

“When Nature Resumes Her Loveliness”: The Slave Narratives as Ecoliterature

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Introduction

As a genre, African American ecoliterature—literature that emphasizes ecological relationships—provides a window into these authors’ views of their relationships with the environment, with other people, and with particular geographical locations. African American slave narratives, written during the antebellum period, serve as some of the earliest examples of African American ecoliterature. Scholars recognize the importance of these narratives within the body of African American ecoliterature, but they exclude several of the major book-length narratives due to the political motives within these texts. These scholars rely on Lawrence Buell’s criteria for ecoliterature, and according to these qualifications, they argue that slave narratives that function as ecoliterature should reflect the authors’ desires to protect the environment. This approach results in the exclusion of several book-length narratives due to the political motives of these texts. Excellent analyses regarding some of these works through this ecoliterary criticism exist, yet the scholarship for this genre remains underdeveloped.

In this essay, I examine the current collection of African American slave ecoliterature alongside Bruno Latour’s theoretical work to propose that ecoliterature can simultaneously function as ecological texts and political texts. By considering another theorist who proposes that ecoliterature can simultaneously contain physical descriptions of nature and present a political message, we can expand the canon of this collection. In the following sections, I will examine our current collection of African American slave ecoliterature and introduce my own analyses between these examples and the narratives I advocate to include within this collection—Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave*. Reading these politically motivated, book-length narratives as ecoliterature allows us to

recognize the political oppression that slaves endured and the ecological effects the system of slavery had on the people and on the landscape. Rather than propose a contradiction to the current qualification or categorization of early African American ecoliterature, I argue that adding to this canon of ecoliterature through the lens of another theorist's work is necessary. Current scholarship suggests that ecological writing should be separate from political writing, but a different theoretical perspective introduces us to the possibility that ecoliterature can possess both qualities. While the existing scholarship is indeed important to the canon of African American ecoliterature, it sacrifices rich opportunities for textual analyses—many major book-length slave narratives, which present descriptions of the slave experience and experiences within nature, can function simultaneously as political texts and as ecoliterary texts.

Examining examples of ecoliterature and ecocriticisms about different regions and minorities allows readers to learn about groups of people's responses to their environments. But in order to determine how slave narratives, known for their political impacts, could operate as ecoliterature, it would be helpful to have a working definition of "ecology" to see how works such as slave narratives could also count as ecoliterature. Across the Humanities, "ecology" is understood as the relationships between living and nonliving things (Buell 131, 200) (Ruffin 18). For our purposes, then, it is reasonable to view slaves' relationships with nonhuman elements as well as relationships between slaves and other humans as both ecological and environmental. But in the case of the classic book-length slave narratives, researchers often exclude these texts as examples of ecoliterature. The most glaring reason for this omission appears to be that these narratives were written with political motives and could not always detail accurate relationships between slaves and their environments, between slaves and fellow slaves, or even between slaves and their masters due to the danger the slave authors faced in publishing their work. Assuming

that all ecoliterature and ecocriticisms must be apolitical, this reasoning would be valid. However, ecological relationships seen in slave narratives reveal that nonhuman entities in the South affected humans in physical ways. For the purpose of reexamining the classic slave narratives under a different lens, it is important to consider how the nonhuman world impacts humans rather than solely considering whether or not slave authors express a desire to protect the environment.

Bruno Latour's piece "Why Political Ecology Has to Let Go of Nature" encourages readers to reconsider how scholars understand ecological literature. While his piece does not address texts such as slave narratives, his arguments allow scholars to consider that texts such as classic slave narratives may be considered ecoliterature because of the political qualities embedded within them. Latour provides an in-depth discussion of nature writing, proposing that nature as a concept does not have to stand in opposition to society—instead, examining nature as a part of society, or even simply as an acting force itself, reveals how people interact with nature and can help us to examine other aspects of humans' relationships with the nonhuman world. Latour argues that the idea that nature is isolated from humanity is one that constantly pervades political ecological writing and writes that "[the literature on political ecology] merely rehashes the Constitution of a *two-house* politics in which one house is called politics and the other, under the name of nature, renders the first one powerless" (18-9). The danger of this mindset, rather than the muddling of nature with politics, is the total absence of politics from nature (19). Such a reality would, as Latour believes, prevent humanity from recognizing that our current view of political ecology, or even our view of nature from the past, is one brimming with politics (19-20). Instead of worrying about contaminating nature with politics (and with people), he argues that political ecologists should disregard the notion of a "pure nature" and should instead

consider the benefits and necessity of recognizing politics within an ecological conversation in order to provide representation for nonhumans and humans alike (26, 41). Anthropology is, Latour writes, “indispensable to political ecology” (44), and to discredit the roles that humans played in developing the current view of nature, or conversely developing the current view of political ecology, would be to discredit the effect nonhumans had on humans in America. He asserts that nonhumans, once free of the concept of Romantic ideals of nature and considered alongside humans as active participants in a political society, can then be better viewed as parts of the political ecology collective (50).

