

COMM WEEK

42nd Intercultural Communication Conference 2024

The Intercultural Communication Conference provides a forum for scholars, students, professionals, and civic-minded leaders to explore topics with cultural, political, economic, and social implications as well as communication dynamics.

Theme: Amplifying Diverse Voices in Media and Communication

DATE: APRIL 8 – 12, 2024, MLK BUILDING

Abstract for Book Review for the Conference

Black to Nature: Pastoral Return and African American Culture, by Stefanie K. Dunning, Jackson, University of Mississippi Press, 2021, 208 pp, \$25 (paperback), ISBN 9781496832986.

This paper is a review of Stefanie Dunning's (2021) book, *Black to Nature*, an opus of critical race theory (CRT) from feminist and Afropessimist perspectives. The book's predicates align with the central theme of the conference. Dunning makes her case in four substantive chapters, each of which is based on two main texts, one audiovisual and the other literary, drawn from pop culture. This method, of building critical social theory by analysis of text in popular films, music, novels, etc., has been a staple of postmodernist critique from Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism* to Eric Lott's (2017) *Black Mirror*. Dunning uses it as well as her predecessors to bring to life and make accessible, to a wider audience, discourses that might otherwise have been confined to academia.

The review draws attention, among other things, to the peculiar American context of Dunning's theses as well as the inherent ironies that lay those theses open to attack by CRT's many traducers.

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[BOOK REVIEW STARTS/FOLLOWS FROM THE NEXT PAGE]

Book Review

Black to Nature: Pastoral Return and African American Culture, by Stefanie K. Dunning, Jackson, University of Mississippi Press, 2021, 208 pp, \$25 (paperback), ISBN 9781496832986.

Critical race theory (“CRT”) has become the cause célèbre in America’s culture wars on mainstreaming discourses of race, especially in schools. On one side, CRT is a no-brainer, the righteous case for acknowledging, liberating, and including Black (and other minorities’) historiographies. To opponents, it is nothing but a vengeful ruse to foist shame and guilt, and even discrimination, on white school children who are innocent of the systemic racism that CRT explicates. Lost in the polemics are CRT’s humble origins as an adjunct to a movement initiated by mostly white scholars, albeit of a liberal bent.

Critical legal studies (“CLS”) officially began at a University of Wisconsin-Madison conference in 1977. Under the slogan “law is politics,” critics pronounced law a malleable tool used by its historically privileged creators to subjugate the underprivileged. In those circumstances, social justice could only be obtained by dismantling law’s enabling hierarchies of oppression and inequity.

Critical race theory emerged as one of several eclectic CLS subgroups. It worked into the central theses a race-based critique of the American legal system as having been established by and to sustain white supremacy.

CLS fell out of fashion within a decade, its novelty having waned. CRT followed its genitor to the margins and remained there for 40 years before being thrust suddenly into the limelight after a succession of high-profile racial incidents such as George Floyd's. Kimberlé Crenshaw, the UCLA law professor credited with coining the term, is however wary of the new interest, saying it arises only because conservatives have appropriated the term to problematize discourses of race. To the extent that CRT has become the catch-all for inclusivity activism, Crenshaw may have a point.

Whatever the rationale for its reincarnation, CRT is undoubtedly in a moment, which Stefanie Dunning seizes. Her *Black to Nature* is an impressive opus of CRT laden with a congregation of *isms*—feminism, environmentalism, nihilism, and a pervading afropessimism. Dunning is convinced that modern Western “civil” society is set up to support white supremacy. Black people can never be truly free except the society is dismantled and the whole world returns to a state of nature, in communion with the land.

Black to Nature renounces the Black progress narrative that holds affluence, especially in urbanized contexts and the American North, the panacea for Black exclusions in America. That narrative, Dunning contends, props up a system that not only perpetuates supremacist hierarchies but also further disconnects Black people from their true nature.

Even a rearrangement where Blackness succeeds whiteness at the top of the social hierarchy holds no appeal. Rather than freedom, it would be an iteration of the same irredeemable system. True emancipation, for Black people and everybody else, lies instead in abjuring all forms of ownership and cleaving to a natural state in which “the earth is perceived as communal place, rather than a thing that can be owned.”¹

Dunning's case is made over four chapters bookended by an elaborate introduction and a brief coda. Each chapter is based on two main texts, one audiovisual and the other literary, drawn from pop culture. This method has been a staple of postmodernist critique, from Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978) to Eric Lott's *Black Mirror: The Cultural Contradictions of American*

¹ p.98. Pages numbers in the footnotes refer to the book under review.

Racism (2017). Dunning uses it well to bring to life and make accessible, to a wider audience, discourses likely otherwise to be confined to academia.

