

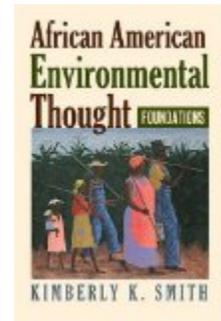
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kimberly K. Smith. *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007. xii + 257 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1516-2.

Reviewed by Fred MacVaugh (Department of English, University of Nebraska at Omaha Slavery)

Published on H-Environment (December, 2007)



Racism, and Environmental Thought: Recognizing and Recovering a Long Overlooked Legacy

On January 22, 2001, the *New Yorker* published “Sowers and Reapers: The Unquiet World of a Flower Bed” by the African American author and gardener Jamaica Kincaid. Her essay openly challenged the American practice of preserving colonial and other gardens as monuments, memorials, and sanctuaries. More to the point, Kincaid, in general, challenged the conventional meaning of gardens. In particular, she argued that Middleton Place in South Carolina did not represent for African Americans what it represented for white Americans—a place of solitude and solemn reflection. Instead, because its world famous gardens had been built and maintained by enslaved Africans, Middleton Place and other similarly preserved gardens signified slavery, oppression, and inequality for black Americans. Although Kimberly K. Smith’s *African American Environmental Thought* never mentions Kincaid’s essay, the monograph, which Smith began working on in 2001, is one of only a recent few (and the first book-length work by a single author) to explore the subject Kincaid so powerfully brought to public attention: slavery’s legacy in creating for African Americans an entirely different relationship to the land and environment than exists for white Americans, particularly elite whites. The effects of this legacy, Smith claims, are still very much in evidence today in the African American community’s absence from widespread participation in environmental preservation efforts and the environmental justice movement.

Smith’s objective is ambitious—far too ambitious, she admits, for more than a “general overview” (p. 192)—

namely, to uncover the origins or “ideological roots” and subsequent manifestations of African American environmental thought “as they evolved from the abolition movement through the Harlem Renaissance period” (p. 3). Smith argues that “natural beauty” and other environmental themes were not uncommon in black discourse, but that black writers tended to discuss natural beauty in the context of home and garden rather than wilderness like the elite white Americans who shaped the conservation, preservation, and urban reform movements (p. 91). Smith insists further that the rich tradition of environmental thought produced by African American theorists and writers is local (that is, related to African Americans’ desire to own their own land) and tied to civil rights (that is, related to their struggle for equality). That tradition “developed primarily in response to two problems”: slavery and racial oppression that “put black Americans into a conflicted relationship to the land—by coercing their labor, restricting their ability to own land, and impairing their ability to interpret the landscape”; and “scientific racism ... that insisted blacks, as a race, had virtually no capacity for free creative action” (pp. 7-8). In *African American Environmental Thought*, Smith analyzes the origins and effects of these two particular “problems.”

Smith, a legal scholar and an associate professor of political science at Carleton College, asserts that scholars have unacknowledged and overlooked African American environmental thought because the conventional definition of environmental thought—preserving wilderness, “maintaining a viable ecosystem,” and evidencing “eco-

centric values”—has been “too narrow” in scope to permit the inclusion of African American voices in the canon of American nature writing (p. 3). To open a space for and introduce these African American voices into that canon, Smith redefines environmental thought as “a set of ideas concerning the relationship between humans and the natural environment, including the norms that ought to govern that relationship” (p.3). Armed with this broadened definition, Smith then analyzes the “elite discourse” of nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American “political and intellectual leaders in the black community,” such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Alain Locke—“the canonical black writers,” as Smith refers to them (p. 6). Their work has been excluded because they wrote about the environment from perspectives and for reasons related to issues of oppression, freedom, and equality rather than conventional (that is, white American) environmental concerns.

Each of the chronologically arranged chapters focuses on a discrete period during which specific environmental perspectives, modes of thought, and/or practices formed and were revealed in slave narratives, literature, and other elite black discourse. In the first chapter, for example, Smith focuses on slavery in “the southeastern plantation culture—the Old South—as it had developed by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,” and on the conflicted, unhealthy, and often harmful agricultural practices and relationships with the environment that slavery produced (p.18). In the second chapter, Smith analyzes the antebellum period and the emergent view among blacks that freedom and free labor could promote good stewardship, while in the third chapter, she turns her attention to the postwar and reconstruction periods, when black environmental thought diverged from the environmentalism espoused and practiced by white progressives. The topic of the fourth chapter is scientific racism? “its effect on the thinking of black theorists, and its alienating effect with regard to blacks’ relationship to nature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The fifth chapter reveals the influence of ideas about art (primitivism and regionalism), philosophy (pragmatism), and anthropological theory (Boasian anthropology) on black perceptions of and relationships to the environment and how they are expressed in black folk culture and art. The final chapter explores how African American artists and theorists thought about and artistically portrayed community in urban environments and landscapes, such as Harlem, which was simultaneously perceived as a homeland (as a place of safety, refuge, and community) and as a jungle (as a place of danger,

vice, and oppression). Smith’s conclusion recapitulates her theory of African American environmental thought; discusses its relevance, strengths, and weaknesses; and poses questions for “further empirical investigation” (p. 192).

