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# If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian: American Environmental History West and South

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## ABSTRACT

Environmental history in and of the American South has developed in a different direction than the field in general in the U.S., which has been shaped by its origins in the history of the American West. The history of humans and the environment in the South has been much more driven by the history of agriculture than by frontier or wilderness interactions, as well as by the history of the relationship between white and black Americans and their respective uses of the land in the region. It also has more in common with environmental history outside the U.S. than with the field as it at first developed in the U.S.

## KEY WORDS

Regions and environmental history, history of agriculture and the environment, African American history, agrarian struggles, environmental history and the American South

Imagine, if John Muir, during his thousand-mile trek through south-eastern North America to the Gulf of Mexico two years after the end of the Civil War, had developed more than a passing infatuation with the landscapes of 'happy negroes' and 'dark mysterious Savannah cypress forests' of Georgia or the palmetto 'hummocks' of Florida, and had decided to stay and live in the South.<sup>1</sup> If he had met up with Sidney Lanier and Joel Chandler Harris and imbibed from them the sensibilities of the southern Arcadian tradition. And if he had written a series of essays about a nature pastoralised and had become an inspiration to the Vanderbilt Agrarians as they took their stand. If this Muir, like the other one, had also been one of the founding fathers of American environmentalism, what kind of Sierra – or Appalachian, rather – Club would have been founded?

What landscapes would have been venerated and called up for protection if Muir had been agrarian and pastoral, rather than wilderness and biocentric, in his sensibilities? Would he have proclaimed, 'In the *agrarian* is the preservation of the world?'<sup>2</sup>

Of course, Muir was no Southerner and his passage through the Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, and Florida countrysides, though on foot, was ultimately feverish in pace. Muir remained blind throughout the trip to the social turmoil and changes on the land that were occurring – in the parts of Georgia he visited, especially – because of Emancipation and realignments of land and labour in the post-Civil War South. And he never returned. But conducting this thought-exercise might tell us something about an ongoing issue in American environmental history. Why has environmental history, a growing and now well-established field, developed more slowly and much differently in the American South? And by what measure should we judge this? At the same time, historians of this region have often talked about the land, and southern history has a deep tradition of agricultural history and human geography that can be described as 'environmental' – yet American environmental historians in general scarcely know about this literature and this tradition. The huge literature that considers the struggle of agricultural labourers against masters, landlords, lenders and their supporters in local and state governments over access and control of resources – what can be called 'agrarian struggle' – is akin to the literature, some of it by environmental historians, about agrarian struggle in places not American, and some historians of the South are quite aware of this kinship. But this awareness has yet to have much of an impact on American environmental historians. What kind of environmental history would have developed, indeed, if John Muir had stayed in the South and become an agrarian?<sup>3</sup>

Muir, of course, was not the only, and probably not even the most important, source or intellectual influence in the development of American environmentalism and environmental history in the United States. And the importance of an agrarian sensibility as well as an agrarian experience – and the hopes for a republic of yeoman citizens – in shaping the early history of American relationships to the land certainly has its historians. But much of the strongest founding work in American environmental history was written by historians of the West and shaped by sensibilities akin to Muir's: with an interest in 'wild' places and in the preservation of them, a concern with capitalist despoliations of pristine environments, the assumption that nature has fundamental value apart from what we ascribe to it, and an engagement with the politics of conservation and environmental protection – all out on the frontier bee meadows and sequoia margins of American settlement, and under a very big sky.<sup>4</sup>

The history of humans and nature in the South, however, has more often assumed a different measure of the 'natural,' one that does not take humans out of nature, and that is more informed by an agricultural experience than a wilderness one. The South has been an agricultural region, and more profoundly

an agricultural region than other parts of the United States where agriculture was important but not so woven into both sense and sensibility as in the South. Every attempt by scholars to understand, as pioneering agricultural historian Lewis Gray explained his mission, ‘the way of life of a great section of a country which was almost entirely agricultural’ has required a close look at the interaction of cultivators and the cultivated – and at perceptions of and ideas about this interaction. Agricultural history, as Donald Worster has both observed and demonstrated, can provide a lens for examining environmental history itself.<sup>5</sup> For most of the history of the South, further, significant social and political relationships cannot be separated from the agricultural landscapes in which they are embedded without a loss of meaning and understanding. In parts of the South these relationships have persisted well beyond the demise of the original form of agriculture that gave rise to them.

America was generally a rural nation with most Americans engaged in the work of agriculture until the early twentieth century. But the imprint of agriculture was deeper in the South, lasted longer, and almost from the beginning (at least after Europeans arrived) was driven by a set of relationships that gave landowners control over both land and labour. Agriculture in many parts of the South evolved within or in relationship to a distinctive form, the plantation. Plantations where staple crops were worked by unfree labour emerged very soon after the first Southern British colonies were founded in the Chesapeake and the Carolina lowcountry. And the social and economic effects of plantation agriculture have lasted in the South long after the demise of plantation agriculture in the mid-twentieth century – sometimes with profound environmental consequences as well, in old cotton belt communities blighted by poverty that became the sites (or proposed sites) of toxic waste dumps.<sup>6</sup>

The plantation itself was an adaptation to the difficult environment that the first colonists encountered – but also one that allowed them to transfer to North America a form of agricultural production that had worked in kindred climates and soils in the Caribbean. Long growing seasons and ample moisture, and a good river system for transporting cash crops, made commodity crop production possible at the same time that poor soils and the conditions of slavery forced mobility in both land and labour. By the nineteenth century, plantations were the backbone of nineteenth-century southern agriculture and drove the economy of the region. Cotton agriculture moved from Georgia and South Carolina to Texas; the significant frontier in southern history is the cotton frontier – and slavery moved along with it. How the South as a region – given its geographical diversity and that a large percentage of landowners did not own slaves – can be identified has been an issue of perennial debate for historians of the South. But that the planter class held most of the wealth and the power in the region and that Southern society was from the beginning at least biracial is beyond question.<sup>7</sup>

By reorganising agricultural labour, landowners were able to re-invent plantation agriculture after Emancipation. The Civil War had been the first

'total war,' in which armies warred not only against other armies but against the societies that sustained them and even against the very landscape itself. The scorched earth tactics practiced in Georgia and other places by Union troops gave the South a distinctive regional history, unique in the United States, of defeat and subjugation by occupying troops. Union troops cut a swathe through both the cultivated and uncultivated environments of the South. Making Georgia howl for example meant the destruction of seed and livestock and agricultural infrastructure, and the confirmation of emancipation at the same time. Large amounts of land in the South were temporarily abandoned after the war was over, farm animals that had been drafted into military service were gone and so were many that had not. In those places where Union foragers had extracted harvests and sometimes everything else, residents, both black and white, were forced to rely more extensively on wild resources, intensifying a relationship between the cultivated and uncultivated portions of the South that already had a long history. Five years after the war less than half the formerly improved land was in use.<sup>8</sup>

Southerners set to work at reviving regional agricultural regimens, and improved land stabilised at about one-third of the total area after 1880. The agricultural economy that postbellum Southerners put together had far more farm units and labourers were dispersed in separate households and worked smaller fields instead of living in quarters and working in gangs on large fields – but the same class of Southerners owned the land and the same class worked the land after the war as before. The profoundly agricultural culture of the South was badly damaged by destruction wrought by the war, but the struggle to recover what had been lost dug it even deeper into the region. Long after the South began to modernise through infusions of capital by New Deal programs and the invention of the mechanical cotton picker, the geography of plantations continue to shape the southern economy and southern culture, and the bustling Sunbelt has a shadow landscape of exhausted soils, pine (and marijuana) plantations, and impoverished rural communities in its stead.<sup>9</sup>

