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Stefanie K. Dunning, *Black to Nature: Pastoral Return and African American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), 193 pp.

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In a 2019 *Edge Effects* podcast focused on the question, “What Is Land,” environmental justice scholar Dr. Monica White replies, “It’s a scene of a crime and a strategy of freedom and liberation” (Hennessy 4:52). White’s response sums up the argument of Stephanie Dunning’s new book, *Black to Nature: Pastoral Return in African American Culture*, which investigates how “Black people and nature are mutually othered” (95). Just as nature has been targeted for exploitation and abuse for centuries, so have Black people. Anti-Blackness and the destruction of the earth are the building blocks of Western civilization; they are how civil society “constitutes itself and operates” (Dunning 109). Though civil rights, equity programs, and diversity movements can temper the violence of white supremacy, the ongoing shooting deaths of Black adults and children and the aggressive destruction of the physical environment suggests, Dunning contends, that “civilization, in every iteration, is always the opposite of freedom” (Dunning n58 178). Focusing on twentieth and twentieth-first-century Black writers and artists, Dunning explores these ideas in texts that circumvent civil society’s toxic anti-Black and anti-nature ideas, signaling a “pastoral return” in African American culture.

Dunning begins with an analysis of primitivism, chattel slavery, and lynching as the primary causes of Black people’s alienation from nature as well as the stereotypes of Black people as “naturally” urban and environmentally indifferent. The bulk of the book, however, examines Black texts that “reclaim the natural world for the Black person via the abolition of civil society” (Dunning 23). Using Zen philosopher Thich Nhat Hanh’s concept of interbeing and African-centric nature-human entanglements, Dunning surmises that the “appearance [of nature] in Black texts is a gesture toward another world and another space of being” (20). Black art and culture have consistently responded to the lethal violence of the state by illustrating a bond between nature and Black people, despite civil society’s efforts to sever that connection. Dunning draws on poet Lucille Clifton’s assertion that the earth “is a black and living thing/ is a favorite child/of the universe” as an example of Black literary culture as a site of healing (6). In addition to Clifton’s poetry, African land-based cosmologies, and Zen philosophy, Dunning draws on Black feminism, Afro-pessimism, literary and film studies, and the author’s own reflections of personal nature-based experiences to illuminate the rich dimensions of Black ecological literary traditions (4).

In chapter one, the author explores Beyonce's visual album *Lemonade* (2016) and Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), showing how each portrays lavish images of Black women and girls enmeshed in nature. This visual strategy challenges white supremacist and patriarchal ideas of Black women's and girls' bodies as defective and excessive in civil society. While both *Lemonade* and *Daughters of the Dust* operate as resistant narratives, they also celebrate the beauty of Black women, girls, and communities, aligning them with water, light, sky, green space, and ancestors. By evoking "African-inflected-woman-centered existence," Dunning says both artists question assimilationist urban progress narratives, white Christianity, respectability politics, and the moral "uplift" of Black women (Dunning 42).

With a focus on Hurricane Katrina, chapter two compares Benh Zeitlin's film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), to Jessym Ward's novel, *Salvage the Bones* (2011). Dunning scrutinizes how each text addresses race, white supremacy, and Black children in the context of environmental catastrophe. Hushpuppy, the protagonist in *Beasts*, reproduces the familiar trope of the mythical, precarious Black girl. With no specific community or support, Hushpuppy's character is an emblem of environmental degradation symbolized by the spectacle of Black suffering (Dunning 64). Though Ward's Black girl character, Esch, also inhabits a world of anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and environmental injustice, her life is replete with nurturing ties to siblings/family, nature, animals, and community. While Hushpuppy is a static, ahistorical figure, Esch is a dynamic and evolving character who grows and changes in relation to other children, history, and nature.

Organized around Ana DuVernay's television series *Queen Sugar* (2016) and Kaitlyn Greenidge's novel *We Love You, Charlie Freeman* (2016), chapter three investigates how Western concepts of land ownership, private property, and "the self/the human" are problematic categories for achieving Black freedom. *Queen Sugar* suggests this by subtly tracing a clash between the African Indigenous idea of "the earth as a communal place, rather than a 'thing' that can be owned" and the American dream of endless capital accumulation (Dunning 101; 98). Dunning also discerns the racial underpinnings of Western culture's human/animal dichotomy and the way anti-Blackness aligns Black people with apes and monkeys. Greenidge's novel focuses on a Black family who participate in a scientific experiment in which they teach a chimpanzee sign language, symbolizing the underlying racism built into the categories of human and animal and suggesting how "both Black people and animals" are held captive (Dunning 118). Western society's model of the superior white human/self are entangled in enslavement and anti-Blackness and is therefore "always already destined to fail" (Dunning 94).

In chapter four, Dunning looks at Black responses to apocalypse and end-of-the world scenarios, arguing these narratives offer an opportunity to imagine a world based in human/nature interbeing. Juxtaposing Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) with Colm McCarthy's horror/thriller film, *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016), Dunning explores how *Parable* operates as a guide to surviving the end of the world and *The Girl With All the Gifts* promotes human/plant hybrids as models for post-civilization

flourishing (149). *Black to Nature's* final chapter, entitled, "Take Me Outside," is a short Black feminist ecological analysis of Laura Mvula's song, "Green Garden." Mvula's video depicts women and men departing urban space for a rural area, illustrating a pastoral return. With light streaming through the trees, the characters dance and play drums as Mvula sings about a garden and the wings of butterflies, lyrics presenting nature as a place of safety and joy. Mvula's work shows how nature can "mitigate the brutalities of the state" even as it also offers "a deeper critique of Western civilization and society" (Dunning 157).

Though Dunning's book offers a stunning meditation on Black nature-culture relations, it misses an opportunity to explore Black lesbian ecologies. In *Daughters of the Dust* (discussed at length in chapter one), Yellow Mary and her lover, Trula, arrive on the sea island lovingly featured in the film only to be met with condemnation. Trula is referred to in non-human terms—"What's that [Yellow Mary] got with her?"—and other community women verbally abuse the couple, rebuking their lesbian relationship and calling them "heifers" because of the sex work they do. These attacks bring to mind queer theorists Dana Luciano and Mel Chen's oft-cited article, "Has the Queer Ever Been Human?," which explores the ways white colonizers violently imposed Christian settler sexualities and gender conformity onto the "uncivilized" and "unnatural." Despite this oversight, Dunning's book is a poignant, unforgettable, and layered study of the power and promise of Black ecologies.

Works Cited

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