SIGNS OF RACE

RACE AND NATURE

FROM TRANSCENDENTALISM TO THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Paul Outka

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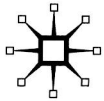

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Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance
By Paul Outka (August 2008)

Series Editors' Preface

The first thing you see when you enter the permanent exhibits at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute is a pair of drinking fountains. Over one hangs a sign that says "White." Over the other hangs a sign that says "Colored."

To the extent that every social identity is to some degree local, the meanings of race in Birmingham, Alabama, necessarily differ, in some demographic and historical particulars, from the meanings of race in North Dakota and Northern Ireland, New York and New South Wales, Cape Town, and Calcutta. But the same questions can be asked everywhere in the English-speaking world.

How do people signal a racial identity?

What does that racial identity signify?

This series examines the complex relationships between race, ethnicity, and culture in the English-speaking world from the early modern period (when the English language first began to move from its home island into the wider world) into the postcolonial present, when English has become the dominant language of an increasingly globalized culture. English is now the medium of a great variety of literatures, spoken and written by many ethnic groups. The racial and ethnic divisions between (and within) such groups are not only reflected in, but also shaped by, the language we share and contest.

Indeed, such conflicts in part determine what counts as "literature" or "culture."

Every volume in the series approaches race from a transracial, interdisciplinary, intercultural perspective. Each volume in the series focuses on one aspect of the cross-cultural performance of race, exploring the ways in which "race" remains stubbornly local, personal, and present.

We no longer hang racial signs over drinking fountains. But the fact that the signs of race have become less obvious does not mean that they have disappeared, or that we can or do ignore them. It is the purpose of this series to make us more conscious, and more critical, readers of the signs that have separated, and still separate, one group of human beings from another.

Those signs are often versions of "No Trespassing," the assertion that certain territories "belong" to one set of people but not another. Members of our species routinely transform neutral "spaces" into social "places," in ways that lend themselves to racial coding. So it should surprise no one that the American fascination with "nature" has always been entangled in the American obsession with "race."

Thus, although Paul Outka's project focuses on American literature in the decades between Crèvecoeur (1782) and Hurston (1937), it begins much closer to home, in 1991, with a very public clash between antiracist and conservation activists, between black liberation theology and white ecocriticism. Outka reexamines our past in order to disentangle the threads that have led us to our knotted present. In that respect, Outka resembles most scholars currently working in critical race studies or in ecocriticism.

What distinguishes Outka is his ambition, and ability, to unite the two fields. He speaks with equal authority about Immanuel Kant and Frederick Douglass, Henry David Thoreau and Harriet Jacobs, Charles Chestnutt and John Muir. Such pairings retrace the relationship between aesthetic genres (sublimity and pastoral, slave narratives and transcendental nature writing) that have traditionally been segregated in different parts of our bookstores and our brains. Moreover, Outka connects those aesthetic categories to shifting racial categories (white and black, before and after the Civil War) and changing landscapes (from the originally forested eastern seaboard to the monocultural plantation system and its ecologically devastated postwar aftermath).

Race and Nature is not simply an act of critical bravura, an interdisciplinary tour de force (though it is that, too). Outka reweaves such seemingly diverse materials into a single narrative by showing us that they were, in fact, always part of the same story, a story that depended in part on systematically suppressing certain relationships. He retells that story by performing the most difficult critical feat of all: looking very closely at, and describing very precisely, what has been in front of us all along. In this case, what's in front of us are passages from many of the classic texts of America's multiracial literature. Outka reads, in America's texts and the places outside those texts, signs pointing to "moments of emptiness, possibility, and connection." Those signs have in the past often been used to "greenwash" American racism; Outka is not naively optimistic, and in fact he recognizes the impossibility of "purity," ethical or political, in any discussion of race. But Outka's rereading of our past, of the possibilities that lurk in emptiness, urges us and teaches us "to see black and white in green." And those are signs worth following.

PHILLIP D. BEIDLER AND GARY TAYLOR

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This book would never have been completed without the generosity and support of a range of people and institutions. I began writing it a few years ago while teaching at the University of Maine at Farmington, and learned hugely from the comments and conversation of a range of colleagues and friends there, especially Gretchen Legler and Michael Johnson who both gave me valuable comments on early drafts. I also benefited greatly from discussions about the project and other environmental issues with Eric Brown, Daniel Gunn, Christine Darrohn, Michael Burke, Jeffrey Thomson, Ruth Hill, and many others. Doug and Judy Rawlings in particular taught me how rich and beautiful rural life can be, and how kind.

While at Maine, I had the great good fortune to be awarded a full-year American Council of Learned Societies/Andrew W. Mellon Junior Faculty Fellowship. With the grant and the generous additional support of UMF, I was able to take a full year off from teaching to work on the book. That one year saved me many, and I will always be grateful to the ACLS and the Mellon Foundation for giving me the chance to devote myself full-time to my scholarship. I owe a particular debt to friends and colleagues who wrote in support of my fellowship, including, especially, Mark Edmundson, my untiringly supportive and unfailingly insightful graduate director.