Those who worked the land and the understandings they developed and employed as agricultural workers were as important to the environmental history of the South as was the structure of agriculture and of crop regimens. Much of the South was shaped by the production of a very few staple crops on plantations, but more directly by the labourers who grew these crops. As Philip Morgan and Ira Berlin have pointed out, cultivation and culture were always linked in the plantation South and Caribbean; how people *worked* tells us a great deal about their cultures. Morgan and Berlin emphasise labour much more than land and the work culture of slaves more than the complex set of relationships they had with the environment. The work that these scholars have collected and themselves done has made the hands that shaped southern landscapes more visible, but for them and for other historians who have studied Southern labour land continues to be no more than abstraction or scene of action. The

hands that shaped plantation agriculture also shaped their own countervailing and sometimes competing landscapes, however, because of and by way of the work that they did on the land.<sup>10</sup>

Competing landscapes too were important expressions of cultural and especially environmental perceptions and power relations. Plantation landscapes were thoroughly racialised; what used to be called 'race' bound up or split apart just about everything else in the region as well. American environmental historians discovered race only about a decade ago; southern historians have seldom been able to avoid it, and have created a superb and complex literature about race relations and constructions of both whiteness and blackness.

Slavery and racism, as it was articulated by way of plantation agriculture, structured the cultivated landscape in the South, but also drove perceptions and uses of the uncultivated landscape as well. The South has had its own kind of 'wilderness'. Indeed, Muir noticed it, but a much different and much more inhabited one than the realm of alpine glaciers and water ouzels he later explored in the Sierras. About 80 percent of the region in 1860 was uncultivated before the Civil War, and when Muir strolled to the Gulf Coast after the war much more had been added around the edges by way of abandoned fields and destroyed farms.

The forests, wetlands, and savannahs of the wild places in the South were uncultivated, but were linked to cultivated ones through a complex of uses – some of them also agricultural. Small farmers and hill folk ranged cattle on wiregrass savannahs and in canebrakes, and hogs in mast-bearing deciduous woods – the enormous canebrakes of the South were vital to the large cattle industry of the region. Hunting and gathering were important components of the subsistence strategies to the more than 80 percent of southerners who did not own slaves – and for some of those who did. Southerners routinely burned the woods in some areas in an early spring ritual to destroy insects and improve understory and savannah browse for their free-ranging cattle.

More importantly, this wilderness South was as structured by social and cultural categories as the cultivated one; and the cultivated and uncultivated were inhabited and used in tandem by Southerners. If one of the questions American environmental historians have been asking in the last decade is 'what wilderness should we get back to,' the answer for the South is that wild lands were always the terrain of an array of purposes and of social and cultural differences – so much so, that they were hardly 'wilderness' at all. In plantation districts, both the cultivated and uncultivated environments were often better known by slaves than by their masters. The work slaves did accustomed them to a closer view of the cultivated environment. They were aware, from row to row, of the progress of the plants during the growing season. They put seeds in the ground and covered them with their feet, stirred and tilled the earth when hoeing, and bent down over rice stalks or moved slowly down rows of cotton during harvest. The hands experienced crop cultures from the ground up. Masters sometimes even depended on the first-hand – and often more tangible – perceptions of leading slaves to make

decisions about crop regimens. At the same time, when a storm came up slaves went in the fields or out on the levees or rice banks to do repairs and salvage crops. They endured suffocating heat – especially in the low country rice swamps or in the damp thickets of Lower Mississippi sugar plantations – while doing the heavy labour of tending and harvesting the crops. Masters and overseers rode or strolled along the borders of the fields and sometimes down the rows, but the slaves who turned the soil, tended the plants, and harvested the crops acquired a first-hand knowledge of the cultivated landscape on the plantation.<sup>11</sup>

Slaves knew the woods and swamps that were not cultivated, too, and often as intimately. The conduits and seams of significance in slave landscapes were marked out not by the boundaries of the fields they were forced to work, but by the pathways and waterways along which they acquired opportunities for small measures of autonomy beyond the fields. They met in the holler for worship, and many depended in part on the local environments for sustenance, oak or seagrass for baskets, roots and herbs for medicine or other purposes – even quilt patterns.<sup>12</sup> Hunting and fishing in the surrounding woods and waterways were an important source of food for slaves. Not all slaves hunted – some plantation surroundings were not rich enough in game to yield much to hunters, and going off the plantation without a pass was too risky in some neighbourhoods. But many did, if not with the rare guns they were able to use as hunters for their masters or that they owned themselves, with an ingenious array of snares, set traps and turkey pens. Or whatever else was at their disposal: Georgian Aunt Harriet Miller reported to a WPA interviewer that when she was a slave, she and other slaves used blow guns made out of sugar cane and burned out at the joints to ‘kill squirrels and catch fish’.<sup>13</sup> With sometimes nothing more than motivation, opportunity, and a good stick, slaves sought something of their own by way of hunting. Slaves hunted everything, but the most common animals that found their way into pots in the quarters were opossums, raccoons, and rabbits. Rabbits were plentiful and had savoury meat, roasted raccoon was meat with character, and the meat of the opossum, when scalded, rubbed in hot ashes, and roasted, and then eaten with roasted sweet potatoes and coffee, was prized most of all by slaves who hunted.<sup>14</sup> But whatever the animal, slaves had to be doubly stealthy and more knowledgeable than common for white hunters: they had to avoid stepping into their masters’ landscapes of control and domination at the same time that they had to be closely attentive – especially if they were hunting merely with sticks and smarts and at night – to the nuances of the behaviour and environment of their prey. Hunting put meat in the pot: on the Georgia and South Carolina coasts, for example, slaves may have procured nearly half the meat in their diets from wild sources – a crucial margin that added substantially to nutrition and sustenance.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, hunting was one more way that slaves acquired knowledge about the physical environment in their neighbourhoods and annotated their surroundings with meanings that were both subversive of

the totality of white power and positive expressions of an African American environmental ethos.

Again, what happened in the woods was linked to the interstices of agricultural regimens – and the history of plantation agriculture in the South. Most slaves devised ways to carve out some of their ‘own’ time to expand their exploitation of local resources beyond the fields or apply specialised skills off task to cultivate, hunt, or gather after their work in the fields was done. Slaves were not only able to supplement rations and feed their families and neighbours. The food that slaves procured from the wild environment became imbued with cultural value when slaves developed a cuisine, tastes for certain wild foods, and used gifts of meat and other foods to reinforce community bonds. They also used what they raised and procured in the wild places to trade for goods and property of their own. Cattle and hogs that ranged in the woods were, indeed, capital on the hoof, which increased by way of the browse that could be found there. Like their masters, slaves extracted commodities from the environment in which they lived and worked, and indeed masters often encouraged some property ownership by slaves – they believed it would make them less likely to run away, and sometimes slave property substantially supplemented plantation rations. Whatever property they could acquire had more than pure economic value, however. In a relationship with other humans and larger institutions that defined them as human property, outside civil society and subject to the almost absolute domination of their masters, small bits of property represented considerable increments of independence and autonomy, even when they also served the goals of masters. Property was not simply wealth, but represented a small measure of security and something that was slaves’ own, and more slaves than not had some.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, ‘wilderness’ resources and the property made from them were not merely used to strengthen individual positions of power, but were important in consolidating family bonds. Wild resources and the process of procuring them did not produce family, but were often the medium of kinship. Cooperative arrangements that freed some slaves to cultivate their own plots, fish, hunt, or gather and then trade or sell, were usually kin arrangements. Slaves worked with relatives to extract resources, relatives took care of property when the owner was absent, and some slaves got their start – a few chickens or a shoat or a calf – by way of a gift or a loan from a relative. When slaves disputed ownership of something, they negotiated a resolution by way of kinship networks – relatives or reliable neighbours were witnesses and trusted ones were arbiters. When slaves died, their children inherited what they had. The resources enslaved African Americans were able to gather or the small property they were able to procure because of these arrangements reinforced and further strengthened kinship ties. Property ownership was so interrelated with kinship for slaves that the making of property and the making of family often went hand in hand. Slaves metabolised resources from the fields, forests, and swamps of



