words, also signifies on the Underground Railroad "loophole" of the fugitive slave narrative by *functioning* as a heterotopia, and it does so in two ways. First, the novel represents the swamp as interwoven with other diegetic spaces; it becomes heterotopic by attaining a functional relation with respect to such spaces. Furthermore, the swamp also works as a "generic" heterotopia that creates the novel itself as a generic other-space that weaves together and signifies on different modes of articulating environmental knowledge to write an alternative "wilderness narrative" from an African American perspective.

The swamp is a space that emerges as more than just a materiality, as it becomes a presence that is spatially entangled within the novel's diegesis through the main characters, first and foremost Zora, and the "silver fleece." Zora herself is inseparably connected with the swamp; she is a native to this place, a "child of the swamp" (*Quest* 27): "the place was hers. She had been born within its borders; within its borders she had lived and grown, and within its borders she had met her love" (116). Her "love" for Bles, but also her motivation for counteracting the oppressive system, and the way in which she ultimately assumes her role as a leader to lift her people out of the "semi-slavery" of the sharecropping system that the novel extensively describes and criticizes,<sup>368</sup> are rooted in the swamp (*Souls* 44). Moreover, it is only *her* intimate knowledge of its environs that makes the planting of the "silver fleece" possible in the first place. This product, a materiality of the swamp, in conjunction with Zora's character, are the novel's primary means to weave the space more broadly into virtually all other places depicted in the novel, which include towns, fields, and plantations in the vicinity, but also the urbanity of Washington D.C. Throughout the journeys that take place in the novel, the "silver fleece," which alludes to the Greek myth of Jason and the Argonauts,<sup>369</sup> is connected with Zora's own search for what she

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<sup>368</sup> The novel depicts and attacks both the sharecropping and the convict-lease-system that prevailed in the South during the post-Reconstruction period. See, for studies that focus on Du Bois's critique of these socio-economic structures e.g. A. Davidson 106-129; and Farland. On the history of the sharecropping system generally, see e.g. Boles 390-408; or Green et al. For Du Bois's own take on the convict-lease-system, cf. his essay "The Spawn of Slavery" (1901).

<sup>369</sup> In the novel, the myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece is introduced by Mary Taylor; Bles and Zora interpret the story in their own way, reading Jason, in analogy to the Cresswells, as "a thief" instead of a "brave adventurer" (20). Some interpretations focus on the Jason-story, stressing parallels e.g. between the Cresswells and Jason, or between Elspeth and Medea. For such readings along the myth, which is also mentioned in *Souls* (chapter VIII), see e.g. Elder 363; Hardwig 154-155; D.L. Lewis 445.

calls “the Way” that begins after she has been abandoned by Bles due to her impurity (cf. *Quest* 169). As Zora begins “searching for the way, groping for the threads of life” (163), the “threads” of the silver fleece, too, begin to recur throughout the novel, whether in a metaphorical sense through flashbacks in the main characters’ memories, or in a literal, material sense, i.e. in the form of a wedding dress woven out of the “silver fleece” that returns at several points, signaling a heterotopic presence of the swamp throughout the diegesis.

The broader diegetic space with which the swamp thus heterotopically interlinks consists of both the local surroundings of Tooms County, Alabama, and global ones that are marked by the ruthless schemes of a large-scale capitalism. On a local level, the swamp interacts with the space of the plantation, which Du Bois presents through the mode of the plantation pastoral as a contrast to the wilderness of the swamp. On the one hand, there is the Cresswells’ blissful Southern aristocratic life and pastoral perspective. The family lives in what is described as an Edenic ancient home: The “oaks [are] waving lazily in the sunlight and the white gleam of the pillared ‘Big House’” (77), which is surrounded by “a smooth green lawn, and beds of flowers, a vista of brown fields, and the dark line of wood beyond” (78). On the other hand, one finds both the “horror” (276) and the “wonder of the swamp,” where the “golden sun was pouring floods of glory through the slim black trees, and the mystic sombre [sic!] poors caught and tossed back the glow in darker, duller crimson” (53); here lies a sublime wilderness that echoes the swamp’s depiction in *Souls*. Although Du Bois thus sets up what Elder calls a “Plantation-Swamp dichotomy” that is fundamentally “structured upon the clash of two opposing world views, that of the Swamp and that of the Plantation” (363, 358), it is crucial that the novel stresses the interconnectedness of both. An interaction of the swamp with a larger global network crucially begins precisely through the production and selling of the “silver fleece” on the local level, i.e. through its interaction with the plantation system. After making the cotton the subject of her “dreams” and defending it with her life during a week-long thunderstorm (cf. *Quest* 113-117), the act of selling the “silver fleece” to the Cresswells in a scene that reveals the immorality of the sharecropping system (cf. 140-143), inaugurates the cotton’s – and by extension the swamp’s – spatial interconnectedness with larger global power structures. In this way, the “silver fleece” itself becomes a primary expression of Du Bois’s interweaving of local and global space; it demonstrates the swamp’s heterotopic functioning within the larger diegetic world.

Du Bois introduces the global dimension into the novel by letting an omniscient narrative voice contemplate “[t]he cry of the naked [that] was sweeping the world” (35):

From the peasant toiling in Russia, the lady lolling in London, the chieftain burning in Africa, and the Esquimaux [sic!] freezing in Alaska; from long lines of hungry men, from patient sad-eyed women, from old folk and creeping children went up the cry, "Clothes, clothes!" (35)

The earth-wise, detached voice of the novel 'zooms out' of its own, local romance plot(s) and depicts a global system of the interconnected "naked" of the world who toil and suffer for a select few in ways that are not recognizable for the majority of single individuals. At the same time as the novel thus occasionally reveals a bigger picture, however, Du Bois's narrator often crucially 'zooms back' into particular places, in this case into a Wall Street office and the "tense silent white-faced men moving in that swarm who felt no poetry and heard no song, and one of these was John Taylor" (35). John Taylor, a Northern capitalist, and his sister Mary, one of the teachers at the local Tooms County school for African Americans, represent the influence of the North on the South, and the conjoining of Northern and Southern wealth and power in a joint exploitation of those who are easily exploitable: poor white workers and southern African Americans. Although Du Bois also emphasizes the differences and the conflicting world views that exist between an old aristocracy of the South, the Cresswells, and the Northern capitalists, politicians, and philanthropists, his overall message is clear: Northern and Southern forces are – in one sense *literally* – wedded in a common deal, the exploitation of black labor. Whether through the large-scale scheme of a cotton corner off which both John Taylor and the Cresswells make a fortune, primarily at the expense of the sharecroppers, or in the somewhat pathetic double wedding of Helen and Harry Cresswell to John and Mary Taylor, the novel does not tire to open readers' eyes to this constellation.

If this joining of sectional forces represents the larger space with which the "swamp" heterotopically interacts, the interconnections become visible especially when Bles and Zora, after breaking off their engagement, separately move out of the South to Washington, D.C. Bles quickly rises to prominence in a presidential campaign in which he defends the Republican party, but is eventually too honest and idealistic to survive the intrigues of the capital's corrupted, immoral political world, while Zora, keeping in the background, seeks to work as his inspiration, desiring to "direct[...] the growing power of a man" (210). Crucially, the swamp keeps recurring through Bles's and especially Zora's characters in intermittent flashbacks. Bles, for instance, when watching the city of Washington, finds that "[s]omehow it looked like the swamp, only less beautiful" (245), and, in a "lofty waiting-room of the Washington station," suddenly forgets "everything but the field of the Silver Fleece" (292, 293). Zora, too, on various occasions compares her experiences to the swamp (cf. 226), for example, when she meets Bles's fiancé,

the talented but cynical Caroline Wynn, which sends “the old dreamy look in her eyes. In one moment she lived it all again – the red cabin, the moving oak, the sowing of the Fleece, and its fearful reaping” (231-232). In this way, the swamp remains a heterotopic presence within thoroughly urban settings; Zora even likens the largest place she visits during her journey to ‘her’ swamp, when she marvels that New York City itself “was like the swamp, always restless and changing,” but “not nearly so beautiful” (188).

This expression of a continuous presence of the swamp through the protagonists’ shared memory is complemented by its continuous material presence in the form of a wedding dress that Zora sews for the double wedding among the Cresswells and the Taylors. As John Taylor decides to have the dresses for the occasion made from the extraordinary cotton Zora and Bles had raised in the swamp, he orders the manufacturing of “a bolt of silken-like cambric of wondrous fineness and lustre” that Zora, by that time employed as the maid of Mrs. Vanderpool, a rich northern lady, works into a dress for Helen Cresswell (172). As Helen shows contempt for the product in a gesture that highlights a white southern estrangement from the beauty and meaning of their material surroundings, and proclaims it impossible to have “A Cresswell married in cotton!” (172), Zora eventually succeeds in gaining possession of the dress, respectively the “silver fleece.” She recognizes the value of its materiality as connected with her own work and fate, and from this point on treats the dress as “her talisman new-found, her love come back, her stolen dream come true” (174). The materiality of the swamp itself, even if transformed, thus returns and will return throughout the novel as it travels in Zora’s “new trunk” out into the world (174). This movement suggests not only that the silver fleece “takes on a fetishistic quality” as “Zora sees her fate as intrinsically embodied in the fleece’s fate” (Rossetti 44), but also signals the continuing presence of the swamp as a heterotopia.

Beyond writing the swamp as a materially, economically, and emotionally interconnected, heterotopic space into the story-world, however, the novel also employs its space as a means to signify on discourses and modes expressing environmental knowledge. It becomes, in this sense, a “generic” heterotopia, a literary space that signifies on different forms of environmental knowledge. As Anthony Wilson notes, Du Bois can be read as an author who reevaluates the swamp; his treatment is “an early expression of a rehabilitation and recognition of the Southern swamp landscape as a locus of self-determination and defiance for racial others in a rigidly white-dominated society” (125). Traditionally, swamps had “been viewed with fear rather than admiration in Western culture, to be filled or drained where possible” (Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 43). The nineteenth-century U.S. literary tradition generally expressed a corresponding attitude,

especially regarding the South, where, for the dominant planter culture, “the swamp resist[ed] inclusion in a distinct Southern narrative of practical agrarian idealism” (A. Wilson 7).<sup>370</sup> The same also holds true for much late-nineteenth century African American literature, since this tradition frequently deployed swamps in conventional terms, especially in sentimental or domestic fiction.<sup>371</sup> Although the “woods and swamps” had, historically, provided enslaved black slaves with “opportunities for small measures of autonomy beyond the fields” and with an “important form of resistance” (Stewart, “Agrarian” 202, 204), the postwar African American writing tradition, especially where the pastoral or the picturesque became a sign of one’s “civilization,” often refrained from associating with the wilderness of swamplands. In this respect, the wilderness sublime did not readily emerge as a viable alternative to a haunted pastoral in the way Outka’s thesis in *Race and Nature* suggests for a white tradition of nature writing, which could in this way gain a distance from the traumatic southern plantation pastoral.

Reconsidering *Quest* in this broader context makes clear why Du Bois’s text is so significant to the tradition of African American environmental knowledge. The novel highlights, by signifying on Underground Railroad space through depictions of the swamp, that there is a long and powerful tradition of African American relations to the wilderness. Through this process of signification, Du Bois not only weaves the swamp heterotopically into *Quest*’s diegesis, but also self-reflexively plays with established writing traditions, which becomes visible, for instance, when considering his revision of a prototypical pastoral retreat-and-return pattern.

*Quest* diametrically reverses the directions of a pastoral retreat-and-return, as its two main characters move not from the city to the country and back, but, on the contrary, out of the swamp into the city and back in order to transform the swamp’s wilderness. In this way, Du Bois’s novel implies that – despite the onset of the “Great Migration” around the time of its publication – the spiritual home and thus the means of black survival in America do not lie in the city. Instead, Du

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<sup>370</sup> On the swamp in southern literature and culture, see esp. A. Wilson’s extensive study (2006), which argues that the swamp, viewed as “a savage nightmare whose horror inheres in its essential inalienability” (3), presented an unproductive, inaccessible, uncontrollable counterpoint to the plantation pastoral. Others, like D.C. Miller or Cronon, similarly suggest a longstanding tradition of negative views of swampland as opposed to more sublime forms of wilderness.

<sup>371</sup> During slavery, African American writing sometimes depicted swamps “as a place of refuge beyond the restricted world of the plantation” (Dixon, *Ride Out* 3); historically, marooning in the swamps had been one possible way to evade the peculiar institution (cf. chapter 3.2, note 123). In much African American literature after the Civil War, with its focus on domesticity, the home, or education, however, the swamp was treated in more conventional (i.e. also more negative) ways. Chesnut’s *House Behind the Cedars* (1900), for instance, ends with a tragic mulatta fleeing into the swamp and eventually dying. Du Bois’s novel, by contrast, not only reverses the fate of black womanhood through his elevation of Zora, but also reevaluates the space through which the fate of Chesnut’s anti-heroine reaches its fatal climax.

Bois suggests that African Americans must recognize their rootedness in the country and in the “folk” – something that is essential to his ideas of uplift through a black elite. Even though a relation to the “country” is traumatized through the peculiar institution that left its mark not only on the controlled plantation pastoral but also, as Elspeth’s cabin suggests, on the wilderness of the swamp, the materiality in which Zora and Bles’s “dreams” lie is definitely *not* the corrupted “city” of Washington, D.C. In emphasizing this, the novel also uses the swamp to reflect on the pastoral. Du Bois’s literary heterotopia, at this point, becomes not just involved as a space that is woven into the novel’s story-world, but also as a means to speak to the pastoral tradition, by revising its retreat-and-return pattern through the novel’s plot.

Moreover, Du Bois’s central claim that blacks should seek a spiritual rootedness in the wilderness represented by the swamp to ensure their survival in a modern capitalistic world becomes even more pronounced when considering how the movement in the novel relates to the narrator’s movement in *Souls*. In the essay collection, Du Bois emerges as the educated and acculturated city-dweller who moves south. “Out of the North,” he writes in “Of the Black Belt,” “the train thundered, and we woke to see the crimson soil of Georgia stretching away bare and monotonous right and left” (*Souls* 74). The depiction of his journey into “the Black Belt, – that strange land of shadows, at which even slaves paled in the past, and whence come now only faint and half-intelligible murmurs to the world beyond” (76), was no doubt formative for the African American literary tradition. As Raine notes, his “description of the Southern landscape [in *Souls*] and his trope of the journey south as a process of self-discovery have been as inspiring for African American writers as Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) has been for white American nature writers and ecocritics” (322). If *Souls* thereby stresses the importance of rediscovering ties to the non-human material world, especially to the wilderness, this thought gains even more force through the reversed retreat-and-return pattern in *Quest*. Both Zora and Bles should not – and, as the heterotopic interconnectedness of the swamp in the diegesis suggests, *cannot* – leave behind the formative experience of the swamp’s wilderness. What they must do instead, in order to become empowered, is deal with the legacy of this wilderness; they have to come to terms with its hauntedness in order to arm themselves with its potential for resistance. The swamp thereby also functions as a “generic” other-space within a broader late-nineteenth-century discourse. In opposition to negatively connoted stock depictions of swamplands, Du Bois revalues his swamp as a space that is not merely associated with death but with rebirth. When Bles, after he has discovered Zora’s impurity, claims, “You should have *died!*” (127), Du Bois, by letting *Quest* go on *without* Zora’s death, suggests that neither this death in accordance with the demands of a

domestic sentimentalism nor more generally the narrative templates and the modes of environmental knowledge that dominant genres and discourses employ, provide a viable strategy for African American writers. What is needed instead, the novel implies, are new narratives, especially a new, alternative African American wilderness narrative.

