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Review of *Environmental Knowledge, Race, and African American Literature* by Matthias Klestil, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 307 pp. ISBN: 978-3-030-82102-9

Andrew C. Isenberg observed that “since 1988 there has been a burgeoning of subfields of environmental studies, each with its own methodologies and disciplinary perspectives” (5). Nowadays, more than ever, literary studies look at how works of literature represent and intersect with various notions connected with the environment. Environmental humanities is an ever-growing field and Matthias Klestil adds to it with his book *Environmental Knowledge, Race, and African American Literature*, which was published in 2023 by Palgrave Macmillan in their series “Literatures, Cultures, and the Environment.”

Researchers have studied the link between environmental knowledge and African Americans prior to Klestil’s publication. For example, Thomas G. Andrews points out that not only Mart Stewart but also “[s]everal other scholars have ... traced enduring connections between African Americans’ environmental knowledge and their struggles to create and preserve spaces of autonomy and resistance” (434). However, numerous scholars focused on historical perspectives. As Klestil focuses on (fiction and non-fiction) literature, his examination is a significant contribution to the intersection of ecocriticism and African American literary studies.

The book comprises an extensive introduction, parts I and II, each consisting of three chapters, and conclusions. The introduction (which is also chapter 1) begins with the analysis of Frederick Douglass’s writing, a choice that could confuse some of the readers as Klestil does not provide any context for the analysis before he examines the text; thus, readers are left in the dark as to the goal of the presented observations. Nevertheless, the exploration of Douglass’s encounter with Niagara Falls illustrates the interweaving of personal experience with broader ecological concerns and, thus, showcases the importance of race and historical

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trauma in shaping environmental consciousness. The introduction opens the book by discussing the manner in which African American literature has been historically excluded from mainstream ecocriticism. The author challenges the notion that the African American literary tradition lacks environmental engagement, and he illustrates that Black American authors have expressed a form of environmental knowledge that was often fundamentally shaped by racial oppression and history. Klestil frames the book's methodology around ecocriticism, Foucauldian environmental knowledge, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s concept of "signifyin(g)," and African American literary theory. The aims and the uniqueness of the approach are stated and restated multiple times throughout the introduction, which seems excessive and can lead the reader to question why the author feels the need to constantly reestablish the fact that his research differs from other publications: should it not be the case that readers arrive at their own conclusions and are not such insistently guided towards them by the author?

Chapter 2 (first in Part I: "Foundations—Antebellum African American Environmental Knowledge") conceptualizes the Underground Railroad as a literary heterotopia. This chapter focuses on analyzing texts by Solomon Bayley, James Curry, Henry Bibb, Henry Box Brown, John Brown, and Frederick Douglass. The author argues that the Underground Railroad can be perceived not only as a literal escape route but also as a symbolic space that allowed African Americans to reclaim their agency over nature. The presented arguments are clear and provide new insight into the selected texts; however, the author makes claims without providing the reader with textual evidence. The conducted analysis seems to be based only on one or two quotes from each of the texts, thus making it not as convincing as it could be if the author provided further context and multiple quotations supporting his claims. Although intriguing, the assertions are not sufficiently supported by quotes and excerpts from the primary sources; therefore, this may suggest to the reader that the scale on which nature plays a role in the narratives is exaggerated. Similar problem is visible in the following chapters in part I, but the lack of textual evidence seems to be the most jarring in chapter 2. In chapter 3, the author turns to the pastoral mode, introduces the concept of a "strategic pastoral," and explores visual regimes in the antebellum United States by examining fugitive slave narratives, mainly by Frederick Douglass and Henry Box Brown. Klestil shows how African American self-representation shifted from objective to subjective vision in the 19th century. Chapter 4 focuses on African American pamphleteers such as David Walker, Hosea Easton, John Lewis, and William Whipper, who in their works argued against the pseudo-scientific racialization of the Black body. The author examines how the pamphleteers countered the narrative of white scientists who claimed the inferiority of Black Americans and that they were inherently suited to their role as laborers and lacked the qualities necessary for intellectual work. Klestil presents the rhetorical strategies of "dissecting and environmentalizing" the Black body (dismantling racist scientific arguments by showing that the bodily differences were superficial) and reinterpreting "nature" (redefining the natural world as a space of equality not based on racial hierarchy) used by the pamphlet writers.