plantation neighbourhoods in their social arrangements as well as adding to their food supply and nutrition. They crafted expressions of culture and values, and also quite literally claimed family ties with what they extracted – both in the process and the product – from the environment.<sup>17</sup>

Uncultivated environments had another important social link to cultivated ones among slaves who ran ‘away’ from one to the other. Though relatively few African Americans, like Frederick Douglass, ‘stole themselves’ to the North and away from slavery altogether, many of them ran away, to visit family on other plantations, or simply to ‘lay out’ in the local swamps for a spell. For these, the wild places were quite literally havens, or crucial highways to family reunions. Slaves who sought either to escape – even if just for a while – the harsh constraints of plantation life and agricultural regimens, or who travelled to other plantations to visit family, travelled or hid out off the roads. The *petit marronage* engaged in by slaves who sought either to escape for a while a particularly repressive master or overseer or who wanted to visit with family on other plantations was common on every plantation and was an important form of resistance that was also shaped by close observation of geography and the weather. Slaves made their way from plantation to plantation, usually at night and with both short and extended periods of truancy, to visit kinfolks and to improve the quality of their family relations. When they ‘layed out’ to avoid punishment or work, or when they travelled from one plantation to another to visit relatives, they also depended upon the support of slaves who stayed home. The physical environment off the plantation, then, was hardly ‘marginal’ to plantation labourers, but an intricate part of the elaborate geography of kinship and social connection.<sup>18</sup>

Though maroon communities were relatively rare in the South, they were not unknown. Such communities existed, at least, on Georgia’s Savannah River in colonial Georgia and in colonial Louisiana between the mouth of the Mississippi River and New Orleans, but also in mountainous, forested, or swampy regions throughout the South. Gwendolyn Hall has explained how groups of runaway creole slaves in Louisiana built huts in the cypress swamps on and behind the estates of French settlers, with secret paths leading to them (sometimes covered with woven mats that were noisy when someone walked on them), grew corn, squash, and rice on small high places in the swamps, gathered berries, dwarf palmetto roots, China-smilax roots (which they pounded into flour and cooked) and sassafras, hunted and fished, and so on. In other words, they created communities in the swamps, raised their own food – and sometimes sold cypress logs to sawmill owners to procure cash for small commodities they could not make or obtain in the ‘wild’. Sometimes entire families fled together – and those who did not run away provided support for those who did. Africans in the swamps had a symbiotic relationship with slaves on the plantation. When Cajuns and Canary Islanders came to these swamps in the late eighteenth century, they learned how to live in them from those who were already there – the debt of these fiercely independent people to maroon communities, Hall explains, is engraved on the language they

still speak today – most often by men, when they are fishing and hunting. Hall does not fully enough explain the history of maroons in this region, and the extent of what she credits as a maroon culture in Louisiana has been contested, but the notion that Afro-Creole traditions that had their origins in the maroon communities in the eighteenth century have left cultural tracks in the vernacular of those who move along similar pathways in the swamps even today suggests the strength of this kind of ‘wilderness’ tradition at the same time that it illuminates its origin in an agricultural one.<sup>19</sup>

Though more land was brought into cultivation in the South after the Civil War, open land continued to be important to the sustenance of poor whites and blacks – Stephen Hahn and several other scholars have explained the social and political turbulence that occurred when influential Southerners began to expand their control of ‘wild’ lands through legislation that made it illegal to run hogs and cattle on unenclosed private lands or ‘trespass’ to hunt. The struggle between tenants or small farmers and wealthier landholders in the South over access to resources on unenclosed lands differed only on the face of it from kindred agrarian struggles elsewhere. It was a contest over access to lands that in terms of current property law was private property owned by individuals rather than public lands that the state sought to control, conserve, manage, or otherwise make more ‘legible’ as an extension also of state policy initiatives. But the ‘state’ – in this case, state and county governments – were a part of the process by which lands were enclosed in the South – local-option stock laws that were passed by state assemblies and then adopted at the county level and which required owners of livestock to fence them in on their own lands were the medium for the enclosure of uncultivated land. Further, the meaning of private property laws was conditioned by long traditions of use that defined unenclosed and uncultivated lands, whatever their legal status, as a kind of ‘commons’. This commons, once again, was for poor whites and blacks either an outfield where they ranged hogs or cattle, or a hunting ground where they could procure provisions and other necessities to supplement what they could grow closer to home. Traditions for the use of uncultivated lands in the South, in other words, survived the Civil War and began to disappear not because they were absorbed and diminished by a wilderness ethic or because they were subdued by state conservation measures, but because landlords and local officials sought to expand the cotton-producing agricultural landscape that was dominated by large landowners and to extend control over all.<sup>20</sup>

Simply, the environmental history of the American South has largely been an agrarian one. It has not produced an indigenous notion of ‘wilderness’ as unoccupied or relatively undisturbed nature, nor have historians of the South had to argue against a historiographical tradition that takes such a wilderness for granted. Even the attempt of modern environmentalists to re-create wilderness in protected areas in the South have had to import the idea from outside the region. Margaret Brown, in her study of the Great Smoky Mountains and the Smoky Mountain National Park,

*The Wild East*, explains how notions of what a wild park should look like were imported from the West and then integrated into the development and management policies of this lodestar national park in the South.<sup>21</sup> For African Americans, wild land was often a source of sustenance and community survival, and for slaves the place beyond the plantation bounds was a place of potential deliverance as well as a region where family and community values could be affirmed.<sup>22</sup>

Uncultivated land never acquired the meaning of 'wilderness' in the South. Even William Faulkner, a reference to whom is an obligation for those who wish to speak about the South, saw uninhabited nature not in biocentric terms or apart from humans. In his paean to the southern wilderness, 'The Bear,' the wilderness is not a place where one goes for salvation, for transcendence, but to discover the darkest part of one's being and also to put oneself into contact with manliness and with other men – it's another, perhaps the supreme, southern hunting story. The wilderness of 'The Bear' is not a redwood cathedral but a 'not farm,' 'unaxed,' and the home of an animal who earned his reputation through 'corn-cribs broken down and rifled, of shoats and grown pigs and even calves carried bodily into the woods and devoured and traps and deadfalls overthrown and dogs mangled and slain and shotgun and even rifle shots delivered at point-blank range yet with no more effect than so many peas blown through a tube by a child ...'<sup>23</sup> In the South, nature and man were never unhitched.

