THE GREEN DEPRESSION: LANDSCAPE, ENVIRONMENTALISM, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE 1930S AND 40S

While critics often associate literary and other cultural work of the 1930s and 40s with progressive or radical forms of political and economic thought, they ignore its concern with the period’s major environmental crises—including drought, dust storms, flooding, and pollution. To fill this gap, my dissertation argues that authors and filmmakers of the 1930s and 40s responded to these and other related issues in ways that we would today call environmental. Furthermore, many of them anticipate “environmental justice” by directly connecting environmental issues to racial, economic, and gender inequality. For Walt Disney, Aldo Leopold, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway, the wilderness became a landscape through which to question anthropocentric attitudes and practices towards wilderness areas and their inhabitants—including deforestation, overhunting, and predator eradication programs—that often led to unforeseen consequences on ecological systems and human communities. Authors and filmmakers like King Vidor, John Crowe Ransom, and William Alexander Percy saw a return to the rural as the answer to the economic and environmental damage caused by industrial capitalism. But in appropriating a residual Jeffersonian agrarian myth, they often replicated agricultural and social practices that supported unsustainable and, in some cases, racist forms of rural life. Frank Capra, James T. Farrell, Mike Gold, Tillie Olsen, and Richard Wright turn to urban spaces to explore the relevance and accessibility of parks and other “urban pastoral” spaces for residents in working-class urban neighborhoods to develop more environmentally- and socially-conscious forms of “place.” And finally, Ray Bradbury, Judith Merrill, and George Schuyler call attention to the racial, gender, and environmental exploitation often accompanying forms of technological progress, including, for some of them, the development and use of the atomic bomb. In identifying the proto-environmental ideas that these and other authors and filmmakers express during the period, I argue for their importance to the development of environmentalism in the second half of the twentieth century.