Part II “Transformations—African American Environmental Knowledge from Reconstruction to Modernity” begins with chapter 5. Klestil examines post-Emancipation African American texts, particularly the journals of Charlotte L. Forten and William Wells Brown’s *My Southern Home* (1880). Chapter 5 explores how Forten presents nature as a multilayered refuge and explores themes of home and education in its context. Klestil observes that although “*My Southern Home* can be read as a negotiation of the same major themes found in Forten’s writings[,] [it] is at the same time a political manifesto that lays out Brown’s vision for a post-Emancipation literary engagement with the slavery-past” (193-194). The author examines how Brown presents the postbellum South as a site of oppression as well as opportunity and shows the ways in which African Americans renegotiated their relationship to land. Chapter 6 provides an analysis of Booker T. Washington’s autobiographies: *Up from Slavery* (1901) and *Working with the Hands* (1904) in relation to pastoral and georgic traditions. Klestil argues that Washington’s vision of Black progress required a transformed environmental knowledge. According to Klestil, Washington saw labor and land cultivation as key to racial uplift; he blended pastoral and georgic traditions in a manner that resonated with but also defied mainstream environmental discourse. Chapter 7 examines Charles Chesnutt’s Uncle Julius stories, which, as the analysis illustrates, subvert dominant environmental narratives by reinterpreting environmental and racial politics through trickster figures and illustrating Black ingenuity in engaging with land and nature despite systemic oppression. Klestil also employs Foucauldian analysis to demonstrate the ways in which Chesnutt’s stories critique racialized management of bodies and landscapes. The concluding section of the book (chapter 8) presents a reflective analysis on how assumptions about Black engagement with nature persist in public discourse by discussing Barack Obama’s 2009 visit to Yellowstone as a case study. The author advocates for a broader, more inclusive framework in which “African American studies and ecocriticism ... interlink more thoroughly” (287).

One of the book’s strengths lies in its interdisciplinary approach. Klestil skillfully implements theories from environmental studies, literary criticism, and cultural studies to create a portrayal of how environmental themes are engaged with and responded to in African American literature. His examination draws on a rich tapestry of literary works that provides a comprehensive overview highlighting the evolution of environmental discourse in African American texts. However, occasionally, the breadth of the inquiry may overshadow its depth. Even though Klestil references a vast array of texts, the analysis seems to only skim the surface. Thus, a more limited selection of texts could have yielded a more in-depth exploration showcasing their environmental and racial dimensions. The formatting and structure of the book could also be improved. Despite the fact that chapters are thematically organized and every section of the book reflects the main theme of environmental knowledge, transitions between sections sometimes feel abrupt, which leads to a disjointed reading experience. The thoroughness of the author’s research is undeniable; the gathered bibliography and extensive notes not only strengthen the arguments Klestil makes but also provide a rich avenue for further explorations into the presented notions. However, the decision to situate separate bibliographies after each of the chapters could be questioned.

On the one hand, readers easily can find sources the author referred to in the specific chapter, but on the other, some of the bibliographic entries are repeated in multiple bibliographies thus creating an impression of a more extensive list of sources than would be listed if the book had only one bibliography. Moreover, some footnotes provide further explanations and expand the discussed idea, thus are vital to the argumentation the author presents in the main text and make it more persuasive; therefore, they would be advantageous there and not as a footnote (for example, footnotes number 21 and 22 in chapter 2 or footnote number 9 in chapter 3). The use of a wide range of sources is commendable; however, there are instances where the attribution of quotes to their respective sources lacks clarity. One of the more notable examples of the problematic manner of quoting is page 183, where the author references the work (or works—it is unclear) of Charlotte L. Forten. Although the bibliography for chapter 5 contains multiple works by her, on page 183, the author provides quotes without distinguishing which text he refers to.

Matthias Klestil's *Environmental Knowledge, Race, and African American Literature* is a significant contribution to African American literary criticism. The book illuminates the important link between race, literature, and environmental thought, which can encourage scholars to reconsider narratives surrounding race and nature. While the text undoubtedly opens new avenues of inquiry into African American literature, areas remain for further exploration and refinement. By deepening the engagement with the explored texts, Klestil's work could serve as an even more impactful resource concerning the complex interrelations between race and environmental issues for scholars and students alike.

Works Cited

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Magdalena Łapińska holds a PhD in Literature. She is an Assistant at the University of Białystok, Poland, where she teaches at the Faculty of Philology. Her publications oscillate around the concepts of identity, memory, and affect represented in African American prose and the representation of racial issues in American fantasy literature.