In contrast to Latour’s implication that ecological literature can involve texts that describe the authors’ physical interactions with the environment, or the ways in which the nonhuman world acts against the authors, Lawrence Buell’s book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* presents an alternative to examining authors’ relationship to the natural world. Buell’s theoretical work on ecological writing rests on its appreciation of the Romantic notion of nature. He provides four qualifications by which he believes an environmental text may be considered truly “environmental”—that the history between humans and their environment is evident by the presence of nonhuman nature, that humanity is presented as no more important than nonhuman elements, that “[h]uman accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation,” and that the environment is pictured as more active or involved than simply existing as a backdrop for humans [emphasis omitted] (7-8). By these qualifications, and according to Buell’s own opinion, the category is broad enough to include most literary works to a small degree, as Latour likewise suggests (8). But Buell warns against environmental literature that is almost anthropocentric in essence and continues to denounce this literature as representing the physical aspects of the

natural world inaccurately, commenting that “[t]he conception of represented nature as an ideological screen becomes unfruitful if it is used to portray the green world as nothing more than projective fantasy or social allegory...” (36). From Buell’s perspective, then, and from the arguments presented by African American ecoliterary scholars in their pieces, the book-length slave narratives are often too allegorical to be considered faithful examples of ecoliterature because the critics have a perception about how they believe nature and humans should interact with one another. In the case of the slave narratives, Buell’s argument seems to suggest that the purpose of the authors’ writing their narratives should be to present their abolitionist messages as means to protect the Southern environment. Many narratives that scholars exclude, however, provide rich details about the outside world and how humans interacted, both consciously and unconsciously, with nature. Scholars who rely on Buell’s writing already exclude these texts, however, because the ways the slave authors present their encounters with nature do not fit into the criteria Buell believes is the accurate way to present nature objectively in ecoliterature.

It could be argued that the abolitionist cause embedded within these texts forced authors such as Frederick Douglass to provide a literary imagery of the beautiful Southern landscape and the helpless slaves as damaged because of the ecologically harmful effects of slavery, which would support Buell’s argument (43). But this outlook is a limited one. Throughout other narratives, such as Harriet Jacobs’s, for example, the authors simply presented nature as it was—nonhuman elements interacting with humans; these authors then described their responses to said nature. According to Latour’s argument, observing nature as an acting force against humans and relating these encounters to demonstrate how nature affected their lives is ecoliterary writing. Book-length slave narratives focus their primary goal on abolitionism, a fact which allows readers to recognize an important political goal relevant to the time. In addition, these texts

provide several mentions of nature's effects on their authors as these writers simultaneously endured the effects of slavery. They recognized that slavery as a system ruined the way they could develop a relationship with the Southern environment, but their narratives do not explicitly identify their desire for a positive relationship. I argue, however, that an explicit desire for a positive relationship with the environment is not necessary for a text to be considered ecoliterature. Acknowledging the role that the natural world had on the slaves in the political slavery system reveals the writers' distinct understandings of the relationships they shared with the environment. By looking through Latour's lens as a means of categorizing ecoliterature, one in which environmental literature does not have to contain accounts of how humans negatively acted upon nature and instead interacted with or were acted upon by nature, we can widen the scope of a limited category such as African American ecoliterature. Scholars can consider slavery's effects on the American political system but thinking of the narratives as pieces of ecoliterature also allows them to analyze the ecological effects outlined in these texts—within these narratives, slave authors described instances in which nature acted on the slaves, which provides a newer manner of considering slave narratives as ecoliterature. This new approach allows environmental and ecological researchers to widen the scope of what can be considered the earliest form of African American ecoliterature.

Existing Scholarship of Early African American Ecoliterature

Scholars who research African American ecoliterature and ecocriticism frequently cite Buell's work to qualify their canonization of ecoliterature. The narratives scholars consider typically promote the idea of nature as more than just a symbolic means to promote abolitionism. Nature seems to be given its own voice, even if this voice is one that is consistently subdued by the slave owners. Although Buell's work provides ample opportunities for ecoliterary analysis,

this same work undoubtedly encourages limits to the scope of analyses, as Buell warns scholars against considering every text that mentions natural imagery as ecoliterature. Both Kimberly Smith and Kim Ruffin, two ecoliterary scholars, appear to take this advice seriously. Their contributions to the African American ecoliterary genre are helpful for us to begin to think about how these texts function as ecological writing, and it may be helpful to identify their own arguments in order to recognize the limitations of these analyses and to demonstrate the difference and benefits of reading the narratives through Latour's lens.

Kimberly Smith's essay "Environmental Criticism and the Slave Narratives" serves as an exploration into the topic of African American slave literature as ecoliterature or ecocriticism. She examines book-length slave narratives, the "classics," and compares the content in these narratives to this period's "democratic agrarian" ideal, the belief that agricultural systems were more socially important than other systems (Smith 320). As with Buell's theoretical work compared to Latour's, it proves helpful to identify the limits of Smith's analyses to clarify why this genre of early African American ecoliterature merits expansion. While her work does describe one aspect of the slave authors' relationships to their environments, she centers her research around the notion that slavery prevented slaves from being able to participate in "democratic agrarianism," presuming that the only purpose of slave-written ecoliterature is to identify the ways in which humans affected by slavery hurt nature. This kind of thinking is biased and exclusionary, as these book-length narratives divulge more than the slaves' conflicted feelings toward the "agrarian ideal" Smith describes; while agriculture was a large—and perhaps the primary—component of the slaves' relationship to their environment, ecoliterature, as Latour defines it, also delineates other connections between humans and other nonhuman elements. These connections can be seen when an author such as Harriet Jacobs describes what she saw

outdoors and how she reacted to these observations as she was trying to escape from her master. To ignore different ways of examining ecological relationships visible in the slave community is to forfeit impartiality in favor of the vision of ecoliterature that Smith, as well as theorists such as Buell, wants to see.

By Smith's own admission, her essay is a foray into analyzing African American ecocriticism rather than an immersion into it, but she does present her own guidelines for determining the extent of a narrative's ecocritical nature. First, Smith identifies the fact that slave narratives expose the author's views of nature as a means of oppression, as well as "the roots of the contemporary environmental justice movement in the environmental ethic" (316). She does note that, due to the innate political rhetoric and the prevailing abolitionist message present within these texts, narratives cannot be a completely accurate representation of a slave's view of nature (3), but she cites Lawrence Buell's view of environmental literature, that literature not written primarily as environmental criticism may still merit inclusion within the category because of the "environmental(ist) subtexts of works whose interests are ostensibly directed elsewhere (e.g., toward social, political, and economic relations)" (qtd. in Smith 315).