### The Frontier: Claiming an African American Wilderness Narrative

One dominant wilderness narrative at the time Du Bois wrote his debut novel was Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis." Turner's idea, which became popular especially through his essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), was in many ways a child of its time. When the Frontier Thesis was presented in a speech at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, Illinois, the United States had already seen a growing discourse on the ceasing westward movement for decades, which emphasized the crucial function of the frontier for the development of the nation.<sup>372</sup> Turner's work, in this sense, expressed a zeitgeist of this period. It found, as Henry Nash Smith notes, "an echo in ideas and attitudes already current" (4), so that twenty-sixth U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt, who had himself written an influential multivolume work on the westward expansion (*The Winning of the West* (1889-1896)), had a point when claiming that Turner simply "put into definite shape a good deal of thought which has been floating around rather loosely" (Roosevelt/Elting *Letters*, Vol. I, 363).

Nonetheless, and despite being in many ways a logical reaction to late-nineteenth-century "frontier anxieties" (Wrobel viii), Turner's work is also original as it describes an ongoing significance of a by then closed frontier. Paradoxically, Turner based his Thesis concerning the frontier on its disappearance, citing the U.S. census of 1890, which had claimed that "at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line" anymore ("Significance" 79). In this way, "Significance," still regarded by many as one of the most important essays in American history,<sup>373</sup> not only provided

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<sup>372</sup> On the long-term discourse on a (disappearing) frontier, cf. e.g. the studies by Wrobel; and Waechter. An expression of the longstanding presence of the frontier as a significant space in U.S. history and politics can also be seen in the (federal) homestead-policies in the second half of the nineteenth century, cf. H.N. Smith 138; or M.E. Young. On the broader history of "closed space theories" of the period, consider the study by Kearns, who turns to the "wide currency [...] [of such theories] at the end of the nineteenth century. Closed-space ideas were 'in the air' at the time" (1).

<sup>373</sup> It took some time in the 1890s until Turner's work was recognized – for three years "neither he nor his frontier thesis was mentioned in the five leading American journals" (Billington, *Turner* 184). Nevertheless, from the close of the century on and, to some extent, until today, his writing on the frontier, especially his

an explanation of an exceptional U.S. American history, but also established the Frontier Thesis as an influential master narrative that affected more than just the field of U.S. historiography. Consequently, and despite decade-long critique, especially in the twentieth century, the Turner Thesis still has a prominent place in American culture,<sup>374</sup> also because of the crucial role it fulfilled around the turn of the century. It provided some sense of continuity in a period of social and economic upheaval that saw, as historian Howard Zinn claims, “the greatest march of economic growth in human history” (253).<sup>375</sup> In this context, Turner gave a meaningful narrative of a characteristically American – and supposedly “Americanizing” – space that optimistically linked an idea of U.S. exceptionalism and manifest destiny with dominant discourses on frontier anxieties and (social) evolutionary thought.<sup>376</sup>

The Turner Thesis, put forward not only through “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” but also in other works such as *The Character and Influence of the Indian Trade in Wisconsin* (1891) and in numerous essays, involves two elements that are particularly relevant for a reading of Du Bois’s *Quest*. First, it centrally describes a repetitive process of

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essay of 1893, are regarded as seminal in U.S. historiography. H.N. Smith, for instance, reads this piece as “[b]y far the most influential piece of writing about the West produced during the nineteenth century” (250). Others speak of the essay as the “most widely known essay in American history,” a piece that “revolutionized historical thought in the United States” (G.R. Taylor v); as a “definitive document in organizing the boundaries for the American national consciousness” (Moos 3); or as an “American masterpiece” because “it influenced the way the American public sees, feels, and thinks about itself, its past, and its future” (Ridge 65).

<sup>374</sup> The Turner Thesis has been much criticized by now and is, in terms of historiography, outdated. Billington, for instance, points out that more recent approaches to the historical meaning of the frontier are much more differentiated, as they “recognize American civilization as the product of a variety of factors, including the European heritage, the continuing impact of the wider world, and the contributions of the many national and ethnic groups represented in its population” (*Western Frontier* xviii). Another important point of critique is Hofstadter’s observation that more land was settled under the Homestead-Act *after* the (supposed) closing of the frontier than before (*Progressive Movement* cf. esp. 52-56); on Turner’s reception, cf. also Billington, *Frontier Heritage* vi; H.N. Smith 295; Claviez 566. This does not mean that the Frontier Thesis is culturally insignificant today, since it has had a “formative influence on the American mind” despite its historical inaccuracies (H.N. Smith 4). In this sense, “Turner’s thesis continues to exert an influence that extends well beyond the walls of the academy” (Kushner 53).

<sup>375</sup> Noble similarly speaks of the turn of the century U.S., which has often been read as a watershed period within the nation’s history, as the “greatest social and economic transformation in the history of mankind” (37). In this context, Turner’s historiographic hypothesis provided an explanation as well as a hopeful myth; it was a “history appropriate to the conditions of the early twentieth century” (Moos 7) that many contemporaries read as implying “that frontiering had made all people equal and that the injustices of the day would soon disappear” (Billington, *Turner* 185).

<sup>376</sup> The Turner Thesis and its overwhelming optimism can also be read in the context of broader, prevalent forms of evolutionary thought; it characteristically involves “a union of geography and biology in public debate” that was central to evolutionism (Kearns 7). Turner himself primarily viewed society in a Spencerian fashion as an “organism,” read history as “the self-consciousness of this organism,” and conceptualized his own historiography as an application of (natural) scientific theories, claiming that “[s]cience has of late years revolutionized Zoology, Biology etc. It must now take up recorded history and do the same to it. This, I would like to do my little to aid” (Turner, qtd. Kearns 5).

settling the North American continent while proclaiming at the same time that this process had ended; secondly, there is Turner's notion of a progressive, "Americanizing" transformation of the individual through the repeated frontier-experiences of the settlers who moved westwards. With respect to the former, i.e. the history of a westward movement that had supposedly ceased, Turner assumed a permanent repetition of an original, first settlement. In "Significance," he describes the

[...] *recurrence of the process of evolution in each western area reached in the process of expansion* [...] [that implies a] return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. ("Significance" 80, emphasis in original)

Turner's idea therefore centrally involves the existence of a particular space, an advancing space between wilderness and civilization that was pushing westward. There was a constant process, marked "from decade to decade" by "advances of the frontier" (84), as the "outer edge of the wave" of civilization, the "meeting point between savagery and civilization," was sweeping the continent (81). Turner reads this process through the lens of a (Spencerian) social evolutionism, as implying "continual beginnings" and a "cyclic evolution" in countless new 'first' settlements, but does not presume that it is homogeneous or uniform. Instead, his historiographic work meticulously describes the different forms of pioneering in different environments, and emphasizes "the unequal rate of advance" of the westward movement (89).<sup>377</sup> In this way, the *process* of settling is historicized as a heterogeneous phenomenon, while the supposed *progress* through this constant repetition of new 'first' settlements in the advancing, "successive frontiers" is suggested to be uniform in the sense that it led to a distinctly American character (86).

The assumption of such a progress is at the heart of the Turner Thesis and its power as a national myth, as it points to the "Americanizing" function of the pioneer's contact with the wilderness. In this respect, Turner articulates what could be called a "myth of mastery" that supposedly formed the U.S. national character, especially its democracy and institutions, and that entailed two primary consecutive phases. Upon a first contact, Turner suggests, the settler had to

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<sup>377</sup> Turner notes in many of his works that frontier spaces were by no means alike, even though the process that supposedly entailed a social evolutionary progress into an American citizen, was seen as induced in the same way across different kinds of frontiers (cf. e.g. *Character and Influence* (1891); or later works such as "The Ohio Valley in American History" (1909); or "The First Official Frontier of the Massachusetts Bay" (1914)). He diagnoses, for example, differences in terms of the time an advancement of the frontier took, e.g., when he describes that pushing forward into the wilderness occurred at a much faster rate after the Civil War, due to revolutions in transportation and communication, cf. Waechter 80.

face an overwhelming ‘wild nature,’ a threatening and hostile non-human materiality, which “masters” her/him:

[t]he wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization, and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and the Iroquois, and runs an Indian palisade around him. (“Significance” 81-82)

What occurs initially, according to Turner, is a process that violently tears the pioneer out of familiar social structures and out of an old world civilization. The settler who comes to America and joins the westward movement is radically forced to leave behind his old (European) habits, customs, and ideas, as the wilderness destroys not just his material but especially also his cultural ‘baggage,’ thus making him “from the moment of his landing [in a frontier wilderness] subject to new stimuli, forced to new ways” (“Colonial History” 107). Only by adapting to the new environs, by becoming like the “Cherokee and the Iroquois” (82), the settlers were able to survive their harsh new surroundings.

In a second phase, which follows the moment in which “the environment is first too strong for the man,” the relationship between the settler and his new, wild surroundings changes (“Significance” 83): “[L]ittle by little he transforms the wilderness,” thereby producing not, however, an “old Europe, not simply [...] Germanic germs” (82). Instead, Turner’s interpretation of the frontier-encounter suggests that there emerges, at this point, “a new product that is American” (82). Through the process of first being overwhelmed and challenged by a hostile, life-threatening wilderness, the (successful) settler eventually gains “dominion over inanimate nature” (85). After ‘being mastered’ by a new environment, s/he eventually turns her/himself into a ‘master’ of this new space and begins to dominate the non-human material world, thereby becoming an American.

In this sense, the Frontier Thesis provides one specific answer to the fundamental question J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur had famously raised more than a century ago, namely “What then is the American, this new man?” (43-44). For Turner, the frontier wilderness itself, providing a “perennial rebirth” was the crucial factor of ‘Americanization,’ and “this expansion westward with its new opportunities [...] furnish[ed] the forces dominating American character” (“Significance” 80). The two-fold process of the frontier becomes, in his view, the Ur-American experience that supposedly produced the exceptional national character and mentality mirrored in American democracy. Turner’s answer to where characteristically U.S. American traits, attitudes, and

institutions stemmed from therefore does not primarily involve a notion of freedom gained through European enlightenment ideals, or through overcoming old world aristocratic structures. Moreover, an American character is seen as emerging neither out of the U.S. Constitution nor from a divinely intended American mission (“manifest destiny”), but instead from a consecutively acquired American environmental knowledge. American-ness, according to Turner, was essentially forged through a particular *environment*, since “[t]he true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West” (80). Turner’s claim that the frontier itself was responsible for the social evolutionary process that furnished the unique “American, this new man” (Crèvecoeur 44), entails therefore a particular form of knowledge of the human in relation to its non-human material conditions that converges with articulating a national myth.

The Frontier Thesis is significant for Du Bois’s cotton-novel as *Quest* signifies on Turner from a distinctly African American perspective. On the one hand, the novel reinterprets the transformative process that Turner describes through its depiction of the wilderness of the swamp, therein repeating as well as revising the mainstream model to create an African American frontier narrative. Secondly, *Quest* proclaims an “opening” – instead of a “closing” – of the frontier and thus highlights one particular facet of Du Bois’s strategy for race uplift; it suggests that it is essential for blacks to write their own wilderness narrative in order to overcome the devastating social situation African Americans faced in the early twentieth century, especially in the South.

Reading Du Bois’s depiction of cultivating the swamp against the Turnerian idea of a transformative process on the frontier reveals both similarities and differences. The violence that marks the “Americanizing” transformation Turner describes but interprets only positively in terms of triggering an inevitable, “natural” form of progressive social evolution, for example, is also present in *Quest*’s depiction of the settling of the swamp. When the African American sharecroppers, armed with “axes, and saws, and hammers,” begin to penetrate into the thick wilderness of the swamp,

[t]he forest trembled as by some mighty magic, swaying and falling with crash on crash. Huge bonfires blazed and crackled, until at last a wide black scar appeared in the thick south side of the swamp, which widened and widened to full twenty acres. (*Quest* 290)

The portrayal leaves no doubt as to the violent nature of the process and presents the same kind of destruction of non-human materialities that Turner’s settlers had to bring upon the threatening wilderness they supposedly had to subdue in order to become American. In this

respect, as well as regarding the toil “beyond exhilaration” that the cultivation of the swamp requires, the novel’s depictions thus parallel the transformative process Turner describes (64)<sup>378</sup>; Du Bois leaves no doubt that a cultivation of the swamp means at the same time its disappearance. When clearing the swamp, “[t]he trees crashed and the stumps groaned and crept up into the air, the brambles blazed and smoked; little frightened animals fled for shelter” (67), with the result that, in the last chapter of *Quest*, Zora is depicted as sitting in a “transformed swamp – now a swamp in name only – beneath the great oak dreaming” (330).

This last depiction of Zora, however, is significant with respect to Du Bois’s take on the clearing of the swamp, as the “great oak” signals that the process of transformation is not supposed to be the one of complete and utter devastation and exploitation for mere economic profit that marked the plantation system and, to some extent, Turner’s model. In Turner’s anthropocentric thesis, the central idea was that the American *man* develops by assuming “dominion over inanimate nature” at the cost of non-human environs and human native populations (“Significance” 85). In the transformation of the swamp in *Quest*, by contrast, one finds an emphasis on a continuing co-existence and interaction between both human and non-human entities that remain connected beyond the process of cultivating the swamp frontier. To begin with, Zora, after all the “child of the swamp” (27), is by no means oblivious to the destruction of its non-human materiality, but entertains a spiritual relationship with this heterotopic space. She articulates an environmental knowledge and an ethos towards the wilderness of the swamp and its non-human inhabitants that becomes visible not only in the scene in which she steals a mule (cf. 66), but also, when a group of rabbits tries to feed off her “silver fleece”:

When the rabbits tried the tender plants she watched hours to drive them off, and catching now and then a pulsing pink-eyed invader, she talked to it earnestly: ‘Brer Rabbit – poor little Brer Rabbit, don’t you know you mustn’t eat Zora’s cotton? Naughty, naughty Brer Rabbit.’ And then she would show it where she had gathered piles of fragrant weeds for it and its fellows. (*Quest* 92)

At this point, Zora expresses an ethics regarding her non-human material surroundings, acknowledging other creatures’ right to live within that space as something that is just as valuable as her own right to do so. Not only does she not hurt or kill the rabbits in her attempts to chase them off – Zora shows them where they can *continue* to live off a shared, common space.

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<sup>378</sup> When the novel describes, for example, that “the swamp is mortal thick and hard to clear” (52), and that its cultivation appears “indeed a hopeless task” of “sickening weariness and panting despair” (64), Du Bois echoes a Turnerian notion of the harsh frontier. In *Quest*, too, the black settlers, whether Zora and Bles or the local community portrayed towards the end of the novel, are first ‘mastered’ by a wilderness that makes them “subject to new stimuli, forced to new ways” (Turner, “Colonial History” 107).

