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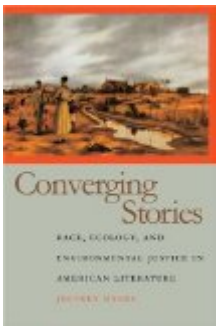
Jeffrey Myers. *Converging Stories: Race, Ecology, and Environmental Justice in American Literature.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005. 188 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8203-2744-0.



Reviewed by Elizabeth D. Blum

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Jeffrey Myers adds to the fields of environmental history and literary ecocriticism with *Converging Stories: Race, Ecology, and Environmental Justice in American Literature*. Lamenting the lack of pre-twentieth century sources on environmental thought in literature, Myers focuses on several sources to trace the connection of ideas of the relationship between nature and race. He posits that these ideas are intimately connected through white European physiphobia, which Myers defines as the "fear of the threat of erasure by the primacy of the natural world" (p. 16). Because of this fear, Myers maintains, whites work "to maintain the separation and primacy of the white self by domination and mastery of the Other--human and nonhuman--without which its power and attendant unearned privilege could not exist" (p. 16). However, several authors resisted this tendency and developed alternative views of nature and race.

Myers first turns to Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*(1785), placing the Founding Father's work at the center of white European thought about the domination of both race and nature. *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Myers states, "offers a continent-wide vision of ecological and racial hegemony, whereby all elements of the natural world--land, waters, trees, beaver, bison, and people--will be under the control and utilization of an expanding, increasingly industrial Anglo-American Empire" (p. 25). Myers effectively links Jefferson's commodification of nature to his racist views of both Native Americans and African Americans. Jefferson becomes, in Myers's work, the role model for white European attempts to dominate both the natural world and other humans.

The book then turns to several authors with differing views of nature and race. In contrast to Jefferson, Henry David Thoreau adopted a more ecocentric view of nature and race through his collection of works. Myers presents Thoreau as the original environmental justice advocate, arguing that "Thoreau's ecological consciousness deeply informs his commitment to social justice" (p. 51). Rather than see Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) or *The Maine Woods* (1864) as separate and distinct from his social justice writings like "Slavery

in Massachusetts" (1854), Myers effectively links these two strands of Thoreau's body of work. He states that Thoreau, "in refusing to exploit nature, ... refuses to exploit other human beings as well" (p. 51).

Although Myers interestingly locates the origin of environmental justice thought with a white European, several writers of color also resisted the white European view of nature and race. Myers examines (among others) Charles W. Chesnutt's ***The Conjure Woman*** (1899) and Zitkala-Sa's ***Old Indian Legends*** (1901). Both Chestnutt and Zitkala-Sa present African American and Native American folktales, legends, or stories to relate the treatment of the natural world to the treatment of all humans. The stories by Chestnutt often equate blacks with trees or other creatures, and demonstrate African American kinship with nature. Myers sees ***The Conjure Woman*** as demonstrating "Chesnutt's awareness of how the construction of the Other in Euroamerican culture is concomitantly and equally injurious to the natural world and people of color ... It is also a call for the conservation of undeveloped land and wildlife in the South at a time when the region was beginning an acute phase of natural resource exploitation" (pp. 88-89). Zitkala-Sa's Native American stories, Myers illustrates, discuss "a number of themes ... a sense of human responsibility to maintain ecological sustainability, the equal importance of other, nonhuman beings, and the necessity of not hoarding the gifts that the natural world offers" (p. 123). Zitkala-Sa and Chestnutt become models for a new, social justice-oriented version of viewing the world. Historians will benefit from a deeper examination of more of these writers of color to determine overall trends and the scope of these ideas.

One of the strongest points of the book is Myers's ability to use an author's work holistically, rather than bifurcate elements into separate categories. For example, when Myers examines Thoreau's work, he blends the social justice aspects with the environmental ideas. Most authors, and most environmental historians, have chosen to either see the two themes as distinct and only deal with one side or the other. Myers, however, discusses Thoreau's visits to the Maine woods from 1846-57, demonstrating that Thoreau's views of nature changed to a more ecological view, and also that his views of Native Americans in the area changed concurrently to an "acceptance, even an affirmation, of cultural difference" (p. 75). This time period also witnessed Thoreau's growing aversion to slavery, his participation in the Underground Railroad, and his night in jail for refusing to pay his taxes. Myers notes that "the seeming separation in Thoreau's writings ... looks more like two streams converging into a deep, broad river" (85).