Researchers of African American ecoliterature continuously pinpoint both Henry Bibb's and Charles Ball's slave narratives as early contributions to the field, but Smith references several other slave narrative authors, such as Equiano; Jacobs; Northup; and Douglass, among others, as ecocritical writers. After defining her qualifications and hesitations for including the slave narratives as ecocriticisms, she also explains why "'democratic agrarianism,' an ideology that accorded agricultural labor profound political meaning" found in and contradicted by these narratives, allows researchers to form a better understanding of Southern slaves' relationship to the environment (319). Namely, Smith centers her research on African American slave narratives

as ecoliterary pieces because the narratives reveal a correlation between the ruinous aspects of slavery and the exhaustive farming practices on the Southern landscape (320). As Smith notes, slaves' social connection to America was one rooted in farming practices, and her analyses highlight this fact. But because her piece is relatively "exploratory," Smith limits her essay to this agrarian focus, arguing that one of the primary qualities of the ecocritical aspects of the slave narratives is the "political equality" not found in the farming lifestyles between white plantation owners and African American farmers (315-316, 320). Smith's references to other narratives' ecoliterary qualities are categorized similarly, and she notes that this trend of "racial oppression lead[ing] to environmental degradation" is a common feature of both future fiction and nonfiction African American literature. Smith's overview of African American slave narratives functioning as ecocriticisms/ecoliterature is extensive, but she categorizes these ecoliterary qualities only as windows into the disadvantaged relationships between humans and nonhumans in an agricultural sense rather than identify other instances in which these slave authors draw from other understandings of their relationship to the environment (324). I argue that these texts provide more evidence of the slaves' relationship with their environments than Smith acknowledges. In general, the scholarship regarding slave narratives as African American ecoliterature and ecocriticism follows a similar trend—due to a limited scope of what scholars consider to be the literary characteristics of environmental criticism, the genre remains underdeveloped and therefore restrictive.

Kimberly Ruffin's book *Black on Earth* uses its introduction and first chapter to examine the characteristics within African American slave narratives that qualify them as pieces of ecoliterature, much like Smith's essay does; also, like Smith, Ruffin's analyses of early African American ecoliterature are underdeveloped because she only uses Buell's ecoliterary criticism to

guide her analyses. Although she introduces the word “ecoliterature” as a text that is significant both in its literary qualities and its ability to describe ecological relationships between people and the environment, and “ecocriticism” as literature that reveals connections between work and enslavement, Ruffin does not include many narratives she considers African American slave ecoliterature (3, 29). Because she operates under a similar principle that Smith does, in that she is wary to include pieces that primarily advocate for a specific political reform and do not demonstrate a “uniform perspective” of the slave experience, Ruffin is nearly discriminatory in deciding which texts she uses to identify some of the earliest origins of this genre, slave narratives (30).

Though Ruffin is somewhat reluctant to write about the classic book-length narratives, writing that it is unwise to believe that these narratives “reveal connections between enslavement and ecological perspective...” (30), she does present both Henry Bibb’s and Charles Ball’s works as examples of ecoliterature because these narratives primarily focus on the authors’ personal relationships with the environments they encounter rather than use these environmental relationships to promote abolitionism or other political ventures. Relying on Buell’s methods of analyzing ecological literature, Ruffin and Smith seem to think that authors’ placing importance on abolitionism, a political movement, excludes many of the book-length narratives from the African American ecoliterary canon and instead suggest that ecoliterature should not reflect political motives. However, the slave authors’ identifications of their relationships and their own views of the land could not be inherently apolitical, as these authors wrote their texts revolving around their experiences in an oppressive environment. The authors currently included in Ruffin’s canon of early African American ecoliterature could not create texts completely void of politicization. Their experiences within nature, which only occurred because slaves lived in

oppressive environments made oppressive by a majority group are, in this case, related both to nature and to a political atmosphere. Adding to Ruffin's analyses by including works that function both as nature-centered texts and political texts, as her examples already do, could contribute to our current understanding of how to analyze the slave experience through the lens of environmental literature.

Throughout the first chapter of her book, dedicated to analyzing her examples of slave narratives that function as ecoliterature, Ruffin explains that slaves and freed slaves lacked a sense of national belonging and therefore "had little, if any, legal or social support in maintaining these connections [between "the human and nonhuman natural world"] (29, 39). She further argues that work plays a significant role in how African American slave writers articulated their personal connections to land and people due to the intense and predominantly non-consensual labor they endured and had to enact upon the Southern landscape (27). These authors, along with actually describing their understandings of their ecological relationships with the environment and how it related to their personal lives, also detail instances in which they physically use the nature with which slavery and plantation life surrounds them, to achieve a goal. The narratives Ruffin examines speak to these truths, as she details one particular poet, George Moses Horton, and his struggle to connect his conditions within the environment to his lack of power due to his experiences from slavery (39). Throughout Horton's poetry, Ruffin notes his constant ecocritical analyses of his relationship to the natural world, particularly because, as a slave, he was neither encouraged nor legally allowed to write (37). His experience as a published author additionally shows his inaccessibility to legal protection and rights—in order to be published, he had to entrust his work and profits to a white man, agree to this man's using all the money to secure

Horton's freedom, and even monetize his descriptions of the landscape with which he already had a complicated love-hate relationship (Ruffin 39).

It is evident that Horton, as with any other slave author, did not write solely to express his emotional connection to the land. It should be noted that Ruffin's in-depth analysis also reveals Horton's lack of societal representation due to his slave status. When his poetry was published, the profits went to Horton's white benefactor (and Horton had to trust would that he would use the money in order to buy his freedom) rather than directly to Horton. He wrote with a purpose—to gain his freedom. The “classic” slave narrative writers used their texts to advocate for other slaves' freedoms. Perhaps, as free men and women, they had more representation and authority than Horton possessed, but their causes reflected a concern for the whole of the slave community and for the future of the United States. Often, these writers pleaded for their Northern audiences to join the abolitionist cause so that the enslaved would be able to live moral, Christian lives.