Furthermore, her ‘dialogue’ in the quote signals that this attitude stems from a long-standing African American legacy of relating to the wilderness, as her address, “Brer Rabbit,” echoes black folk culture. In this moment, Du Bois signifies on Turner through his protagonist’s reference to the black vernacular tradition, suggesting that this tradition had long established close ties to the wilderness in ways distinct from the exploitative ones that characterize the plantation system and the Frontier Thesis.

Crucially, Du Bois therefore goes beyond merely portraying Zora’s personal attitude towards the swamp, which also includes her recognition that “[d]eath and pain” must be the price for cultivating the swamp, i.e. that “hoeing was murder,” even if it had to be done (94, 93). As *Quest* progresses, it begins to portray a special relationship of African Americans more generally to (southern) non-human materialities that diverges from that of Turner’s settlers to a frontier wilderness. This becomes apparent especially in depictions of the cultivation of the swamp in the last third of the novel. In one scene, for instance, Du Bois describes how the African American settlers, after cutting “a wide black scar” into the “thick South side” of the swamp,

“[w]ith ravenous appetites [...] fell upon the food, and then in utter weariness stretched themselves and slept, lying along the earth like huge bronze earth-spirits, sitting against trees, curled in dense bushes. (290-291)

The ones transforming the swamp are thus not transformed in the way Turner’s idea of “mastering” the wilderness suggests; they are not simply involved in a violent, exploitative act that allegedly created “American-ness” through subsuming a supposedly “free” space. Instead, Du Bois proposes, especially by his use of the term “earth-spirits,” that the black settlers gain their humanity precisely because they remain *connected* with the non-human materiality within the process of its transformation, not because they have been disconnected or hyper-separated in an act of subduing the wilderness. In this sense, the novel can also be read as another example of acting against the long-standing environmental othering of the black body through a strategy that writes against environmental exception. Not primarily by writing against “biological exclusion” via claiming an anatomical or biological sameness of the black and the white body within the human family (cf. chapter 3.3), but by writing against an “environmental state of exception” through relating the black body to the non-human material, *Quest* seeks to verify African American humanity.

Beyond repeating and revising a Turnerian frontier-process that, Du Bois suggests, must take a different form for African Americans, the novel furthermore signifies on the Turner Thesis by depicting an *opening* – instead of a closing – of the frontier, which crucially (re-)introduces a distinct African American “wilderness narrative.” In this respect, it is essential to consider the

general status of the swamp in the turn-of-the-century southern topography the novel depicts. As Colonel Cresswell, exhibiting the traditional logic of the old southern aristocracy and the plantation pastoral, points out, the swamp is categorically excluded from a (white) southern frontier narrative, since “You can’t get it cleared” (*Quest* 281). The only way to do so, in his mind, would be to “[s]ell it to some fool darkey” and to “let them believe they’re buying land. In nine cases out of ten he works hard a while and then throws up the job. We get back our land and he makes good wages for his work” (281). That the Colonel, the novel’s voice of the old aristocracy, feels justified and finds no moral fault in this course of action rests on his age-old conviction that “white people rule here” (281), and is another way in which Du Bois draws attention to the persistence of an abominable post-Reconstruction “semi-slavery” that continued to thwart African Americans’ attempts at uplift in the South (*Souls* 44).

The white southern relation to the swamp articulated through the Colonel moreover works to emphasize Du Bois’s scheme of uplift, which, in the novel, also involves an African American wilderness narrative. Generally, the essential element of Du Bois’s model of uplift – frequently read in opposition to Booker T. Washington’s model of “industrial education” – is the need for a strong, highly educated black elite, represented in *Quest* through Bles and Zora.<sup>379</sup> Only with such an elite will it be possible, the novel implies, to effectively combat the injustices heaped upon African Americans on multiple levels, for instance, through the legal system or through politics. It does not suffice merely to produce good servants and farmers through an industrial education model, since they would only reproduce the systemic poverty and the low social status of blacks. If change was to take place, Du Bois therefore argued, African Americans needed a “Talented Tenth”<sup>380</sup> who could stand in with their advanced skills for the rights of the entire race. There was a need for the Zoras who could read the “law books,” knew “the law and most of the

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<sup>379</sup> *Quest* has sometimes been read as a fictionalized version of Du Bois’s famous critique of Washington and Tuskegee in *Souls* (cf. 34-45), and as his alternative suggestion of building a black elite through higher education. Cf. for readings that emphasize this aspect e.g. Schmidt 195-197; Rossetti 44; or A. Davidson 106-129. More generally, for an overview of the canonical Du Bois-Washington-controversy, cf. e.g. Anderson esp. 238-278; D.L. Lewis esp. 211-237; Williamson, *Crucible* 70-78; Bauerlein; or Howe; a good overview along compiled primary material, i.e. writing and correspondence from both Washington and Du Bois, can also be gained from Aiello (2016).

<sup>380</sup> Du Bois argued for a black elite, for an “educational system” that rests on the basis of “the well-equipped college and university” in which such an elite must be trained (*Souls* 42); the same thought was also publicized in the well-known essay “The Talented Tenth” in *The Negro Problem* (1903), a volume edited by Booker T. Washington. The idea may be read in different ways in *Quest*. On the one hand, there is unmistakable critique of the black elite through characters like the urbane and highly gifted Caroline Wynn, who, however, has grown cynical as racism stands in the way of her life’s dream of becoming a sculptor. On the other hand, the idea of a black elite is celebrated through Bles and, especially, Zora, whom Du Bois describes as “a younger class of educated black folk, who were learning to fight with new weapons” (307). It is precisely such a class and such weapons that, *Quest* suggests, are necessary.

decisions,” and could thus stand up and defend their people’s rights in courts against opponents like Colonel Cresswell (318).

If this is the well-known, stock version of Du Bois’s scheme of uplift, *Quest*, however, foregrounds yet another facet of this scheme that becomes visible when reading the novel through the lens of environmental knowledge: *Quest* points out that, to advance in the U.S., it is crucial for African Americans to claim their own wilderness narrative that diverges from Turner and that incorporates a history of the Underground Railroad. The novel proposes that African Americans must realize the strengths that lie in their own cultural history, which crucially includes particular forms of environmental knowledge. To succeed in “uplift,” African Americans need to realize that they have long developed alternative relations to non-human materialities, for instance, through the heterotopia of the Underground Railroad on which Du Bois’s swamp signifies. True, the swamp is the place where Elspeth’s cabin lies, where Zora’s rape and – in the eyes of the dominant society – a stain of impurity stems from; there is trauma in the swamp, to be sure, and that trauma keeps haunting African Americans until the time Du Bois writes his novel. However, Du Bois does not tire to stress that there are also “dreams” in the swamp, that there is an environmental knowledge that can affirm humanity, and that therefore African Americans must not ignore this part of their past, if they truly desire uplift. Even though the wilderness, the frontier that opens up in the novel through the heterotopia of the swamp, thus cannot be conceptualized as the kind of (supposedly) “free” space into which Turner’s European pioneer moves, the novel suggests that a gradual transformation through the wilderness is possible for African Americans. The novel strongly implies that catharsis may occur, not only by depicting the death of Elspeth, but also because her cabin, that “evil place” is finally replaced, in the transformed swamp, by a small settlement that holds the potential for interracial cooperation and friendship. Through the transformation of the swamp, *Quest* proposes that African Americans must regain the productive forces of an acquired environmental knowledge, and that to do so, it is necessary to turn to the wilderness in order to turn its *history* into *narrative*. One would thus be mistaken if assuming that Du Bois proposes that African Americans should literally recover southern swamps as frontier territory. Instead, he suggests that they have to claim a “wilderness narrative” for themselves. To express African American humanity through such a narrative is central for Du Bois, and his turn to fiction – to *narrative* fiction – in itself implies what his book, in its overall meaning suggests, namely that there is a need for narratives that articulate African American environmental knowledge.

## 4.5

### Opening the Ethnographic Eye: Zora Neale Hurston's Early Short Fiction, De-Anthropocentrizing Rivers, and the Anthropological Observer

"From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had known about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut and what the Squinch Owl says from the house top. But it was fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that."

(Hurston, *Mules and Men* 1)

"I have seen millions of lovers, child. I have borne them up and down, listened to those things that are uttered more with the breath than with the lips, gathered infinite tears, and some lovers have even flung themselves upon the soft couch I keep in my bosom, and slept."

(Hurston, "Magnolia Flower" 34)

If Du Bois's *Quest* points to the ways in which a tradition of signifying on environmental knowledge continued into the twentieth century through the dimension of the spatial, Hurston can be read as a writer whose work repeats and revises through the visual. As the previous chapters have shown, the tradition of expressing African American environmental knowledge through the visual, which had its antebellum roots in the "double vision" of the fugitive slave narrative, transformed during the postwar decades. Especially Forten's, W.W. Brown's, and Washington's writings reveal how important shifts occurred. As attention generally moved to the themes of "home" and "education," Brown and especially Forten demonstrate how environmental knowledge was increasingly articulated through the lens of the picturesque, while Washington centrally employed a new, disciplining gaze within his model of the pastoral and the Georgic. Crucially, all three writers share an ethnographic gaze on the black body. Forten exerted a curious, touristic gaze on the freedmen she educated at Port Royal; Brown worked quasi-ethnographically through his memory of the old South; and Washington moved through Alabama like an early ethnographer who meticulously examined the living conditions of the population of the Black Belt he meant to "lift up." When Du Bois speaks, famously, of "double consciousness" as "this sense of always *looking* at one's self through the eyes of

others” (*Souls* 14, emphasis mine), this impulse seems also connected to the ways in which the black literary tradition often gazed ethnographically at black bodies, thereby sometimes expressing environmental knowledge.

Zora Neale Hurston’s early work, this chapter argues, presents a continuation of this black ethnographic gaze and further opens up an “ethnographic eye” of African American literature already present during the nineteenth century, even before she came into direct contact with Boas, her later mentor.<sup>381</sup> Although she famously claimed, at the beginning of *Mules and Men* (1935), her first major book of ethnography, that her work for Boas gave her the “spy-glass of Anthropology” to look at African American folk culture (1), her early short stories suggest that her “spy-glass” may also in part be stemming from the black literary tradition itself. Hurston, her early fiction suggests, continued a line of quasi-ethnographically observing the black body that converged with articulating environmental knowledge.

Since Hurston’s rediscovery and reappraisal in the 1970s, scholarship has overwhelmingly focused on her novels, especially the highly acclaimed *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and has traditionally approached her texts along the themes of race, gender and anthropology. Moreover, such critical perspectives have been complemented by the recognition of another vital dimension of Hurston’s *oeuvre*, her portrayal and appreciation of the natural world in general, and of her native Florida in particular. However, although critics are increasingly drawing attention to this last aspect of Hurston’s work, often explicitly arguing for this author’s importance to ecocriticism,<sup>382</sup> both African American studies and environmentally oriented literary criticism have displayed a tendency to overlook much of Hurston’s short fiction of the 1920s, the beginning years of her writing career. The former continues, under the influence of scholarship from the 1970s that assessed these texts as “apprentice work” (Bone, *Down Home* 144), to dismiss much of her early short prose, with the exception of “Drenched in Light”

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<sup>381</sup> Since there is no clear evidence that Hurston was already drawing directly from Boas for the texts I discuss here, Boas is treated in this chapter as part of a broader discursive context rather than an immediate influence on Hurston, who only came into direct contact with Boas in 1925. Sources with respect to the period in question are scarce (only one Hurston-letter pre-1925 is known to have survived), and Hurston’s own assessments of her early life in her autobiography *Dust Tracks On a Road* (1942) is too unreliable (cf. Kaplan 35-49) to suggest a clear connection to Boas with respect to the stories discussed. Nonetheless, it is probable that Hurston came into contact with Boas’s influential ideas during her college years in Washington, D.C. and as she became part of the “New Negro Movement” in New York – i.e. even before she began conducting fieldwork for Boas in 1926 (on Hurston’s relation to Boas generally, cf. e.g. Boyd 142-155; and Plant 55-84).

<sup>382</sup> Work on the role of non-human nature in Hurston can be found in Goodwin; Morris/Dunn; A. Brown; E. Jones, “Pastoral”; Stein, *Shifting* 53-83; Levy; C. Davis; Hicks, “Environmentalism”; and Klestil. The latter three contributions take an explicitly ecocritical perspective.

(1924), “Spunk” (1925) and “Sweat” (1926).<sup>383</sup> The latter, lamenting that Hurston “by all accounts, remains largely unheralded as an ‘environmentalist,’” likewise exhibits much more fervor with respect to interpreting her novels, whilst so far focusing much less on the shorter works (Hicks, “Environmentalism” 113).<sup>384</sup> Turning thus to a generally underrepresented and, in part, only recently retrieved set of texts, this chapter focuses on three short stories, “John Redding Goes to Sea” (1921), “Magnolia Flower” (1925), and “Under the Bridge” (1925; rediscovered in 1996). These early texts give an opportunity to see how Hurston’s particular kind of environmental writing developed not simply in reaction to Boas and her anthropological training, but how she also developed her stance out of a tradition of ethnographically writing about the black body that was already present in African American literature. Echoing a longstanding ethnographic eye of this literary tradition, Hurston employs her own gaze in the texts to visualize African American relations to non-human materialities in a way that both celebrates folklore and envisions a de-anthropocentrized relation of the black body to non-human materialities. Her environmental knowledge emerges through looking at African American culture in a way that stresses a co-agency of the non-human world.

To demonstrate this, one may turn to one central element that recurs in all three stories, namely rivers. The crucial function of streams in Hurston’s texts can be traced both on a narrative level and with respect to broader discursive contexts. On the one hand, rivers are the primary instrument of Hurston’s de-anthropocentrizing narrative strategy: “John Redding Goes to Sea” and “Under the Bridge” weave rivers into their plots and diegeses as non-human agents in their own rights; “Magnolia Flower” employs streams themselves as narrators, seeking to blur human and non-human perceptive modes. On the other hand, Hurston’s stories thereby challenge racially and environmentally hegemonic discursive formations of her time, especially those of the disciplines of (physical) anthropology and sociology. In this sense,

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<sup>383</sup> Under the influence of works such as Hemenway’s seminal Hurston-biography (1977), scholars have traditionally read the early tales as (yet unaccomplished) writing experiments. Higher literary value has only been attributed to the three above-mentioned texts; for an overview of scholarly approaches to these cf. Davis/Mitchell 101-107. The texts treated in this chapter are usually mentioned only in passing; two exceptionally extensive readings of “John Redding Goes to Sea” are given by Bone, *Down Home* 141-150; and M. Perry 110-124.

<sup>384</sup> Ecocritical approaches to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* include e.g. Rieger 92-134; Norwood 173-188; and Stein, *Shifting* 53-83. Moreover, environmentally oriented criticism has turned to Hurston’s use of folk culture (S. Clark) and her relation to Florida (Willis 103-123); Hicks more generally argues for Hurston’s inclusion in the ecocritical canon (“Environmentalism”). While several critics have turned to the role of nature in Hurston’s short fiction, the only ecocritical approaches to some of the stories considered in this chapter to date are the contributions by C. Davis; and Klestil. In my own essay on Hurston, I treat the same set of stories through framing theory.

