

Conceptualization of Nature in the African American Poetry: Ecocritical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

The article examines the linguistic means of the representation of the concept *NATURE* within the African American poetic discourse. It is proved that the nature as a relatively independent cultural and intellectual phenomenon is the embodiment of the cultural and aesthetic values and conventions of a linguistic community. The research is carried out within the analysis of the African American nature poetry of XVIII - XXI cent. The methods of the cognitive and ecocritical discourse analysis are aimed at the dynamic text interpretation resulting in the outline of the constituent elements of the concept *NATURE* characteristic for the African American community. The diachronic scope of the study helps to trace the emergence and the evolution of the concept *NATURE*, and serves the basis for the comparative analysis of its constituent elements in the African American poetry throughout the centuries. The results of the research show that the conception of nature by the African Americans (represented within the dichotomy of such notions as life and death, hostility and refuge, wilderness and paradise, etc.) is an outcome of an external historical and cultural influence and a continuous struggle with white civilization.

Keywords: African American nature poetry, cognitive discourse analysis, cultural-historical continuum, ecocritical discourse analysis, poetic discourse.

Introduction

The ecological turn in humanities and social sciences has triggered the emergence of numerous multidisciplinary approaches to the study of ecological issues in relation to society and culture (Ch. Glotfelty, 1996; K. Kull, 1998; G. Lakoff, 1987; C. Gersdorf, 2006; A. Fill and P. Mühlhäusler, 2001; L. Buell, 2001, 2005; G. Garrard, 2004). The rise of ecocriticism (Ch. Glotfelty and H. Fromm, 1996; W. Rueckert, 1978; L. Buell, 2001, 2005; P. Barry, 2009), ecopoetics (F. Gander and J. Kinsella, 2012), ecofeminism (K. Warren, 1997; L. A. Lorenzen, 2004; G. Gaard, 2010), and ecopsychology (T. Roszak, 1993; M. Day, 1998; D. Fideler, 2014) has extended the boundaries of the linguistic discourse analysis of texts regarded from the point of view of their embeddedness into a physical environment. As over the decades literature has become a pretext to the study of environmental issues under the influence of ecological debates, and relevant texts have often been evaluated according to their capacity to articulate ecological contexts (Opperman 110), African American poetic works have also become an object of scientific research within both literature (K. Lynes, 2009; K. Ruffin, 2010; A. Wardi, 2011) and linguistics (W. Napier, 2000; S. Stoudamire 2012; M. Amsler, 2012). This article is not an exception. The research presupposes the linguistic-cultural analysis of the African American nature poetry of the XVIII - XXI centuries.

The majority of the linguistic studies of the African American poetry focus on the analysis of the stylistic peculiarities of literary works, and the idiosyncratic use of the Black English (often leaving behind the cognitive component of the discourse analysis).

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However, text interpretation depends to the highest extent on the choice of linguistic units that are symbolically and situation ally predetermined, and represent the cultural-national background of a linguistic community, since language reflects, embodies and symbolizes the cultural reality. Therefore, this article is an attempt to generalize the ways of nature perception by African Americans by means of its conceptualization, and to prove that nominative linguistic units (as well as tropes) may be endowed with cultural connotations revealed within the context of a poetic work. Hence, the aim of the conducted research consists in the outline of the constituent elements of the concept *NATURE*; the analysis of the linguistic and pragmatic means of the representation of the concept *NATURE* in the African American poetry of the XVIII - XXI centuries; the study of historical and cultural events that have shaped the conception of nature by African Americans.

Considering the objectives stated above, ecocriticism opens new horizons for the cognitive discourse analysis because of its understanding of nature as an autonomous cultural construct. As African Americans are referred to as a group oppressed in terms of race and class, the determination of the place of nature as a relatively independent cultural and intellectual phenomenon in the system of their cultural and aesthetic values will help to demonstrate the level of inherent interconnection of African Americans and a physical environment, for the ways we perceive, interact with and ultimately change nature cannot be detached from who we are in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, nationality, and geographical location (Gersdorf 13).