Each text has a Black woman author or features Black women protagonists. Dunning says that Black women's texts deserve the special consideration she has given because they cover Black exclusions common to the genders and then those applicable, because of patriarchy, to women alone.

The texts have also been chosen because Dunning adjudges them counternarratives to the myth of Black progress. But she does not always hold them up as odes to Black wholesomeness even if she finds that they ultimately align with her book's anti-materialism. Having fawned over Beyonce's 2016 *Lemonade* album and Julie Dash's 1991 film, *Daughters of the Dust*, in chapter one, Dunning turns somewhat against *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) in the next chapter.

Dunning is upset that a Black girl has been cast as the destitute main character, Hushpuppy, who was a white girl in *Beasts*' screenplay. She accuses Lucy Alibar, the white filmmaker, of deliberately avoiding making a white person the vulnerable subject and instead burying "Black girlhood under the weight of disowned white pathology."² The official line that Quvenzhané Wallis was cast for her transcendence in the role, not her race, cuts no ice with Dunning who takes further umbrage at Alibar not mentioning Wallis' race while discussing the casting.

Given the overwhelming liberal backing, across color lines, for casting minorities in previously white roles, as typified by Halle Bailey playing Ariel in 2022's *The Little Mermaid*, Dunning's position on Wallis might seem counterintuitive at first. It is not, at least from her ideological standpoint.

A tenet of CRT is the rejection of notions that people can be color blind. The persistence of deep racial inequality despite decades of civil rights' reform has convinced theorists of Dunning's ilk that racial bias is endemic and afflicts even the best intentioned of people.

² p.68.

Once cognizance is taken of this analytical framework, that Dunning's subset within CRT insists on filtering all interracial encounters through the prism of racism, light is shed on what informs some startling generalizations in *Black to Nature*. The book's treatment of a singular murder-suicide by a white same-sex couple who drove off a cliff with their adopted Black children is notable. Dunning instinctively presumes and reaches for racism—that the white parents must have regarded the Black children as sub-human, that it must have been stereotypes of unfit Black parenting and a preference for white caregivers over Black relatives that kept the children in a troubled home.

This license claimed by Dunning and her peers, under the guise of exposing racism, to indulge in the same kind of stereotyping that they deprecate when it comes from the other side, has given fodder to CRT's assailants. CRT is therefore labeled divisive, vindictive, and hypocritical by conservatives such as Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis who has likened it to hate speech and state-sanctioned racism.³ Crenshaw and her brood have a counter riposte: that the criticism is a well-worn tactic to deflect from CRT's virtues by insisting that demonstrating racism is racism.

Dunning's gloomy brand of CRT ultimately evolves nihilistic visions. Her fourth chapter discusses two apocalyptic texts, the film, *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016), and Octavia Butler's 1993 novel, *The Parable of the Sower*. Dunning celebrates end-of-the-world scenarios in both as victories over anti-Blackness and the enthroning of new orders devoid of Western society's oppressive binary oppositions.

It is not difficult to see how the right-wing opposition might seize on Dunning's insistence on societal destruction as evidence of the existential threat that CRT poses to the American way of life. Yet, Dunning's book is neither representative of all CRT nor does it so claim. Indeed, the bases for its bolder aspirations for nature sound more like faith-based proselytism than grounded theory.

³ _____ (2021). Governor DeSantis Announces Legislative Proposal to Stop W.O.K.E. Activism and Critical Race Theory in Schools and Corporations. <https://www.flgov.com/2021/12/15> [Accessed 3/16/24].

The reader will probably be hard put to find the rationale for Dunning’s exalting of the agrarian South, including slave landing sites, as the prospective locus of emancipation and spiritual regeneration for Black people. As with some of Dunning’s disenchantments with modernity, this might simply be down to personal preference.

Dunning loves the countryside and has moved out there from the city, bristling at the ensuing condescension she perceives from acquaintances in the know. During a successful battle with a brain tumor, she has often immersed herself for days in nature, cutting all connection with modern technology.

Still, the scholar in her is stumped when challenged by fellow academics, while writing the book, on whether she would posit nature as the answer. Recalling this in her coda, Dunning still demurs: “Of course, I didn’t intend to argue—and haven’t, I hope—that nature is “the answer.””⁴ This stunning *volte face* is all the more remarkable for its location and the book’s unequivocal stance hitherto that nature is not just the answer but the *only* answer. Fortunately for it, *Black to Nature* has done enough by this point to leave indelible impressions of its epistemological foundations. The corpus of CRT, curiously reenergized by recent adverse possession and denigration, should be all the better for it.

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⁴ p.157.