Ruffin's analysis of the struggles of an African American slave poet appears to delineate the author's personal qualifications for what she feels constitute as African American slave ecoliterature/ecocriticisms—the slave writers must demonstrate a personal relationship to the land, one that encapsulates the inequalities between the laborers and the land in which they work. Moreover, these works may also reveal some form of human-human relationship, as seen in Horton's case when he had to entrust his own work to a white publisher. These slave narratives reveal questions concerning humanity and instances of dehumanization the slaves faced. As Ruffin notes, slave children would often be categorized along with farm animals, resulting in the slaves' loss of personal identities early in life (33). These factors are evident in many other slave-written works and can also be found in the book-length narratives examined in this paper. But her conversation about book-length slave narratives as ecoliterature/ecocriticism is scarce and

incomplete. Like Smith, Ruffin agrees that viewing the “abolitionist slave narratives as comprehensive documents for understanding the ecological perspectives of the enslaved” can be a dangerous action (30). The use of the word “abolitionist” implies that Ruffin is referring to the book-length narratives, as these narratives are known for this politicized theme. While the narratives—Horton’s poetry and Henry Bibb’s and Charles Ball’s narratives—she discusses match the qualities in ecological writing that Laurence Buell prescribes, Ruffin’s clear exclusion of political writing in the topic of ecoliterature and ecocriticism is disadvantageous, according to Latour. By attempting to create a clear separation of politics and nature, Ruffin and scholars like her run the risk of excluding valuable ecological literature from the ecoliterature/ecocriticism canon.

Like Smith, however, Ruffin expresses a similar belief that ecoliterary-minded slave authors wrote their narratives in an attempt to recapture some sort of positive, beneficial relationship with nature that they had been denied them. She writes, “For as long as Africans have been Americans, they have had no entitlement to speak for or about nature” (1). Ruffin’s book analyzes ecocritical slave narratives with a focus on how the authors wrote about the work they were forced to accomplish. Her depiction of George Moses Horton as an ecocritical writer is as follows: “[Horton’s] life and written art exemplify the problem of becoming invested in a land where one is not recognized fully as a member of the human community.” (37). To build on Ruffin’s point, his poetry displays a seemingly contradictory appreciation and negative feelings for the nature in which he is immersed, and he continuously laments his inability to fully love the landscape because of the harmful effects that slavery has on both slaves and on the landscape. In Horton’s case, then, Ruffin suggests that his abolitionist cause is one spurred by his desire to protect nature, rather than a cause promoted by human interests. This difference in motive is one

that seems to define the current collection of early African American ecoliterature, and it seems to be the reason why she cites Horton's poetry as ecocriticism more frequently than she does the book-length narratives. This same reasoning reveals why this genre has few foundational texts—according to Buell's standard for ecological writing, Horton's poetry is one of the only acceptable examples of early African American ecocriticism. By using Latour's theoretical work, work that allows us to consider ecological writing as texts that describe any interactions with the environment, scholars have the means to consider Horton's work alongside various other slave-authored texts as foundational to African American ecoliterature.

The fact that scholars use Buell's argument that ecoliterary writers must explicitly express a desire for a personal relationship with the environment is one that isolates the classic slave narrative writers from the genre while ignoring other ways in which the authors denote an understanding of their ecological relationships. Given his qualifications, some narratives will fit into his standard for ecoliterature more than others. The use of Horton as an example of an early ecocritic reveals a pervading history of the culture of African American authors' relationship with nature. But this culture does not apply only to a widely accepted ecocritic such as Horton, or even Ball or Bibb, as authors of the classic slave narratives also express their own culture of nature writing—that they knew much about agriculture and about their environment but felt as if they could not possess a genuine appreciation for nature because they were forced to interact intensely with the Southern landscape in order to avoid punishment and mistreatment. Considering Bruno Latour's work, however, that nature writing is able to exist without a political motive and without the notion that environmental writers should write to express their desire to preserve nature opens opportunities for the exploration of other texts as ecoliterary pieces. As we consider the political stakes for other book-length narrative writers, as well as the different

intentions they had in writing their narratives, we should consider broadening these constrictive and dated qualifications in order to include more authors who might have also shared a concern for their environment or perhaps used their experiences with the nonhuman world to describe other ecological relationships. As Buell initially notes, we can consider most texts as ecoliterature because of some quality of nature writing attached to them. But when we try to tailor these pieces and their content to fit narrow criteria, as Ruffin and Smith do, we sacrifice other valuable qualities in the text that also merit an ecoliterary analysis. Rather than argue a contradiction to these scholars' contributions, I suggest that an expansion of this genre would provide opportunities for richer analyses of ecoliterature.

A Reevaluation of Narratives As Ecoliterature

Because slaves were forced to work in close proximity to the land, to the plantations, and therefore relied on the health of the plantations for their own survival, they might have held negative feelings borne out of fear and codependence for this same land, as evidenced by the previous examples of slave ecoliterature. Although it was helpful for slaves to possess this knowledge about their environment, as it provided some of them means with which to grow their own food, hide from their masters and slave traders, and practice medicine, above other provisions, they still had to be conscious and even wary of their environment so that they did not bring harm to themselves. While not every author of a book-length slave narrative spends nearly as much time praising the beauty of nature, these writers do express their desires to be able to work independently and to make money to better themselves rather than to benefit their masters. They also describe how plantation life operates, along with expansive explanations of agricultural practices and facts about the plants. Some use natural imagery to describe the South to Northern readers. They condemn slavery for what it denies them—job opportunities, safety,

literacy and education, personal relationships between themselves and other people, health, and perhaps even pleasant feelings toward the land. But it is also important to consider the narratives written by authors who did not write about an explicit desire to protect or preserve the landscape, such as those by Harriet Jacobs or Frederick Douglass or Solomon Northup, who were instead using instances of nature writing to describe how the environment affected their experiences as slaves. At times, these authors were able to use nature in beneficial ways, such as using herbs for medicine or using a forest as a hiding place, and at other times, the outside world was an obstacle that they had to overcome. In these descriptions, ecological relationships can be seen as nature acting against humans rather than humans interacting with nature. The fact that the authors were able to describe their relationship to nature and the environment, whether positively or negatively, demonstrates a recognition of ecological relationships past those that Buell, and by extension Smith and Ruffin, describe—these are relationships that move past Romantic imagery of nature or the “agrarian ideal” and instead reflect all the encounters the authors shared, or perhaps endured, with the nonhuman world.

