African American Literature, Racial Vulnerability, and the Anthropocene

Reading W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* in the Twenty-First Century

Matthias Klestil

Abstract

This article discusses W. E. B. Du Bois's first novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), in the context of the broader debate on the role of race in the Anthropocene and in relation to Judith Butler's theory on corporeal vulnerability. Specifically, this article spotlights three particular ways in which rereading African American literature may enhance a more race-conscious Anthropocene discourse. Initially, this article demonstrates how Du Bois's text gives opportunity to trace African American vulnerabilities through various scales from the local to the planetary. A genealogy of African American racial vulnerability, I argue, can be vital for better understanding and acting against continuing forms of racism in the Anthropocene. This article continues by turning to Du Bois's representation of vulnerabilities as part of power relations, showing how African American epistemologies of resistance negotiate racial vulnerability. Lastly, this article examines how the novel plays with generic conventions to engage racial vulnerabilities, evincing an African American aesthetics of resistance and suggesting alternative forms of storytelling.

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Reading W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* in the Twenty-First Century

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In *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), Lawrence Buell took up W. E. B. Du Bois's famous prediction about the "color line" to rephrase that a still more pressing issue of the twenty-first century "may prove to be whether planetary life will remain viable for most of the earth's inhabitants."[1] Buell's claim was nearly visionary, as, today, an even greater amount of scientific evidence and an alarming increase in tangible effects of a changing climate around the globe leave little doubt that anthropogenic climate change will indeed shape our near and far-off future. Moreover, Buell's allusion to Du Bois was farsighted for hinting at links between race and the environment, which have become central to various branches of ecocriticism and the environmental humanities.

At the same time, however, and in light of the mushrooming discourse of the Anthropocene, which until recently has paid little attention to questions of race, Buell's parallelism also somewhat obfuscates the fact that Du Bois's work has much to say about "planetary life." His texts often not only move imaginatively through local, sectional, national, and global contexts but they also stress their entanglements, revealing interactions between humans and the nonhuman natural world. More than turning Du Bois into an environmental writer,[2] this tendency to expose racialization as shaping relations to nonhuman nature on various scales makes his work particularly relevant for exploring links between race and the Anthropocene. Du Bois and African American literature often address intersections between the problem of the "color line" (Du Bois) and the problem of the viability of "planetary life"

(Buell). Hence, though not sufficiently noted thus far,[3] such literature has much to say about the Anthropocene, as it records how changing constructions of race, concepts of the (non-)human, and racially inflected power relations, vulnerabilities, and resistance strategies contributed to the shaping of modernity. The African American literary tradition offers alternative analytical lenses and forms of storytelling that can be vital for critically addressing still largely underrepresented questions of race in the Anthropocene.

Following Rob Nixon in his assessment that many conceptualizations of the proposed new geological epoch have "marginalized questions of unequal human agency, unequal human impacts, and unequal human vulnerabilities,"[4] this essay turns to Du Bois's debut novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), to suggest ways in which African American literature speaks to the Anthropocene. As such, I focus on questions of vulnerability through concepts from African American studies and Judith Butler's notion of vulnerability as being tied to resistance. Butler's thought in particular provides a productive framework when turning to what I consider "racial vulnerability," understood here as such forms of vulnerability that, while rooted in an ontological human condition, are at the same time significantly shaped through social constructions, practices, and performances of race. Therefore, racial vulnerability is not to be equated with the vulnerability of African Americans, although in a US context the group thus designated has disproportionately experienced specific forms of racial vulnerability. Racial vulnerability, however, is most productive conceptually and as an analytical tool if understood more abstractly, as emerging and traceable through particular discursive contexts, racially inflected categories, bodies, and systemic distributive patterns. Even with my main objective being to (provide means to) explore how African American writing bears on the Anthropocene, through an ecocritical reading of Du Bois's novel, the following thereby also seeks to chart some of the general potentials of interlinking scholarship on vulnerability more extensively with Anthropocene thought.

To this end, after briefly contextualizing my argument within the broader debate on race in the Anthropocene, concepts from African American studies, and Butler's theory on vulnerability, I discuss *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* by spotlighting three ways in which rereading African American literature in the twenty-first century may enhance a more race-conscious Anthropocene discourse. I demonstrate how the novel gives opportunity to trace the workings and entanglements of African American racial vulnerabilities through various scales from the local to the planetary. A genealogy of African American racial vulnerabilities can be vital for a better understanding of, and acting against, continuing forms of racism in the Anthropocene. My argument continues by turning to Du Bois's representation of vulnerabilities as part of power relations, showing how African American epistemologies of resistance

negotiate racial vulnerability. Lastly, I briefly examine how the novel plays with generic conventions to engage (racial) vulnerabilities, evincing an African American aesthetics of resistance and suggesting alternative forms of storytelling.

Race, Vulnerability, Anthropocene

Both race and vulnerability are central to the concept of the Anthropocene. The latter is vital to the new geological epoch in at least two fundamental ways. On the one hand, the Anthropocene formalizes an ontological human vulnerability through the notion of a (self-destructive) species agency, the idea that "humanity acts on the planet as a geophysical force."[5] On the other hand, it is precisely this ontological human vulnerability of the Anthropocene that threatens to inhibit our view of unequally distributed vulnerabilities emerging through human history and extending into the present, for example, along race, class, or gender lines. Race and racialization are thus among the significant factors for the new geological epoch, as a growing debate on the Anthropocene and race, especially in the fields of (human) geography and (moral) philosophy, emphasizes. Noting an erasure of race in Anthropocene discourse, scholars such as Laura Pulido, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Kathryn Yusoff, and Nancy Tuana have recently come to address the need and provide models for exploring its role in the Anthropocene more rigorously.[6] Their research complements other critiques of the Anthropocene that revolt against the perception that the new epoch, through a "flattening we" of the human species, has inappropriately resurrected "a figure who reigns as a singular (masculine) 'species,'" thereby ensuring awareness that the Anthropocene also needs to be seen as a racial process.[7]