2. Theoretical and methodological approaches to the ecocritical discourse analysis within the framework of linguistic studies.

As any discussion of nature in its cultural, linguistic, and ethical dimensions, this research presupposes the implementation of interdisciplinary theoretical approaches to the text analysis, and the employment of the achievements of the environmental, cultural and social studies. The theoretical-methodological approaches to the discourse analysis of literary texts are determined by the two main branches of ecolinguistics that are the ecological study of language and the linguistic study of ecology. The ecological study of language appropriates ecology as a system, uses its main biological parameters of interaction and diversity as metaphors, and investigates as well as regards the interaction between language, nature, and the environment as a necessary prerequisite for an ecological approach to language and culture. The linguistic study of ecology broadly emphasizes the role of language in the cultural shaping of nature and the environment. Both strands move beyond the description of nature, as they focus on context, because the language use is always treated in correlation with social activities and ideologies (Busse133). As this research focuses on the linguistic-cognitive analysis of literary texts, the linguistic study of ecology defines the choice of the key methods of text analysis.

Language is the medium in which meaning is created, the medium that allows social groups to develop, categorize, and negotiate specific concepts of reality, the medium that has a per formative function of shaping the world. It is language that allows us to develop ontological concepts of nature, culture, and the human, and it is their textual representations that shape human-nature relationships (Mayer 112). Consequently, language plays an important role in creating and limiting knowledge about the natural world and political, economic, and ethical dimensions of human-nature interactions. In terms of the linguistic analysis of literary works the questions put by ecocritics are regarded within the cognitive approach to the text interpretation that implies the understanding of language as a symbolic embodiment of a cultural reality, constructed in the dynamic process of the historical development of a linguistic community. The ecocritical turn in literary and cultural studies presupposes a reconsideration of the culture-literature relationship to the dimension of "nature," which had been virtually banned from the characteristic approaches of cultural and linguistic studies in the past decades (Zapf 50). Due to such social and cultural transformations that led to the changed perceptions and representations of nature, the latter itself turned into a cultural construct. In this way, ecocriticism as an approach to the interpretation of culturally specific information behind the meaning of linguistic units encompasses the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfeltyxix), and focuses on the expression of human experience primarily in a naturally and consequently in a culturally shaped world. It looks at literature and other cultural forms as part of an intellectual ecosystem, implemented and sustained by the interactions between the natural world, both human and non-human, and its cultural representations (Volkmanxii-xiii).

Indeed, the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term "human" itself (Garrard4). As language does not exist separately from culture that is regarded as socially inherited set of skills and ideas shared by a community, it is increasingly accepted that representations of the "natural" world are socially constructed (Alexander 3). That is why within literary discourse nature becomes a cultural construct actualized on the level of both linguistic units and artistic structure of a text.

The cognitive analysis of linguistic units that represent the concept of nature in literary works is based on the eco linguistic approaches that see language as part of a socio cultural ecology where it shapes societies and cultures, and reveals the cognitive capacity of organisms to adapt to their environments (Steffensen, Fill7). Thus, the ecocritical analysis of the literary discourse implies the study of texts which happen to be about the environment, and of how words in a language relate to objects in the local environments (Stibbe8). One of the most powerful tools for the cognitive analysis of literary texts is a constructionist that suggests that the nature is a cover for the interests of some social groups. The challenge for ecocritics is to keep one eye on the ways in which nature is culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists, both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse (Garrard 10). Lawrence Buell calls this "a myth of mutual constructionist: of physical environment (both natural and human-built) shaping in some measure the cultures that in some measure continually refashion it" (Buell6). Therefore, the ecocritical approach to the study of the nature poetry presumes the involvement of the extra-linguistic information about the cultural, social, and historical background of a linguistic community into the process of the cognitive linguistic text analysis, providing in such a way the understanding of the role of nature in human lives.

As an emerging interdisciplinary paradigm within linguistics and literary studies, ecocriticism has developed in a few directions, the methodological approaches of which can help to conduct the all-encompassing cognitive discourse analysis of African American nature poetry.