Harriet Jacobs’s narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* provides many instances of her encounters within nature, though she does not share in the typical slave experience of working on a plantation. Instead, she describes nature and its dangers as she details life outside of her working environment. The ways in which she is forced to interact and respond to the natural world while fleeing from slavery still reflect the consequences brought about because of her position as a slave. This is best evidenced in Jacobs’s recollection of physical pain caused by nature. Throughout the text, Jacobs makes various references to animals biting her when she is confined to her grandmother’s attic. The space becomes infested with “hundreds of little red insects, fine as a needle’s point, that pierced through [her] skin” (128). As she solves one

problem, another arises—even mosquitos cannot live in the attic due to the lack of fresh air (134). Her living conditions, then, which are forced upon her in her flight from slavery, are so horrible that they attract painful bites from bugs and are so unlivable that some kinds of those creatures refuse to live in that environment. In this circumstance, nature negatively affects Jacobs rather than her acting upon it. As a slave, she, unlike these insects, is unable to leave this oppressive environment and is instead subjected to the physical effects of the natural world. While current scholarship of African American ecoliterature proposes that Jacobs as an ecoliterary writer should express an explicit desire to protect the environment, she instead focuses on the negative aspects of the environment. Rather than exist in a positive, mutually beneficial relationship with the environment, Jacobs is at-risk, both from the slave owners who pursue her, and from the natural world in which she is forced to live.

Jacobs uses her understanding of Romantic concepts of nature, the belief that nature should exist as a safe haven, to emphasize her contradicting experiences with nature. Slavery leaves her physically vulnerable to the natural surroundings because of her political status as a slave. Along with the mention of bugs, she recalls being bitten by “a reptile of some kind” when she first runs away from Mr. Flint, leaving her with a poisoned wound that requires a remedy from one of the slave doctors (111). This experience leaves her especially fearful later when she is forced to take refuge in “Snaky Swamp,” but the stronger fear she possesses, one of being caught, prevents her from being able to indulge in this fear (125). Although the nonhuman world has no discernible reason to act against her, as nature is indifferent to humans, Jacobs clearly possesses a different understanding of her relationship with the natural world. Throughout this text, she references the many occasions in which she is endangered by the environment’s potential dangers. Although Jacobs desires freedom from slavery, her interactions within the

environment result in pain, and she understandably develops a fear of the natural world. This relationship between Jacobs and nonhuman nature serves as an allusion to the unequal power dynamics she endures because of her condition as a slave. During this time, she and the natural world are not only metaphorically unsafe from the dangers of slavery, as Ruffin and Smith suggest—she herself is also physically unsafe from the Southern environment. In fact, she compares “Slavery” to a “serpent” with “many and poisonous fangs” (73). Throughout her narrative, Jacobs expresses her fear of snakes on more than one occasion; she writes, “But those large, venomous snakes were less dreadful to my imagination than the white men in that community called civilized” (126). Before this, when Dr. Flint is trying to rape Jacobs, she notes, “No animal ever watched its prey more narrowly than he watched me” (49). By doing so, Jacobs compares slavery and her slaveholder Dr. Flint to nonhuman creatures that injure her and possess the ability to kill her. In this same statement, she also imagines herself as a part of nature, a “prey” that her beastlike master is trying to catch. Subject to the physical dangers of her environment, Jacobs begins to blur the distinction between humanity and nonhuman helplessness. Just as slavery threatens her morality as a godly woman, it too threatens her very humanity within an indifferent environment.

Jacobs accomplishes more than writing about her experiences with animals. As she works to free herself from slavery, she finds herself at odds with the weather, with the seasons, and with the time of day. Especially evident in this case, Jacobs holds no control over how the environment acts against her. No human can change the weather, but Jacobs is hardly able to find protection from it. When she hides in her grandmother’s attic for a number of years, she is subject to the elements and endures extreme heat and unrelenting cold; those conditions, along with a prolonged inability to move, leaves her with permanent physical impairments (163). She

often refers to a common convention in slave narratives—that she uses metaphors, particularly ones about nature, as a means to appeal to Northern readers’ sympathies and to propose that slavery is ruinous to the spiritual and emotional states of slaves. Her contrasts between *darkness and light* and *heaven and hell* speak to this notion. She frequently (and rightfully) claims that her indiscretions and morally ambiguous actions can be attributed to a harmful environment, writing that “in the land of my birth the shadows are too dense for light to penetrate” (45). To her, darkness is “oppressive,” but darkness also provides her the most security, as she is only able to travel quickly at night (127). Conversely, Jacobs correlates a positive lifestyle (one she attributes to that of a white woman) with “flowers” and “a sunny sky” (37). Jacobs further equates good weather with positive feelings as she writes that “when Nature resumes her loveliness, the human soul is apt to revive also. My drooping hopes came to life again with the flowers” (94). She loves the light, but she cannot fully or confidently appreciate it because being outside during the daytime would undoubtedly expose her identity to slaveholders. Both literally and metaphorically, she expresses her desire to breathe “fresh” or “free” air, as she is not only denied freedom in the South, but she is stifled in her grandmother’s attic. When she is finally able to experience fresh air as she is escaping from the South, she expresses her joy at being able to be outside “without fear or restraint” (174). Natural amenities, such as sunlight or stars or even fresh air, should be equally available to humans, but because Jacobs lives in this slave environment in the South, she is unable to enjoy these features without fear of being punished or caught. She cannot enjoy nature as it is, and on a larger scale cannot enjoy the Southern landscape, because it has been denied to her due to her station in life.