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Florida State, and offered critically important help when I needed it most.

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gives me more joy than I thought humanly possible; to him I owe some of the very happiest moments of my life. Finally, this book is dedicated to my wife, Uma, my closest friend, the love of my life, and the first and last reader of everything.

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Introduction: The Sublime and the Traumatic

In 1991, an umbrella organization of environmental justice activists sent a sharply critical open letter to ten of the largest environmental organizations in the United States, accusing them of "environmental racism." The letter charged that the groups focused monothematically on wilderness preservation, paid scant attention to the vastly unequal exposure of minority communities to toxic waste, diesel particulates, agricultural pesticides, and lead contamination, and were indifferent to the almost entirely white composition of their workforce. Most of the groups that received the letter (particularly Greenpeace and the Sierra Club) responded positively, subsequently paying greater attention to environmental justice concerns and recruiting people of color to serve on their professional staffs. Still, the letter exposed a much deeper racial fault line in American environmentalism than could be mended by shifting priorities and altering hiring practices.[1] As the black liberation theologian James Cone laments,

> Until recently, the ecological crisis has not been a major theme in the liberation movements in the African American community. "Blacks don't care about the environment" is a typical comment by white ecologists. Racial and economic justice has been at best only a marginal concern in the mainstream environmental movement. "White people care more about the endangered whale and the spotted owl than they do about the survival of young blacks in our nation's cities" is a well-founded belief in the African American community. (138)

Although both people of color and whites are deeply engaged in environmental struggles, the nature each group is concerned with remains markedly different.[2] One environment is inhabited, toxic; the other is uninhabited, wild, pure, untouched except by the gaze of the privileged visitor. American wilderness in all its empt(ied) glory

remains a largely white preserve, while urban, polluted landscapes have long been identified with people of color.

This book analyzes the cultural history of the racialized split between an ahistorical and vulnerable wilderness ever in need of defense and a degraded and exploitable "other" nature. Race and nature have been profoundly entangled—and bitterly divisive—constructions since the first European colonization of the "New" World. This simultaneous division and imbrication, I argue, is an often hidden but always formative thematic of the slave narratives and transcendentalist abolitionism. The thematic emerges explicitly in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America with the founding of the conservation movement and the so-called Great Migration in the wake of the failure of Reconstruction. The book is divided into eight interlocked chapters that examine this immensely complex period of natural and cultural transition. I argue throughout the book that sublimity and trauma represent two racially disjunct resolutions of a similar moment when a given subject's identity merges with the nonhuman natural, and that the racial and environmental schism marked by that disjunction is central to the tangled ways nature and racial subjectivity have been constructed in America.

In the last few years, a number of ecocritics have pointed out that far from being natural, the wilderness is a racially and culturally particular construction with intellectual and aesthetic origins in Romantic sublimity and American transcendentalism, a construction institutionalized by the late nineteenth-century conservation movement of Muir, Pinochet, and Roosevelt that created the national park system.[3] Under such readings, "wilderness" functions in almost definitionally ideological terms. It marks a dehistoricized space in which the erasure of the histories of human habitation, ecological alteration, and native genocide that preceded its "wild" valorization is, literally, naturalized. As Stuart Hall notes, "the hope of every ideology is to naturalize itself out of History into Nature, and thus to become invisible, to operate unconsciously."[4] Such unconsciousness is reflected, for example, in John Muir's journal entry celebrating the wildness of his lakeside camp in Yosemite—"no foot seems to have neared it"—written almost on the spot where Chief Tenaya of the Yosemite Miwok people was captured by Major Savage (really) of the Mariposa Brigade twenty-five years earlier.[5] The absence of people of color from a nature defined by the absence of people—except, of course, for the leisured Romantic observer—is perhaps unsurprising. It is certainly at the

root of the larger, racially tinged, antiurbanism that afflicts mainstream environmentalism to this day.

The brutal history of the "removal" of Native Americans from the natural places they inhabited and shaped has been extensively examined, and the ways Native subjectivity was constructed by whites as synonymous with the "savage" American wilderness has also received significant critical attention. Similarly, Annette Kolodny's important work in the 1970s established a critical tradition of aligning American nature with a feminized and domesticated pastoral, a landscape "tamed" by men in ways that mirrored disciplinary gender relations. Her work reflected a larger insistence in ecofeminism on the intersection between ecological violence and an often racially marked misogyny, an analysis generally predicated on an alliance of the natural with the female.[6] Only recently, however, have a few essays appeared that address how the wilderness is constructed as a white-only space.[7] And while the role of the natural sublime in the construction of both valorized wilderness and white male American identity has been celebrated since (at least) Teddy Roosevelt's presidency, we still do not have a sustained analysis of the ecological effects of the sublime and its multifaceted relation to the construction of race.[8]