A content-oriented, sociopolitical form of ecocriticism examines texts from the point of view of their attention to natural phenomena, degree of environmental awareness, recognition of diversity, attitude to non-human forms of life, etc. In addition to the categories of race, class, and gender, the nature has been established as a category of textual and cultural study, and has been applied to texts from different periods and genres. Literature is considered here as a potential medium of consciousness change and an increased ecological sensibility which, however indirectly, can help to contribute to a change of political and social practice (Zapf51). Methodologically, the establishment of the interrelation between the content of a literary work and its linguistic realization consists in the definition of a referential situation, endowed with a conceptual meaning; linguistic-cultural interpretation of the basic elements of the conceptual sphere of a linguistic community; structuring and generalization of the results preceding the outline of the holistic conceptual picture of the world within a certain discourse.

In a cultural-anthropological direction, ecocriticism has diagnosed and explored the deep-rooted self-alienation of human beings within the civilizatory project of modernity. Whereas in pre modern, preindustrial societies, human life was embedded in concrete forms of interaction and exchange with natural life cycles modern society has become abstract in the sense of increasing differentiation, specialization, division of labor, and the loss of holistic ties with natural and social life (Zapf 52). From this perspective, nature can be viewed as an autonomous concept that represents the system of social beliefs and values. As the process of cultural development is evolutionary by its nature, concepts themselves are regarded as the formulae of evolution and generalizing links of a cultural continuum. That is why the cultural-anthropological approach enables the analysis of the changes in the relations between nature and human civilization on a text level.

On an ethical level, ecocriticism strives for the revision of an anthropocentric cultural value system, which not only involves the recognition of the dignity and independent value of non-human nature, but turns it in some respects into a source of cultural values (Zapf 52). Within the framework of the linguistic-cultural analysis of literary texts, this aim of ecocritics seems to be one of the priority as it serves a basis for the study of the culturally specific attitude of a linguistic community to the natural environment represented by linguistic and pragmatic means on a text level, considering the historical and social background of the former.

In an epistemological perspective, ecocriticism is a part of a larger postclassical paradigm shift from casual and linear to complex, nonlinear form of knowledge. With the acceptance of evolution as a basic axiom, procession interactions rather than isolated properties of individual phenomena are emphasized (Zapf 53). A continuum character of culture proves its dynamic and continuous historical development. The fundamental principle of the theory of cultural evolution states that every level of the civilization development evolves from the previous one and cannot exist by itself. That is why continuum as a form of the culture existence presupposes the unity of space and time that enables its relative autonomy and self-sufficiency, integrity and internal wholeness (White, 1960). Thus, on every stage of its development a culture forms certain spatial and time coordinates based on the system of symbols and styles, due to which it reveals and objectifies an inherent potential, shaping in such a way a historical process. In other words, reality is reflected in cultural models, endowed with conceptual meaning. Accordingly, a cultural continuum is organized around concepts that are the representations of a linguistic community's mindset. Such a direction of the research allows ecocritics to regard nature as a self-consistent concept that evolves in time and space bearing specific features that are defined by the speakers' cultural background and are actualized in texts on the level of linguistic units endowed by a certain connotative meaning.

A fifth direction of ecocriticism, which is of specific importance to the cognitive discourse analysis of literary works, is concerned with the potential implications and perspectives of the aesthetic and imaginative dimension of literature for an ecologically redefined model of humanity and of human culture. Literature has always been the medium of a "cultural ecology" in the sense that it has staged and explored the relationship of prevailing cultural systems to the needs and manifestations of human and non-human nature. Therefore, literature appears as a sensorium and imaginative sounding board for hidden problems, deficits, and imbalances of the larger culture, as a form of textuality which critically balances and symbolically articulates what is marginalized, neglected, repressed or excluded by dominant historical power structures, systems of discourse, and forms of life, but what nevertheless of vital importance to an adequately complex account of humanity's existence within the fundamental culture-nature relationship (Zapf 53-56). Hence, the ecocritical reading of literary texts presupposes the all-encompassing analysis not only not only of the nature's cultural manifestations, but also the linguistic modes and functions of its representation. In other words, the understanding of the natural environment as both a physical-material entity as well as a cultural construction and of culture as embedded in the physical-material world (Grewe-Vol pp, 2006) has basic consequences for the cognitive discourse analysis of literary texts within the framework of ecolinguistics.