My reading of Du Bois's novel focuses specifically on the text's negotiation of racial vulnerability in relation to the Anthropocene—i.e., on such forms of vulnerability that, while rooted in an ontological human condition, are at the same time significantly shaped through social constructions, practices, and performances of race. Thus, yet another set of relations becomes central to my argument, namely the manifold interlinkages between race and vulnerability, which have become an object of study in a variety of fields and contexts over the past few decades. While links between race and vulnerability have been addressed in (some of the) research that explicitly focuses on vulnerability, some of the most relevant contributions in this respect stem from other fields, such as US ethnic studies or the field of primary interest in the present context, African American studies. Though not explicitly under the rubric of vulnerability studies, the latter, often through revisions of entire disciplines such as anthropology or geography and their racist pasts, has frequently produced concepts that centrally involve questions of vulnerability, as African American studies scholars have turned to the various "afterlives of slavery."[8] Demonstrating how productive vulnerability as a concept may be, a host of major studies in the field have

dealt with forms of racial vulnerability in diverse contexts ranging from the Middle Passage and gender roles during Jim Crow, to surveillance, imprisonment, and the COVID-19 pandemic.[9] Such scholarship is broadly reflective of how "in the United States, our economy, our cultural frameworks and repertoires, and our government policies have been shaped by a history of racial relations and racially inflected decision making," thus forming an immediate context for my ecocritical readings.[10]

Beyond drawing from such theory, I want to take a step back to sketch briefly and more generally how African American literature may speak to Anthropocene discourse via notions of vulnerability. Butler's ideas about corporeal vulnerability offer a productive framework in this respect, as they help highlight how linking racial vulnerability and the Anthropocene may enrich a rereading of the African American literary tradition and can therefore be particularly fruitful for three reasons.

Firstly, I read Butler's deconstructivist focus on the human as being intimately related to African American literary and critical discourse, which, as Cornel West once succinctly pointed out, always "was meant to try to redefine what it means to be human."[11] While traditional views often diagnosed a tendency to move "into" humanity out of a position of the systematically de-humanized, recent studies such as those by Lindgren Johnson, Yusoff, and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson are questioning this assessment, arguing against interpretations of African American and Black diasporic literature as reacting to racialization through a mere "plea for human recognition."[12] Instead, they propose that African American resistance strategies, while engaging dehumanizing racialization, often rejected rather than embraced liberal humanism's assumptions.[13] Such views correspond with Butler's notion of vulnerability, which likewise rejects a "foundational, transcendentally understood human subject,"[14] and which is particularly productive in the present context, as it provides a concrete tool for examining US racial thought in relation to vulnerability: what Butler terms "name-calling." Taking into account practices of "name-calling," understood as being "vulnerable to, and affected by, discourses that we never chose,"[15] speaks to African American literature, which has negotiated such practices for centuries. Butler's theory thus helps describe how systemic, changing forms of "name-calling" shaped not only racial vulnerabilities but also resistance strategies.

Secondly, Butler's thinking on vulnerability is productive in an African American context because it employs a lens that not only seeks "to show that vulnerability is part of resistance" but one that also explicitly refuses to view vulnerability as being primarily "victimization and passivity"—i.e., the opposite of autonomy, agency, and resistance.[16] Vulnerability in this sense, while being "an existential condition," is simultaneously also "a socially induced condition."[17] It is part of political and cultural practices, since it "always operates within a tactical field,"[18] and is therefore enmeshed in

relations of power, which by extension (as Michel Foucault so adamantly stressed) always hold the potential of resistance. Such an understanding of the concept enriches the reading of vulnerability in African American literature not only because it opens up new ways through which relations of racial vulnerability in this literary discourse can be disentangled, but also because this discourse itself often explicitly lays out and practices vulnerability as a productive rather than repressive concept. The African American literary tradition, after all, frequently exhibits a tendency to not victimize the vulnerable (whether humans or non-humans), to not categorically disconnect or eradicate forms of autonomy and agency from their plight. Instead, diverse texts, ranging from classic fugitive slave narratives to Du Bois's novels and into the present, abundantly show forms of vulnerability as conditions rather than opposites of enacting resistance—a thought that is also central to recent scholarship in African American studies, which celebrates resistance down to the level of what Hartman calls "the radical practice of everyday life."[19] Thus, Butler's proposal that vulnerability is intimately linked to resistance resonates strongly in this body of literature, making her standpoint an expedient tool to highlight what is often at the core of African American literature: racial vulnerability.

Thirdly, it is vital in the present context that Butler's approach refrains from privileging either ontological or discursive facets of vulnerability. Insofar as she focuses on the body, vulnerability always has an ontological dimension, as clarified in her assertion that "without shelter, we are vulnerable to weather, cold, heat, and disease, perhaps also to assault, hunger, and violence."[20] Yet, Butler at the same time stresses that any concrete form of vulnerability cannot emerge without also being constructed, since "the body is constitutively social and interdependent."[21] The primary way in which Butler's understanding of vulnerability thereby intersects with the Anthropocene is that it corresponds with one of the fundamental conceptual dichotomies that Anthropocene scholarship has offered thus far: what postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty terms the distinction between *homo* and *anthropos*. Chakrabarty reads the Anthropocene as a collision between different conceptions of the human, which corresponds with a new understanding of history that witnesses "the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history."[22] In his "pragmatic distinction" between *homo* (the human as cultural and social being) and *anthropos* (the human as biological creature and species among others), the human emerges "simultaneously on contradictory registers: as geophysical force and as political agent, as a bearer of rights and as author of actions; subject to both the stochastic forces of nature (being itself one such force collectively) and open to the contingency of individual human experience; belonging at once to differently-scaled histories of the planet, of life and species, and of human societies."[24]

This doubled figure of the human Chakrabarty describes corresponds somewhat to Butler's notion of corporeal vulnerability having ontological and discursive dimensions, yet the two theories are nonetheless significantly incongruent. Butler's theory becomes particularly useful in an Anthropocene context, I believe, because it does not explicitly address the former, ontological dimension, via "upscaling." Butler does not base her twofold concept of vulnerability primarily along a trajectory of grand spatial and temporal scales in the way the Anthropocene does, yet nevertheless shares with Chakrabarty a mode of speaking "simultaneously on contradictory registers." This *only partial* overlapping, the way in which Butlerian theory is sufficiently vague regarding scales but immensely concrete regarding corporeality, is crucial. By understanding the body as "less an entity than a relation" that "cannot be fully dissociated from the infrastructural and environmental conditions of its living,"[25] Butlerian vulnerability includes *homo* and *anthropos*, yet refrains from aligning them with those Anthropocene scales regarded by many as barely accessible through human experience, imagination, or narrative. Vulnerability may thus become a means of interlinking and articulating Anthropocene forms of experience, with the process of translation between Butler's and Chakrabarty's ideas being key, as it marks an analytical potential of vulnerability in relation to the Anthropocene through a partial incongruence along the simultaneity of the ontological and the discursive. Vulnerability, in this sense, provides a powerful language for describing versions of human existence in the Anthropocene, a means of addressing transitions between scales of being in the Anthropocene without "upscaling."