As a woman, Harriet Jacobs experiences even more unbalanced power dynamics in the relationships she has with her slaveholders. In fact, she is aware of the culture of the slave

woman's position and believes that slavery is worse for women than it is for men (88). In her case, she is not only physically required to work for Dr. Flint, but he also expects her to be sexually available. Although she is able to reject his advances by becoming pregnant with another man's children, Jacobs does write about other mothers' experiences. She recalls one of Dr. Flint's cooks and how he would force the woman to be away from nursing her child, denying her an action every mother should be able to do if they want (19). When another slave became pregnant with her master's baby and lost the baby and was close to death herself, the slave's mother saw it as a tragic blessing (20). Jacobs herself explains that she "would rather drudge out [her] life on a cotton plantation . . . than to live with an unprincipled master and a jealous mistress" (38). And when she gives birth to her own son, she makes another nature metaphor, writing, "The little vine was taking deep root in my existence, though its clinging fondness excited a mixture of love and pain" (73). Once again hearkening to the dehumanizing qualities of slavery, Jacobs even compares her own child to a natural object rather than a human baby. For Jacobs, it is natural for her to love her baby, and this feeling is in fact inescapable for her, as seen by the imagery of a "vine" literally digging itself into Jacobs. However, she does not feel free to love her child without hesitation, nor does she feel as if she is doing the right thing by having a child in the first place. The very fact that she willingly brings another human being into a slave environment causes a tremendous amount of guilt to the young woman. Jacobs is faced with a disadvantage that should be a natural right for her, but because she is a slave woman and conceived a child so that she could avoid her master's sexual advances, the choice and presumed privilege of having a child is instead a last resort for her. In her plea for abolition, Jacobs seems to connect the political act of family-making with the biological, or natural, act of reproduction. She creates an intersection between these two ideals, allowing audiences to recognize the

interconnectedness between her political station and her relationship to the environment. It is impossible for Jacobs to separate her identity as a slave with her identity as a natural being, but it is within these two identities that Jacobs denotes her relationship to the environment.

With Latour's perspective that I am using to examine these often-excluded slave narratives, it is evident that Jacobs understood the political climate in which she lived and how it related to her identities as a slave and as a woman. Her narrative likewise provides invaluable information regarding a slave woman's measures to ensure that she secured the safety of herself and her family, as well as to stave off her master's advances and to try to mediate peace between herself and her mistress. She uses those understandings both in order to survive as a slave and later to incorporate it within her writing so that she can reach her Northern audiences with her abolitionist viewpoint. Toward the end of the text, Jacobs even comments on the differing environments between the South and England, comparing the conditions of the English poor with those of the slaves. Ultimately, Jacobs submits that living in poverty as a free person would still provide better living conditions than those of the slaves in the American South. For Jacobs, as well as other slave authors, even the non-physical oppressive and restricting environment associated with slavery is something of which they had to be aware so that they could inform their readers about how much of a need there was for abolition.

Much like Northup's, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* describes both the culture and the politics of what slavery was like. In his case, he originally lived in Maryland, a state which supposedly treated the slaves better than Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana did (a fact corroborated by Ball in his narrative), though he did not personally experience any kinder treatment from his masters (8, 14). As stated previously, Douglass writes about the physical work that he endured while he was in slavery, as well as the

other practices he observed from other slaves, keeping a detailed account of his own history as a slave and the crops and farming practices he saw from plantation to plantation. In this way, he exemplifies Buell's view of ecological writing, but Douglass also takes his narrative in different routes. Possessing a deep understanding of the environment in which he lived, Douglass had to navigate multiple factors as he petitioned for abolitionism. Like Jacobs, Douglass uses metaphors to impress upon his readers the tortures of slavery. However, what is particularly evident in his narrative is Douglass's use of identifying natural locations and the emotional effects they had on him. For example, Douglass notes that the plantation is more than a physical location, writing that it was instead a window with which one could "witness [Mr. Severe's] cruelty and profanity" (24). In the first chapter of his narrative, the plantation serves as a backdrop upon which a young Douglass observes his master beating Douglass's aunt. He writes that this scene "was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass" (20). He uses a metaphor of hell, implying otherworldly anguish, to describe the dangerous and inhumane kind of environment for slaves that worked on plantations. Of course, Douglass's commentary does not only serve on an emotional level—the physical violence in this area reveals the elevated risk of this environment, and the slaves on this plantation are at risk not only emotionally (perhaps even spiritually) but also physically.

Along with the plantation fields, Douglass identifies the woods as a place of secrecy for slaves. The forests provided a place in which slaves could sing their work songs. While he notes that people might perceive the songs as positive ones, Douglass contends that they instead reveal the ruinous effects of slavery and writes,

If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods,

and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul,—and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because “there is no flesh in his obdurate heart.” (26)

In his view, then, Douglass sees the woods, a physical and “natural” location, as a means by which other people could see and hear how damaging slavery was for the slaves. But even when he is traveling through the woods in order to avoid being seen, Douglass is at the mercy of the forest floor, which cuts his feet and further endangers him because of his insufficient food supply (66-67). Despite these potential harms, however, Douglass still seems to view the woods as a necessary evil, one that constantly reminds him of his condition but provides him a hiding place.