3. Practical aspects of the cognitive discourse analysis of the African American nature poetry.

In the course of history nature has been frequently misused as an ideological instrument and a vehicle of power and manipulation for the justification of supposedly "natural" hierarchies of gender, class, race, ethnicity, etc. (Zapf 50), which makes it all the more necessary to explore the significance and possible meanings of the concept *NATURE* within the framework of the cognitive discourse analysis of literary texts. In American literature, ecocritical conceptions of nature often function as alternatives to the dominant myth of "nature's nation". D. Pease state that the cultural images of the myth of "nature's nation" interconnect an exceptional national subject (American Adam) with a representative national scene (Virgin Land) and an exemplary national motive (errand into the wilderness). The composite result of the interaction of these images was the mythological entity – Nature's Nation – whose citizens believed, by way of the supreme fiction called natural law, that the ruling assumptions of their national compact (Liberty, Equality, Social Justice) could be understood as indistinguishable from the sovereign power creative of nature (4). The dark side of this myth, according to Pease, is that it excluded "women, blacks, foreigners, the homeless", people understood to be of a different nature. It was a monological story ignoring geographical, economic, and ethnic conditions and the social complexities involved with these (Mayer5).

As the ecocritical conception of nature highlights that culture and society are embedded in the material world, and reveals individual as well as collective mechanisms of perception which comprise many different ways of approaching the non-human world, the decision to depict nature as an active agent or as a passive object reflects ideas about the self, about a community, and in a larger context even about a nation (Grewe-Volpp 78-80). That is why the following discourse analysis of the African American nature poetry outlines the main constituent elements of the concept *NATURE* (that is regarded as an autonomous force), taking into account a wider cultural and historical context, and examines linguistic means of their representation on a text level.

In such a way, the study defines the role of nature within cultural traditions of African Americans and gives insight into their social-historical being throughout the centuries.

3.1. **NATURE as A Source of LIFE and DEATH.**

Published in 1773, the poem "On Imagination" by Phillis Wheatley (Wheatley 149) in a literary way describes the nature as a source of eternal life and constant resurrection:

(1) ... Though *Winter* frowns to *Fancy's* raptur'd eyes
 The fields may flourish, and gay scenes arise;
 The frozen deeps may break their iron bands,
 And bid their waters murmur o'er the sands.
 Fair *Flora* may resume her fragrant reign,
 And with her flow'ry riches deck the plain;
 Sylvanus may diffuse his honours round,
 And all the forest may with leaves be crown'd:
 Show'rs may descend, and dews their gems disclose,
 And nectar sparkle on the blooming rose...
Winter austere forbids me to aspire,
 And northern tempests damp the rising fire...

The dichotomy of life and death is explicitly presented through the images of spring and winter, the former of which is the symbol of birth and youth, and the latter impersonates obliteration and hostility. The stylistic device used to accentuate such a contradiction is the antithesis of the word-combinations *gay scenes*, *flourished fields*, *rising fire* and *frozen deeps*, *iron bands*, *Winter austere*, *northern tempests*. As a symbol of life, water is one of the central images in the poem: *waters murmur o'er the sands*, *show'rs may descend*, *dews their gems disclose*. The opposition of water and sand also implies the antagonism of such notions as life and death, since only water can turn arid ground into fertile soil. The idea of life and fertility is likewise presented through the comparison of dew with gems and nectar, which is considered to be the food of gods.