Hurston's rivers fulfil not only a de-anthropocentrizing function but also bear a de-racializing potential in the context of dominant assumptions of a set of transforming discourses. In the following, I will first outline three of these assumptions that were also challenged through the "father" of modern American anthropology, Franz Boas. Subsequently, I will turn to Hurston's stories and read their rivers as instances of resistance against a racialized anthropocentrism that also suggests that Hurston was already moving in a similar direction as Boas before they met and collaborated.

### Towards a Boasian Anthropology

Hurston's early stories emerged at a time that was still marked by a persistently held set of simultaneously racist and anthropocentric ideas formed primarily through nineteenth century evolutionism, but still characteristically articulated by a variety of dominant discursive formations of the first decades of the twentieth century. One may identify three such ideas in the disciplines of (physical) anthropology and sociology that correspond, in many ways, with the general ideas of an evolutionary thought on the "negro problem" (cf. also chapter 4.2, esp. 220-226).

Firstly, there was the central idea of an essentialist universalistic evolutionism. Drawing from a tradition of social evolutionary thought, often of a Spencerian brand, which had converged with earlier pseudo-scientific concepts of the "American School," one persistent notion in turn of the century anthropology was the a-priori assumption of a timeless constant of human (societal) development. As David Brinton, then President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, had pointed out in 1895,

[t]his discovery is that of the physical unity of man, the parallelism of his development everywhere and in all time; [...] the absolute uniformity of his thoughts and actions, his aims and methods, when in the same degree of development, no matter where he is or in what epoch living.  
(qtd. Pöhl, "Einleitung" 8)

The assumption here is a simple (and simplifying) notion of "same causes – same effects," which, even though the idea of the "physical unity of man" prepared the ground for modern anthropology, was turned by many of the leading theorists of the time into an essentialist theory of racial difference. From the perspective of scientists like Lewis H. Morgan, John Wesley

Powell, or William John McGee, the assumption of “the physical unity of man” primarily facilitated the recognition of certain undeniably existing and all-embracing stages of development, several of which could – and according to this view in fact did – occur synchronically across the North American continent of that given moment. This perspective did not focus on the geographic or environmental contexts of a given culture but was primarily concerned with tracing human culture-evolutionary “Progress.” An expression of this point of view may be seen, for instance, in such bizarrely appearing projects as the exhibition of “living objects” at the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893, which portrayed and visualized graphically “the stages of development of man on the American continent” (Frederick Putnam, qtd. Hoxie 88), or William John McGee’s “Congress of Races,” an exhibition of living ethnological and anthropological curiosities during the “Louisiana Purchase Exhibition” of 1904 (cf. Pöhl, “Tote”; Rydell). It was such phenomena and their underlying conceptual premise of a universalistic evolutionism against which Boas came to argue throughout his career. With his diverging focus on the specificity of distinct cultures, read in their distinct social as well as non-human environments, he formed, instead, his well-known idea of cultural relativism.

Intimately connected with the idea of a constant and traceable human societal development including the assumption of different but possibly synchronically occurring stages, was a second idea endorsed by many early-twentieth century anthropologists and sociologists, namely the assumption of a hierarchical relation among such stages of development. Whether still rooted in polygenist arguments that assumed and constructed racial difference on the basis of primal physical distinctions, in terms of racial “character,” as Boeckmann (2000) has suggested, or on the basis of Brinton’s and others’ ideas of culture-evolution and “Progress,” an overwhelming majority of anthropologists and sociologists proposed a hierarchical order in terms of the “value” of the groups of humans synchronically being attributed to different societal stages. Euro-American “civilization,” from this perspective, was held to be the climax of human societal development, i.e. the highest rank of a teleologically understood ladder.

This thought was expressed with respect to African American as well Native American populations. Roswell Johnson, for instance, an American eugenics professor who joined Carnegie Institution’s “Station for Experimental Evolution” in 1905, conceded in his *Applied Eugenics* (1918) that “[w]e do not mean, of course, to suggest that all natives who have died in the New World since the landing of Columbus have died because the evolution of their race had not proceeded so far in certain directions as that of their conquerors,” only to continue: “But the proportion of them who were eliminated for that reason is certainly very large” (qtd. Pöhl,

“Einleitung” 16). Even though expressed here in terms of a “tendency” by Johnson, the underlying impetus appears clear. Simultaneously existing but presumably distinctly far developed and therefore not equally “progressed” and “valuable” groups at different “evolutionary stages” will inevitably (and not just metaphorically) “struggle for life” in the social arena, with civilization as the “fittest” element surviving. Boas critically drew attention precisely to this second concept, when he pointed out in the *American Anthropologist* in 1920, how “it may be recognized that the hypothesis [of a linear and universal social evolutionism] implies the thought that our modern Western European civilization represents the highest cultural development towards which all other more primitive cultural types tend” (Boas 282). His own stance of cultural anthropology, by contrast, was set against such hierarchies, which is reflected not only in his claim for a holistic view – and a particular value – of each culture, perceived in its specific societal, historical and geographic context as a phenomenon of its own, but also in his engagement in the African American struggle for equality throughout his career.<sup>385</sup>

What generally followed from the described reasoning for many leaders within the scientific disciplines that formed the immediate backdrop for the emergence of Boas’ cultural anthropology was, thirdly, a deductive and prescriptive methodology. Deductive, because the methodological frameworks largely applied were not based on working from the observation of phenomena actually found through fieldwork in a specific culture, but primarily aimed to validate the pre-assumed hierarchical ladder leading up to “civilization”; and prescriptive, as supposed findings, especially regarding African Americans, were sought to be actively turned into political and social practice. Concrete policies were proposed both on the basis of a residual biological essentialism that assumed an innate (physical) inferiority, as well as in connection with a recognized physical “unity” of an evolutionarily understood human race. An example of the former can be found in Robert Bean’s widely disseminated article “Negro Brain” (1906), which proposed openly racist education policies on the basis of the assumption that “due to a deficiency of gray matter and connecting fibres in the negro brain [...] we are forced to conclude that it is useless to try to elevate the negro by education or otherwise except in the direction of his natural endowments” (qtd. Baker, “Location” 123). Additionally, it was also prominent scientists like Brinton – whose work is permeated with racist hierarchies and the idea of an unsurmountable

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<sup>385</sup> While Boas actively supported “race uplift” and conversed with Black leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois or Booker T. Washington on the “Negro problem,” his involvement with the African American intelligentsia of his day was certainly ambivalent and to some extent problematic. Cf. Hyatt 83-102; the study by V. Williams; and Lee D. Baker’s recent work (“Location”; *Anthropology*).

inferiority of African Americans despite his argument for the “physical unity of man” (cf. Baker, *Savage* 32-37) – who opened the gates for racist political action via the unspecific, but all the more prescriptive general claim that anthropology “offers a positive basis for legislation, politics and education as applied to a given ethnic group” (Brinton 69).

### Opening the Ethnographic Eye: Hurston’s De-Anthropocentrizing Rivers

In a variety of ways, then, the ideas of a universalistic evolutionism, in conjunction with persistent hierarchies of social evolutionary thought, and a corresponding deductive and prescriptive methodology permeated scientific and public discursive formations and marked the climate against which Boas modernized anthropology and Hurston produced her first short fiction. Such ideas were vital elements of what L. D. Baker describes as the “ideological cement that fused capitalist development, imperialism, scientific progress, racism and the law into a rock solid edifice within US society” in the first decades of the twentieth century (“Location” 112). Hurston was undoubtedly becoming aware of this “cement” as she began studying and working in Washington D.C. in 1919 and then moved to New York in January 1925 to become part of the circles of the Harlem Renaissance and to receive training as an anthropologist at Barnard College.

It was at D.C.’s Howard University, namely in a student organization and literary magazine called *Stylus*, which had been established in 1915 by Montgomery Gregory and Alain Locke for the purpose of “stimulating and producing authors and artists within the race,” that Hurston’s first known published piece of short fiction, “John Redding Goes to Sea,” appeared in May 1921 (qtd. Boyd 84).<sup>386</sup> The event gave Hurston access to a literary salon hosted by poet Georgia Douglas Johnson on Washington’s S street, which enlisted distinguished members such as poets Sterling Brown and Angelina Grimke, writers Jean Toomer and Rudolph Fisher, and racial leaders such as James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois. “John Redding Goes to Sea,” often underestimated by critics in the legacy of Hemingway’s dismissal as Hurston’s “groping, stumbling attempt to capture the folk ethos,” is the story of an outsider-protagonist living in a Southern Black community, who is fatally equipped with a persistent longing for the sea and for exploring the world (*Literary Biography* 19). Having been perceived from the start by the

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<sup>386</sup> Five years later, in January 1926, “John Redding Goes to Sea” was republished in *Opportunity*, the much more widely read National Urban League Magazine edited by Charles Spurgeon Johnson.

villagers of a typical Hurstonian Eatonville<sup>387</sup> as a “queer child,” due to his overarching wanderlust and dreaminess, John’s character is fundamentally linked – as his name suggests – with an element of the non-human material world, a fictionalized “St. John’s River” (Hurston, “John Redding” 925).

Read as a symbol, the “St. John’s” primarily stands in for John’s longing, as it is able to do exactly that which John desires most of all: it moves away, down “to Jacksonville, the sea, the wide world” (Hurston, “John Redding” 925). Signifying on Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative*, Hurston’s story portrays John Redding as wandering restlessly “down to the water’s edge, and, casting in dry twigs, watch them sail away,” referring to these twigs as his “ships” (925). However, just as for the young Douglass, still a slave in the famous apostrophe-scene of the *Narrative*, the sails at the distance remain unattainable (cf. Douglass, *Narrative* 46), so John’s “ships,” too, encounter various obstacles. As metaphors for the protagonist’s own stagnation, “these twigs [...] did not always sail away. Sometimes they would be swept in among the weeds growing in the shallow water, and be held there” (Hurston, “John Redding” 925-6).

In addition to functioning as a signifying symbol, however, Hurston’s ethnographic gaze at the black community and the river in “John Redding” also expresses a de-anthropocentrized sense of agency. With John being “home-tied” (930), at first by his mother Matty, who will not give the required blessing to her son’s wandering off into the “wide world,” and then by mother and John’s newly-wedded wife Stella in unison, who vehemently oppose his desire, the river ultimately becomes the only means by which the protagonist is able to escape – even if it is through death. The story builds up to its climax as John is being employed to help fortify a bridge over the “St. John’s” in order to fend off an approaching storm. Prior to embarking on this last – or maybe rather the first real – adventure of his life, John gives an insightful description of his state of mind and his dilemma in a conversation with his father. He explains:

I feel that I am just earth, *soil*, lying helpless to move myself, but *thinking*. I seem to hear herds of big beasts like horses and cows thundering over me, and rains beating down; and winds sweeping furiously over – all acting upon me, but me, well, just soil, *feeling* but not able to take part in it all. Then a soft wind like love passes over and warms me, and a summer rain comes down like understanding and softens me, and I push a blade of grass or a flower, or maybe a pine tree – that’s the ground thinking. Plants are ground thoughts, because the soil can’t move itself. Whenever I see little whirls of dust sailing down the road I always step aside – I don’t want to

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<sup>387</sup> Eatonville, Florida, one of the first all-black settlements in the U.S. and Hurston’s hometown, recurs throughout her work and can hardly be overrated as a source of inspiration. Eatonville may easily be recognized as the setting of “John Redding” (cf. Plant 33; and Boyd 85); in “Under the Bridge,” the influence seems more subtle (cf. Boyd 138).

stop ‘em ‘cause they’re on their shining way – moving! Oh, yes, I’m a dreamer. . . .  
I have such wonderfully complete dreams, papa. They never come true. But even as  
my dreams fade I have others. (Hurston, “John Redding” 933-4, emphasis in original)

John, the dreamer, the “queer child,” closely associates with the non-human material world, entrusting to his father, the only character in the story who empathizes with John’s wanderlust, his sense of a fragmentariness of modes of perceiving the world that extend beyond the human sphere. He implies and muses on a variety of possible perspectives of experience, which, he feels, fundamentally escape socially framed human perception, but which may be accessible through a deeper sensual understanding. Although John, at this point, uses the idea of being “soil,” “just earth” (933), as an expression of his own non-agency, he does see – and eventually will find – the agency necessary for the fulfilment of his desire within another part of that natural world: the “St. John’s.” It is only as the river eventually swells up towards the end of the story and sweeps away not just the bridge but a crucified John Redding with it that the protagonist’s life wish is fulfilled. Only by actually turning into pure “soil,” into “just dust” of a floating body, does his liberation occur. The storm and swell of the river, read in this sense, represents more than a “deus ex machina of an approaching hurricane” to resolve the conflict and bring the story to some kind of ending, as G.M. West has suggested (24).<sup>388</sup> It also stands in, beyond being a mere symbol for a human being’s longing, for a sense of agency possibly lying beyond the human, which Hurston’s more ethnographic gaze recognizes and foregrounds.

The second story, “Under the Bridge,” first published in 1925 in “The X-Ray: The Official Publication of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority” of Howard University, but only recovered in 1996,<sup>389</sup> similarly embraces a more holistic perspective through its employment of an unnamed river. Ending not on top, but “under” a bridge, as the title implies, the plot revolves around a tragic love-triangle including a 58-year-old father, Luke, his newly-wed 19-year-old wife, Vangie, and his 22-year-old son, Artie. After a month’s living together through a sweltering Florida summer, more-than-platonic feelings begin to develop between the son and the young stepmother. Luke, pained by jealousy, decides to rely on conjure to prevent his marriage from failing. With a “small parcel sewed up in red flannel” and purchased for 10 dollars, he believes

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<sup>388</sup> Other critics have perceived the ending of the tale as either tragic (e.g. Fisher Peters 24-25) or ironic (e.g. Howard 58-59); Boyd sees in it “a final act of perverse justice” (85).

<sup>389</sup> Discovered in a cardboard box of Hurston memorabilia, the text has not been included in Gates and Lemke’s *The Complete Stories* (first published in 1995). However, it underscores their assessment of Hurston’s storytelling as evolving around the themes of “love, betrayal, and death,” which are undoubtedly central to “Under the Bridge” (Gates/Lemke xxiii). Regarding the process of the text’s discovery, cf. Houston Day; the text is also mentioned briefly in Boyd 138-9; Croft 164; Cronin 23; and G.M. West 230.

the seller of the item, a local “conjure man,” that

[...] nobody can't ever cross you. Wait till sundown, sprinkle it wid a drop or two of water and nobody kin git twixt you 'thout water gittin' him. But don't sprinkle it tell youse sho' you wants somethin' done, cause it's bound to come after de sprinklin'. And don't never take it off once you put it, else it will work the other way. (Hurston, “Bridge” 16)

Eventually, the latter happens, when Luke, as a last resort, sprinkles and activates the “parcel” intending to tragically harm his beloved son, but loses the conjuring device during a boat trip on the river. The charm unfolds and works, as foretold, the opposite way: In the climactic scene under the bridge readers find the young couple embracing and kissing, while Luke, a victim of his own backfiring scheme, ends up lying dead in the rear of the boat and “was not” (19).