Since tracing such transitions means telling "the story of human empires—of colonial, racial, and gendered oppressions—in tandem with the larger story of how …*Homo sapiens* came to dominate. . . this planet,"[26] exploring perspectives such as that of the African American literary tradition is essential. What is central to this particular tradition—histories of enslavement, Jim Crow, ongoing (if more hidden forms of) racism—is also integral to the structures and practices that produced the Anthropocene. Reading African American perspectives via a (Butlerian) lens that focuses on racial vulnerability through the category of the human, forms of resistance, and vulnerability as being simultaneously ontological and discursive can serve to highlight alternative genealogies, epistemologies, and aesthetics of race in the Anthropocene. Thus, the following turns to *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* to spotlight a threefold potential of African American literature in the twenty-first century, as it speaks to the Anthropocene through genealogies of racial vulnerability, thereby suggesting epistemologies and aesthetics of resistance.

Genealogies of African American Racial Vulnerability

A first potential of the African American literary tradition, with respect to exploring race in the Anthropocene, concerns how it chronicles various forms of racialized structures, practices, and vulnerabilities as a factor in humankind's rise as a geophysical power. What Pulido observes in a contemporary global context, namely that "the distribution of risk, vulnerability, and death (still) follows along pre-existing lines of racial inequality,"[27] also holds true for the US in particular. A racism of indifference, "a certain privilege to be able to overlook race" runs through Anthropocene discourse, showing "how quickly we seem to forget all the work that has been done to establish how and why so many people have been designated as nonhuman and bought and sold as material objects."[28] Rereading African American literature works against this forgetfulness, since the tradition often traces those "pre-existing lines of racial inequality" that Pulido and many others demand taking into account more thoroughly. A genealogy of African American racial vulnerability that charts "how and why so many people have been designated as nonhuman" is vital for understanding and acting against continuing forms of racism in the Anthropocene.[29]

The Quest of the Silver Fleece contributes to such a genealogy in elaborate ways, being partly a realist critique of the cotton industry and sharecropping and partly a sentimental romance revolving around its Black protagonists—Zora, a local descendant of slaves who grows up in an Alabamian swamp, and Bles, who arrives in the area to attend the local school. Critics have usually read the text as fictionalization of themes that Du Bois had introduced in earlier works. The novel, for example, echoes sociological studies such as *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), essays such as "The Study of the Negro Problems" (1898) and "The Talented Tenth" (1903), and the groundbreaking *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Its sentimentalism has earned the text negative assessments from some scholars and reviewers, while others have viewed Du Bois's cotton novel more positively as a fictionalized sociological tract that examines the role of the Black elite, peonage, and education philosophies around the turn of the century, lavishly mixing genres of romance and realism. Though its reception history, the fact that *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* defies neat categorization in African American literary history, and the minor status of fiction in Du Bois's oeuvre may explain the text's relative neglect in scholarship, it is nonetheless surprising that the novel has not received more ecocritical attention to date.[30]

For a genealogy of African American racial vulnerability in the Anthropocene, Du Bois's crowded text presents a rich archive that records how racialization and racism manifested in political, economic, and cultural practices in the early twentieth-century United States. The novel, for example, employs (stereotyped) characters to represent pseudo-scientific forms of racism ("sociologist" Mr. Bocombe), patronizingly

racist philanthropy (Northern schoolteacher Mary Taylor), Northern capitalism (her brother John), and the Old South (Colonel Cresswell). Thus, Du Bois demonstrates the working of schemes that seek to align the commercial interests of Wall Street, federal politics, and sectional sentiments, aiming, for example, to prevent alliances between social groups such as formerly enslaved African Americans and poor whites, to ensure the ongoing exploitation of both.

The novel's particular significance in an Anthropocene context, however, lies in Du Bois's sophisticated fusing of a portrayal of post-Reconstruction Southern peonage and its local distribution of (racial) vulnerabilities with a representation of interconnected global structures and practices. On the one hand, the text, set primarily in Alabama's Black Belt, deploys an elaborate panoramic technique to depict racially inflected forms of vulnerability by giving detailed accounts of the atrocious sharecropping system. A chapter titled "The Promise," set on land largely owned by the novel's representatives of the Old South, the Cresswell family, who barely tolerate and constantly sabotage the local Tooms School, an education project for descendants of the formerly enslaved run by New Englander Sarah Smith, exemplifies this technique. The omniscient narrative voice, focalized through the school's headmistress who nods off in her office, moves on:

> As she slept an old woman came toiling up the hill northward from the school, and out of the eastward spur of the Cresswell barony . . . Her face was dull and heave and homely, her old eyes sorrowful . . . Opposite her, to the southward, but too far for sight, an old man came out of the lower Cresswell place, skirting the swamp. He was tall, black, and gaunt, part bald with tufted hair, and a cowed and furtive look was in his eyes. One leg was crippled, and he hobbled painfully . . . A woman, hurrying out of the westward swamp up the path that led from Elspeth's, saw him [the young plantation owner] and shrank back hastily. She turned quickly into the swamp and waited, looking toward the school.[31]

Readers will recognize the (minor) characters thus described, all of whom the novel has already briefly mentioned by then; they will have a vague idea about Aunt Rachel (the "old woman"), Jim Sykes (the "old man"), and Bertie (the woman who "shrank back"). Yet, the manner in which Du Bois anonymizes these characters in the scene via a panoramic perspective, embedding them in the localities through which they move, only to refocus on each separately as the chapter continues and they enter Sarah Smith's office one by one, presents an effective way of stressing that their individual vulnerability is simultaneously communal. Du Bois thus links his characters' racial vulnerability to the prevailing system of the "Cresswell domain that lay like a mighty hand around the school"—a system that tellingly works smoothly on its own, while the focalizer of the scene falls asleep—and at the same time individualizes their fate.[32] As we learn more about Aunt Rachel, whose boys were sentenced

to labor in the chain gang for minor offenses, Jim Sykes, who was seriously injured through back-breaking work, and Bertie, who was forced into prostitution and wants to protect her baby, Du Bois's technique becomes a powerful means of representing racial vulnerability in its interlinkages with other forms of vulnerability. These include connections to a racialized criminal justice system, health threats, economic exploitation, and especially the sexual exploitation of female Black bodies, as readers gradually learn not only of Bertie's but of the main character Zora's sexual abuse as an adolescent, at the hands of the local plantation owner Harry Cresswell, in the adjoining swamp.