The literary personification of life in the text is the Roman goddess of spring, youth, and fertility *Flora*, the reference to which is aimed to emphasize the divinity of nature. Phillis Wheatley also mentions a god of woods *Sylvanus* that only strengthens the idea of nature's deity, taking into account the fact that forests were often used by African Americans for religious services. Even though Christianity as religion dominated among African Americans, it shared room with Earth-based religious traditions in Africa. For example, the practice of woodland religious worship within enslaved communities suggests early African Americans sought ways to syncretize Christianity with traditional African practices that stressed the interrelationship of human and non-human nature (Ruffin92). By the way, the belief of African Americans those plants, animals and nature in general should be treated with respect contrasted with the views of white men at that time who felt that nature should be dominated and exploited for profit, which supported the separation of humans and nature (Finney 58). The conceptualization of nature through the opposition of life and death is typical for the African American poetry of all times, the example of which is the poem "The Ephemera" by George Marion McClellan published at the beginning of the XX century (McClellan 49):

(2) Creature of gauze and velvet wings.
 With life for one brief day,
 Dancing and flitting where the breezes fling
 The sweets of blooming May...
 Only to die when the sweet wild rose
 Gives perfume to the night...
 Living for a day in the world of flowers,
 And then – everlasting night...
 Who knows – in the light of eternal things –
 Your life is less than ours?..

The main idea of the poem revolves around the contradistinction of day and night as symbols of life and death. The lexemes *dancing, flitting, sweets, blooming* represent the idea of gaiety and warmth, essential to the conception of life. However, the antithesis of the nominative linguistic units *brief day vs. everlasting night* exemplifies the ephemerality of life, and in the context of the whole poem points at the uncertainty of the African Americans' life (*creatures of gauze*) due to certain historical and sociopolitical conditions (*Who knows... / Your life is less than ours?*). In addition, the word-combination *in the light of eternal things* represents the understanding of nature as an eternal notion in terms of which human lives mean nothing.

The idea of the continuity of life and death cycle is also represented in the poem "Monument" by Natasha Trethewey (Trethewey 175):

(3) ...At my mother's grave, ants streamed in and out like arteries, a tiny hill rising
above her untended plot...
I watched a long time
the ants' determined work,
how they brought up soil
of which she will be part,
and piled it before me...

The notion of death (*my mother's grave*) is closely intertwined with the idea of regeneration (*they brought up soil / of which she will be part*) and consequently, of the eternal life. As a symbol of a ceaseless toil, the ant is the metaphorical embodiment of a constant movement and development which are the fundamental characteristics of life (*ants streamed in / and out like arteries*). Moreover, the idea of the continuity of generations also implies the understanding of nature as an interminable and all-encompassing realm of our existence.

The poem "Last Talk with Jim Hardwick" written by the modern African American writer Marilyn Nelson (Nelson 278) proves the belief in the eternity of nature as an indefinite cycle of vitality and cessation:

(4) ...Nothing is wasted
or permanently lost
in Nature. Things
change their form,
but they do not cease
to exist. After
I leave this world
I do not believe I am through.
God would be a bigger fool
that even a man
if He did not conserve
the human soul...

The author presents nature as a perfectly organized system that is constantly developing and never ceases to exist. Within this system, men are considered to be not only its inalienable part, but the crown of God's creation. Such an understanding of the status of humans contradicts the perception of human-nature relationships of the previous epochs based on equality and tolerance. On the other hand, the glorification of the *human soul* as a constantly alive substance in the natural world implies the spirituality of nature and its divine origin.

3.2. NATURE as a source of HOSTILITY and ALIENATION.

One more distinctive feature of nature as perceived by African Americans has always been its hostility and severity which can be easily explained by the historical prerequisites, as in the early part of the American history, when Africans were forcibly brought to the New World and sold as slaves, interaction with the natural environment was influenced by the economic incentives of the "master" and by survival instinct (Finney 57). Such a critical look at the natural world is characteristic of not only the early African American poetry, but also of the modern literary works. Let's consider the poem "Children of the Mississippi" by Sterling Brown (188):

(5) These know fear; for all their singing...
 These folk knew even then the hints of fear...
 These folk know grief.
 They have seen
 Black water gurgling, lapping, roaring,
 Take their lives' earnings, roll off their paltry...
 These have known death
 Surprising, rapacious of cattle, of children,
 Creeping with the black water...
 No buoyant hoping now, only dank memories
 Bitter as the waters, bracken as the waters,
 Black and unceasing as hostile waters.