In the book’s later chapters, there are points where Smith’s analysis strays widely from the avowed purpose of the book, so much so, in fact, that the reader is likely to lose sight of her objective and see her argument as forced when she does return to it, sometimes briefly. However, readers need to keep Smith’s purpose in mind. Smith is identifying and analyzing the origin and essence of African American environmental thought (as she, a Caucasian, perceives it). Simultaneously, she attempts to formulate and give definition to a theoretical framework designed to help explain and interpret what blacks thought about the natural world and constructed environments, such as urban landscapes; when and why they thought the way they did; and how it affected black folk culture, individual and community identity, and blacks’ relationship to nature. The point is that Smith should be granted latitude to define and situate this theoretical framework, for to do so, she must address the intellectual milieu that influenced the black theorists whose writings are the basis for her theory. For example, although Smith’s extensive treatment and analysis of philosophy and art may appear off track, both are necessary to frame and elaborate on the origins and essence of environmental thought as defined and expressed by black theorists and writers who were, as Smith argues, adopting and adapting the language of the dominant culture to communicate to both white and black audiences, often with a different meaning intended for each audience (p. 5).

Although Smith extensively uses and references literature and literary studies to support the arguments she makes about African American environmental thought as it is expressed by black writers (for example, Charles Chesnutt and Richard Wright), she does not use (or even seem to be aware of) any prior work on the subject completed by ecocritics, such as Karla Armbruster, Michael Bennett, Lawrence Buell, Scott Hicks, and Kathleen R. Wallace.[1] Smith’s omission gives one familiar with the work pause, but in the end does not diminish the strength or value of her scholarly accomplishment, because she approaches the issue from the perspective of a political scientist, looks at many of the same sources as the ecocritics, and arrives at comparable conclusions. If anything, Smith’s work and theirs lend credibility to one another and in turn demonstrate “consilience” and the value of interdisciplinary scholarship.[2] This is further sus-

tained by Smith's reference to and use of recent scholarship in environmental history (a field closely allied with ecocriticism) that examines African Americans' historical relationship(s) to nature, including *"To Love the Wind and the Rain": African Americans and Environmental History* (2006), a collection of scholarly essays edited by Diane Glave and Mark Stoll.

The irrefutable strength of *African American Environmental Thought* is Smith's extensive use of primary sources—the works of black theorists and writers she discusses as well as of white writers and theorists who influenced them—for they give the essential substance and support to the theory Smith puts forward. In places, however, Smith relies too heavily on the words of these theorists and writers to carry her argument. The consequence is that her claim and the correlation she “sees,” for example, between art/artistic expression and individual/communal thought vis-à-vis the environment is obscure, especially in chapters 5 and 6. The few pages in chapter 6 that Smith devotes to analyzing Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* (1940), for example, is one of the few instances in either chapter where she brings together many of the strands of thought she has discussed and actually shows how they are connected and given expression in art (versus explained in the theoretical texts). Smith's book would have benefited enormously from more of this type of analysis and example, as well as from more explanation in her own words of her reading(s) and interpretation(s) of various theorists' ideas.

Lastly, although the book is rich with perceptive ideas and credible claims, Smith's evidentiary support for some of those claims is inadequate. In the conclusion, for instance, Smith states that “black environmental activism looks different from our usual picture of mainstream environmental politics; it has been aimed neither at preserving unique wilderness areas nor at resource conservation on a national scale. Instead, it has been local in scope and focused on access to open space and public services, pollution abatement, and local public health issues” (p. 188). The evidence and explanation provided in the book indubitably sustain the claim in the first sentence. Until the conclusion, however, very little, if any, evidence supports the claim that “black environmental activism” has “focused on access to open space and public services, pollution abatement, and local public health

issues.” In fact, contrary to the best practices in historical and literary scholarship (but perhaps consistent with the structure and presentation of legal arguments and scholarship), what evidence Smith provides in support of this latter claim is not given until the conclusion. Smith assumes that her readers know enough already about environmental justice to understand how her theory of African American environmental thought is evidence enough to validate the claim.

Despite these weaknesses produced as much by overambition as by writing style (at times inconsistent and evidencing the author's legal background), *African American Environmental Thought* represents an exceptional example of interdisciplinary scholarship. The fact that Smith's work challenges the conventional conception and definition of environmental thought in productive ways speaks to the value and significance of her work—and, more important, of the work of the black theorists about whom she writes—and the contributions it makes to the larger endeavor of improving human understanding, healing, and reconciliation. The book is a highly readable (though at times dense), very informative, and immensely valuable contribution to the literatures of many disciplines. It is a solid foundation for informing substantive and theoretical discussions about the fundamental nature and significance of African American environmental thought and its effects on the current thinking in many professional and scholarly fields inside and outside the academy, including black studies, environmental justice, law, literary studies, politics, and public history.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Armbruster, eds., *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001); Michael Bennett, “Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery,” in *Beyond Nature Writing*, 195-210; Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001); and Scott Hicks, “W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Richard Wright: Toward an Ecocriticism of Color,” *Callaloo* 29 (2006): 202-222.

[2]. Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: Fred MacVaugh. Review of Smith, Kimberly K., *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. December, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13967>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.