The beginnings of conservation in the South – until recently largely ignored by American environmental historians, who have favoured the kinds of environmentalism created by the real John Muir and by liberal moments and leaders who have focused on more open places in America – was also thoroughly enmeshed in the culture of slavery, the history of the plantation, and the agricultural history of the South. In the 1820s and 1830s, when many Southerners began to feel their region was in the grip of a cultural and economic crisis and also began to chafe against the attacks on slavery from outside the region, they sought solutions through agricultural reform and conservation practices. Leading planters, especially in the older parts of the South where soil exhaustion most profoundly challenged the continued vitality of plantation society, advocated more beneficent management practices for both slaves and soils. They exchanged and promoted ideas about better ways to grow rice, cotton, sugar, tobacco and other crops, about crop rotation and fertilising, about machines that would make agricultural practices more efficient, all with the goal of diversifying southern agriculture and making it more efficient and restoring depleted lands. An ethic of stewardship emerged in the abundant discussions of agricultural improvement that showed up in addresses to agricultural societies and in the pages of new agricultural journals.

Some of the practices advocated by planters followed what modern environmentalists might recognise as ecological principles. One of the Georgia lowcountry's most progressive planters, James Hamilton Couper, for example, sought not only the salvation of tired soils, but agricultural practices that would harmonise with 'the principles of vegetation'. In a contribution to the *Southern*

*Agriculturist* in 1833, he described an elaborate soil and crop management program that went further than the usual laments about soil exhaustion in its recognition of the basic unsoundness of monoculture and the implications for plantation agriculture. 'Where nature is allowed to sow her own seeds and reap her own harvest,' he wrote, 'the earth, instead of being impoverished by her vegetable productions, seems at each new effort but to augment that fertility, which is ever presenting to the eye a varied aspect of beauty and fruitfulness'. When the earth is instead controlled by humans for specific agricultural productions, though, the effects have been markedly different: 'Their exhaustion generally follows production, and utter impoverishment would succeed to teeming fertility, were not resort made to benign nature, or to expensive manures, to restore the lost fertility.' Once soil was used for agriculture, planters should carefully follow crop rotation schemes that 'harmonised' with nature, Couper explained, if they wished to ensure perennial fertility. In the second part of the article he laid out such a scheme, one that he had worked out on the highlands and tidal swamplands of his Georgia plantation.<sup>24</sup>

Many planters merely talked about reform and did not dirty their hands with the attentive management and hard work that was required to carry reform ideas into practice. But even armchair agricultural reform constituted an early source of conservation ideas that has only recently been examined by scholars who have studied the history of conservation and environmental ideas and politics. These conservation ideas, though they had much in common with a larger movement among reform farmers throughout the older regions of the U.S. in antebellum America to stay and improve rather than skim and move, took shape in a distinctive form within the context of slavery and regional consciousness. This, too, is part of the deeply social content of Southern environmental history.<sup>25</sup>

Planters went further than this with ideas about the relationship between nature, agriculture, and culture – not just with ideas about how to improve nature through proper cultivation as the foundation of a regional counter-revolution and as a way to develop a path to southern economic strength. They also used nature as part of an argument to justify agriculture and slavery and to defend what they believed to be distinctive about southern society. In the mid-nineteenth century, the South was not just a region or a section, but also a nation – that leading southerners justified partly by a defence from nature. In the 1850s, some influential southerners developed a pro-slavery argument that *naturalised* staple crop production, slavery and southern society. The argument went like this: Because of the climate, staple crop agriculture was the best adapted to the region (and as the defensive fever of the 1850s intensified, Southerners ignored variations in climate within what became the solid South); because of this agriculture, the plantation was the best unit of organisation for growing staple crops; because of plantations, slavery was the best labour system, because Africans had been imported as plantation labourers and, according to prominent variants of the argument, were better suited for labour in the long, hot summers; because of all

three, the South possessed an economic and cultural uniqueness. Pro-slavery ideologues more often defended the peculiar institution and the culture that depended upon it in arguments derived from Scripture rather than nature, but by the end of the 1850s, 'the sunny South' and the 'peculiar climate' had become a fundamental point in an ideological defence, a note in a common chord struck to reinforce the commitment of leading Southerners to slavery and to Southern society. The South, especially after secession, was also Nature's Nation, but with a consistently agrarian content.<sup>26</sup>

Black Southerners who knew how to extract resources discreetly and who occupied a natural landscape that was leavened with strategies for strengthening kin and community had the makings of a different environmental ethos that also operated in tension with the conservation ethos of their masters. But it was this very experience with the conservation ethic and other demands of elite Southerners – those who owned them but to whom they were partly invisible – that contributed the crucial element to African American environmentalism (even as it has bloomed in more recent times). Slaves were required to negotiate for everything, either directly and indirectly, with masters and with the systems of control they devised. They had to bargain with both words and behaviour for access to resources, to move around on the plantation and beyond the bounds of the cultivated fields, to manipulate adjustments to the burden of labour that was placed upon them, and to do all in the interest of kin and community. Anything they did for themselves was potentially and sometime quite overtly an act of resistance, and had to be negotiated carefully. Even the medicine they sought to apply to treat illness, even if it brought back a slave's health and his or her capacity to be a productive worker, was usually regarded by planters, who sought to control the bodies of slaves as well as what those bodies could do, as an act of subversion. Reformers and Freedmen's Bureau officials who worked with freedmen in the South just after Emancipation were often surprised – stunned, even – by the speed and deftness and with what collective force freedmen labourers negotiated with landowners or managers to mark out better terms for themselves. They remarked often about the rapidity with which freedmen and women organised churches – usually with denominational lines that follow kinship and neighbourhood ones – that also became homes to community political activities and expressions. What they were witnessing and experiencing was not something new, but a political behaviour with deep roots in the conditions of American slavery and in the relationship of African Americans to the land.<sup>27</sup>

This history left twentieth century black Southerners with a double-edged inheritance. Those who lived in the old plantation districts were more likely, at the end of the century, to live in poverty than their urban African American counterparts. Again, poor, underdeveloped counties in the South with large black populations have also been more likely to be locations or proposed locations of hazardous waste sites or factories that spew noxious pollutants. But slavery

and emancipation and the political culture that came out of them – both in the countryside and in the urban places to which rural southern blacks migrated – have produced a positive response to injustices, environmental ones included. Relationships with the environment have always been social and collective for African Americans, and always in process of negotiation.<sup>28</sup>

Nature provided resources not just for profit but often to consolidate community – moving into nature and through nature was usually a collective matter, as was negotiating either individual or group spaces from masters using environmental knowledge or by way of spaces in the fields and the surrounding forests and swamps. For African Americans, ‘wilderness’ was not a place in which the preservation of the world could be found, but a site of healing, a trail to kinship, a place where a decisive edge of resources could be added to meagre plantation rations, a place where salvation could be gained – either through worship in the holler or through stealing oneself away permanently. Slave experiences with the environment were profoundly social ones – they moved into nature to enact social meanings, at the same time that they did not make the sharp distinction between the human and nonhuman worlds that were common for whites. For African Americans in the South, nature was negotiated, it was kin, and it was community. And for both black and white Southerners, nature was *inhabited*.