The place name Mississippi mentioned in the title gives an insight into the historical context of the described events. As white planters wanted to transform the Mississippi Delta once filled with swamps and forests into an agricultural territory, the enslaved Africans were to put such an ambitious task into reality. The terrible labor conditions turned this work into the fight for survival, and nature became a hostile environment (*hostile waters*). This idea is clearly delivered by the author with the help of the stylistic device of a climax (*These folk knew even then the hints of fear... / These folk know grief... / These have known death*) that presents the evolution of the relationships of Africans with the natural world around, the latter of which is said to bring devastation. A comparison of nature with death is intensified by the word combination *rapacious of cattle, of children* which is aimed to demonstrate the ruthlessness and severity of nature that leaves no room for hopes and aspirations (*no buoyant hoping now*). The repetition of the adjective *black* in such word combinations as *black water* and *black memories* creates the atmosphere of anguish and sorrow, at the same time forging a strong link between slaves and the natural environment. Moreover, turning to the theme of the unfortunate past of African Americans in the XXI century, Sterling Brown insists on the necessity to revive collective memories which constitute human identities in order to construct a space for contact between the past and future generations.

Closely connected to the idea of the hostility of nature is the motif of human alienation from it. The poem "Wood and Rain" by Melvin Dixon (96) demonstrates such relationships between humans and the natural world by turning to the history of African Americans:

(6) I am black man of woods
 weeping
 where old trees root
 like men
 hollering
 in the wind
 for lost children...
*there is no hiding, there is no home
 in wet woods or this soil ...*

The two last lines clearly demonstrate the idea of the estrangement from nature, although at the beginning of the poem the author associates the lyrical hero with the natural world. Such a discrepancy in the conception of human-nature relationships can be easily explained within the historical context. The woods induced both positive and negative feelings: a place that was resource-rich, a place of transformation, but also a place to fear (Finney 58). Very often black people were subject to extralegal actions that resulted in their death by hanging. A tree became a painful symbol for many black people (the verbs *weeping* and *hollering* deliver this idea on the text level) reminding them that the color of their skin could mean death, as the tree is associated with lynching (*I am black man of woods*). Between 1882 and 1968 approximately 4, 742 black people were lynched illegally. Approximately the same number of people were either legally lynched (based on court decisions), fell victims to "private white violence," or were murdered by a variety of means in isolated rural sections and dumped in rivers and creeks (Finney 60). Thus, woods became the symbol of the oppression of African Americans that is clearly expressed in the analyzed poem.

This fact explains the alienation from nature represented in the nominative word combinations *no hiding* and *no home*. On the other hand, given the poor rations they received and the conditions under which they toiled, the enslaved could not rely entirely on the institutions around them to maintain health or even, indeed, stay alive.

While their work conditions suggested they were sub-humans relegated to life with other beasts, much of the voluntary work during enslavement reinforced the outlook that human beings are nature (*old trees root / like men...*) and need to have relationships with non-human nature (Ruffin, 2010). Nevertheless, through backbreaking labor and general day-to-day interactions, enslaved Africans became more knowledgeable about their surrounding environment than their white slave owners (Stewart 57) did. Such knowledge about and the bond with the environment helped Africans to increase their power within the slave community and between master and slave. For example, the wild environment was a source of power for female slaves who were knowledgeable about roots and herbs used for medical purposes. Cultivating and foraging plants was also a form of resistance – a way for slaves to regain and maintain ownership over their bodies and how they cared for them (Finney 58). The poem “Spring Dawn” by George Marion McClellan (334), the African American writer of the 2 half of the XIX – 1 half of the XX century, demonstrates such multifaceted human-nature relationships through the equaling of nature and *WILD ENVIRONMENT*:

(7) There comes to my heart from regions remote
A wild desire for the hedge and the brush,
Whenever I hear the first wild note
Of the meadow lark and the hermit thrush...
It is then when the earth still nestles in sleep,
And the robes of light are scarce unfurled,
You can almost feel, in its mighty sweep
The onward rush and roll of the world.

