In *Ruin and Resilience: Southern Literature and the Environment*, Daniel Spoth delves into the intricate topic of environmental narratives from the southern United States, tracing their evolution from post-Civil War literature and film to the insights of revered authors such as William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, Frances Welty, and Flannery O'Connor. His exploration culminates in modern perspectives that intertwine ecological tales with contemporary food studies, climate-centric fiction, and imaginative stories rooted in the South's unique milieu.

In the introduction, Spoth offers a compelling examination of Karen Russell’s "The Gondoliers" (2019), immersing readers in the remnants of a postapocalyptic Miami. This combination magnifies the transformative power of storytelling in environmental conversations, moving beyond mere data-driven arguments. Central to Spoth's thesis is the intricate relationship between ruin and resilience as key elements of southern environmental thought.

Spoth highlights the South's distinctive environmental narratives, woven with threads of despair and hope, and underscores its marginalized role in wider environmental discussions, given the region's complex historical and ecological narrative. Spotlighting the untapped potential of southern ecocriticism, Spoth showcases its capacity to offer novel insights into current environmental issues. Moreover, he advocates for a rethinking of the prevailing Romantic and preservationist views that dominate southern environmental literature.

Among the many highlights, Daniel Spoth delves into the nineteenth-century Florida expedition of John Muir. Muir anticipated discovering a lush, floral-rich Florida but was instead met with challenging environments like swamps, salt marshes, and less-than-friendly inhabitants. His experiences were further marred by a debilitating bout of malaria during his stay. Though Muir endeavored to see the beauty in his surroundings, notably praising elements such as palm trees, his
writings in *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* (1916) are tinged with discernible disappointment.

Spoth further emphasizes that the South, as portrayed by Muir, wasn’t the pristine Eden he had hoped for but was deeply shaped by human influence. The region’s history, stained by events like slavery and wars, seemed to overshadow its natural beauty. Muir’s quest for pristine landscapes was disillusioned by lands marred by industrialization and exploitation. Spoth also sheds light on the shift in perspective about landscapes during the industrial era in Europe. A once-dominant belief in untouched, pristine landscapes shifted toward an acceptance that human activity was destined to alter these terrains. The South, especially, became emblematic of this “paradise lost” narrative, a region tainted by human missteps.

Spoth’s analysis of Muir’s accounts provides a captivating glimpse into early environmentalists’ views of the South. It underscores the perpetual tension between untouched natural ideals and the realities of human intervention. The narrative calls for a deeper appreciation of landscapes, recognizing their intricate interplay with human history. The portrayal of the South as once a “paradise lost” serves as a poignant reflection on the evolving relationship between nature and people.

Chapter 2 delves into topics such as Robert Persons’s film *General Orders No. 9* (2009), a visually arresting exploration of the South’s environmental legacy. Using close-ups of assorted artifacts that evoke an archaeological ambiance, the film paints a picture of the South’s environmental heritage. It transitions from a nostalgic portrayal of the pre-industrial South to the bustling streets of Atlanta, ultimately merging the two worlds. Intertwoven with poetic narration, the film contrasts the pastoral allure of the old South with a more critical view of its burgeoning urban centers. By toggling between the past’s bucolic charm and the challenges of modernization, *General Orders No. 9* encapsulates the ongoing tension in the South between venerating its history and steering its future, highlighting the dual nature of nostalgia and progression.

In the third chapter of his book, Spoth offers a compelling dissection of a memorable scene from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) in which the protagonist’s encounter with a Harlem yam vendor becomes emblematic of identity and heritage. In this context, the yam stands out against the urban backdrop as a symbol of genuine connection to one’s beginnings. The profound use of a humble yam to drive home the narrative indicates the profound influence of everyday events in defining our self-awareness and our relation to our environment.

In the subsequent chapter, Spoth turns his attention to works by Zora Neale Hurston and William Faulkner, setting them alongside the contemporary HBO series *Treme* (2010-13). Literary works like Faulkner’s “Old Man” (1939) and Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) expose the South’s recurrent environmental and racial oversights. Spoth contends that southern literature does more than just celebrate nature’s beauty; it also throws light on humanity’s shortcomings. Therefore, southern literature, in its portrayal of natural calamities, encapsulates both the tragedy and the enduring spirit, capturing the South’s intricate dance with nature.

In the fifth chapter, Spoth dives into climate fiction, spotlighting the theme of resilience in a postapocalyptic South as exemplified by Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006). The narrative vividly paints the picture of a desolate world, where once-significant markers like the Rock City advertisement stand as mere remnants of a lost era. Such fragments, once tethered to human memories and importance, now echo the void of connection and significance. Spoth posits that the true calamity of environmental decay is not just in the tangible obliteration but in the eradication of human connection and the symbolic essence of places. *The Road* masterfully contrasts a stark present with a poignant past, suggesting that these devastated
landscapes transform into "nonplaces," void of human relevance. This exploration delves deeper than just portraying environmental decay; it captures the psychological and emotional ramifications in such a world, pushing readers to introspect on the essence of memories and the inherent worth of our surroundings.

Chapter 6, meanwhile, shifts the lens to "The Fantasy of Return in Postapocalyptic Southern Literature," drawing inspiration from Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" (1914). This poem elucidates the presence and necessity of boundaries, both tangible and abstract, with its protagonist contemplating the relevance of a wall, while a neighbor upholds its significance, claiming, "Good fences make good neighbors." This wall serves as an emblem of existential dilemmas and embodies the tug-of-war between modernity and inherent survival instincts. Spoth parallels this theme to the southern context, analyzing myriad barriers shaping its identity, from monumental Civil War structures delineating social tiers to invisible divides like racial and economic chasms. Southern environmentalist narratives frequently spotlight the erosion of these walls, symbolizing the drift from age-old norms toward the uncertain future. However, within southern literature, there is a fascinating dichotomy of views on these shifts—some mourn these breaches as irrevocable losses, while others see them as steps toward adaptability. Yet, certain literary works challenge both perceptions. Spoth's intricate dismantling of these walls, both physical and ideological, against the backdrop of the South's history and literature offers a profound insight.

In his concluding chapter, "Against Resilience," Spoth delves into the complexities of environmental narratives in the Anthropocene. He questions the constant emphasis on resilience, suggesting that accepting stories of ruin can stifle activism and foster a sense of inevitable defeat. Spoth points to James Watt's 1981 comments, which melded religion with a disregard for environmental care, an attitude that resonates in areas like the South with strong religious beliefs. This acceptance of ruin diminishes individual empowerment, leading to "environmental melancholia" as identified by Renée Lertzman, where unchecked despair results in inaction. As the climate crisis escalates, "eco-anxiety" emerges—a blend of overwhelming loss and incapacitating helplessness.

Addressing these feelings can mitigate their effects, but the root environmental challenges often appear insurmountable. Spoth underscores the role of narrative in shaping collective attitudes toward the environment, especially between storytelling, religious beliefs, and activism. Delving into southern environmental literature, Spoth both celebrates its rich heritage and offers fresh perspectives.
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