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Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770-1860

Ian Frederick Finseth

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Shades of Green offers a creative reimagining of early and antebellum American literary culture by exploring the complex web of relationships linking racial thought to natural science and natural imagery. The book charts a dynamic shift in both polemical and imaginative literature during the century before the Civil War, as scientific, artistic, and spiritual vocabularies regarding "nature" became increasingly important for authors seeking to mobilize public opinion against slavery or to redefine racial identity. Finseth argues that these vocabularies both liberated and constrained antislavery philosophy and, more broadly, that our understanding of race in early American literature must take the natural world into account. In doing this, Finseth fuses a cultural history of the period with fresh readings of such major figures as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Frederick Douglass.

Drawing on a range of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, including aesthetics, anthropology, phenomenology, and ecocriticism, Shades of Green demonstrates the agility with which human thought about the natural and the racial leapt across formal epistemological, professional, and artistic boundaries. In this innovative account, the politics of race and slavery are shown to have been deeply intertwined with putatively apolitical cultural understandings of the natural world. The book will be of value to scholars in a variety of disciplines, including American studies, African American literary history, and environmental philosophy.

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