The use of the names of bird species in the text (*meadow lark* and *hermit thrush*) illustrates the deep knowledge of the natural world (fauna, flora, and landscapes) by African Americans. The repetition of the adjective *wild* in the word combinations *wild desire* and *wild note* emphasizes a powerful link between inner wishes and needs of humans, and the voice of nature. Furthermore, the idea of the wilderness and power of nature is expressed in the last two lines of the poem: *You can almost feel, in its mighty sweep / The onward rush and roll of the world*. However, the most important fact here is the close intrinsic connection of humans with the wild nature on the level of senses and feelings (*You can almost feel... / The onward rush and roll of the world*). Such a perception of the wild nature by African Americans can be easily explained by the historical facts.

3.3. *NATURE* as a way to *FREEDOM* and *REFUGE*.

The wilderness often became a place of refuge and possibility for black people. The notion of the “black landscape” undoubtedly demonstrates the specific vision of the world around by the slaves. Being the system of paths, places, and rhythms that a community of enslaved people created as an alternative, often as a refuge, to the landscape systems of planters and other whites (Finney 122), the black landscape is the recognition of another way of looking at one’s surroundings. Therefore, the natural world has always been perceived by African Americans as a way to survival. Consider the following lines from “Rape of Florida” by Albery Whitman, African American writer of the 2 half of the XIX century (162):

(8) The Negro slave by Swanee river sang;
Well-pleased he listened to his echoes ringing;
For in his heart a secret comfort sprang,
When Nature seemed to join his mournful singing...
But he can crave the freedom of his race,
Can find his harvests in the desert sown,
And in the cypress forest’s dark embrace
A pathway to his lonely habitations trace...

The phrase *The negro slave by Swanee river sang* in the first line of the poem is an allusion to the famous song "Old Folks at Home", also known as "Swanee River" written by Stephen Foster in 1851. Being the official state song of Florida (such a reference is made by the mentioning of the state name in the title of the poem "Rape of Florida"), it romanticizes slavery, as the narrator, black slave, "longs for de old plantation". However, the poem of Albery Whitman contradicts such a view on the African Americans' past and presents an opposite vision of the history.

On the text level the phrase *he can crave the freedom of his race* exemplifies the yearning of the enslaved people for freedom, and presents nature as a guardian of such aspirations: consider the personification of nature that, according to the author, is able to sympathize the lyrical hero (*Nature seemed to join his mournful singing*), and the comparison of the cypress forest with a pathway to liberty.

The poem "Lament for Dark People" by Langston Hughes (1944) written in the 1st half of the XX century also demonstrates the tight bond between African Americans and the wild nature that is believed to be their home and salvation:

(9) ... They drove me out of the forest.
They took me away from the jungles.
I lost my trees.
I lost my silver moons.
Now they've caged me
In the circus of civilization.
Now I herd with the many –
Caged in the circus of civilization.

The antagonism between Africans and the world around them is established on the level of the opposition of the personal pronouns *they* and *I*, the former of which represents the civilized world that is regarded as a cage for the black people (*caged in the circus of civilization*). The lexemes *forest, jungles, trees, silver moons* are used to describe the native environment of the lyrical hero, endowing the wild nature with sentimental memories about home. As we can see, such a conception of the wild nature as a home and refuge is closely intertwined with its perception as an embodiment of freedom.

This motif is also characteristic for the African American poetry of the XXI century, the example of which is the poem "the earth is a living thing" by Lucille Clifton (6):

(10) is a black shambling bear
ruffling its wild back and tossing
mountains into the sea
is a black hawk circling
the burying ground circling the bones
picked clean and discarded...

By means of the stylistic device of metonymy (the images of *a bear* and *a hawk*) the author describes nature as a powerful and wild organism (*a black shambling bear / ruffling its wild back and tossing / mountains into the sea*), a free living being that encounters no restrictions (*a black hawk circling*). The usage of the adjective *black* in such word combinations as *a black shambling bear* and *a black hawk* illustrates the metaphoric association of Africans with the natural world and emphasizes their craving for freedom.