As in the case of “John Redding Goes to Sea,” “Under the Bridge” ends with a dead protagonist floating away on a river and taken over by the stream: “The boat drifted on, for Destiny, the grim steersman, had seized the rudder and they were bound – whither?” (Hurston, “Bridge” 19) Thus, both stories leave human agency exposed as ultimately potentially open to failure – adrift, without a “rudder” – or, at least, as certainly not a sole guiding principle that could be seen as separate from alternative dimensions of agency such as the “water gittin' him” (16). In this sense, Hurston's de-anthropocentrizing rivers – in opposition to the premises of a dominant universalistic evolutionism infused with a hierarchization of cultures and focused on human societal “Progress” – imply not only a radical focus on the inner values of the portrayed Black folk culture of her own origin, which is celebrated in its peculiarities (use of the vernacular; conjure). Moreover, they also parallel a Boasian particularism as they combine this more holistic notion of a specific culture with an environmentalism that resists modes of thought based on a merely human perspective (or a purely biocentric one), emphasizing instead contingencies between the agency of both the human and the non-human.

A third short story, “Magnolia Flower,” published in the 1925 July-issue of a magazine called *Spokesman*, is even more radical in its employment of de-anthropocentrizing rivers, as it directly subverts human perceptive frameworks through its narrative technique. The text, literally reduced to a footnote in Hemenway's Hurston-biography (1977) and unfavourably received by subsequent critics,<sup>390</sup> is significantly not a tale about a river, but is told, for the

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<sup>390</sup> Hemenway references “Magnolia Flower” as “[a]nother less-than-successful ZNH story from this period” (*Literary Biography* 83). Others, being somewhat more appreciative, have perceived the tale as sentimental love story – a “happier version of *Romeo and Juliet* set in Florida” (Croft 93) or a “story of love conquering all” (Boyd 103).

most part, *by* an anthropomorphized river as first-person narrator.

The story begins in heterodiegetic narration with a nightly squabbling among the large “St. John’s,” also referred to as “The Mighty One,” and a small brook, who unnerves the former by laughing and singing away loudly at night-time (Hurstun, “Magnolia” 33). In the ensuing conversation, the “Mighty One” tells its younger companion that it has borne lovers “up and down, listened to those things that are uttered more with the breath than with the lips” (34). The brook, intrigued, convinces the “St. John’s” to relate a tale, which makes up the major part of Hurstun’s text, entitled “The River’s Story” (34).

Apart from “Magnolia Flower’s” anthropomorphism, two aspects are particularly striking with respect to the de-anthropocentrizing and de-racializing role of the rivers. Firstly, there is the deconstruction of the idea of a racist hierarchization of cultures leading “up” to civilization through the intra-diegetic narrative. Secondly, it is crucial to note the means by which Hurstun’s text, more radically than the other stories, challenges the perceptive boundaries of experiencing the world, the means by which modes of perception are mutually and continually blurred.

With respect to the first aspect, it is crucial how the intra-diegetic story told by the “St. John’s” reverses the relations between “white,” “black” and “native American” – i.e. between the supposedly fixed, because “naturally” or “culture-evolutionarily” explicable human racial groups. The river’s voice recounts the fate of a former fugitive slave named Bentley, “large and black and strong,” who subsequently turns himself into a tyrant in a Florida jungle setting (Hurstun, “Magnolia” 34). Here, Bentley “had many to serve him, for now he had built a big house such as white men owned when he was in bondage” (35). He takes a native for a wife, oversees a large workforce by which he is “hated” and “feared,” and seeks to marry his beautiful daughter Magnolia Flower away (35). Eventually, Bentley dies of his own rage when she falls in love and elopes with a teacher named John, whose complexion is a shade lighter than his own. Throughout, the river’s tale thus emphasizes how Bentley excessively and quasi-symmetrically repeats the ways of American “civilization” during African American enslavement. Bentley becomes precisely the kind of oppressor he had originally fled from. Hence, “The River’s Story” takes a critical position with respect to the delineated discursive background. It stresses, against the ideas of essentializing and racist evolutionary theories of Hurstun’s time that it is neither “necessary” to be white (i.e. to be marked as “civilized” according to the dominant hierarchical logic) in order to be a “commanding” (or oppressive) race, nor that it is impossible to relatively quickly reverse currently dominant race relations,

which are thus unveiled as non-essential and constructed. After all, Bentley's "career" from fugitive to oppressor takes a mere four years.

The second way in which "Magnolia Flower" resists culturally dominant premises of its time is the text's deconstruction of the centrality of human consciousness as prime perceiver of the world, which is implied in Brinton's "discovery [...] of the physical unity of man" (qtd. Pöhl, "Einleitung" 8) and in culture-evolution's anthropocentrism that omits contextualizing specific cultures environmentally. Throughout its tale, the "St. John's" displays a distinct sense of time and history. It repeatedly refers, for example, to the ways in which "men love to clip Time into bits" (Hurston, "Magnolia" 34), creating "man-made time notches" (35), and mocks the idea of human historicity, as historical events are continuously described in a detached mode as something that occurs but that is not vital or necessary to the river's own creation of a meaningful world. Moreover, the St. John's perspective de-emphasizes the importance of naming, as protagonists' names are mentioned only belatedly, in passing, and as if coincidentally. The latter, in this context, appears to be not so much a (perhaps expectable) qualitative deficit of a young writer's apprentice work, but seems part of Hurston's deliberate narrative strategy – a strategy implying that, from the perceptive point of view of the stream, even that which humans call identity may be void and shallow.

How conceptually "fluid" Hurston's rivers become in this last piece may be seen most clearly in the closing scene of the text, in which the voice switches back to heterodiegetic narration. Here, the protagonists of the St. John's tale return, having been absent from the vicinity for a period of 40 years, and indulge, as an aging couple, in their life memories on the river's banks where they used to secretly meet. The last sentence of the story, uttered by Magnolia Flower herself to her lover, is an answer – and at the same time technically and significantly a question – to his inquiry why the river appears to be making oddly unsettling sounds, why it is "murmuring" or "talking" in a way John has never heard rivers sound before (Hurston, "Magnolia" 40). Her response is: "Maybe it's welcoming us back. I always felt that it loved you and me, somehow?" (40) Ending the text on a "somehow" and a question mark re-emphasizes not only the existence of two (or more) distinct ways of perceiving and being in the world, but also hints at the difficulties of communication between the two perceiving and narrating entities of the text: the river and the human. The story, by investing rivers with a de-anthropocentrizing function, thus ultimately leaves readers with the notion of a fluidity of perception; it celebrates an openness between both levels of perception, the human and the nonhuman, as mutually shaping each other's fate.

In Hurston's stories, rivers therefore function not just as simple elements of a local color-celebration of the author's native Florida, or as symbols or literary motifs. Moreover, Hurston's visualization of the life of black folk in their non-human material surroundings can also be read as a continuation of a tradition of ethnographically gazing at black bodies while simultaneously expressing environmental knowledge that had been present for several decades in African American literature. She thereby echoes writers like Forten, W.W. Brown, or Washington, who had also looked at the life of African Americans and depicted this life as centrally involving interactions with non-human materialities. Hence, when read in the suggested discursive contexts, Hurston's texts can be identified as another example of the black literary tradition that signifies on environmental knowledge in two typical ways: On the one hand, her stories are a repetition of an African American ethnographic literary gaze at the black body that simultaneously articulated environmental knowledge. The stories are in this sense not just a forerunner of a Boasian stance of Hurston's writing that reveal how she was already moving in a similar direction as Boas, but should also be recognized as a signifying revision of African American environmental knowledge. On the other hand, the texts also signify on a contemporary discursive context of racial and environmental knowledge. Hurston's de-anthropocentrizing rivers are a means of a broader, subversive critique of some of fundamental notions pervading racially and environmentally hegemonic discourses of her time. As the stories employ streams of water as de-anthropocentrizing elements, they also unfold a de-racializing potential: "John Redding Goes to Sea" and "Under the Bridge" question and deconstruct notions of a universalistic evolutionism by suggesting a more holistic understanding of African American folk culture, and by environmentalizing agency through their rivers. "Magnolia Flower" employs a more radical narrative technique in order to unsettle notions of a prioritization of human perceptive frameworks, while at the same time openly challenging the idea and possibility of a hierarchization of human racial groups on the basis of a single trajectory heading towards "civilization."

## 5.

### Conclusion:

### African American Environmental Knowledge at Yellowstone

The year 2009 saw a somewhat quaint episode in Barack Obama's presidency that reveals the timeliness of the issues and questions raised in this study. In the August of this year, the 44th U.S. President and his family took a trip to Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Canyon. At first glance, this may not seem to be in any way extraordinary or noteworthy. After all, Obama was only continuing a long tradition of American leaders visiting Yellowstone and, more generally, the vast natural sites, parks, and resources of the nation in an often highly publically visible manner. What was peculiar in this case, however, was how the announcement of Obama's trip soon triggered an echo across the media that was bent on the question whether the first family was actually going to be camping outside, in the wilderness. Especially after White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, on a press conference held during the visit, confirmed such speculations to be true, acknowledging that Obama had "always tremendously enjoyed being outside," and expanding, more specifically, on the president's fascination with "fly-fishing," a whole array of responses emerged. While some voices began to exploit and caricature the idea of the president's standing on top of the Grand Canyon gazing down into its depth by drawing analogies to his staring at the "debts" of his financial politics, most of the evolving discussions involved mildly amused imaginings and comments on Obama's (apparently rather unsuccessful) fishing endeavors, since Gibbs had informed the journalists that "he was dying to do that, and finally got the chance to do that, though was a bit frustrated he didn't get to hold one of the fish."<sup>391</sup>

What became perceivable throughout the exchange was how deeply unfamiliar the image of Obama and of African Americans generally in a frontier setting, "shar[ing] the outdoors and some of the beautiful places in the country," seemed to be (Gibbs). Especially on the internet, comments drew attention across blogs to the oddness of the idea, sometimes in connection with statistics documenting considerable lack of African American visitors to U.S. National Parks, and asking, to quote one representative blogger: "As Obama goes camping, why don't more

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<sup>391</sup> A transcript of the exchange of Gibbs with White House reporters can be found on the official website of the White House, under <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/press-gaggle-press-secretary-robert-gibbs-81509>>. See also on the debate in the media J. James 175-177.

blacks do the same?” (qtd. J. James 176). Responses thus reveal, as J. James puts it, that camping is “a racially loaded signifier which points to the reification of spatial imaginaries in discussions of blacks and nature” (176). They also point, if one thinks further, to another underlying question that involves a paradoxical tension, namely why and how it is, that the first African American president is much less expected to enjoy nature than his predecessor in office. Why was Obama, after all well known for his political “greenness,” “felt” to be much less capable of connecting to nature than George W. Bush, Jr., who could pull off the nature man through iconic images that showed him playing with his dogs on a Texas farm whilst at the same time cancelling the Kyoto protocol? Why is it, in other words, that there is apparently something odd in imagining Obama in nature, “fly-fishing”?

This study has, in a sense, been a dive into the long-standing history behind this question through the African American literary tradition. As a Foucauldian “history of the present,” it meant to investigate genealogically some of the roots of the surprise and wonderment that became visible in responses to Obama at Yellowstone. What has been seen in this investigation, through a combination of Foucauldian, ecocritical, and African American literary theory, is that an African American literary and cultural tradition was by no means oblivious to non-human materialities, even though its modes of expression may not fit the dominant narrative of “nature’s nation” and has therefore often been neglected. Nevertheless, African American literature *has* a long tradition of environmental knowledge that was decisively shaped by the histories of slavery, race, and other dominant forms of environmental knowledge throughout the century-long period considered in this study. There may not be a “black Thoreau” in this tradition, as K. Smith has pointed out (*Thought* 4), yet a closer look through the dimensions of the visual, spatial, and biopolitical has revealed that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black literature holds a rich environmental knowledge, that it developed its own themes and modes of such knowledge that were repeated and revised within the tradition, thereby producing a rich legacy. Non-human materialities were described as becoming loopholes, refuges, or rewards; environmental knowledge was written through modified frameworks like the pastoral, the sublime, the picturesque, or a wilderness narrative. There are thus no doubt many “environmental texts” (L. Buell) in this particular part of American literature as well, and, moreover, a tradition of a knowledge of the human in its non-human non-discursive material conditions that runs in intertextual threads from the first major African American genre of the slave narrative and antebellum pamphlets through the literature of the latter half of the nineteenth century. African American literature was therefore, to be sure, never marked

by any kind of “lack” or “deficiency” in terms of writing about the human in its relation to non-human materialities, even though this has not generally been recognized by dominant U.S. culture, as considering the wonderment at Obama’s attempt at fly-fishing suggests. In other words, if Obama’s going into the wilds was perceived as odd, this is not because he and his family did something that was strikingly new or extraordinary for African Americans, but because this tradition and its specific and diverse forms of relating to and writing about relations to the non-human has long been overlooked.

To be sure, in order to see all this, one has to “reverse the optics” of reading as I have suggested by alluding to Morrison’s approach in *Playing in the Dark* in the introduction to this study. It is necessary to read closely and with a changed perspective in order to “read green in black,” to make visible an oftentimes hidden environmental knowledge of the black literary tradition, but its presence is undeniable. Both in the antebellum period and after the Civil War up to early twentieth century, one can find an African American environmental knowledge that signified on both a white tradition of environmental writing and, after Emancipation, also increasingly on a by then established black literary environmental knowledge.

By revealing how the black literary tradition writes African American environmental knowledge, this study not only complements ecocritical work on African American literature that has only relatively recently begun to reveal that “there exists a parallel, or perhaps more accurately a perpendicular, tradition in African American culture and literature of deep connections to nature, connections where nature and culture are entangled in positive ways” (Beilfuss 486). Moreover, the results of this study also speak more generally to the fields of African American studies and ecocriticism. In this sense “Reading Green in Black,” hopes to be a broadly suggestive starting point in (at least) three ways.

First, and with respect to an immediate scholarly context of ecocriticism on African American literature, the Foucauldian genealogical perspective employed in this study can help further explore the complex relations between the production of racial and environmental knowledge. When examining the African American literary tradition through the lenses of the visual, the spatial, and the biopolitical, environmental knowledge may become visible in many more places. A logical step would be, for instance, to move on chronologically into the twentieth century and the Harlem Renaissance, to explore books like Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), or Ellison’s and Wright’s writing. Many nineteenth-century works that I have not had the chance to include in this study, too, e.g. by Paul Laurence Dunbar or Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, are certainly also worth rereading in terms of African American environmental

knowledge, not to mention the potential that lies in expanding investigations to different genres like drama or poetry.

Moreover, a rereading through environmental knowledge has shown that the assumption of a general, overwhelming antipastoralism in African American literature that has sometimes been suggested ignores the diversity of responses to, and uses of the pastoral in black letters. Even with respect to the slave narrative, the genre based on which Bennett proclaimed his thesis of an African American antipastoral tradition, one can see that the label “antipastoral” does not fully capture the complexities of the engagement with the pastoral as a literary mode. This is not to say that Bennett’s claim is false if one understands “antipastoral” more broadly in the sense of “anti-nature.” Outka in this sense classifies the slave narrative as “anti-nature writing, the enactment of, and proof of, the author’s disconnection from nature, from the bestial and the field,” in which “[t]o achieve literate voice, to tell one’s story, was to separate oneself categorically from the South’s commodified pastoral” (Outka 58). In my reading, both of these ideas describe what I have termed, after Plumwood, an impulse of “hyper-separation” that no doubt marks the genre and antebellum African American literature generally, and that *sometimes* leads to a literary antipastoralism. Nevertheless, the readings in this study have also shown that the use of the pastoral as a literary mode is much more complex in the slave narrative’s “double vision” than the term and concept of the “antipastoral” suggests.