That the intersection of nature and race—perhaps the two most perniciously reified constructions in American culture—has yet to be thoroughly examined underscores the longstanding, often normative, whiteness of ecocriticism.[9] It also suggests a much harder fought anthropocentrism in critical race studies that inverted the terrible historical legacy of making people of color signify the natural, as a prelude to exploiting both. This legacy—in which whites viewed black people as part of the natural world, and then proceeded to treat them with the same mixture of contempt, false reverence, and real exploitation that also marks American environmental history—inevitably makes the possibility of an *uncomplicated* union with the natural world less readily available to African Americans than it has been to whites who, by and large, have not suffered from such a history. To have "the survival of young blacks in our nation's cities" come in second to the "endangered whale and the spotted owl" in the regard of some white environmentalists thus implicitly references, indeed repeats, a much older trauma. For Cone, this split fundamentally distorts both the struggle for racial justice and for the environment: "People who fight against white racism but fail to connect it to the degradation of the earth are anti-ecological—whether they know it or not. People who struggle against environmental degradation but do not incorporate in it a disciplined and sustained fight against white supremacy are

racists—whether they acknowledge it or not" (138). While Cone goes further than I would—or at least I take a much longer historical route in what follows to get there—clearly the time for a critical dialogue between those interested in deconstructing "nature" and in those engaged by deconstructing "race" is long overdue.

Mainstream environmentalism, ecocriticism, deep ecology, ecofeminism, and other largely (though not exclusively) white forms of environmentally engaged writing generally agree that nature is valuable in itself, that an association between the human and the natural is salutary, at least for the human, and that the human/natural binary needs to be questioned, if not entirely done away with. All well and good. But these are principles that uncritically assume a much less fraught relation between the natural world and the human than that experienced by many African Americans. Such a view refuses to recognize the racial privilege arguably inherent in the blanket notion that "Nature is sacred." Which is not to say that Nature isn't (or is) or that people of all "races" do not often find great emotional and spiritual value in their relation to the nonhuman natural. But it is to call explicit attention to the very different ways that a relation to the natural has historically signified along sharply divided racial lines. It is to insist that critics, especially ecocritics, pay attention to the human as well as natural history of the ground we stand on when we speak. Looking down, there may be bones and ashes; breathing in, a sickly sweet smell; listening, the sound of dogs; looking out, strange fruit. When we can see this, as well as the mountain, we may be seeing something that looks more like the American landscape in all its contradictory nature, rather than a mystical and romanticized construction writ sublimely large.

This book attempts such double-vision, such historicized seeing, in an examination of how natural experience became racialized in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. I am fundamentally interested in the history of the intersection between the construction of racial identity and natural experience, in what sort of ecological and human consequences have flowed from the conjunction of differing racial subjects and particular nonhuman natural environments in this period.[10] In focusing on the historic intersection between the construction of racial identity and natural experience I strive to make neither race nor nature a privileged term, to avoid the twin errors of either a racial anthropocentrism or an ahuman "deep" ecology. Put another way, my own commitments to the natural world and to antiracism both inform the book's analysis and place some important boundaries on what I consider. These boundaries focus the book on race and nature, on the construction of whiteness and

blackness, and on a particular period in American history, and each carries certain risks, as I examine below.

First, while my approach is influenced by ecofeminism's insistence on a constitutive link between intrahuman oppression and ecological violence, throughout the book race, rather than gender, provides the fundamental analytic category. In making race primary, I mean neither to overlook how gender inflects both racial and natural experience, nor to argue that race is somehow more important than gender in understanding how natural experience has been constructed, nor, certainly, to render normative white male experiences of the natural world. Quite the opposite; indeed this project is perhaps most profoundly engaged by denaturalizing those white male experiences and the white male subjectivity that emerges from them. So I examine a wide variety of texts produced by both women and men and pay close attention to the ways that gender inflects both natural and racial experience, in, for example, an analysis of the pastoral and the twinned figures of the slave concubine and the white Southern belle, or the ways real and imagined male sexual violence is naturalized, or the way gender inflects sublimity. While throughout my analysis I am acutely conscious of how racial subjects are always also gendered and classed subjects, the fact remains that race has often been slighted in ecocritical conversation. I want to engage that specific problem in a way that does not replicate the important work that ecofeminism has already performed.

To use "race" as an analytic category is always to risk reductive description, however central such reductive descriptions were to the period of American history with which I am concerned. Such distortions are to some extent unavoidable, a traumatic echo of the violence and distortion that marks the history of the construction of race in America. Writing about race (or gender, or class, or sexual preference/practice, or the many other categories we employ to group subjects) privileges it in a way that risks (at least) subsuming other ways identity is marked and shaped. I do hope to mitigate that distortion in part by engaging many different texts and authors, and I remain throughout explicitly self-conscious about the dangers of suppressing difference in favor of intellectual tidiness. And my formative insistence in this project that race and nature should always be understood as historically interdependent constructions itself works against reifying either nature or the white/black binary. As Margo Crawford insists in her Preface to the March 2005 issue of *American Literature*, *Erasing the Commas: RaceGenderClassSexualityRegion*, an "intersectional" approach to these all-too-privileged signifiers as "both the method of analysis and the content most worthy of analysis" is an