On the other hand, Du Bois simultaneously often zooms out of this local setting to reveal wider national and global entanglements of an African American racial vulnerability. His narrative technique, in this respect, corresponds with Chakrabarty's suggestion "to scale up our imagination of the human" in the Anthropocene.[33] The novel deploys a form of "spatial upscaling" by considering how the local, race-based semi-slavery of sharecropping and convict leases intertwine with global (capitalist) practices that have large-scale effects. Thus, although the text came into existence long before the notion of the Anthropocene was around, and even as the motivation for its upscaling overtly lies in resisting the oppression of early twentieth-century US racism, Du Bois's strategy is significant for drawing attention to how racialization and racism contributed to turning humans into a geophysical force. One of the most striking passages in this respect occurs at the beginning of a chapter tellingly titled "Cotton":

> The cry of the naked was sweeping the world. From the peasant toiling in Russia, the lady lolling in London, the chieftain burning in Africa, and the Esquimaux freezing in Alaska; from long lines of hungry men, from patient sad-eyed women, from old folk and creeping children went up the cry, "Clothes, clothes!" Far away the wide black land that belts the South, where Miss Smith worked and Miss Taylor drudged and Bles and Zora dreamed, the dense black land sensed the cry and heard the bound of answering life within the vast dark breast. All that dark earth heaved in mighty travail with the bursting bolls of the cotton while black attendant earth spirits swarmed above, sweating and crooning to its birth pains.[34]

Spatially "scaling up" the imagination, Du Bois in such moments inserts a global dimension into his detailed depictions of locally and individually identified vulnerable African American characters. Describing vulnerability with an emphasis on both ontological and constructed facets, the passage simultaneously speaks to the human as *homo* and *anthropos*. It alludes to an existential vulnerability of human bodies—i.e., to the *anthropos*—by representing humans as a life form vulnerable to the forces of its environs. *All* bodies are "freezing;" the ubiquitous demand for literally covering a

condition of defenselessness suggests an ontological vulnerability of the human as a biological creature, independent of discursively constructed racializing caesurae. Du Bois plays with a metaphorical power of nakedness to express Butler's assertion that "without shelter, we are vulnerable to weather, cold, heat, and disease."[35] Not just the explicit reference to a "cry of the naked," but also the use of adjectives such as "hungry," "sad-eyed," "old," and "creeping" convey a sense of an ontological vulnerability of the human animal that corresponds with the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene.

Simultaneously, however, by pointing to the diversity of circumstances under which this vulnerability occurs, Du Bois also brings a discursive dimension into play, thus alluding to the *homo*. The novel interlinks an ontological facet of human vulnerability with the social conditioning and distribution of racial vulnerability in two ways. Firstly, Du Bois anthropomorphizes the materiality of the Black Belt; for example, when describing how "the dense black land sensed the cry" of the naked. This technique connects the "dark earth" with "black attendant earth spirits"[36]—i.e., the local African American population, whose panoramically portrayed vulnerabilities are thus revealed as being shaped locally by material conditions, power struggles, and gender relations, as well as being related to global structures. Secondly, what scholars have recognized as the central theme and symbol of the novel, cotton (the titular "silver fleece"), also serves as a means of interlinking Anthropocene facets of vulnerability. Besides figuring as a "hyperobject" or giving rise to particularized forms of talk,[37] cotton in the novel becomes a poetic means to interconnect two (Anthropocene) dimensions of vulnerability. While its substance gains an ontological dimension with respect to vulnerability, as a means to prevent an ontological vulnerability of naked, freezing human bodies, the matter of cotton also intersects with a discursive dimension of vulnerability, being centrally involved in distributing forms of vulnerability via racialized power relations on a local level. Cotton, in this sense, works as what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert call a "*matterphor*, a tropic-material coil, word and substance together transported,"[38] binding together dimensions of vulnerability of the Anthropocene, as it relates the human as an "animal in need of cover" (*anthropos*) to the human as an "animal capable of providing cover" (*homo*). Ultimately, Du Bois's upscaling of the imagination through anthropomorphization and a "matterphorical" use of cotton that links *homo* and *anthropos* make his text significant for Anthropocene discourse. Revealing intersections between local forms of racial vulnerability and planetary processes, practices, and structures, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* exemplifies the potential and importance of genealogies of African American racial vulnerability in moving against a racism of indifference.

African American Epistemologies of Resistance

The Quest of the Silver Fleece, rather than merely mourning the atrocious conditions under which its African American characters have to live in the Black Belt, also celebrates the poetry of Black work and life, thus embracing a resistance potential of (racial) vulnerability. Du Bois's linking of his "black attendant earth spirits" to the "black land" foreshadows the most elevating moment of the novel,[39] when sharecroppers, led by Zora, eventually begin determining their own fate by cultivating the swamp, thereby proposing African American epistemologies of resistance that arise from a spiritual connection to the land. In the novel, such epistemologies manifest in the form of an environmental knowledge emerging from a particular space: the swamp bordering the Cresswell plantation. The text thereby reflects not only the historical role of swamps as spaces of resistance (marooning, laying out) but also signifies the swamp as an African American literary space traditionally conceptualized as both haunting and empowering. Accordingly, Du Bois sometimes stresses the "horror of the swamp" that lies in the fear and disorientation its wilderness evokes and in the human cruelties that have often marked wilderness from African American perspectives.[40] His primary symbol of these cruelties is the cabin of Elspeth, Zora's mother and the local conjurer. A place of drinking, gambling, and sexual exploitation, her home represents a kind of unrestrained, atrocious (white) human power, thus stressing the continuation of racial and gendered forms of vulnerability after abolition. The cabin, after all, marks the root of Bles and Zora's estrangement, giving rise to the central conflict of the novel, as he learns of her "impurity" resulting from her sexual abuse as an adolescent by Harry Cresswell at Elspeth's.