The shortcomings of the idea of an overwhelmingly antipastoral African American literary tradition become apparent even more drastically when turning to literature of the postwar period. During Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction, when African American literature increasingly began to turn to themes and spaces of “home” and “education,” the pastoral became, in fact, *involved* in the act of hyper-separation. If hyper-separation, in the slave narrative, had meant a general tendency towards altogether omitting descriptions of non-human “nature” (i.e. also the pastoral) in order to represent oneself as “civilized” as the dominant culture’s equivalent of “human,” then many postwar writers, although guided by the same hyper-separating impulse of moving into “civilized” humanity, recognized the pastoral as well as the picturesque as modes that could function as the *sign* of such a “civilization.” Ironically, writing about “pastoral nature” or “picturesque nature” therefore followed the same imperative to become civilized through hyper-separation. Both modes became particularly prominent in domestic writing that focused on the home, e.g. in Forten or in the “women’s era” towards the end of the century, but also in Booker T. Washington, who hyper-separated and moved “up from slavery” precisely by claiming the pastoral as the reward, the mark of his cultivation and

civilization. It is also telling in this respect that the (traumatic) wilderness narrative that had been involved in the heterotopia of the Underground Railroad in the slave narrative disappeared at the same time when the pastoral became the sign of achieving humanity. In any case, such observations disprove that there existed a simple, overwhelming antipastoralism in the black literary tradition, at least for the period treated in this study.

Beyond this, “Reading Green in Black,” secondly, and more broadly suggests how African American studies may find new themes and dimensions in the black literary tradition through using ecocritical concepts. When recalling that the field has often neglected – no doubt *existent* – environmental dimensions, sometimes simply by using abridged editions as in the case of the Billington-edition of Forten’s *Journals* (cf. chapter 4.1, 170-171), it seems a necessary as well as rewarding task to reread texts anew against previous interpretations that were traditionally focusing on the issue of race. This is *not* to suggest drawing attention away from this issue, but rather to move on to considering the relations and interactions between race and the articulation of environmental knowledge. One may, for instance, use concepts such as “trans-corporeality” (Alaimo) to demonstrate, as in the case of Chesnutt’s Julius stories, another meaning of a specific text, or read the tradition more broadly through approaches that combine ecocritical ideas with African American studies’ concepts. Such readings may help uncover more of the richness of the tradition, help further inscribe African American culture environmentally into “nature’s nation,” and may moreover help deal in new ways with the memory of slavery. In an interview on *Beloved*, Toni Morrison once lamented the lack of memorials of slavery, claiming that

[t]here is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There’s no 300-foot tower. There’s no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or better still, on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place doesn’t exist (that I know of), the book had to. (“Bench” 4)

Reconsidering the African American literary tradition more environmentally through a growing “African American studies ecocriticism” may help overcome the lack Morrison feels here. The tradition provides, after all, in numerous places, empowering depictions of former slaves’ relations to non-human environments that may, if recognized as such, help create memorials through the literary tradition and criticism itself.

Thirdly, ecocriticism may in turn benefit just as much from treating African American texts through more interaction and exchange with African American studies. As the use of Gates’s concept of signifying has demonstrated, ecocritics who turn to African American literature

should not forget or underestimate the expertise that African American studies has long brought to interpreting the tradition, and should therefore employ concepts such as “signifying” or “double consciousness” more centrally. In this sense, cross-fertilization between the two fields can be enriching on both sides. Moreover, an explicitly Foucauldian perspective as it has been employed in this study may be another fruitful way of considering texts for ecocriticism more generally, i.e. beyond readings of an African American literary tradition. If taking Foucauldian thought not as radically constructivist but instead as one element of a “weak constructionism” (Heise), a Foucauldian environmental knowledge may become a means not only of finding and describing new environmental texts and of expanding the boundaries of ecocriticism, but also of further exploring the links between race, environmentalism, and discourses of “nature.” If Buell, in his preface to *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, cites W.E.B. Du Bois’s famous prediction “that the great public issue of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line,” and goes on to suggest that, as the twenty-first century begins, an “ultimately still more pressing question may prove to be whether planetary life will remain viable for most of the earth’s inhabitants,” exploring environmental knowledge may be one productive way to conduct the analysis of the long history of intersection between both issues (vi). A Foucauldian analysis of environmental knowledge offers ways to genealogically explore histories of human life, which seems an essential task in the age of the Anthropocene, and at a time of global environmental crises and continuing racism. If “[f]or technological breakthroughs, legislative reforms, and paper covenants about environmental welfare to take effect [...] requires a climate of transformed environmental values, perception, and will” (Buell, *Future* vi), environmentally rereading literary and cultural histories like that of African America can help working towards such a transformed “climate.” In other words, to critically think about, and try to explain why it apparently felt so odd for many Americans that Obama goes “fly-fishing” may be part of the solution of broader environmental and social problems.

## 6.

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## 7.

### Deutschsprachige Zusammenfassung

### Reading Green in Black: Environmental Knowledge, Race, and African American Literature, 1830s to 1920s

Die vorliegende Dissertation befasst sich mit der Tradition eines ‐Umweltwissens‐ (‐Environmental Knowledge‐) in afroamerikanischer Erz hliteratur des neunzehnten bis fr hen zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts. Im ersten Hauptteil der Arbeit (‐Foundations: Antebellum African American Environmental Knowledge‐) wird untersucht, wie sich in der Vorb rgerkriegsliteratur Grundformen eines afroamerikanischen literarischen Umweltwissens herausbilden. Der zweite Teil (‐Transformations: African American Environmental Knowledge from Reconstruction to Modernity‐) beschreibt im Anschluss, wie sich Autoren der Jahrzehnte nach der Abschaffung der Sklaverei auf diese Grundformen beziehen, diese transformieren und weiterentwickeln, dabei aber auch immer wieder neue, dominante diskursive Kontexte problematisieren. Damit leistet die diskursanalytische, breite Wissensformationen mit einbeziehende Arbeit nicht nur einen Beitrag zu einer wachsenden  kokritischen Forschung zur afroamerikanischen Literatur und deckt eine Verschr nkung von Rassenkonzepten der damaligen US-amerikanischen Gesellschaft mit Umweltwissen auf, die die Artikulierung und Entwicklung afroamerikanischen Umweltwissens ma geblich beeinflusste. Zudem wird durch die Verwendung von Konzepten und Theorien Michel Foucaults auch aufgezeigt, wie sich diese gewinnbringend in die Forschungsfelder des ‐Ecocriticism‐, also einer an Umweltfragen orientierten Literaturwissenschaft, und der ‐African American Studies‐ integrieren lassen, um neue Erkenntnisse  ber die Wechselbeziehungen zwischen Rasse und Umweltbewusstsein zu gewinnen.

Methodik: ‐Umweltwissen‐

Um dies zu leisten, entwickelt und verwendet die Studie zentral das Konzept des ‐Umweltwissens‐ (‐Environmental Knowledge‐). Der Begriff der ‐Umwelt‐ ist dabei bewusst weit gefasst, da, wie die bisherige  kokritische Forschung zur afroamerikanischen Literatur immer wieder zu Recht betont hat, zur Untersuchung einer afroamerikanischen Tradition ein ver nderter Blickwinkel n tig ist, der von traditionellen  kokritischen Begriffen und Genres (wie

etwa dem des „nature writing“) abweicht. Mit einem engen Umweltbegriff würde man schwerlich fündig; man wird kaum einen „black Thoreau“ finden (Smith, *Thought* 4). Leitet man den Begriff des „Wissens“ weiterhin von Foucaults Ideen des Diskurses und des Macht-Wissens ab, so meint „Umweltwissen“ in dieser Studie grundsätzlich solche „*Formationen von Macht-Wissen, die das Menschliche in seiner Beziehung zu nicht-menschlichen, nicht-diskursiven materiellen Bedingungen verhandeln und konstituieren*“. Dies bedeutet, dass „Natur“ Untersuchungsobjekt, nicht aber Analysekategorie der Arbeit ist, da „Natur“ aus einer Foucaultschen Perspektive heraus immer nur als eine der Historie unterworfenen Linse, als ein „Name“ gedacht und analysiert werden kann, der immer schon eine diskursive (Macht-)Position darstellt. Umweltwissen meint etwas Grundsätzlicheres, ein Wissen das in der Beziehung des Menschen zu nicht-menschlicher, nicht-diskursiver Materialität liegt und diese Beziehung – aber dabei auch das „Menschliche“ selbst – formt. Im berühmten Bild Foucaults am Ende der *Ordnung der Dinge* vom modernen Menschen als einem Gesicht im Sand, das möglicherweise „verschwindet“, hinweggewaschen wird, wäre Umweltwissen also jenes Wissen, das in der Beziehung zwischen der jeweiligen „Form“ eines solchen Gesichts und der Materialität des Sandes, der Luft, der nächsten Welle liegt.

Wie sich bei der Erschließung und Bearbeitung des Korpus an Primärtexten gezeigt hat, wird ein solches Umweltwissen in der afroamerikanischen literarischen Tradition primär über die Dimensionen des „Visuellen“, des „Räumlichen“, und des „Biopolitischen“ artikuliert, was nicht gleichsam bedeutet, dass dies Paradigmen sind, die Absolutheit beanspruchen, also auf jegliche denkbare Formen von Umweltwissen zutreffen müssten. Es handelt sich aber dennoch, so eine grundlegende Beobachtung der Arbeit, um die großen „Linsen“, durch die sich in afroamerikanischer Literatur des behandelten Zeitraums ein Umweltwissen Ausdruck verleiht. Somit verknüpft das Konzept des Umweltwissens einen Foucaultschen, diskursanalytischen Ansatz mit dem „Ecocriticism“ und afroamerikanischer Literaturtheorie, aufbauend auf der mittlerweile wachsenden Erkenntnis in den Environmental Humanities, dass Foucaults “concepts can be made highly relevant to environmental thinking, whatever attitude to ‘nature’ Foucault himself might have held” (Darier “Foucault” 6).

Das zentrale Konzept afroamerikanischer Literaturtheorie, welches die Studie mit der Idee des Umweltwissens verzahnt, ist Henry Louis Gates‘ in *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) eingeführte Idee des „Signifyin(g)“, also eines charakteristischen Spiels mit Sprache und einer speziellen Form von Intertextualität, die sich laut Gates durch die afroamerikanische Literatur- und Kulturtradition ziehen. Im Sinne intertextueller Verbindungen gibt es grundsätzlich zwei

Arten von Signifyin(g), die sich beide auch in Bezug auf die Artikulation von Umweltwissen in afroamerikanischer Literatur nachweisen lassen: Erstens gibt es ein Signifyin(g) innerhalb der eigenen (afroamerikanischen) literarischen Tradition; zweitens ein Signifyin(g) bezüglich (euroamerikanischer) dominanter Traditionen, etwa in Bezug auf bestimmte Genres, literarische Modi oder rhetorische Figuren. Aus der Verknüpfung der Konzepte eines Foucaultschen Umweltwissens mit dem Konzept des Signifyin(g) ergibt sich auch der grundlegende Aufbau der Arbeit. Der erste Hauptteil (Kapitel 3.1 bis 3.3) befasst sich durch die Dimensionen des Visuellen, Räumlichen, und Biopolitischen, mit den „Foundations“, dem Fundament afroamerikanischer literarischer Artikulation von Umweltwissen, bei dem vor allem ein Signifyin(g) auf euroamerikanische Traditionen wie etwa das Pastorale oder das Erhabene festzustellen ist. Hier entstehen also, v.a. durch die Sklavenerzählung, Grundmuster eines afroamerikanischen Umweltwissens, die untrennbar mit der Sklaverei und Rassenkonzepten verbunden sind. Im zweiten Hauptteil („Transformations“) wird dann untersucht, wie eine afroamerikanische literarische Tradition nach dem Bürgerkrieg diese Grundmuster aufgreift und weiterentwickelt, damit also vermehrt ein Signifyin(g) auch innerhalb der eigenen Literaturtradition praktiziert, gleichzeitig jedoch auch immer wieder auf sich verändernde Formen von Rassen- bzw. Umweltwissen reagiert, wie etwa sozialdarwinistische, evolutionäre Theorien oder die „Frontier Thesis“ von Frederick Jackson Turner. Dadurch wird letztlich die Ausbildung und Entwicklung eines intertextuellen Umweltwissens in der afroamerikanischen Literaturtradition nachgezeichnet, wie die folgenden detaillierteren Zusammenfassungen der einzelnen Kapitel zeigen.

#### Teil 1: „Foundations“

Grundsätzlich ist zunächst mit der Forschung festzustellen, dass afroamerikanische Literatur der Vorbürgerkriegszeit davon gekennzeichnet ist, dass oftmals klare Abgrenzungen von nicht-menschlicher Materialität stattfinden, was vor allem mit dem vorherrschenden Bild des schwarzen Körpers zusammenhängt. Aufgrund dieses entmenschlichenden, rassistischen Bildes, welches einen maßgeblichen Teil der Rechtfertigungsstrategien für die Sklaverei des Südens darstellte, indem es den Schwarzen der „Natur“ zurechnete und dem „zivilierten“ Menschen gegenüberstellte, sind afroamerikanische Autoren dieser Zeit, vor allem in Sklavenerzählungen, dazu gezwungen, sich von nicht-menschlicher Materialität – und von einem Diskurs „Natur“ –

abzugrenzen, um sich dem konzeptuellen Raum des „Menschen“ zuallererst zurechenbar zu machen. In afroamerikanischer Literatur der Vorbürgerkriegszeit findet sich also das, was die Umweltphilosophin Val Plumwood als „Hyper-separation“ – eine radikale Trennung zwischen Mensch und Natur – bezeichnet (vgl. 101-102).

Dieses auch von der bisherigen Forschung oftmals konstatierte Phänomen wird jedoch durch die vorliegende Arbeit hinterfragt. Denn wie sich nachweisen lässt, existierten durchaus subversive Strategien im afroamerikanischen literarischen Diskurs jener Zeit, durch die Umweltwissen Ausdruck fand. Die ersten beiden Kapitel beschäftigen sich mit Sklavenerzählungen und demonstrieren, dass hier über das Visuelle und das Räumliche Umweltwissen artikuliert wurde; das dritte Kapitel zeigt anhand von Pamphleten der Vorbürgerkriegszeit, wie afroamerikanische Literatur auch durch das Anschreiben gegen einen biologisierenden Diskurs über den schwarzen Körper ein Umweltwissen ausdrückte.