The book also shows historians and other scholars the power of using alternative sources, particularly popular culture, as a way of mining the past. Most of the literature of the history of the environmental justice movement has focused on the post-1980 period. Several works redress this chronological gap, yet more needs to be done to fill in the gaps.[1] Myers notifies historians that literature can provide an extremely useful link to the pulse of a time period. In addition, the book suggests some extremely fruitful avenues for cross-disciplinary work between historians and literary critics.

Converging Stories, despite its many strong points, also demonstrates several weaknesses, especially when viewed from the perspective of environmental history. For historical background, Myers relies almost exclusively on Robert Bullard and his theory that minorities "are at greater risk from environmental degradation than are working class whites, even after taking class into account" (p. 13). In seeing race as the ultimate cause of environmental injustice, Myers oversimplifies the picture historically to a whites versus nonwhites conflict. The work presents all whites (with the exception of Henry David Thoreau) as de-

structive, domineering, and controlling over non-whites and the environment, while portraying all African Americans or Native Americans as having beneficial, legitimate, sustainable views of nature and its relationship with ethnicity. Myers seems intent on demonstrating a dichotomy between "physiophobic" whites and "ecocentric" minorities when such a split was hardly so simple. Many environmental historians have begun to develop a far more complicated picture of environmental justice, incorporating not only variations within ethnicities, cultures, economic conditions, regions, and gender, but also class differences.

In a related vein, although Myers repeatedly lists the environmental degradation wrought by whites throughout the time period he discusses, he neglects some of the reform efforts by whites or minorities concurrent to the literature. For example, in his discussion of both Chestnutt and Zitkala-Sa, he notes the destruction of the Great Plains ecosystem, the elimination of the grey wolf, bison, passenger pigeon and heath hen, as well as the series of wars against Native Americans, and the increase in lynchings and violence against African Americans. After a litany of white failings, Myers fails to mention the numerous environmental crusades during the Progressive Era to limit smoke and noise pollution, improve sanitation and health conditions, and protect wildlife and nature. In other words, Myers fails to place the views of Chestnutt and Zitkala-Sa within the context of other Progressive Era environmental reform. A lesser degree of contrast develops when comparing Myers's subjects to Progressive Era activists than comparing them to Jefferson, for example.

Another omission in the work stems from Myers's neglect of gender issues. Certainly, a book review should not criticize an author for themes outside the intended scope of the work, and Myers did not list "gender" within his title. However, the theme of gender has become a pervasive one within environmental justice. Activists praise the inclusiveness of women within the movement just as they do the inclusiveness of people of color. In fact, the pervasiveness of women has often been cited as a reason for the health-centered language of the movement. The material certainly provides ample fodder for gendered analysis. For example, Myers attributes Zitkala-Sa's writing in a style for children as more acceptable because of the "racist equating of the 'savage mind' with the 'childlike mind'" of Native Americans (p. 123). Yet, for a woman to write a book around the turn of the twentieth century using a children's format would have also made it more acceptable and less threatening to men.

To summarize, Myers's *Converging Stories* is a powerful addition to the history of environmental justice. He vividly demonstrates the importance of using popular culture sources to examine the past, revealing several instances of authors linking the degradation of race and nature almost one hundred years prior to the beginning of the environmental justice movement. The work serves as a starting point. Historians need to add to the literature reviewed to determine trends, incorporate the ideas into a historical framework and context, and certainly add the concept of gender to complicate Myer's picture into a valuable historical account.

Note

[1]. For some recent additions in the history of environmental justice, see, Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll, eds., *'To Love the Wind and the Rain': African Americans and Environmental History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006); Sylvia Hood Washington, *Packing Them In: An Archeology of Environmental Racism in Chicago, 1865-1954* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005); and Kimberly Smith, *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

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