## CONCLUSION

So what about the question at the outset of this essay: Why has environmental history in and of the South appeared to lag in development behind the field elsewhere – or why is, as one observer has explained about Southern environmental history, the South ‘again the backward region’.<sup>29</sup> And what kind of environmental history would we have had if the field had first emerged in the South and been shaped by deep traditions of Southern history? Historians of the South, much more aware of their region as a Region than historians who look at them from afar, have often written about the relationship of the South to the rest of the nation by asking questions about how the South became like the rest of America, how it became ‘Northernised’ or ‘Americanised’. But they have also made legitimate claims as well as wry and deliberately tongue-in-cheek ones about how the South has also transformed America, how Dixie has ‘Southernised’ America – or at least, how the rest of America, after cracks in its progressive façade were opened up in the 1960s and 1970s by urban race riots, defeat in Vietnam, and the political corruption revealed by Watergate, had become more like the South. Reflecting on identity is an old preoccupation in the South that dates at least back to the antebellum planters who attempted to claim a special status for slavery by proclaiming southern cultural distinctiveness. And it has usually been done in the same way that the South has been observed from out-

side, by comparing it to a yardstick of something better, usually in terms of 'the North'. Historians have often either pronounced the South as special, blighted, or 'distinctive,' or have asked 'why not?' instead of 'why?'<sup>30</sup>

The venerable C. Vann Woodward, in a classic and widely read essay published nearly a half century ago, on the other hand noted that the complex history of struggle and defeat that has been the South's is not so distinctive nor so blighted when viewed in a global context instead of by way of comparison to the North.<sup>31</sup> And indeed, comparative history of the richest and most revealing dimensions has been done by historians of the South who have compared slavery, emancipation, and segregation there with slavery and emancipation in Brazil and elsewhere in the Americas, the emancipation of the serfs in Prussia or Russia, and racism and apartheid in South Africa. Even some of the spare environmental literature on the plantation South or on the disease environments of the South has pointed to the importance of at least a transnational view of the South.<sup>32</sup>

These two historiographical trends suggest that any assessment of environmental history of the South needs to take into account how southerners themselves conceive of environmental values and politics and the practice of environmental history as well as compare this practice not with the American environmental history Ur-region, the American West, but with environmental history elsewhere in the world. The environmental history of the American South may have more in common with environmental history that has emerged in other parts of the world, which has had to come to terms with landscapes that have been continuously occupied and cultivated, with a history of interactions between humans and nature that have been structured more by agriculture and urban spaces rather than wilderness ones, with a history that has not worried itself so much with locating the boundary between culture and nature (and finding or erasing 'frontiers'), and in which Frederick Jackson Turner and his long and doggedly persistent train of interpreters and refuters are nigh alien. Like most of the hemispheric 'South,' the American South was a colonial economy until well into the twentieth century and has had to confront the problems of how to solve environmental problems and at the same time countryside poverty. The history of disease and how it has shaped the geography of the South, agriculture and other economic regimens, and even concepts of race, has a profound kindred literature in African environmental history, and also connects with a growing literature on the shaping influence of disease regimens on colonial enterprises as well as ideas of 'whiteness' in Asia. Southern planters exercised their own kind of imperial action on the environment and on ideas about nature that can be illuminated by looking at the rich literature of the relationship between imperialism and the environment elsewhere in the world. And unlike all of the rest of relatively isolated North America, the South has experienced the environmental ravages

of modern war – and the history of this, much of it not yet written, will connect the South with other parts of the world in yet another important way.

What about the ‘wilderness’ in which the preservation of the world can found? The South was quite simply a different place, come time for ‘wilderness’ and all the questions associated with it. The struggle in the South over uncultivated places could more often be characterised as an agrarian struggle, and one that reflected racial and social divisions that have old history in the South. This history indeed may have more in common with agrarian struggles in other parts of the world, which has its own literature, than with the environmental history of wild places elsewhere in the United States. This connection has not gone unnoticed by historians of the South, who have recognised that the struggle over access to resources by a disenfranchised Southern ‘peasantry’ has much in common with kindred struggles elsewhere in the world, at the same time that they have not fully greened their understanding of ‘resources’ – and especially in the terms in which the ‘peasants’ they study may have understood them. The very recent discovery by historians of the West that the ‘pristine’ natural areas that were enclosed by the National Park system were not so pristine after all, but human landscapes from which the original inhabitants were removed, or the study of the struggle between local inhabitants and state conservation efforts elsewhere in the United States – including the West – is not so much an innovation as an environmental take on a subject that has a substantial literature in southern history (at the same time that these studies largely ignore the South).<sup>33</sup>

If John Muir had been an agrarian, then, the history of environmental history might not have been so eccentric – so ‘American’, with the peculiar obsession of Americans with the frontier and wilderness and everything that goes along with it – and then with refuting frontier and wilderness myths and everything that go along with this. It might not have taken environmental historians so long to have discovered that landscapes are always riven by what we used to call ‘race’ – as well as by gender, ethnicity and class. The history of other variants of environmentalism and conservation might not have taken so long for American environmental historians to discover, and might not have taken so much instruction from abroad, if they had looked more closely at the deeply conservative and paternalistic conservation ideas of antebellum improving planters as well as the environmental sensibilities and politics of the African American slaves upon whose labour these planters were utterly dependent. Several rich seams in the history of the South might have provided riches that might have saved a whole generation of New Enviro-Western historians a great deal of labour. Indeed, as environmental history continues to develop in the South, we may discover that the South is not so ‘backward’ after all, but way out ahead, and at the same time a window to the rest of the world and a less provincial practice of environmental history in America.<sup>34</sup>



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Muir, *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916), 58, 69, 115–17. My thanks to Fitz Brundage, Peter Coclanis, David Johnson, Mark Harvey, Jeffrey Stine, and the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay, and to Adam Rome as well.

<sup>2</sup> Lucinda Hardwick McKethan's *Dream of Arcady* focuses on the pastoral tradition in Southern literature, but it is a good introduction to the pastoral – and profoundly agrarian – vision in Southern culture: *The Dream of Arcady: Place and Time in Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980). For the agrarian tradition in southern political thought, see Paul V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001). Murphy includes a consideration of the poet and essayist Wendell Berry, and places him with the conservative agrarian tradition of the South, pp. 264–72. On Berry, see also Thomas L. Altherr, “‘The Country We Have Married’: Wendell Berry and the Georgia Tradition of Agriculture”, *Southern Studies*, n.s. 1 (Summer 1990): 105–15. A more considered treatment of Berry's agrarianism is Kimberly K. Smith, *Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition: A Common Grace* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003). Smith connects Berry not with the conservative tradition of intellectual and political agrarianism in the South (with the exception of the Vanderbilt Agrarians), but says Berry reconfigured traditional agrarianism in general by ‘importing’ environmental ideas into it and by emphasising the ecological integrity of the relationship of the community of right-minded small farmers to the land. In any case, *agrarianism* in this essay is meant to be taken broadly, as a way of life, values, and environmental behaviours connected to the practice of agriculture. Henry David Thoreau, of course, was the first American to link ‘wildness’ and the ‘preservation’ of the world (in ‘Walking’), but Muir's adaptation of Thoreau's proclamation to reflect his own Sierran sensibilities and then the appropriation by the mid-twentieth century American environmental movement of his adaptation as scriptural makes his version of this conceit more important here.