While thus signifying on the threatening elements of African American wilderness narratives that link such spaces to the (racial) vulnerability of female Black bodies, Du Bois's portrayal also stresses a potential empowerment through the swamp's association with African American environmental knowledge. Central in this respect is Zora and Bles's growing of cotton, the "silver fleece," their act of gardening in the swamp. When the protagonists discover "a long island" with immensely fertile soil, the swamp's "virgin and black" grounds provide the material means to resist the exploitations of the plantation system, via a form of knowledge that recognizes co-agencies of nonhuman nature.[41] Zora exemplifies such an environmental knowledge in relation to the swamp's wilderness—e.g., in her reaction to a group of rabbits that try to feed off the "silver fleece." Driving them off and catching one of them, "she talked to it earnestly: 'Brer Rabbit—poor little Brer Rabbit, don't you know you mustn't eat Zora's cotton?'" Empathic and careful not to harm the nonhuman inhabitants of the swamp, "she would show it where she had gathered piles of fragrant weeds for it and its fellows," thus expressing both an environmental ethos regarding her surroundings and highlighting that this attitude stems from a long-standing African Amer-

ican legacy of relating to the wilderness.[42] Her address ("Brer Rabbit") echoes Black folk culture, suggesting that the Black vernacular tradition had long-established, close epistemological and ethical ties to the wilderness, in ways distinct from, and resistant to, the exploitative ones that characterize the plantation system.

In parallel with his strategy regarding the representation of African American vulnerability, Du Bois "scales up" this epistemology of resistance emerging through the swamp as well, by weaving its space into the novel in three ways. Firstly, the swamp becomes a presence via its close association with the main character; Zora is inseparable from the swamp, having "been born within its borders; within its borders she had lived and grown."[43] Du Bois's strategy in this respect is a risky one, considering that the portrayed (enforced) sexual digressiveness of the main character potentially links her racial and sexual vulnerability with the criminalizing discourses of (Black) "wayward girlhood" of the time that Hartman describes in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019). In this context, as Hainze points out, the novel's "depiction of Zora's development sharply accentuates the liminal position of the wayward black girl in the South."[44] At the same time, however, this social marginalization and pathologization, in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, entails a spatial and environmental liminality that, from an ecocritical perspective, translates into a means of empowerment. The fact that Zora is not merely presented as vulnerable to being marginalized as "immoral," through discourses that practiced a backlash against Black women, but, to use McKittrick's term, also becomes "ungeographic" through her links to the swamp,[45] means that she can practice an environmental resistance via this place, as part of her vulnerability, that she can imagine and create alternatives. Her love for Bles, after all, is rooted here, in the swamp, as is her intimate knowledge of how to plant the "silver fleece" and her motivation for counteracting oppression and the way in which she ultimately assumes her role as a leader, to lift her people out of the conditions of semi-slavery that the novel criticizes. Wherever Zora, the "child of the swamp," moves, the swamp and its resistance potential also move, including the towns, fields, and plantations she visits in Alabama, as well as Northern urbanities.[46]

Secondly, Du Bois's narrative technique employs intermittent flashbacks to fuse the swamp as a presence into the novel, when Zora and Bles, after breaking off their engagement, separately move to Washington, DC. There, Bles quickly rises to prominence in a presidential campaign but is eventually too honest and idealistic to survive the machinations of the capital's corrupted politics, while Zora, remaining in the background, seeks to work secretly as his inspiration. Throughout, the swamp continually recurs through both characters in allusions and flashbacks. For example, Bles, when observing the city of Washington, finds that it "somehow looked like the swamp" and, in a "lofty waiting-room of the Washington station," suddenly forgets

"everything but the field of the Silver Fleece." Zora also links her experiences to the swamp on various occasions, as she repeatedly "lived it all again—the red cabin, the moving oak, the sowing of the Fleece, and its fearful reaping."[47] Thus, the swamp, through Du Bois's use of internal focalization, remains a presence within various settings, as Zora even likens New York City to her home, marveling that the place itself "was like the swamp, always restless and changing," but "not nearly so beautiful."[48]

Most importantly, however, the third way in which Du Bois weaves the swamp and environmental knowledge into his novel's diegetic world lies in a continuous material presence of the swamp-grown cotton in the form of a wedding dress. This piece of clothing, of which Zora coincidentally gains possession and which takes on "a fetishistic quality,"[49] symbolizes the continued life of the "silver fleece." The central substance of cotton thereby attains an additional meaning through Du Bois's "upscaling" of an African American epistemology of resistance. As the (transformed) materiality of the swamp returns, remaining a material presence throughout the novel and travelling in Zora's trunk out into the world, cotton, through its spiritual potential from an African American perspective, gains yet another dimension beyond relating to *homo* and *anthropos*. The latter two Anthropocene dimensions, expressed through cotton as "matterphor," interlink in Du Bois's imagination with cotton as matter of African American epistemic resistance, represented rather melodramatically through the dress as a "talisman new-found."[50] Ultimately, both deploying the swamp to suggest a de-anthropocentrizing African American environmental knowledge and the described "upscaling" of such knowledge through the main character, a narrative technique using flashbacks and the extended matterphor of cotton deny victimization of Du Bois's cast, in the face of racial vulnerability.