Kapitel 3.1 („Resisting (through) the Eye“) demonstriert, dass sich in der Sklavenerzählung ein Umweltwissen findet, das sich über den Diskurs des Pastoralen ausdrückt. Das Kapitel geht davon aus, dass das Pastorale, eine dominante Form des Ausdrucks von Mensch-Natur-Beziehungen auch in den USA des 19. Jahrhunderts, immer auch durch einen Blick, eine Perspektivität, gekennzeichnet ist, und zeigt, dass die afroamerikanische Sklavenerzählung eine eigene Form dieses Blickes entwarf. Das Genre ist primär eine politisierte Zeugenliteratur; um ihr Ziel der Abschaffung der Sklaverei zu erreichen, waren die „Abolitionists“ in den Nordstaaten auf den Blick vom vormals versklavten Flüchtling angewiesen. Zunächst lässt sich also beobachten, dass durch das Genre ein „black observer“, ein schwarzer Beobachter, entstand, der eine „rhetoric of visibility“ vorführen musste. Die Sklavenerzählung brauchte das „Auge“ desjenigen, der die Sklaverei tatsächlich gesehen hatte, und der sein (literarisches) Auge nun abermals retrospektive auf die schlimmsten Facetten der „peculiar institution“ des Südens richten musste – auf den körperlichen, seelischen, und sexuellen Missbrauch, oder auf die ikonischen Auspeitschungen – um die Sklaverei moralisch-ethisch zu verdammen. Viele afroamerikanische Sklavenerzählungen, etwa jene von Frederick Douglass (1845) oder Henry „Box“ Brown (1849), applizierten diesen Blick nun jedoch auch, um ihr eigenes Umweltwissen zu schreiben und Beziehungen zu nicht-menschlicher Materialität auszudrücken. Es entstand dadurch, so die These des Kapitels, eine einflussreiche Form des afroamerikanischen Pastoralen, nämlich eine solche kritische, in der ein „pastorales Auge“ zwar geöffnet, aber gleichsam durch das „Auge des Sklaven“ negiert wurde. Es findet sich also ein „doppeltes Sehen“ in der Sklavenerzählung, das einerseits das Pastorale zulässt und teils sogar zelebriert, andererseits dadurch aber auch ein

(weißes) Privileg markiert und somit die Sklaverei fundamental kritisiert, indem die Unzugänglichkeit des Erzählers zu pastoraler Erfahrung kontrastierend vorgeführt wird. Dieser doppelte Blick des Pastoralen ist eine erste essentielle Facette afroamerikanischen Umweltwissens der Vorbürgerkriegszeit.

Kapitel 3.2 („Reclaiming (through) Space“) befasst sich mit einem anderen Element, durch das die Sklavenerzählung afroamerikanisches Umweltwissen ausdrückte, dem heterotopischen Raum der „Underground Railroad“. Die sogenannte „Underground Railroad“, die im Allgemeinen ein Schleusernetzwerk meint, das Sklaven bei der Flucht aus den Südstaaten in den Norden half, wird in diesem Abschnitt als ein literarischer Raum verstanden, der durch die Sklavenerzählung bestimmte Funktionen als eine literarische „Heterotopie“ (Foucault) erfüllte. In den Beschreibungen dieses Raums wurde in vielen Erzählungen zugleich *enthüllt* und *verhüllt*, d.h. ehemalige Sklaven machten Angaben darüber, *dass* ihnen Hilfe auf der Flucht zuteilwurde, konkretisierten jedoch meist nicht *wie* genau dies geschah, um nachfolgende Flüchtende nicht zu gefährden. Es entstand so ein Ort, der durchaus Auswirkungen auf die Realität hatte – ein solcher, der potentiell überall und nirgendwo sein konnte, eine „literarische“, also durch die Literatur produzierte, Heterotopie der Underground Railroad. Über das subversive Potential, das diese Heterotopie somit ausüben konnte hinaus ist jedoch entscheidend, dass die Nicht-Eindeutigkeit und Verschwiegenheit, die für diesen Raum in der Sklavenerzählung charakteristisch waren, eine andere Möglichkeit des Erzählens eröffneten. Der Raum erlaubte es, autonom eigene Erfahrungen zu schildern, und zwar auch solche, in denen ehemalige Sklaven ihre Beziehung zu Elementen der nicht-menschlichen materiellen Welt ins Zentrum rückten. Man betonte etwa, dass nicht-menschliche Materialitäten helfende Akteure („co-agents“) der Underground Railroad sein konnten, sei es, weil Verstecke im Dickicht, in Höhlen, oder in Mooren und Wäldern geboten wurden, oder weil Tiere – oftmals wilde Pferde – als Helfer fungierten und als solche erkannt und wertgeschätzt wurden. Auf diese Weise avancierte die literarische Heterotopie der Underground Railroad in der Sklavenerzählung zu einer Art „loophole“ (Schlupfloch) für die Artikulierung von afroamerikanischem Umweltwissen.

Kapitel 3.3 („Negotiating (through) the Skin“) schließt den ersten Teil mit einem Blick auf afroamerikanische Pamphlet-Literatur ab und zeigt zunächst eine grundlegende biopolitische Konstellation in Bezug auf den „black body“, den schwarzen Körper, auf, die weitreichende Folgen für die Entwicklung von Umweltwissen in der afroamerikanischen Tradition hat. Der schwarze Körper war zugleich durch eine „biological exclusion“ und einen „environmental state of exception“ markiert. Das heißt, er wurde nicht nur „biologisch“ durch oftmals pseudo-

wissenschaftliche Rassendiskurse entmenschlicht, also der „Natur“ zugerechnet und nicht dem „zivilisierten“ Menschen, sondern zur selben Zeit auch durch dominante (euroamerikanische) Formen von Umweltwissen wieder eingeschlossen. Vor allem in der Tradition des „Plantation pastoral“, einer Form des Pastoralen, die den Raum der Plantage verherrlichte und als „natürliche“ Ordnung darstellte, ist diese Konstellation feststellbar, wenn auf der einen Seite der „tierhafte“, nicht menschliche schwarze Körper dargestellt und biologisch *ausgeschlossen*, dieser auf der anderen Seite jedoch gleichsam wieder integraler Bestandteil des Gesamtbildes, sprich wieder *eingeschlossen*, wird. Diesem paradoxen, rassisierenden „einschließenden Ausschluss“ (vgl. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*) tritt die afroamerikanische Tradition in der Vorbürgerkriegszeit primär durch ein Schreiben gegen das erste Element, also eine „biological exclusion“, entgegen, d.h. durch den Versuch der Annäherung an ein „zivilisiertes“ euroamerikanisches Menschenbild. In der Sklavenerzählung wird dies durch den Impuls der Hyper-separation deutlich, während sich zeigt, dass Verfasser von Pamphleten primär drei Strategien verwendeten: Diese Autoren, oft freigegeborene Afroamerikaner in den Nordstaaten, schrieben, erstens, durch die Ideen von „Birth and Blood“, versuchten also ihren Status als Mensch und Bürger der USA durch ihre Geburt in ihrem Territorium und durch das Kämpfen in Kriegen, vor allem im Unabhängigkeitskrieg, zu legitimieren. Zweitens verfolgten die Verfasser von afroamerikanischen Pamphleten oftmals eine rhetorische Strategie des „Dissecting and Environmentalizing“ des schwarzen Körpers, die sich bemühte, die biologische Äquivalenz dieses Körpers und Organismus anatomisch nachzuweisen. Drittens kämpften Pamphlete, vor allem ab den 1840er Jahren, über einen Diskurs der „Nature“, den man umzuinterpretieren versuchte, gegen ein biologisches „Othering“ des schwarzen Körpers. In diesem Sinne wird in der Vorbürgerkriegszeit sowohl im autobiographischen wie auch im Pamphlet-literarischen Teil der afroamerikanischen Schreibtradition gegen „biological exclusion“, einen „biologischen“ Ausschluss aus der Menschheit, angeschrieben.

## Teil 2: „Transformations“

Der zweite Teil, der sich mit Autoren der Zeit nach dem Bürgerkrieg befasst, ist notwendigerweise selektiv. Es ist explizit nicht (utopisches) Ziel der Kapitel – und der Arbeit als ganzer – eine gesamtliterarische Tradition nachzuzeichnen, sondern einzelne Traditionslinien

vorzuschlagen und zu verdeutlichen, in denen ein Vorbürgerkriegs-Umweltwissen transformiert wurde. Das erste Kapitel (4.1) dieses Teils beschäftigt sich in diesem Sinne mit einer ersten erkennbaren breiten Transformation bezüglich des literarischen Raums, in dem Umweltwissen in Nachbürgerkriegsliteratur artikuliert wird. „Nature, Education, Home“ legt den Fokus auf Literatur der „Reconstruction“ and „Post-Reconstruction“-Phase, die Umweltwissen nicht mehr primär in „loopholes“ wie der Heterotopie der „Underground Railroad“ in der Sklavenerzählung ausdrückt, sondern in Räumen von „Education“ und „Home.“ Beispiele hierfür finden sich z.B. in Charlotte Fortens Schreiben und William Wells Browns *My Southern Home* (1880). Beide Autoren bedienen sich vor allem der Linse des Pittoresken, um Beziehungen zu nicht-menschlichen Materialitäten auszudrücken. Charlotte Forten, eine hochgebildete Nachfahrin des berühmten Geschäftsmanns und frühen Abolitionisten James Forten, verwendet das Pittoreske, um nicht-menschliche „Nature“ als ihren Rückzugsort („refuge“) darzustellen und die heilende Wirkung ihrer „Mother Nature“ zu betonen (Forten, *Journals* 260). Ein Vergleich ihrer privaten und zu Lebzeiten unveröffentlichten *Journals* und ihrer publizierten Werke führt überdies vor, wie Rassismus und Geschlechternormen die Artikulierung eines Umweltwissens beeinflussen konnten. Brown gebraucht das Pittoreske hingegen in ironisierender Form. Er drückt dadurch einerseits eine Nostalgie für sein ehemaliges „Southern Home“ aus sowie den wichtigen Gedanken, dass die ehemals versklavte afroamerikanische Bevölkerung ein Umweltwissen erworben hat, das sie zu Experten des Landes und der Farmwirtschaft macht; andererseits übt er aber auch offen Kritik, vor allem an den sozialen Verhältnissen der „Post-Reconstruction“-Era. Bei beiden Autoren zeigt sich gleichermaßen eine generelle Bewegung hin zur Artikulation von Umweltwissen in neuen literarischen Räumen, die mit zwei zentralen Themen dieser Zeit korrespondieren: „Education“ und „Home.“

Auch der in Kapitel 4.2 („Rewriting the Pastoral“) behandelte Autor stellt diese Themen, vor allem das der „Education“, ins Zentrum seines Schreibens. Booker T. Washington, vor allem bekannt für sein Erziehungsmodell der „Industrial education“ und die Gründung des „Tuskegee Institute“ in Alabama, kann als zentrale Figur in der Geschichte eines afroamerikanischen Umweltwissens angesehen werden; seine Autobiographien reflektieren ebenso auf die Tradition der Sklavenerzählung wie auf einen Evolutionismus seiner eigenen Zeit, der Hort sowohl eines neuen Umweltwissens als auch rassistischer Wissensdiskurs war. Einerseits demonstrieren die untersuchten Texte, *Up from Slavery* (1901) und *Working with the Hands* (1904) Washingtons Um-Interpretation des Pastoralen und seine Einführung eines Georgischen, agrarischen Modells. Washington verwendet das Pastorale nicht mehr im Sinne eines „doppelten Blickes“, in dem der

pastorale Blick zwar möglich, aber das Pastorale selbst (für den Sklaven) unerreichbar war, sondern interpretiert das Pastorale als realisierbaren „reward“, eine Belohnung für harte Arbeit. Das Georgische fungiert dabei als das Element seines Modells, das den Weg zu dieser Belohnung zu weisen vermag. Dieses progressive Narrativ, durch das Washington das Pastorale der Sklavenerzählung transformiert, ist gleichzeitig auch mit einem evolutionistischem Gedankengut verbunden, das eine Hauptkomponente der Diskurse über das zu dieser Zeit so genannte „Negro Problem“ bildete. Washingtons Progressivismus ist einerseits eine teilweise Adaption solcher sozialdarwinistischer Gedanken für sein eigenes Modell des „black uplift“, beinhaltet andererseits aber auch die meist subversiv geäußerte Kritik bestimmter evolutionistischer Ideen, wie etwa des zu dieser Zeit kursierenden Gedankens vom unvermeidbaren „Aussterben“ der „Negro race“ aufgrund einer angeblichen naturgegebenen Minderwertigkeit. Seine Texte sind somit ein typisches Beispiel für ein doppeltes Signifyin(g): zum einen in Bezug auf eine vorangehende afroamerikanische Literaturtradition, zum anderen in Bezug auf ein dominantes (euroamerikanisches) evolutionistisches Umweltwissen seiner eigenen Zeit.

Ein weiteres Beispiel hierfür sind auch Charles W. Chesnutts Kurzgeschichten, die in Kapitel 4.3 („Writing against an Environmental State of Exception“) besprochen werden. Chesnutts „Uncle Julius Stories“ werden als eine Revision des schwarzen Körpers (3.3) gelesen, die diesen Körper als „trans-korporeale“ Entität (Alaimo) mit nicht-menschlicher Materialität explizit in Beziehung setzt. Chesnutts Umweltwissen betont einerseits, sowohl durch magische Elemente des „Conjure“ wie auch durch andere Metamorphosen des Körpers, z.B. durch die Aufnahme bestimmter Nahrung, dass der schwarze Körper trotz seiner Entmenschlichung über Diskurse von „Natur“ während der Sklaverei auf gewinnbringende und heilende Art und Weise mit nicht-menschlicher Materialität verbunden werden kann. Seine Geschichten vergessen dabei nie das Trauma, das auch in die beschriebene Landschaft als trans-korporealem Teil des schwarzen Körpers eingeschrieben wird, betonen aber gleichsam auch die Widerstandskraft und Stärke, die darin liegen können, den Körper als Teil einer erweiterten Materialität zu sehen. Andererseits reflektiert Chesnutt auch auf den Evolutionismus seiner Zeit, speziell auf die Gedanken Herbert Spencers, der im Text explizit zitiert wird. Dadurch stellt Chesnutt in der Rahmenerzählung, in welche Uncle Julius' Geschichten eingebettet sind, verschiedene epistemologische Modelle gegenüber: Der Vertreter des Spencerismus, John, ein aus dem Norden zugereister Geschäftsmann, wird durch ein Umweltwissen von Julius kritisiert, karikiert und gelegentlich durch Julius' „tricksterism“ für den Hochmut seines evolutionistischen Wissens abgestraft, das nicht nur als amateurhaft sondern auch als rassistisch entlarvt wird. Letztlich übt Chesnutt

darüber hinaus aber auch Kritik an der Validität menschlichen Wissens von nicht-menschlichen materiellen Phänomenen per se; die Geschichten artikulieren in diesem Sinne eine fundamentale „epistemological resistance“. Chesnutts selbstreflexive Texte dekonstruieren so den Absolutheitsanspruch eines *jeden* Umweltwissens, auch des afroamerikanischen, das Julius repräsentiert, was die Uncle Julius Stories letztlich zu einem ökophilosophischen Argument werden lässt, das sicher auch über die Untersuchung speziell afroamerikanischer Literatur hinaus Relevanz im Ecocriticism haben kann.

