

Call for Papers for a Special Issue of the Journal *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* (ZAA)

“African American Environmental Narratives in the Anthropocene: Vulnerability, Resilience, Resistance”

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The last two decades have seen a significant increase in environmentally oriented research on African American literature and culture. Although “eco-criticism, as it historically unfolded, did so without regard for the particular ways that nature and the environment figured in nonwhite contexts” (Dunning 7), studies in the field have by now explored a variety of traditions from the nineteenth-century to the present day, thereby laying the groundwork for continued readings of African American eco-literary traditions, modes, and genres (e.g. Outka 2008; Ruffin 2010; Smith 2007). At the same time, there are growing fields of Black Geographies and Black Ecologies (e.g. Hawthorne 2024; Moulton/Salo 2022; Roane 2023; Rusert 2010). Environmental concerns have also received heightened attention in African American/Africana Studies, renegotiating concepts ranging from post-humanism (Johnson 2018) to pastoralism (Dunning 2021), and environmental justice scholarship continues to explore new African American contexts. Overall, this research on African American literature and culture has tended to emanate from a variety of disciplines and critical traditions and has introduced a multiplicity of perspectives, concepts, and narratives. However, while adding distinct perspectives to the study of African American environmental thought, such research has to some extent remained disconnected with respect to a more comprehensive understanding of African American environmental narratives in the Anthropocene.

The proposed special issue seeks to interlink and expand such scholarship through a focus on African American environmental narratives that spotlights their potentials as critical interventions in Anthropocene discourse. African American environmental narratives can be understood in a broad sense as individual works of literature and art, but also as visible across single texts and media, as part of cultural discourses and practices and/or as lived responses to the Anthropocene’s environmental disasters and injustices. Even as the Anthropocene has been rejected by the IUGS as a geological epoch it retains relevance as a philosophical concept and critical socio-political discourse within the humanities. As Fressoz points out, “Its main strength is not scientific: It is primarily aesthetic.” (288) The Anthropocene, as a discourse in the humanities, has often come in the form of a search for new ways of representing environmental relationships through narrative (e.g. Heise 2019; James 2022). At the same time, it has also been rejected as an evasive concept by Indigenous and Black theorists for describing too narrow an idea of the origins, impacts, and consequences of environmental challenges. We are interested in curating a special issue that explores how African American environmental narratives relate to and challenge the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene conversation revolves around 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” (Chakrabarty “Anthropocene 1”, 39). At the same time, it is precisely this ontological human vulnerability addressed within the Anthropocene discourse that threatens to obscure our view of unequally distributed vulnerabilities emerging through human history and extending into inequalities in the present. Questions of indigeneity and racialization are thus increasingly recognized as relevant factors by various scholars (Davies et al. 2019; Pulido 2018; Todd 2015; Whyte 2017; Yusoff 2016, 2018), which signals the significance in an Anthropocene context of exploring African American environmental narratives that focus on racialized forms of vulnerability, and resistance and resilience strategies.

Moreover, research about African American literature and culture can address the problem of the Anthropocene concept as flattening and ignoring multiple human conditions, or as Roane suggests, the Anthropocene “silos, and it flattens, and it elides” (Roane 131). At the heart of major studies on African American literature and culture are questions about relations of race, Blackness, forms of vulnerability, resistance, and resilience (e.g. Wynter 1987; Sharpe 2016; Hartman 2006). These potentially enhance a critique of the inflation of *anthropos* with all of humanity and ignorance of the origins of environmental change within pre-capitalist systems of exploitation and expropriation of land and bodies. African American environmental narratives have for a long time addressed these questions of vulnerability, resistance, and resilience, that are core to the Anthropocene understood as philosophical concept and critical socio-political discourse. Even today, Williams reminds us, “Black diasporic communities continue to be on the frontlines in regard to climate and environmental disparities” (1).

African American environmental narratives emphasize the idea that alternative stories and epistemologies must be part of the Anthropocene discourse. These alternatives can include what Roane describes as “[t]he seeds of a different world [...] already alive in the everyday practices of ordinary Black and Indigenous people” (Roane 136). Ultimately, such perspectives on African American narrative may create a different Anthropocene discourse. Potentially, this can help us address problems of vulnerability, resistance, and resilience that the current discourse elides and encourage us to envision different aesthetic, socio-political and environmental choices.

Questions emanating at this point are:

1. How are concepts of vulnerability, resistance, and resilience explored in African American environmental narratives and within different critical traditions and methodologies?
2. How do these concepts speak to the temporal and spatial scales, multiplicities, and disparities of the Anthropocene? How do they challenge Anthropocene discourse?
3. How can interlinking concepts of vulnerability, resistance, and resilience from different disciplines and critical traditions provide new directions for understanding the Anthropocene as a philosophical concept and socio-political discourse in the humanities?
4. What is the potential of transdisciplinary environmental thought – emerging from the exploration African American environmental narratives – to realize different forms of agency for the Anthropocene?

With an interest in environmental work on African American literature and culture that interlinks different strands of research and critical traditions, we welcome articles that focus on the above critical questions and on topics including (but not limited to):

- African American ideas of the planetary
- African American concepts and critiques of the human (post-humanism, transhumanism, fugitive humanism)
- Anti-racism, anti-Blackness and/as anti-speciesism
- African American resistance and resilience within Anthropocene discourse
- Indigenous and African American environmental justice in the Anthropocene
- Methods of transdisciplinarity among various scholarly fields and forms of knowledge
- Practices and narratives of agency for the human and more-than-human
- Black and Indigenous scholarship as critiques/revisions of the Anthropocene concept
- Black Feminist Ecologies/Ecological Thought as critiques of the Anthropocene
- Discourses of slavery and the Anthropocene
- Theories of race and the Anthropocene
- Indigenous and African American environmental thought
- African American rhetorical forms and signifying in Anthropocene narratives
- Histories of nature and climate in relation to concepts of race
- Traditions and limitations of African American ecocriticism
- Critiques of and alternatives to the Anthropocene concept (e.g. Plantationocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene)

Submission Timeframe:

If you would like to contribute a paper to this special issue, please send a 300-word abstract and short bio by 24 March 2025. Authors will be informed of acceptance of their abstract by mid-April 2025. Completed articles of 5000-6000 words including notes and bibliography for original, unpublished work that is not under consideration by another journal will be due by 1 October 2025.

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