<sup>3</sup> Again, ‘agrarian’ is meant to be taken broadly in this essay, as designating a way of life, a set of practices, values, and environmental behaviours, as well as the ideas about them, connected to the general practice of agriculture. The term is deployed here in the same sense that it is used by scholars of agrarian culture outside the United States, to refer to farmers and others who live off the land who often function on the margins of commercial economies and practice mixed subsistence strategies – who are often called by scholars ‘peasants’.

Muir's exuberant love for nature – what some scholars call *biophilia* – was a unifying force that cut across class and ethnic divisions, and his *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf* shines with it. Nonetheless, he passed through a countryside in which ideas about the proper relationship between different groups of Americans and nature were being fundamentally challenged and negotiated, and he hardly noticed it. This is an enormous blind spot that needs to be reckoned with by Muir historians. Muir was a successful orchardist later in life in California – his experience as an agriculturist needs further examination by historians.

<sup>4</sup> Few of the many essays, some of them deliberately historiographical, about environmental history that have been published by American environmental historians in the last twenty years mention any of the literature about the South that might inform the practice

of environmental history. Environmental history textbooks also slight the South; only Theodore Steinberg's *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (Oxford, 2002) includes a balanced portion of attention to the South. For a recent essay about American environmental history that nails its origins to historians and the history of the West, see Hal Rothman, 'Conceptualizing the Real: Environmental History and American Studies', *American Quarterly* 54 (September 2002): 485–97. Much of what I say in this essay about what environmental historians can learn from historians of the South they've already learned. See the now venerable collections of path breaking essays in the *New Western History*: Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991); and William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, eds., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992); and the analysis of the unmaking and re-making of cultural and environmental in the intensively used and occupied regions of the mid-nineteenth century lower Great Plains in Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1998). My point is that by having to work so hard to re-imagine and revise the history of the West to come to the same conclusions, they have promoted issues and a 'trail' to the past that may have committed some of the sins of the fathers.

<sup>5</sup> Even though Worster begins his landmark early assessment of the field of environmental history, 'Transformations of the Earth', with an example from the bluegrass country of Kentucky and nods in the direction of Southern environmental history by including an essay by Carville Earle about the 'myth of the Southern soil miner' in his edited volume, *The Ends of the Earth*, he ignores the enormous body of Southern agricultural history that should be of interest to environmental historians in working out the contours of the relationship between cultivators, the cultivated, and nature. See Donald Worster, 'Transformations of the Earth: Toward an Agroecological Perspective in History' *Journal of American History* 76 (March 1990): 1087–1106; Carville Earle, 'The Myth of the Southern Soil Miner: Macrohistory, Agricultural Innovation, and Environmental Change', in Donald Worster, ed., *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 175–210. The scholarship on the history of long-settled, rather than newly developed agricultural landscapes in the United States, have in general still not fully realised the potential of analysing agricultural landscapes in agroecological terms. A recent exception is Brian Donahue, *The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). It should be pointed out that the idea of re-examining of agricultural units as 'agroecological' landscapes owes a great deal to the prominent twentieth-century ecologist, Eugene Odum, who spent his entire career at the University of Georgia. See Mark Glen Madison, "'Potatoes Made of Oil': Eugene and Howard Odum and the Origins and Limits of American Agroecology", *Environment and History* 3 (June 1997): 209–38.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Aiken has analysed the geography of plantations in the old cotton belt, and argues that an identifiable geography can be tracked until at least the mid-twentieth century: Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998). On the placement of toxic waste dumps in the vicinity of poor rural black communities in the old cotton belt, see Aiken, 360–61 and Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Equality* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

Native populations also had an agrarian past in the South. South-eastern Natives too practised agriculture on an extensive basis in the rich river bottoms of the region. The South

has had a continuity of corn since the ancestors of Southern Dent was moved up trade routes along the Gulf from Central America at least a millennium ago. The Choctaw, Creeks, and Cherokee also adapted and integrated the agricultural practices of the newcomers into their own, and used both cultivated and uncultivated lands for agricultural purposes. Canebrakes were so important to Creeks who raised cattle in the late eighteenth century that they moved to find new ones when the usually resilient cane – which thrives on disturbance – began to be destroyed by heavy grazing and the trampling of Creek herds. See Robbie Ethridge, *Creek Country: The Creek Indians and Their World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 160–74.

<sup>7</sup> Even though commentators exaggerate the homogeneity of the South as a way to identify it, investigators have found a high level of consensus among black and white residents of ‘the South’ that their region has a cultural integrity. At the same time, as Edward L. Ayers concludes in a thoughtful essay on the problem of Southern regional identity, ‘The South is continually coming into being, continually being remade, continually struggling with its pasts.’ See Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Peter S. Onuf, *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 82.

<sup>8</sup> On the environmental damage of the Civil War in the South, see David De Laubenfels, ‘Where Sherman Passed By’, *Geographical Review* 47 (1957): 381–95; and Jack Temple Kirby, ‘The American Civil War: An Environmental View’, on TeacherServe, <http://www.nhc.rtp.nc.us:8080/tserve>.

<sup>9</sup> The literature on the reorganisation of land and labour after the Civil War and Emancipation is huge, but see the summary in William J. Cooper, Jr. and Thomas E. Terrill, *The American South: A History* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1991), v. 2, 423–45 and the relevant portion of the volume’s bibliographic essay on pp. 785–88. See also two essays in John Boles, ed., *A Companion to the American South* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002): Laura F. Edwards, ‘Emancipation and Its Consequences, 269–83; and Joseph P. Reidy, ‘Economic Consequences of the Civil War and Reconstruction’, 303–20. For agriculture in the South after Reconstruction: see Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures Since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985) and Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost, 1920–1960* (Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> T. H. Breen’s stunningly obvious observation that most early Americans spent most of their waking hours working outdoors on the land, and that therefore an analysis of agricultural work might be more important than anything else in understanding the history of early America, can be found in ‘Back to Sweat and Toil: Suggestions for the Study of Agricultural Work in Early America’, *Pennsylvania History* 49 (October 1982): 241–58. For an analysis of how labour was the nexus of culture and cultivation in slave societies, see the essays in Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993). See also Robert B. Outland III, ‘Slavery, Work, and the Geography of the North Carolina Naval Stores Industry, 1835–1860’, *Journal of Southern History* 62 (February 1996): 26–54. That not just ‘work’ and labour needs to be examined to understand plantation agriculture and culture, but also *labour on the land* is one of the core arguments of Mart Stewart, ‘What Nature Suffers to Groe’: *Life Labor and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680–1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996). See

also Stewart, 'Rice, Water, and Power: Domination and Resistance in the Low Country, 1790–1900', *Environmental History Review* 15 (Fall, 1991), 47–64.

<sup>11</sup> A debate that has taken several directions about the relationship between social status, environmental values and 'wilderness' was spurred along by a 1996 essay by William Cronon: 'The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature', in *Uncommon Ground: The Reinvention of Nature*, ed. William Cronon (N.Y.: Norton, 1996), 24–37. On slave perceptions of agricultural work, see Stewart, 'What Nature Suffers to Groe', 98–102, 135, 146–8.

<sup>12</sup> Dale Rosengarten, *Row Upon Row: Sea Grass Baskets of the South Carolina Lowcountry* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1986); Leland Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650–1800* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 59–120. The Works Progress Administration Slave Narratives, published in George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Co.), are rich – in some volumes, nearly every account yields something – about what slaves grew, hunted, gathered, or made from garden patches or edge places on the plantation and from all kinds of environments off. A useful introduction to some of these that also provides an analysis of the gendered quality of slave environmental practices, but that is far from exhaustive, is Elizabeth D. Blum, 'Power, Danger, and Control: Slave Women's Perceptions of Wilderness in the Nineteenth Century', *Women's Studies* 31 (2002): 247–65. My thanks to Vongphong Luangphaxay for research assistance on this point.

