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Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770-1860

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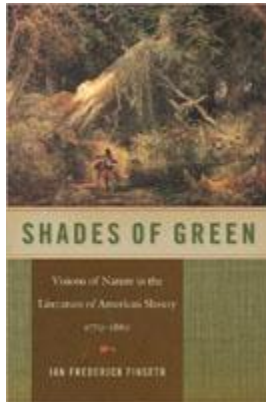
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Book Review



Ian Frederick Finseth, *Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770-1860*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009, 348 + xi pps., \$39.95 cloth, ISBN 13 978-0-8203-2865-2.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Simon Lewis, College of Charleston, Department of English

Anglo-Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta opens her 1983 novel *The Rape of Shavi* with the crash of a "bird of fire" into the desert landscape of Shavi, an imaginary African country somewhere on the fringes of the Sahara. The "bird of fire" is in fact a strange home-made aircraft called the Newark carrying its European passengers away from what they presume is imminent nuclear war. As the pale survivors struggle from the wreckage, the Shavians deliberate over how to treat these extraordinary creatures; everything hinges on whether they are properly "human:" if they are, the traditional Shavian hospitality demands that they be taken in and cared for; if not, they can be killed. Luckily for the Newarkers (but unluckily for the Shavians), the signs of mourning for a dead child, convince the Shavians that the strangers really are human, so they take them in. Emecheta's novel thus opens with a deliberate repetition-with-a-twist of eighteenth-century European and Euro-American definitional debates over race and human nature where an apparently philosophical judgment masks a life-or-death political decision. In this single and *singular humanus ex machine* plot-device Emecheta dramatizes the crucial way in which epistemology, ideology and power co-exist in the contemporary post-nuclear world. What Emecheta is responding to in this dramatic fiction, of course, is the actual world-historical consequences of European and Euro-American racial ideology, especially in the United States, that is the subject of Ian Finseth's fine new book *Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770-1860*.

Although an English professor by disciplinary training, Finseth is as concerned with intellectual history, in all its facets as much as he is with literary analysis. In *Shades of Green* he has produced a rich, dense, wide-ranging study of the ways in which antebellum American writers' and artists' representations of nature and the landscape informed and were informed by their ideas of culture. Paying particular attention to the vexed relationship between the "human" and the "natural," Finseth offers compelling readings of the work of writers from the eighteenth-century abolitionists Olaudah Equiano and Anthony Benezet, through to Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe to support his claim that "natural science informed antislavery rhetoric and philosophy more fully than we have recognized" (p. 5). The claim is an important one according to Finseth, in that nature played a "central yet protean role in the representational war over racial slavery, and therefore over American national identity" (p. 1). What's more, as Finseth himself emphasizes in a brief but significant "Epilogue," his arguments resonate long after the antebellum period and contribute to the ongoing ethical and social debates that are at the

root not just of disciplinary subgenres such as ecocriticism, but also of public issues such as stem-cell research, environmental policy, and biotechnology generally. And, as my reference to *The Rape of Shavi* indicates, the geographical reach of their significance extends well beyond the borders of the United States.

The book opens with a tightly argued introduction that sets out the rhetorical tensions between an abolitionist rhetoric that variously contained both universalizing and racializing notions of the human, and that variously embraced ideas of nature as idealized "manifestation of moral and emotional harmony" (p. 6) and in need of taming and improvement. Chapter One "Nature and Antislavery Philosophy" continues to set out the intellectual field fairly broadly, covering a range of authors from James Ramsay to Benjamin Banneker, and introducing discussion of the two chief literary modes associated with writing about nature -- the pastoral and the georgic -- in a period in the history of Western thought when Romanticism fostered an anxiety "that an empirical, analytical approach to nature would destroy the feelings of mystery, wonder, and even reverence that the natural world could inspire" (p. 65).

Following these two wide-ranging chapters, the bulk of the book is mainly given over to comparative readings of astutely paired authors, white and black. These pairings are strikingly original in conception and lead to some fascinating insights. Analysis of the two "expatriates and cultural hybrids" Crèvecoeur and Equiano, for instance, draws Finseth to comment on the uses and limits of narrative in opposing slavery and the slave-trade as a violation of natural order.

Likewise, in "Nations of Blood" (Chapter Four), Finseth reads Emerson's developing attitudes to race against David Walker's and Martin Delany's proto-black nationalism. Finseth argues that each author's search for "some form of social utopia [. . .] authorized, as always, by natural law" (p. 164) contains its own internal contradictions. Of Delany's *Blake*, Finseth writes that the novel "expresses a tension between human unity and racial division, a simultaneous assertion of a common human nature, eternally unchanging, which entitles all people to natural rights, and of the existence of multiple racial bloods" (p. 184). Finseth is particularly sharp in discussing Emerson's later attitudes to race and nature suggesting that Emerson's favoring of a "biological intermixture as the principal dynamic of American progress" may work "ultimately to consign nonwhites to a mere supporting role in the drama of Anglo-American progress" (p. 204).

Similar issues that probe what Finseth calls the "continuing dilemma of American liberal thought: its fundamental commitment to the intrinsic worth of the individual, and yet its conflicting impulses toward identitarian racialism on one side and inclusive humanism on the other" (p. 206) animate Chapter Six "Revisiting, Reliving, Reforming." In this chapter, Finseth makes a persuasive case for re-reading the later work of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglass not just against each other to draw attention to their racial positioning, but against each author's own earlier, canonical work. In urging us to read Stowe's 1856 novel *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* as an intellectual advance on the sentimentalism of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Finseth argues that Stowe "imagines a principle of creative destructiveness in the natural world that works to philosophically authorize

slave rebellion and violence" (p. 252). Although he sees Stowe as still trafficking in racial essentialism to a degree, Finseth insists that *Dred's* representation of nature generally demonstrates a clear consciousness that the idealizing tendencies of pastoral exist in a perpetual give-and-take with other discourses and realities" (p. 265) that perpetually threaten it with their "disruptive, entropic forces" (p. 267). In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Finseth sees Douglass producing a more all-encompassing moral condemnation of American (as opposed to specifically Southern) slavery in which "Douglass means to connect not only the southern fields with the blood of his enslaved people, but the systematic violation of African Americans with the systemic pollution of the natural world" (p. 281).

In between the Delany/Emerson and Stowe/Douglass chapters, Chapter Five, "Race in the Landscape," extends the range of Finseth's analysis by offering some readings of antebellum American painting. Finseth draws attention to the way in which American painters confronted the problem of how to represent black labor in the dignified fashion that eclogue or pastoral traditions had established, when representations of black idleness might reinforce negative stereotypes. Another of Finseth's valuable insights in this chapter, that American artists of this period appeared unable to imagine anything but a "lone black figure, cut off from family and community" (p. 239), perhaps draws attention to Finseth's limiting himself to professional artists (whether formally trained or self-taught) who, whatever their degree of originality, operated essentially within the realms of convention both of production and of consumption and circulation. Consideration of vernacular forms, and the inclusion of native American representations of nature and race might have allowed Finseth to expand his cultural analysis still further and move beyond an implicitly bi-racializing vision of American identity.