Die letzten beiden Kapitel behandeln abschließend Texte des frühen zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts, die signalisieren, wie auch Autoren dieser Zeit ein Umweltwissen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts weiterverarbeiten. Kapitel 4.4 („Claiming the Wilderness Narrative“) befasst sich mit einem der wichtigsten afroamerikanischen Autoren überhaupt, W.E.B. Du Bois. Der Fokus liegt jedoch nicht – wie in den meisten bislang existierenden ökokritischen Interpretationen – auf Du Bois soziologischen, gesellschaftskritischen nicht-fiktionalen Werken, sondern auf dem Roman *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911). In der Tradition afroamerikanischen Umweltwissens stellt *Quest* ein signifikantes Werk dar, da hier eine „Wilderness narrative“ in transformierter Form wiederkehrt, die durch das Pastorale und Pittoreske der vorangegangenen Jahrzehnte und deren Fokus auf „Home“ und „Education“ weitgehend in den Hintergrund gerückt war. Du Bois verarbeitet in seinem Roman zentral den Raum des „Swamps“, der ein „Signifyin(g)“ sowohl auf die Heterotopie der Underground Railroad darstellt, als auch eine Verhandlung der zu dieser Zeit dominanten „Frontier Thesis“ Frederick Jackson Turners aus afroamerikanischer Perspektive. Auf der einen Seite entwirft Du Bois durch diesen Raum und die Interaktionen seiner Protagonisten auch das Swamp als eine Heterotopie, die sowohl das Trauma als auch das Potential der Wildnis betont. Sein Werk ist insofern tief verwurzelt in der Tradition afroamerikanischen Umweltwissens und markiert eine Widerkehr zur Wildnis, die auch als wegbereitend für einen Primitivismus der Harlem Renaissance angesehen werden kann. Auf der anderen Seite stellt Du Bois aber auch die Spezifität eines afroamerikanischen Umgangs mit der Wildnis in Abgrenzung zur berühmten These Turners heraus. Während Turner die Schließung einer Frontier proklamiert, öffnet Du Bois in seinem Roman einen Frontier-Raum. Er macht dadurch deutlich, dass afroamerikanische Kultur eine historisch gewachsene, alternative Beziehung zur wilden Natur hat, in der das „Menschsein“ weniger über Dominierung und Ausbeutung nicht-menschlicher Materialität produziert wird, sondern eher über den Ausgleich zwischen verschiedenen menschlichen und nicht-menschlichen Akteuren. Du Bois‘ Roman sieht es als Aufgabe der

Literatur, eine solche „Wilderness narrative“ aus afroamerikanischer Sicht zu schreiben, um „race uplift“ zu praktizieren.

Im letzten Kapitel schließlich, 4.5 („Opening the Ethnographic Eye“), zeigt sich anhand einer weiteren Autorin, Zora Neale Hurston, wie afroamerikanisches Umweltwissen des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts eine vorangegangene Tradition fortschreibt. Hurston, Autorin und Anthropologin, rekurriert vor allem auf einen lange präsenten ethnographischen Blick, über den in der afroamerikanischen literarischen Tradition des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts auch Umweltwissen artikuliert wurde. Das Kapitel argumentiert anhand dreier früher Kurzgeschichten aus der Zeit bevor Hurston bei Franz Boas in die Lehre ging und explizit anthropologisch arbeitete, dass auch ein solcher afroamerikanischer ethnographischer Blick ihr Schreiben beeinflusste. In ihren Geschichten zeigt sich anhand einer Untersuchung der Funktion von Flüssen ein Umweltwissen, das de-anthropozentrisierend den schwarzen Körper als materielle Entität in den Blick nimmt.

Die Arbeit zeigt somit durch ihren diskursanalytischen Ansatz, der afroamerikanisches Umweltwissen im Kontext diskursiver Formationen liest die Rassen- und Umweltwissen artikulieren, in welchen Linien sich ein afroamerikanisches literarisches Umweltbewusstsein ausdrückte. Es wird ersichtlich, wie sich Grundformen eines solchen afroamerikanischen Umweltwissens bereits während der Sklaverei herausbildeten, und wie nachfolgende Autoren sich auf diese Formen bezogen, diese aber auch transformierten, indem sie mit neuen diskursiven Kontexten interagierten. Darüber hinaus zeigt sich auch, wie produktiv Foucaultsche Konzepte in der ökokritischen Forschung sein können, wenn Foucaults Werk nicht als radikal konstruktivistisch verstanden wird, sondern als ein Ansatz, der Geschichten vom Menschen in seinen nicht-menschlichen, nicht-diskursiven materiellen Bedingungen aufzuzeigen vermag.

8.  
Appendix

FIGURE 1  
Frederick Douglass. "Niagara," 1843. Note in the "Album of the Friends of Freedom," Western Anti-Slavery Society. Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

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Niagara.

I went to this world but I had the most lofty expectations I had heard - reach - than what I had felt much in regard to I had for years gazed with extreme delight upon its mountain I longed to behold the original. My imagination, I had often seen its brow a blue waters rushing on amidst the dim darkness of its own creation - towards the awful Cataract. - The towering total to any power into position a basis to its onward progress, its - in the station of beauty - grandeur - wonder in a tabor. (Long before I saw it) dance a spontaneously in my soul, I saw its majestic spray flying wildly into the air - its beautiful rainbows. In a heavy and awful thunder. As I approached it - it felt somewhat as if I dia. At the approaching hour, when on the first time I was to stand on free soil. an a breath free air

When I came into its awful presence. The power of destruction filled me, an irresistible power closed my lips. Completely charmed I stood with eyes fixed, all - all abandoned. - I saw the concious of my own existence, I felt as if I were felt before. The heavy trees all around me quivered - the ground trembled, - the night rocks shook! - an its awful roar gave them its terrible man a death.

My courage quailed. In unison with the rock. hill and dale, I tumbled totally subdued. I stood in solemn reverence. The awful God, - was there!

Frederick Douglass  
Feb 22 1843

## Transcription

### Niagara

I went to this wonderful place with the most lofty expect[ta]tions. I had heard – read – thought and felt much in regard to it. I had frequently gazed with extreme delight upon its mini[a]ture I bought [o/in] behold the original. In my imagination, I had often seen its broad-blue waters rushing on amidst the dim-dark gloom of its own creation – toward the awful cataract – threatening total destruction [sic!] to any power interposing a barrier to its onward progress. Its in[s]piration of beauty – grandness – wonder and terror (long before I saw it) danced [sportively] in my soul, I saw its majestic spray flying wildly into the air, - its beautiful rainbow and heard its awful thunders. As I approached it I felt somewhat as I did at the approaching how, when for the first time I was to stand on free soil. And breath free air.

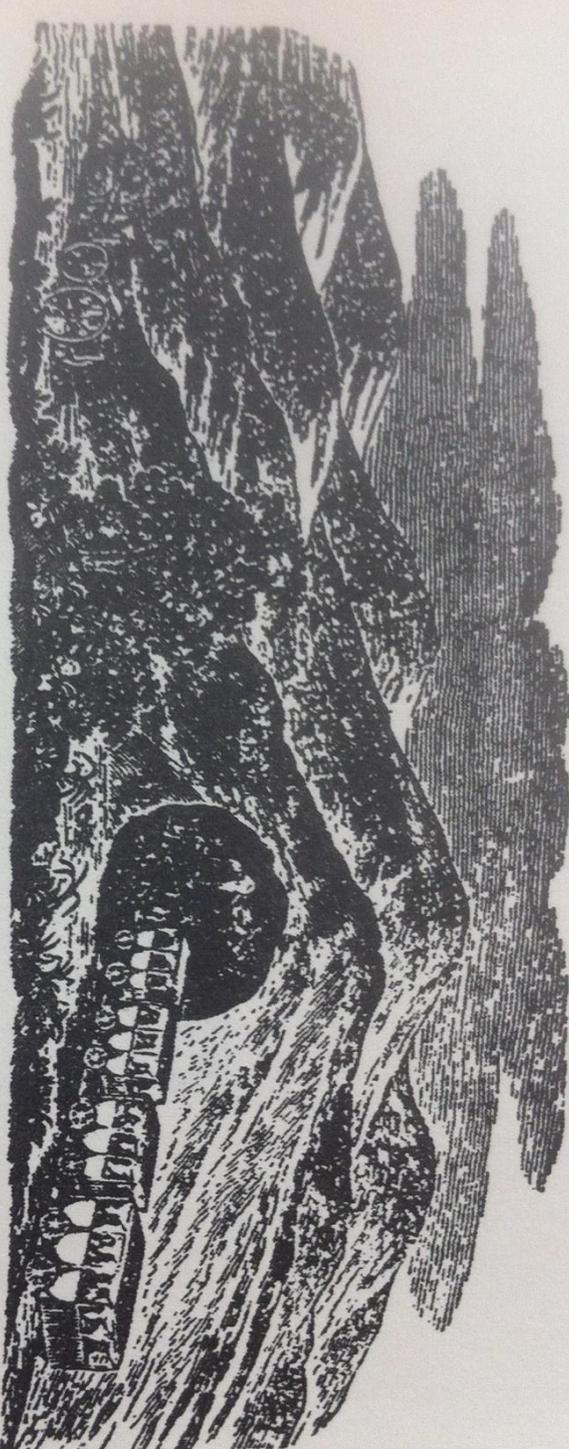
When I came into its awful presence the power of discription [sic!] failed me, an irresistible power closed my lips completely, charmed I stood with eyes fixed, all. all. absorbed. – Scarcely conscious of my own existence, I felt as I never felt before. The heavy trees all around me quivered the ground trembled,– the mighty rocks shook! – as its awful roar gave them its terrible mandate. My courage quailed. In unison with tree rock hill and [dark/clak], I trembled totally subdued I stood in solemn reverence. The awful God – was there!

Frederick Douglass, Aug 2<sup>d</sup> 1843 (p. 183-184, “Album of the Friends of Freedom”)

FIGURE 2  
Anonymous. "America," 1801. Mezzotint Engraving. McAlpin Collection of the New York Library Print  
Collection.



FIGURE 3  
 "Liberty Line. New Arrangement Night and Day," July 13, 1844. Advertisement in *The Western Citizen*.



**LIBERTY LINE**  
**NEW ARRANGEMENT--NIGHT AND DAY.**

The improved and splendid Locomotives, Clarksoh, and Lundy, with their trains fitted up in the best style of accommodation for passengers, will run their regular trips during the present season, between the borders of the Parrichal Dominion and Libertyville, Upper Canada. Gentlemen and Ladies, who may wish to improve their health or circumstances, by a northern tour; are respectfully invited to give us their patronage:

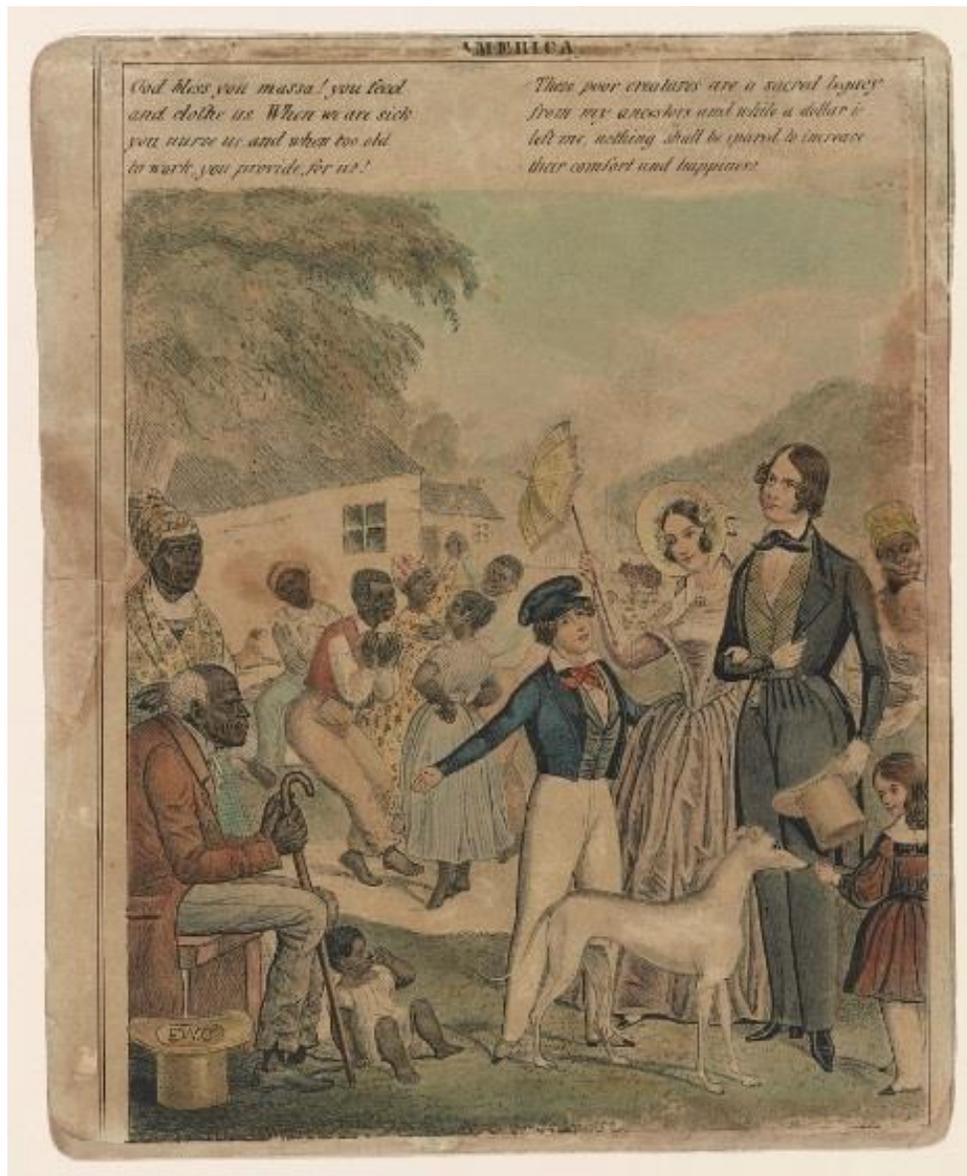
**SEATS FREE, irrespective of color.**  
 Necessary Clothing furnished gratuitously to such as have "fallen among thieves."

**D** Hide the outcasts—let the oppressed go free. *—Bible.*  
**D** For seats apply at any of the trap doors, or to the conductor of the train.

**J. CROSS, Proprietor.**  
 N. B. For the special benefit of Pro-Slavery Police Officers, an extra heavy wagon for Texas, will be furnished, whenever it may be necessary, in which they will be forwarded as dead freight, to the "Valley of Kisculls," always at the risk of the owners.

**D** Extra Overcoats provided for such of them as are afflicted with protracted chilly-phobia.

FIGURE 4  
Edward Williams Clay. "America," 1841. Hand-colored lithograph. Published by A. Donnelly, New York, 1841. American Cartoon Prints Collection of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



### Transcription

God bless you massa! you feed  
and clothe us. When we are sick  
you nurse us and when too old  
to work you provide for us!

These poor creatures are a sacred legacy  
from my ancestors and while a dollar is  
left me, nothing shall be spared to increase  
their comfort and happiness!

FIGURE 5  
 “Map of Virginia and West VA, North & part of South Carolina, Maryland & Delaware, Showing the Situation in these States of Schools taught by Graduates of the Hampton Normal & Agricultural Institute from 1871 to 1876,” 1876. Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

