

QUEER AND COLOR IN THE MUD

Some time ago now bell hooks wrote, “It is easy for folks to forget that at the first part of the twentieth century, the vast majority of black folks in the United States lived in the agrarian south...the psychological impact of the ‘great migration’ of black people from the agrarian south to the industrial north...wounded the psyches of black folk” (*Belonging* 36-37). Before this diasporic un-placing / re-placing, were black lifeways set firmly on some ground? Before the city’s underbelly, was there a rich soil to which black life could more meaningfully belong? Or was there even then, as Bruno Latour has recently written, some “fighting to land on Earth” (*Down to Earth* 89)? In her radical redress of geologic grammar and Anthropocene origin studies, Kathryn Yusoff argues that blackness is “*ontology without territory*,” a result of colonialism’s “shearing of subjects from geography and the reinstatement of these subjects into a category of geology that recorded them as property” (*A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* 81 and 30). What she calls *ecoimperialism* engendered what would be an ongoing “disruption of ecological belonging” that began before the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when “the biopolitical category of nonbeing is established through slaves being exchanged for and as gold” and continues now into what we call the Anthropocene present as subjects of color are across every category more susceptible to the dangerous maneuverings of planetary destabilization (30 and 5). Where on Earth is blackness?

But I am also interested in knowing where queers belong. Most of all, through a lens of environmental justice, I am interested in where queers of color belong. C. Riley Snorton recently released a monograph tracing a complicated history of diasporic movement and processes of belonging: “Captive flesh figures a critical genealogy for modern transness, as chattel persons gave rise to an understanding of gender as mutable and as an amendable form of being” (*Black on Both Sides* 57). Speaking to fugitive chattel slaves who *passed* into alternate gender and sexual manifestations to elude connections with their past relations (and perhaps with their past *selves*), Snorton exposes a process that is “transitive – as in fungible passing into fugitive – and transversal

– as in fugitivity intersecting fungibility” (58). The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have stories of the utmost importance to tell on the “fungibility of Blackness and geologic resources” but also of the ways queerness stakes into processes of belonging to the land and place-making: “making home in no home” (Yusoff 32 and 65). That queerness and color found (or were relegated to) urbanity when the nineteenth gave way to the twentieth century here in the United States already tells a story of what to expect from literatures preceding. There is a silent expectation of a different past. But, when I look, do I see greener lives out there in the older country for queers of color?

Anthropocene studies are not always accommodating to difference. I am leading an honors seminar this semester at UAH (called Composing Difference in the Anthropocene) where the goal is to read difference through various environmentalisms. What my class has found already is that scholarly and popular writing (and filmmaking) on climate change often flattens difference across human, non-human, and more-than-human relations. Particularly in the years closely following Crutzen’s and Stoermer’s proposal, there developed a discourse around the Anthropocene that too frequently, too easily slipped into universalisms about culpability and the ways “humans” have endangered their own lifeways. Terms like Capitalocene, Plantationocene, and Chthulucene have been coined in an effort to more accurately describe Anthropocene-producing powers and the subjects who have wielded them (*Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*). This is how humanities and social science scholars chafe at the implications of any universals. Though I am specifically interested in queer and queer of color stories about landed belonging, I also know that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary studies must have myriad ways of reading difference into the Anthropocene. I would be excited to hear some different avenues for thinking difference at the symposium.