In contrast, Douglass’s observations of the Chesapeake Bay reflect a means to freedom, physical safety, despite the seemingly obvious physical threat of the water. When he envisions himself and other slaves trying to escape, most of the fears Douglass fosters are those of nature acting against him—being without food, drowning, being hunted, and being attacked by animals—but he is most concerned with getting caught by slave owners (77-78). Though he cannot swim, and though water poses danger to him, he recognizes symbolic and physical freedom is beyond the Chesapeake Bay. In this instance, *freedom* itself is an actual location, as the North is on the other side of the bay. At this point in the text, Douglass presents no description of the agrarian ideal that Smith describes in her analyses of African American ecoliterature, nor does he reflect a desire to facilitate a beneficial relationship with the environment, as Ruffin, through Buell’s description of ecological literature, would require. However, Douglass is able to position himself in a relationship to the environment. To Douglass, the North represents both political and physical safety. And the South, the environment with forests that paradoxically hides slaves and the violence enacted against slaves, the area which

houses a body of water that can both save and kill Douglass on his route to freedom, is a “hell” to him. He feels intellectually and physically oppressed in the South, trapped “in the hottest hell of unending slavery,” and it is only through fleeing this environment that he feels as if he can reclaim an identity as a human that has been denied him (63). Even without his mentioning much about the agriculture and physical interactions with the Southern landscape, Douglass is still able to define his understandings about the ways in which he, as a disadvantaged minority in America, was forced into unequal and dependent relationships with other organisms, both human and nonhuman, that acted against him. His narrative reveals an understanding of ecology, of this “overlapping experience of relationships,” because he writes about the culture of the environment in which he lived (Ruffin 18).

Solomon Northup in *Twelve Years a Slave* takes great care to design a metaphorical description of the agriculture of cotton planting and how it looks on a plantation. Regarding the fields, Northup writes, “There are few sights more pleasant to the eye, than a wide cotton field when it is in the bloom. It presents an appearance of purity, like an immaculate expanse of light, new-fallen snow” (109). Though picking cotton is a tremendously difficult experience for him, Northup praises the beauty of the cotton crops. As seen by Buell’s expectations regarding the qualities of ecological writing, Northup’s comments seem to adhere to accepted examples of this literature—Northup correlates agricultural landscapes with imageries of purity. He recognizes that his position as a slave prevents him from freely appreciating the beauty of the environment; however, he does not use this appreciation to express a desire to protect the landscape, as he is understandably more concerned about his own rights as a human than those of the environment.

Kimberly Smith’s essay includes Northup’s narrative in her own examples of slave-written ecoliterature because he writes about the “agrarian virtue” that she believes connects him to the

Southern environment more than anything else he could have done (318). Smith suggests that Northup's "ambivalence" toward agricultural work, his knowledge in the subject and coinciding dislike for the actual practice, demonstrates how his narrative "captures some of the complexity of African Americans' relationship to the American landscape" (319). Smith begins to draw a link between Northup's physical interactions with the environment (farming) and the political stakes in his narrative, but she does not consider his other experiences within nature as part of his contribution to the ecoliterary genre. Her analyses of the agrarian ideal within Northup's narrative is thorough, but analyzing Northup's—and other narrative authors'—texts using Latour's theoretical work on ecological writing would allow us to recognize the interconnectedness of a slave author's relationship to the natural world with other aspects of their lives, such as emotional responses, political ties, and personal relationships.

Northup uses symbolism and imagery about the environment to describe his emotional state. As an observer, he sometimes simply explains his experiences within nature to describe how the outside world acts against him, to present an ecoliterary text. As a writer familiar with popular literary conventions, Northup also uses symbolism and metaphors to appeal to the sympathies of his audience. A born-Northerner, he is understandably familiar only with the scenery of the North; because of this fact, he describes what he sees as he is leaving Washington in relation to what he values from the Northern environment. He writes, "It was a very pleasant morning. The fields along the river were covered with verdure, far in advance of what I had been accustomed to see at that season of the year" (29). While Northup appreciates the aesthetic of this place, he positions his description to juxtapose the beauty of this area with the tragic realization that he is now enslaved. In this same description, he observes the birds in Washington and continues, "The happy birds—I envied them. I wished for wings like them, that I might

cleave the air to where my birdlings waited vainly for their father's coming, in the cooler region of the North" (29). Northup compares himself and his children to these animals in order to invoke an emotional response from readers, and he relates freedom to animals and to the North in general. Further on, he uses his knowledge of the nature about the North to make a comparison to what he sees in the South. Ford's plantation around Pine Woods reminds Northup that the Southern scenery and the animals are much larger and wilder than what he is used to in the North (53-54). Northup's observations reveal a personal connection he makes between the environment and his conditions. The descriptions he provides about Ford's plantation—that "[t]he space was entirely surrounded by woods, and covered with a carpet of rich, rank verdure," that "[i]t was a quiet, lonely, pleasant place—literally a green spot in the wilderness"—identifies the positive physical qualities of Ford's plantation in relation to the fact that Ford was the only master Northup does not completely condemn in his narrative (55).