African American Aesthetics of Resistance

Another means by which Du Bois denies victimization of his Black characters and conceptualizes vulnerability as part of resistance pertains to the novel's play with genre, which evinces an African American aesthetics of resistance. In turning to the new geological epoch, one of the primary concerns of literary scholars has been the question of storytelling in the Anthropocene. "If the Anthropocene indeed calls for a scaling-up of the imagination," Ursula Heise sums up what is at stake, "How might that imagination translate into narrative? What characters and plot architectures would it involve? What models do existing narrative forms offer for telling the story of our climate-changed presents and futures?"[51] Whatever the answers to such questions may ultimately turn out to be, it is clear that assessments of the efficiency of different literary forms in narrating the Anthropocene have so far largely agreed in at least one respect: declaring the (realist) novel problematic. Diagnosed by

many as a symptom of the Holocene, there is an overwhelming skepticism regarding the potential of the novel's formal strategies for representing the Anthropocene. In Jesse Oak Taylor's words, "the novel form is at once the product of and a participant in the social, historical, economic, and ecological forces responsible for bringing the Holocene to an end, framing the novel itself as a signature of the end-Holocene event." Thus, he suggests "a more expansive conception of *fiction* over and against the novel as such, in order to meet the demands of Anthropocene storytelling" and argues that "the novel must now confront the reality of a world after the Holocene stability in which it was conceived."[52]

While I generally agree that the novel's anthropocentrism earns it a problematic status in relation to the Anthropocene, a turn to African American writing nonetheless provides (more) evidence that this criticism does not apply to all types of novels and novelistic traditions. In the case of African American literature (and this is already visible with respect to narrating alternative epistemologies), it is often precisely the disruption and absence of a sense of "Holocene stability" that is at stake, since such stability, in a thoroughly racialized US society, was rarely perceivable from this tradition's perspective. If, as Ghosh reminds us, the "Anthropocene has reversed the temporal order of modernity," meaning that "those at the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us,"[53] the question is whether African American literature in particular has not at many points included such an anticipation of Anthropocene experience, by signifying on various traditions. In relation to the novel, for example, has it not confronted "the reality of a world after the Holocene stability in which it [novel] was conceived" all along,[54] and is this confrontation not central to texts such as *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, thus marking another potential of reading African American literature as Anthropocene literature? If what Nancy Armstrong says is true, namely that "the history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, one and the same,"[55] it seems only logical that a transformed novelistic tradition from the perspective of those systematically excluded from modern subjectivity and perception of a Holocene stability must break up generic frames and conventions.

Hence, while others have responded by suggesting generic alternatives, such as the epic (Ghosh), the romance (Taylor), or science fiction (Heise), I wish to close my argument by briefly hinting at ways in which African American literature may offer viable aesthetic forms for the Anthropocene. Therefore, extending the question of storytelling in the Anthropocene, to include the African American tradition, means asking how narrative strategies of writing against race, of rejecting the human of a Holocene stability, and of resisting through vulnerability also move against fundamental processes of categorization and principles of closure that have driven

the life of a species growing into a geophysical force. In addition to what I have suggested thus far regarding a "scaling up" within both genealogies of racial vulnerability and epistemologies of resistance, I propose that Du Bois's novel also speaks to the Anthropocene in (at least) two senses by resisting fundamental principles of closure and control through its aesthetics.

The first way in which *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* does this is by providing an alternative African American vision of the settlement and cultivation of the swamp. Beyond breaking with traditional Western perspectives that regularly viewed such spaces "with fear rather than admiration …, to be filled or drained where possible,"[56] it is significant that the swamp is eventually cultivated by the African American sharecroppers in a manner that breaks with principles of closure and control by partially resisting colonialist logics. Partially, since in some ways the novel's depiction of the clearing and settling of the swamp no doubt echoes the violence found in dominant US settler narratives (e.g., a Turnerian frontier myth that emerged powerfully only a decade before Du Bois wrote his text). After Zora buys the swamp, the sharecroppers, in a communal effort, begin to penetrate its thick wilderness; the novel vividly describes how "the forest trembled as by some mighty magic, swaying and falling with crash on crash. Huge bonfires blazed and crackled, until at last a wide black scar appeared in the thick south side of the swamp, which widened and widened to full twenty acres."[57] The depiction leaves no doubt regarding the violent nature of the process, its destruction of nonhuman nature that is key to traditional Euro-American settler narratives. The cultivation of the swamp means, at the same time, its partial disappearance, as readers ultimately find Zora sitting in a "transformed swamp—now a swamp in name only—beneath the great oak dreaming."[58]

Yet, Du Bois's last depiction of Zora is significant regarding his take on the cultivation of the swamp, since the "great oak" signals that the process of transformation is not one of complete, utter destruction and exploitation for mere economic profit, which marks the plantation logic and colonialist desires. The novel, at this point, breaks with a principle of closure and absolute control by emphasizing instead, through the transformation of the swamp, a continuing co-existence and spiritual interaction between human and nonhuman entities and vulnerabilities that remain connected beyond the process of a cultivation that emerges from an African American environmental knowledge. Du Bois proposes that the black settlers, as "earth-spirits," gain their humanity precisely because they remain linked with the nonhuman materialities they transform because, alluding to Donna Haraway's phrase, they "make kin" through mutual transformation, rather than produce the human as ontological category, by disconnecting themselves in an act of subduing wilderness.[59] The text's strategy ultimately provides no closure narratively (in the novel), no justification culturally (as manifest destiny), and no human category essentially (of race). Instead,

this strategy reflects (resistance through) the doubled figure of the human in the Anthropocene: tricking the plantation owner into selling the swamp figures clearly as resistance to the Old South's racism, while the settling of the swamp simultaneously suggests a material process set against a Holocene logic of closure and control.

Secondly, and relatedly, the novel denies victimization through vulnerability and aesthetically resists essentializing categories and closure through its main character as a "fallen" but non-dying heroine. Zora represents a particular form of vulnerability, also through violent contemporary discourses of "colored waywardness," that is inscribed into her female Black body, being not only an unusually dark-skinned African character, as scholars have often noted,[60] but also Du Bois's means to expose and defy the rigid morals regarding "purity" of the (Victorian) novel. The protagonist—against her will and precisely due to this vulnerability—is not "pure" in the expected sense, which would normally deal her character a death sentence in the genre, and Du Bois does not refrain from letting Bles articulate this verdict explicitly: "You should have *died*!"[61] Du Bois, however, lets his novel go on with a living and ultimately thriving victim of white male aggression. The (generically highly unlikely) eventual reunion of the lovers not only represents a redemption of Black womanhood in an empathic denial of victimization of the text's vulnerable main character, but it also suggests that neither Zora's death, in accordance with generic demands, nor the narrative templates and modes of knowledge that the novel form promotes offer Black writers viable strategies. Du Bois instead implies that such templates and modes are not feasible from a perspective of the racially vulnerable, suggesting that alternative, transformed narrative templates and modes are necessary to revise the norms, morals, and principles of closure and control that govern the (Victorian) novel form. Eventually, the text's play with concepts of virginity and purity thereby also bears Anthropocene dimensions, as the discrepancy between generic expectation and actual plot development hints at how *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* reflects on a twofold mode of thinking the human that relates to the distinction between *homo* and the *anthropos*. It ultimately shows, decades before the Anthropocene was formally introduced, that the enlightenment distinction between "man as moral species" and "man as animal species" could hardly be upheld from an African American perspective—that, to use Chakrabarty's terms, the "Kantian fable of human history" is, for some, even then "coming under strain in unprecedented ways."[62] If it is true that, through the Anthropocene, the notion of "moral life representing a zone of freedom" must be reconsidered, recognizing that we cannot afford to think any longer that "the needs of our animal life will be attended to by the planet itself,"[53] Du Bois's text indeed addresses issues that lie at the heart of contemporary debates. Written from a perspective that could not easily experience moral life as a zone of freedom due to racialization, and through its negotiation of racial vulnerability in

which moral and animal life meet, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* does address fundamental Anthropocene questions.