<sup>13</sup> George P. Rawick, *The American Slave*, Georgia, vol. 13, part 3, 130.

<sup>14</sup> Nicolas Proctor, *Bathed in Blood: Hunting and Mastery in the Old South* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), 144–68. Notes on the value of various animals for food can be found, for example, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, ser. 2, vol. 12, Georgia, pt. 1, 3–4; and supplement 1, Miss., v. 8, part. 3, 1293. See also Stuart A. Marks, *Southern Hunting in Black and White: Nature, History, and Ritual in a Carolina Community* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Tyson Gibbs, Kathleen Cargill, Leslie Sue Lieberman, and Elizabeth Reitz, 'Nutrition in a Slave Plantation: An Anthropological Examination', *Medical Anthropology* 4 (Spring 1980): 175–262.

<sup>16</sup> On the cultural meanings of slave food, see Charles W. Joyner, 'Soul Food and the Sambo Stereotype: Foodlore from the Slave Narrative Collection', *Keystone Folklore Quarterly* 16 (1971): 171–178; Stacy Gibbons Moore, "'Established and Well Cultivated": Afro-American Foodways in Early Virginia', *Virginia Cavalcade* 39 (1989): 70–83; Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 134–45. On slave property, see Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 45–78.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 79–109. For slaves and later for freedmen, property was always connected to family, Penningroth argues, and 'was less an institution or a legal right than a social process'. He connects this insight to scholarship in African Studies that argues that access to resources is connected to social identity and that property ownership is more an ongoing social process than a matter of having something to the exclusion of the claims of others: 191–2. The animal and trickster tales slaves told were comprehensive expressions of slave relationships to nature, negotiation, and kin: These tales were also a vehicle for the por-

trayal of slaves' perceptions of 'natural' social relations in two senses. African-Americans saw themselves as part of a unified universe of all creatures and did not make a sharp distinction between humans and other creatures. At the same time, these tales, especially the trickster tales, were depictions of social relations as the African-Americans believed they were inscribed in nature. When a weak animal defeated a strong one by using its wits, this was a conquest with doubly meaningful social resonance. See Stewart, 'What Nature Suffers to Groe', 178–80. Such tales were common at least in South Carolina and Georgia. See Georgia Writers Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 79, 110–11, 160–1, 171. An older collection, with no notes on informants, is Charles C. Jones, Jr., *Negro Myths from the Georgia Coast Told in the Vernacular* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1888; repr. University of Georgia Press). Patricia Jones-Jackson describes the discernment of distinct features of particular animals that sea island storytellers bring to their tales: *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 16–17, 171n–2n. African Americans also developed a strong sense of place, which wove together networks of kin and their close understanding of local environments. Though many moved around after Emancipation to reunite with kin and to escape the supervision of their ex-masters, Freedmen's Bureau officials who worked with freedmen and women after the Civil War often notes the strong loyalty to place and the resonance of place with kinship networks that many emancipated slaves continued to express: Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 208–11; Drew Gilpin Faust, 'Culture, Conflict, and Community: The Meaning of Power on an Ante-Bellum Plantation', *Journal of Social History* 14 (Fall 1980): 93–4; Patricia Guthrie, 'Catching Sense: the Meaning of Plantation Membership Among Blacks on St. Helena Island, South Carolina' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1977), 114–29; Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 139–40.

<sup>18</sup> Philip Morgan explains how recurrent patterns of running away by eighteenth-century slaves were connected to patterns of visiting: *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 524–30. See also Morgan, 'Colonial South Carolina Runaways: Their Significance for Slave Culture', *Slavery and Abolition* 6 (December 1985): 72–4. See also Stephanie M.H. Camp, "'I Could Not Stay There': Enslaved Women, Truancy and the Geography of Everyday Forms of Resistance in the Antebellum Plantation South', *Slavery and Abolition* 23 (December 2002): 1–20, which begins to understand the full importance of truancy but that does not fully comprehend the importance of the landscapes of woods and swamps to slave culture in general. Slave runaways in any case represented only a small minority of the whole, but the complicity of slaves who were not 'truant' in the successful truancy of others made this a more significant form of resistance – as did the cultural significance of running away and the narratives it generated in the quarters.

<sup>19</sup> Minutes of the Governer and Council, July 7, 1772, *Colonial Records of Georgia*, 14: 292–93; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 201–36. Gilbert C. Din claims Hall overestimates the extent of *grand maroonage* in colonial Louisiana, but does not deny that it happened: *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves: The Spanish Regulation of Slavery in Louisiana, 1763–1803* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press.), 19–34. Herbert Aptheker, in a classic essay

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about maroon communities, identified about fifty in that part of North America within the present-day limits of the U.S.: 'Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States', in *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, ed. Richard Price (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 151–67 (repr. from *Journal of Negro History* 24 [1939]: 167–84).

<sup>20</sup> Steven Hahn, 'Hunting, Fishing, and Foraging: Common Rights and Class Relations in the Postbellum South', *Radical History Review* 26(1982): 37–64; Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1983), esp. chapter 7; and chapter 3 of Jack Temple Kirby's *Countercultural South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995). See also J. Crawford King, Jr., 'The Closing of the Southern Range: An Exploratory Study', *Journal of Southern History* 48(1982): 53–70; and Shawn E. Kantor, *Politics and Property Rights: The Closing of the Open Range in the Postbellum South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). The place to go to study how 'the State' sees and makes legible resources and public lands is John C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), esp. chapter 1, but *passim*.

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Lynn Brown, *The Wild East: A Biography of the Great Smoky Mountains* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Melvin Dixon discusses how this notion of wilderness as a place of deliverance was accentuated in slave spirituals and was meant to be taken literally as well as in the Biblical sense. See *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 1–28.

<sup>23</sup> 'The Bear' (*Go Down, Moses* version), in *Bear, Man, and God: Seven Approaches to William Faulkner's 'The Bear'*, eds. Francis Lee Utley, Lynn Z. Bloom, and Arthur F. Kinney (New York: Random House, 1964), 5–114, quotation on p. 7 This interpretation can likely be contested without much trouble. Faulkner's stories are wildly open to interpretation, and have generated a vast scholarship. Louise Westling, for example, looks at 'The Bear' in the context of Faulkner's other works, and sees a sometimes ambivalent, sometimes thoroughly hostile rejection of wild nature at the same time that he feminises it – an old trope by male writers, not just Southern ones, about both women and nature: Louise H. Westling, *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 101–24.

<sup>24</sup> James Hamilton Couper, 'Essay on Rotation of Crops', *Southern Agriculturist* 6 (Feb., March 1833): 57–66, 113–20. Couper recognised intuitively the significance of beneficial soil properties and food webs of micro- and other organisms that develop in soils that are not channeled into monocrop production. For a full discussion of Couper, planter conservation ideas, and 'green paternalism', see Stewart, 'What Nature Suffers to Groe', 182–8, 323–245, n74.