While Northup does use his preexisting knowledge about the North to demonstrate some ways in which he establishes his relationship with the Southern environment, it is beneficial to examine other ways he accomplishes this task. Throughout his narrative, Northup calls upon his experiences as a slave and as a freeman to create a negative comparison to what is happening to the Southern environment. By doing so, he appears to adhere to the traditional literary qualities of ecological writing. In other parts of the text, however, Northup brings attention to the ways in which nature oppressed him, rather than use his narrative to explain why he is not interested in farming. A particularly harrowing example, perhaps more telling about the dangers of this environment than his frequent descriptions about agricultural practices on the plantation, comes when Tibeats and his men attempt to lynch Northup. Tied up outside in the Southern heat, Northup recounts how he was affected by the sun and by the environment he could see. He

agonizes under the heat but describes his situation in conversation with that of the rest of the environment. He writes, “[The sun’s] hot rays scorched the ground. The earth almost blistered the foot that stood upon it” (70). By injuring one natural medium, and literally, by transferring heat from the sun to the ground, another similarly injures Northup. He recounts his jealousy over the sight of the shaded area of the plantation, again writing about his experiences in relation to a natural environment. Northup’s desire for relief is evident when he writes, “Over the fence . . . the peach trees cast their cool, delicious shadows on the grass. I would gladly have given a long year of service to have been enabled to exchange the heated oven . . . for a seat beneath the branches” (70). His use of positive and enticing imagery, such as "cool" and "delicious," while admitting his metaphorical willingness to perform extra labor (something that has been illegally forced upon him) in order to enter an environment to which he has been denied, reveals the severity of Northup’s physical situation. The natural world causes Northup such intense pain that he would have agreed to be a slave longer, a social contract which would also bring him physical and mental abuse, for a moment of relief. This scene, then, provides a clear example of the internal and external effects the natural world had on a slave. Though Northup does not explicitly mention a relationship he shares or wishes to share with the Southern environment, he is nonetheless connected to this environment, as the natural world continues to act upon him and ultimately influence his thoughts.

Conclusion

As Latour insists, it is impossible for a society to exist free of politics and purely inundated with nature because a society built using nature already exists. African American slave ecocritics such as George Moses Horton, Charles Ball, and Henry Bibb are no less ecological writers if we expand the qualifications of considering pieces as ecoliterature; the difference is

that we would be able to include more perspectives from other slave's experiences as they interacted within different social spheres. To be able to expand the field to include politically motivated works, as well as narratives that involve discussions about relationships between slaves and other humans, would be to allow readers and researchers alike to understand ecological relationships from a point of view that does not necessarily revolve around agricultural practices.

Jacobs, Douglass, and Northup present African American ecoliterature in a different manner than previously accepted examples of this genre. Their narratives do not operate identically—for example, Jacobs illuminates the gender-based and race-based oppression she endures as a slave woman, while Northup and Douglass only reference this situation in small sections of their respective texts. However, these authors do reveal different ways in which narrative authors physically experienced nature, thus demonstrating a relationship, whether explicitly acknowledged by the authors or not, with nature. They present to this study a different understanding of how African Americans have been denied developing and fostering positive relationships with the natural world. While they do not state explicitly that they cannot love their environment in the way free people could, their experiences within nature reveal this truth—slaves had to fear the environment for safety. Harriet Jacobs could not travel through a forest without being attacked by animals. Douglass initially cannot leave the plantation without fear of drowning. The construct of slavery, and the environment in which slavery operates, is a “hell” to him (20, 63). Northup's punishment of being forced to stand outside in the heat, directly following a lynching attempt, is so severe that he feels as if another year of slavery would have been more endurable than the physical environment he is in now. Unable to exist in a positive and mutually beneficial relationship with the natural world, these authors had to express a

different though not unimportant relationship with nature, one that highlights the physical risks the environment posed to slaves.

These narratives, which some scholars argue are solely driven by a political motive, also demonstrate that the authors' encounters with nature directly stem from their statuses as slaves. Without slavery, they would not have been taught to fear the environment in such ways and perhaps would have had the opportunity to navigate other relationships with the natural world. In the occasions that the slaves were able to use nature to benefit their needs, seen in the cases of medicine women and personal farming methods, their experiences still stemmed from the acknowledgment that they were lived in oppressive environments that forced them to use nature to survive. At no point could these authors separate their experiences as a slave from their experiences in nature, nor could they present their narratives in manners which excluded one experience in favor of the other. These intertwined experiences, then, shaped these authors' understandings of the ways in which they existed within their environments.

One of the problems of previous scholars' solely using Buell's criteria for ecological writing to separate nature writing from political writing is, as Latour insists, that it "*use[s] nature to abort politics*" (19). This thinking is especially dangerous in the conversation of the slave narratives as early African American ecoliterature—with such a small sample of foundational work, the genre itself faces an incomplete picture. Along with contributing to the collection of ecoliterature and ecocriticism, slave narratives could benefit from this distinction by allowing audiences to view the authors' experiences within the environment in a different manner. These experiences affected how they approached the writing of their narratives, as seen by the use of natural imagery and metaphors within these works, as well as descriptions of physical encounters within nature. While the texts succeeded in their efforts to promote abolitionist sentiments and

movements in the North, modern readers have the ability to view these works neither as exclusively political literature nor exclusively nature literature. Intense farming within the slavery system, as Smith notes, influenced how former slaves approached the natural landscape in the future. The effects of slavery, both Smith and Ruffin contend, created situations in which African Americans felt unable to develop strong, positive relationships with the environment (Smith 318, Ruffin 1). These examples reveal both the political effects of plantation life in the South and the ecological effects this lifestyle had on African Americans and their approach to environmental matters. Reading book-length narratives as ecological texts as well as political texts at the same time, then, points readers to situations in which they can see how responses to and effects of slavery affected how African Americans identified—or were denied—relationships to the natural world.

Ruffin's book points to the truth that African Americans face exclusion from conversations about ecological relationships due to the limited amount of literature that details this group's experiences within nature. As she says, "[A]s long as Africans have been Americans, they have had no entitlement to speak for or about nature" (1). Excluding slave narratives from the genre, then, would be disadvantageous in a literary sense, not only to scholars considering the body of early African American ecoliterature, but also to those who study the progression of the literature within the genre. By including these classic, book-length narratives into the early examples of African American ecoliterature, scholars have the ability to recognize the different manners in which slaves defined their ecological relationships. Recognizing that ecological writing does not have to include one's expressed desire to protect the environment, or that ecological writing could be as straightforward as describing how nature and other groups

operated together and separately within an oppressive environment, allows researchers to understand the progression of African Americans' definition of ecological relationships.

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