Conclusion

My reading of Du Bois's novel suggests that African American literature has much to say with respect to (race in) the Anthropocene, as the tradition often simultaneously speaks to both Du Bois's "color line" and Buell's "planetary life." Rereading such literature via a (Butlerian) focus on racial vulnerability and through the Anthropocene has broader implications for a variety of fields and questions. Without suggesting exhaustiveness, I believe that there are at least three primary directions in which future research might move. First, it is my hope that my interpretation of Du Bois's first venture into fiction and its tracing of the genealogical, epistemological, and aesthetic potentials of African American literature may invite additional reinterpretations of classic works along similar lines. An ecocritical reading of *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* through the lens of racial vulnerability implies that other African American novels of the (early) twentieth century, by writers such as Charles Waddell Chesnutt, Jean Toomer, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright, are also worth reconsidering as parts of an African American literary archive that chronicles racial vulnerabilities that have shaped our Anthropocene past and present. Secondly, in relation to vulnerability studies but also other fields that turn to questions of vulnerability (e.g., US ethnic studies, African American studies), my rereading of Du Bois's novel stresses once more the breadth of resistance potentials that may emerge from diverse forms of vulnerability and therefore might further inspire more investigations of the environmental dimensions of resistance through vulnerability. In other words, it may contribute to including ecocritical potentials more extensively in explorations of the "double edge of vulnerability—its connection to regulation, subjugation, and death on one hand, and its power to bring together and mobilize political agency on the other," while at the same time encouraging more work that explicitly focuses on vulnerability in ecocriticism.[64]

Lastly, and perhaps most critically, rereading African American literature along the suggested lines should contribute to raising more awareness in Anthropocene scholarship regarding the significant role of racial processes in the making and shaping of the new geological epoch. Although the Anthropocene, as a concept, must remain rooted in the natural sciences to have meaning, we cannot risk forgetting race as a human historical factor shaping the new age, also because racialization and racism continue to affect contemporary life in systemic, often hidden ways, and on various scales, perpetuating (racial) vulnerabilities created in the past. If this happened (and, sadly, there are signs that it might), the Anthropocene could lose its distinct political potential, its hopefulness, and agency as a form of discourse. Texts such as *The*

Quest of the Silver Fleece and African American literature can be vital in this respect, as a means of acting against an imminent amnesia about race and an Anthropocene racism of indifference, by providing much needed genealogies as well as alternative forms of knowledge and narrative techniques for our current moment.

Notes

1 Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), v.

2 Ecocriticism on Du Bois typically focuses on his non-fiction, especially *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and includes contributions e.g. by Scott Hicks, "W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Richard Wright: Toward an Ecocriticism of Color," *Callaloo* 29, no. 1 (2006), DOI: 10.1353/cal.2006.0054; Anne Raine, "Du Bois's Ambient Poetics: Rethinking Environmental Imagination in *The Souls of Black Folk*," *Callaloo* 36, no. 2 (2013), DOI: 10.1353/cal.2013.0129; Michael J. Beilfuss, "Ironic Pastorals and Beautiful Swamps: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Troubled Landscapes of the American South," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 22, no. 3 (2015), DOI: 10.1093/isle/isv025. A chapter in John Claborn's *Civil Rights and the Environment in African-American Literature* (2018) provides an insightful reading of Du Bois's autobiographical collection *Darkwater* (1920); John Claborn, *Civil Rights and the Environment in African-American Literature, 1895–1941* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

3 Readings of African American literature that focus explicitly on the Anthropocene are rare so far. A recent exception that turns to the Anthropocene and Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) is found in Rebekah Taylor-Wisemen, "Reading *Cane* in the Anthropocene: Toomer on Race, Power, and Nature," *Mississippi Quarterly* 70/71, no. 3 (2017/2018), DOI: 10.1353/mss.2017.0018.

4 Rob Nixon, "Anthropocene 2," in *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment*, ed. Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 45.

5 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Anthropocene 1," in *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment*, ed. Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 39.

6 Laura Pulido, "Racism and the Anthropocene," in *Future Remains: A Cabinet of Curiosities for the Anthropocene*, ed. Gregg Mitman, Marco Armiero, and Robert S. Emmett (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Nicholas Mirzoeff, "It's Not the Anthropocene, It's the White Supremacy Scene; Or, the Geological Color Line," in *After Extinction*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Nancy Tuana, "Climate Apartheid: The Forgetting of Race in the Anthropocene," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7, no. 2 (2019), DOI: 10.5325/critphilrace.7.1.0001.

7 Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 3. Critiques that specifically target the omission of racial and colonial histories can be found (adding to those cited in the previous note) in Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us* (London: Verso Books, 2016); Jason W. Moore, "The Rise of Cheap Nature," in *Anthropo-*

cene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016); Janae Davis, Alex A. Moulton, Levi Van Sant, and Brian Williams, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene,… Plantationocene? A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises," *Geography Compass* 13, no. 5 (2019), DOI: 10.1111/gec3.12438; the special issue "Race and the Anthropocene" (2019) of *Critical Philosophy of Race*.

8 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

9 Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*; Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: Norton, 2019); Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

10 Ann Chih Lin and David R. Harris, "Why is American Poverty Still Colored in the Twenty-First Century?" in *The Colors of Poverty: Why Racial and Ethnic Disparities Persist*, ed. Ann Chih Lin and David R. Harris (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008), 4.

11 Cornel West, "Conversation with Bell Hooks," in *The Cornel West Reader*, ed. Cornel West (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 542.