<sup>25</sup> For other discussions of the emergence of ecological sensibilities among southern planters, and especially leading Virginia agricultural reformer, Edmund Ruffin, see Joan E. Cashin, 'Landscape and Memory in Antebellum Virginia', *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 102 (Oct. 1994): 477–500; and Jack Temple Kirby, *Poquosin: A Study of Rural Landscape and Society* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 477–500 and his introduction to *Nature's Manager: Writings on Landscape and Reform* by Edmund Ruffin (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000). Richard Grove has recognised the antecedents to conservation thought among slave-holding planters,

though his work has focused not on the nineteenth-century South, but on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century colonial specialists in Dutch, French, and English colonies – island colonies, especially. See *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), esp. 2–15. Steven Stoll has more deliberately than any other scholar looked at the ecological sensibilities in agricultural reform in the South during this period, and links it up to similar developments north of the Mason-Dixon Line at the same time: *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002). But he does not adequately identify the extent to which southern agricultural reform was shaped by the institution of slavery and its place in a larger effort to reform slavery to address attacks from outside the region – and that all of the *work* of applied conservation in the South was done by slaves.

<sup>26</sup> See Mart A. Stewart, “‘Let Us Begin with the Weather?’: Climate, Race, and Cultural Distinctiveness in the American South’, *Nature and Society in Historical Context*, ed. Mikuláš Teich and Roy Porter (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 240–56. U.B. Phillips’ suggestion, ‘Let us begin with the weather’, from *Life and Labor in the Old South*, which is often quoted by historians of the South to introduce discussions of environmental influences needs to be re-examined: When antebellum Southerners developed an argument that used climate to justify slavery, as if the two were bound together in the same natural-as-nature arrangement, they *ended*, rather than *began*, with the weather.

<sup>27</sup> See Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 2, 128; Jack Temple Kirby, *The Countercultural South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 8–32. Kirby argues that deep traditions of negotiation and collective action have given African Americans more political power, once segregation was demolished, than poor whites – who have tended to withdraw into isolation or into individual acts of subversion. Some grassroots environmental actions have emerged out of poor white communities in the recent past, however: see Suzanne Marshall, *Lord, We’re Just Trying to Save Your Water’: Environmental Activism and Dissent in the Appalachian South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003). ‘Community’, by the way, was not here a cohesive unit, free of internal conflict – recent scholarship has shown that slave populations were no more free of competitiveness or conflicts with each other than any other human population: See, for example, Christopher Morris, ‘The Articulation of Two Worlds: The Master-Slave Relationship Reconsidered’, *Journal of American History* 85 (December 1998): 1001–2. And several important works of scholarship have warned scholars of slavery away from constructing a misty past where the ‘slave community’ or the ‘African American community’ had an utopian integrity that ignores time and place and more importantly the harsh and ultimately severely exploitative relationship of slaves to the institution of slavery. Whatever slaves were able to make for themselves they were still slaves, masters made them so, and work was the first reality of their lives. See Mark M. Smith, *Debating Slavery: Economy and Society in the Antebellum American South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 42–59.

<sup>28</sup> Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 360–61. Steven Hahn explains how rural black Southern culture was transported to urban places during the Great Migration, and there became the foundation for Garveyism and other important expressions of collective action and black nationalism: Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 465–78. For a review of the origins of African American environmentalism, see Mart Stewart, ‘Nature, Negotiation, and

Community: Slavery and the Origins of African American Environmentalism', in *To Love the Wind and the Rain': Essays in African American Environmental History*, eds. Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, forthcoming 2005)

<sup>29</sup> Otis Graham, 'Again the Backward Region: Environmental History In and Of the American South', *Southern Cultures* 6 (Summer 2000): 50–72. For another view of southern environmental history see Mart A. Stewart, 'Southern Environmental History', in John Boles, ed., *Blackwell Companion to the American South* (Blackwell, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> See Harry S. Ashmore, *An Epitaph for Dixie* (New York: Norton, 1958); Peter Applebone, *Dixie Rising: How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture* (New York and Toronto: Times Books, 1996); Richard N. Current, *Northernizing the South*, Mercer University Lamar Memorial Lectures No. 26 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983); James C. Cobb, *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1999); Carl N. Degler, 'Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis: The South, the North and the Nation', *Journal of Southern History* 52 (February 1987); Sheldon Hackney, 'The South as Counterculture', *American Scholar*, 42 (Spring 1973); and John Egerton, *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974). See also James C. Cobb's 'An Epitaph for the North: Reflections on the Politics of Regional and National Identity at the Millennium', *Journal of Southern History* (66 (February 2000): 3–24.

<sup>31</sup> C. Vann Woodward, 'The Irony of Southern History', *Journal of Southern History* 19 (February 1953): 3–6.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Carl Degler, *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971); Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russia Serfdom* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987); Stephen Hahn, 'Class and State in Postemancipation Societies: Planters in Comparative Perspective', *American Historical Review* 95 (February 1990): 75–98; George M. Fredrickson, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) and *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Other notable examples of comparative history include: Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975); Shearer Davis Bowman, *Masters and Lords: Mid-Nineteenth Century U.S. Planters and Prussian Junkers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Rebecca J. Scott, 'Defining the Boundaries of Freedom in the World of Cane: Cuba, Brazil, and Louisiana After Emancipation', *American Historical Review* 99 (February 1994): 70–102; Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, and Rebecca J. Scott, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina press, 2000); Kees Gispens, ed., *What Made the South Different?* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990). Peter Kolchin has reviewed as well as amplified the rich literature that has compared the South with 'Un-souths', kindred Souths, and other Souths in *A Sphinx on the American Land: The Nineteenth-Century South in Comparative Perspective* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003). A study that compares American and non-American historiography in environmental history is David Arnold, *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture and European Expansion* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996). And Paul Sutter's essay, 'What Can U.S Environmental



Historians Learn from Non-U.S. Environmental Historiography?’ which makes connections between emerging issues in American environmental history and what historians in the field have long been doing elsewhere, can be found in *Environmental History* 8 (January 2003): 109–129. For studies that argue the importance of comparing or connecting transnational environments, see Daniel Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 84–92; Stewart, ‘What Nature Suffers to Groe’, 93, 102; and Judith Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). An approach to nineteenth-century history that is both transregional and transnational and that engages processes that move from place to kindred place in important ways is outlined in Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies’, *Journal of American History* (December 2001): 829–865. See also most of the essays in Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> On agrarian revolt as struggle over access to resources and everything that this meant in the cultivated and uncultivated postbellum Southern landscape, see the many studies of the Populist movement in the South, but especially Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). The tenant farmers union movements in Alabama and Arkansas are other examples of agrarian revolt, where dispossessed farmers acted – sometimes violently – to protest the appropriation of land and access to resources both on and off the margins of the farms they worked. See Theodore Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 296–375; Robin Kelly, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997). For Native American and de-populating the National Parks, see: Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of National Parks* (Oxford University Press, 2000); and Robert H. Kellar, *American Indians and the National Parks* (University of Arizona Press, 1999). For struggles between rural residents and state conservation efforts on public lands (not in the South), see Louis Warren, *The Hunter’s Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); and Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>34</sup> A well-reasoned discussion of the need to reassess the environmental history of another important American region, New England, in terms that are more home-grown and less shaped by the scholarly agenda of environmental historians of the West can be found in Richard W. Judd’s ‘Writing Environmental History from East to West’, in Ben A. Minteer and Robert E. Manning, *Reconstructing Conservation: Finding Common Ground* (Washington: Island Press, 2003). Jack Temple Kirby and Don Davis are both currently completing volumes that will more thoroughly mark the environmental history of the American South.