

Some Pigs: Rita Williams-Garcia Writes Back to E.B. White's Pastoral in *One Crazy Summer*

One of the most urgent calls for civic responsibility can be heard in environmental justice debates. Thus far, children's literature criticism has been slow to respond to this call—in part because we have been perpetuating an unqualified view of the pastoral as “good” for too long, without considering the ways this vision excludes or oppresses o/Others.

To shift this thinking, I propose reading *One Crazy Summer* as an environmental justice text. Like Evelyn C. White, who draws upon her “genetic memory of ancestors hunted down and preyed upon in rural settings” to explain her fear of the wilderness (284), Rita Williams-Garcia acknowledges the countryside's danger and writes back to a white Transcendentalist tradition of nature writing through her clever use of *Charlotte's Web*. Set in Oakland, California in 1968, *One Crazy Summer* tells of the Gaither sisters' coming to terms with their mother Cecile, who abandoned them, and their political identities. Crucial to each sister's learning is her understanding of herself as a Black person; in Fern's case, this subjectivity is achieved through her relationship to literature. At the start of the novel, Fern proclaims that she is a vegetarian after reading of Wilbur's troubles; by its end, she will have composed a poem denouncing “the pigs” (in this case, the police) and delivered it onstage at a Black Panther rally.

“As with other ideological representations,” Mei Mei Evans determines, “popular U.S. American cultural constructions of ‘nature’ serve to empower some members of our society while simultaneously disempowering others” (181). Many forget that *Charlotte's Web*, set in what first seems to be the bucolic countryside, depicts the child as someone who needs saving, first by a mother, then by a writer, from slaughter. Williams-Garcia knowingly repositions children (one, a writer named Fern) as agents of their own survival and reimagines the city as a “natural” environment where Black children may thrive—even if “the pigs” there are neither humble nor terrific.

Works Cited

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