12 Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 1; Lindgren Johnson, *Race Matters, Animal Matters: Fugitive Humanism in African America, 1838–1934* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2018); Yusoff, *Black Anthropocenes*.

13 As part of a by now firmly established ecocriticism on African American literature, such studies seem to mark a new direction in this field. My impression is that while earlier work primarily aimed to trace the environmental aesthetics and modes of African American literature (for an overview of the field, see the introduction in Claborn, *Civil Rights and the Environment*), more recent engagements turn explicitly to interrogating the human as a discursive and ontological category. While not suggesting clear demarcations between these strategies, fundamentally questioning the category of the human through African American (literary) discourse is the main concern not only of the studies mentioned above, which often respond to posthumanist thought, but also, in this case responding to Anthropocene discourse, the focus of the following.

14 Tuija Pulkkinen, "Vulnerability and the Human in Judith Butler's and Adriana Cavarero's Feminist Thought: A Politics of Philosophy Point of View," *Redescriptions* 23, no. 2 (2020): 152, DOI: 10.33134/rds.342.

15 Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 24.

16 Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, "Introduction," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 7, 1.

17 Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," 25.

18 Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay, "Introduction" 5.

19 Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 395.

20 Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," 13.

21 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso Books, 2009), 31.

22 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 201, DOI: 10.1086/596640.

23 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Human Condition in the Anthropocene: The Tanner Lectures in Human Values" (Yale University, 2015), 147, https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_resources/documents/a-to-/c/Chakrabarty%20manuscript.pdf.

24 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change," *New Literary History* 43, no. 1 (2012): 14, DOI: 10.1353/nlh.2012.0007.

25 Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," 19.

26 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 7–8.

27 Pulido, "Racism and the Anthropocene," 118.

28 Mirzoeff, "It's Not the Anthropocene," 125.

29 Mirzoeff, "It's Not the Anthropocene," 125.

30 This even more so since Du Bois is one of those writers that pioneering ecocritical work on African American perspectives has frequently turned to. His cotton novel, by contrast, has rarely been considered ecocritically, let alone in the context of the Anthropocene, even as it has recently been revalued by scholars (see, e.g., Alex Benson, "Gossypoglossia: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Pragmatics of Dialogue," *Narrative* 27, no. 2 [2019], DOI: 10.1353/nar.2019.0012). The only extensive environmentally oriented readings so far are those by Stephen Knadler, "Narrating Slow Violence: Post-Reconstruction's Necropolitics and Speculating Beyond Liberal Antirace Fiction," *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 5, no. 1 (2017), DOI: 10.1353/jnc.2017.0003; and Benjamin Child, "The Plantation Countermelodies of Dunbar and Du Bois: Writing Agropolitical Subjecthood in the Nadir," *American Literature* 91, no. 3 (2019), DOI: 10.1215/00029831-7722128. An earlier treatment that notes the importance of Du Bois's depictions of nature in the novel is Arlene Elder, "Swamp Versus Plantation: Symbolic Structure in W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*," *Phylon* 34, no. 4 (1973), DOI: 10.2307/274251.

31 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 68–69.

32 Du Bois, *Quest*, 68.

33 Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 206.

34 Du Bois, *Quest*, 25.

35 Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," 13.

36 Du Bois, *Quest*, 25.

37 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Child, "The Plantation Countermelodies of Dunbar and Du Bois"; Benson, "Gossypoglossia."

38 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, "Introduction: Eleven Principles of the Elements," in *Elemental Ecocriticism*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 11.

39 Du Bois, *Quest*, 25.

40 Du Bois, *Quest*, 196.

41 Du Bois, *Quest*, 38.

42 Du Bois, *Quest*, 62.

43 Du Bois, *Quest*, 82.

44 Emily Hainze, "'Wayward and Untrained Years': Reforming the 'Wayward Girl' in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* and *Jennie Gerhardt*," *Studies in American Fiction* 46, no. 2 (2019): 358, DOI: 10.1353/saf.2019.0015.

45 Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 7.

46 Du Bois, *Quest*, 19.

47 Du Bois, *Quest*, 173, 206, 163.

48 Du Bois, *Quest*, 133.

49 Gina M. Rossetti, "Turning the Corner: Romance as Economic Critique in Norris's Trilogy of Wheat and Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*," *Studies in American Naturalism* 7, no. 1 (2012): 44, DOI: 10.1353/san.2012.0000; see also M. Giulia Fabi, "To Fashion the Wonderful Garment: W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*," in *Extravagances: Habits of Being 4*, ed. Cristina Giorcelli and Paula Rabinowitz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

50 Du Bois, *Quest*, 123.

51 Ursula K. Heise, "Science Fiction and the Time Scales of the Anthropocene," *ELH* 86, no. 2 (2019): 279, DOI: 10.1353/elh.2019.0015.

52 Jesse Oak Taylor, "The Novel After Nature, Nature After the Novel: Richard Jefferies's Anthropocene Romance," *Studies in the Novel* 50, no. 1 (2018): 110, DOI: 10.1353/sdn.2018.0006. Regarding questions of literary form and the Anthropocene, which are most often treated in relation to climate change, see also, e.g., Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015); Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

53 Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 62–63.

54 Taylor, "The Novel After Nature," 110.

55 Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of British Individualism from 1719–1900* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 3.

56 Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 43.

57 Du Bois, *Quest*, 205.

58 Du Bois, *Quest*, 234.

59 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

60 See, for example, Arnold Rampersad, "W. E. B. Du Bois as a Man of Literature," *American Literature* 51, no. 1 (1979), DOI: 10.2307/2924919; Nellie McKay, "W .E. B. Du Bois: The Black Women in His Writing—Selected Fictional and Autobiographical Portraits," in *Critical Essays on W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. William L. Andrews (Boston: Hall, 1985).

61 Du Bois, *Quest*, 90.

62 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Humanities in the Anthropocene: The Crisis of an Enduring Kantian Fable," *New Literary History* 47, nos. 2–3 (2016): 388, DOI: 10.1353/nlh.2016.0019.

63 Chakrabarty, "Humanities in the Anthropocene," 388.

64 Anu Koivunen, Katariina Kyrölä, and Ingrid Ryberg, "Vulnerability as a Political Language," in *The Power of Vulnerability*, ed. Anu Koivunen, Katariina Kyrölä, and Ingrid Ryberg (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 9.

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