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Comics beside Literature: Race and Environment in  
Twentieth-Century American Fiction

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M.A., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2008  
B.A., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2006

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An abstract of  
a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the  
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## Abstract

### Comics beside Literature: Race and Environment in Twentieth-Century American Fiction By Guy Conn

This dissertation participates in the “nonhuman turn” of literary theory by juxtaposing twentieth-century U.S. literary and comics texts within an ecocritical framework that deprivileges anthropocentric reading practices. This project’s ecocritical approach is less concerned with recovering wilderness or staving off apocalypse than with how quotidian human engagements with the world require ongoing negotiations between nonhuman agency and capitalist ideologies of ownership and exploitation. In particular, this dissertation explores how the narrative framing of individualist encounters with nature often draw from and reinforce logics of segregation by insulating idealized human/nonhuman relationships from racialized others. As an interdisciplinary project analyzing comics, novels, and short stories as well as film, television, and advertising, it contends that our current methods of regarding narrative mediums often relegate the environment to mere ambience, as something to be filtered out for more important (human) matters. Yet, as *Comics beside Literature* traces that ambience across mediums, it shows how the specific qualities of environments are as necessary to their stories as the nonhuman animals and objects that vitally structure the societies those stories depict.

Through the work of Frederick Law Olmsted, Henry James, and Justin Green, the first chapter examines the ecologically-disastrous aesthetic of green lawns that develops from nineteenth-century theories of environmental health and natural beauty. In response to Aldo Leopold’s famous dictum, the second chapter asks: in what ways can we articulate thought as a capacity attributable to mountains? To explore this question, this chapter turns to the collaborative work of Chester Himes and Aline Kominsky-Crumb to consider how ignored voices can persist and even flourish in hostile intellectual environments. The third chapter reads civil-rights-era comics by African-American creators as responding to packaging companies’ dissemination of racially-charged disgust for “litter bugs”: this disgust enabled consumers to express anxiety over proliferating waste while making only superficial changes—like recycling—to their habits of consumption. The final chapter engages narratives of recreational nature excursions by James Baldwin, ZZ Packer, and Melanie Gillman. In these stories, child protagonists encounter camp and park grounds as distant outposts for the racial segregation and social oppression from which they sought respite.

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