The understanding of nature by African Americans discussed above inevitably leads to its recognition as a *PARADISE* in the literary works of all times ("Rape of Florida", Whitman 162):

(11) ... Who could wish more, When Nature, always green,
Brings forth fruit-bearing woods and fields of bread?
Wish more, where cheerful valleys bloom between,
And herds browse on the hills, where winter ne'er has been?..
Is earth not like the Eden-home of man and wife?..

The comparison of the natural world with the paradise is explicitly revealed on the text level: *Is earth not like the Eden-home of man and wife?* The use of adjectives with positive meaning, such as *green* [Nature], *fruit-bearing*, *cheerful*, etc., implies the idea of the serene contemplation of the world around, in which every human can be free and happy.

3.4. NATURE as a VULNERABLE BEING.

The modern African American poetry, however, views nature not only as a paradisaical place, but also as a being that is vulnerable to human world and needs protection. Let's consider the poem "be careful" by Ed Roberson (29):

(12) i must be careful about such things as these.
the thin-grained oak. the quiet grizzlies scared
into the hills by the constant tracks squeezing...
i must be careful...not to jar
the fragile mountains against the paper far-
ness...

The intention of the author to express the sensitivity of nature is realized by the stylistic device of oxymoron: *thin-grained oak*, *quiet grizzlies scared*, *fragile mountains*. Apparently, the representation of the wilderness as a frail environment delivers the idea of the responsibility for nature which has been suffering from human civilization for too many years. The poem "look at the blackbird fall" by June Jordan (82) also illustrates the opposition of the natural environment and human civilization:

(13) look at the blackbird fall
down
into the lake
split white speedboats full of white people
loading the atmosphere with gasoline
and noise
now
you can't drink the water
of the lake ...

By contrasting the images of *ablackbird* and *white speedboats*, the author intentionally makes a distinction not only between nature and humans, but also between African Americans and white people. In such a way J. Jordan identifies the black people with the natural world and stresses their strong spiritual connection. The repetition of the adjective *white* in the word combination *white speedboats full of white people* is aimed to emphasize the idea that white people are the only to blame for the technological achievements of today's civilization that led to the destruction of nature. The word combination *the atmosphere with gasoline / and noise* intensifies such a point of view.

The intrinsic bond of African Americans with nature, that is rooted in history and their opposition to the white world is also revealed in the poem "Tap-Root" by the modern African American writer Indigo Moor (276-277):

(14) Concrete and steel drew the M'ssippi
back like a fist. Scythe blade swung
through dry harvests. Plow turned
soil hard enough to raise the Blues...
The M'ssippi used to cover
these parts, until they dammed
it up, held its tongue like words
you choke back in church
to keep your insides from escaping.
Staring across dusty fields
you can ache the need for river...

The main idea of the poem presupposes the opposition of the natural world, an alienable part of which is the African American community, and the human civilization, represented on the text level by the lexemes *concrete* and *steel* that symbolize the artificial nature of the white people's world. The opposition of such word combinations as *dusty fields* and *need for river* also accentuates the estrangement of the human civilization and nature. In addition to this, the belief in the divinity of nature alienates white people from the natural environment by revealing their insincerity in the face of God: *held its tongue like words / you choke back in church / to keep your insides from escaping*.

The mentioning of the Blues in the text is also of vital importance for the understanding of the connection of Africans with nature (Mississippi river is the central image in the poem). Elements of the blues sound and ethos are directly related to the changing relationships of African Americans and their ecological experience. Blues origin stories usually begin in the Mississippi Delta, transformed by white planters, seeking to take advantage of the Mississippi River's nurturing impact on soil health. The rich soil was stewarded by enslaved Africans accustomed to singing while they worked. Their specific agricultural tasks informed the sound and content of their work songs; they used tools percussively, rhythms and content shifted to accommodate various circumstances (*scythe blade swung, plow turned soil hard*). These various relationships with human and non-human nature birthed key elements in the sound that would become known as the blues: call-and-response, improvisation, backbeat emphasis, and the blue notes from an African-inspired tonal system (Ruffin 137-138). By such references to musical traditions of African Americans, the author emphasizes the fact that a great bulk of the African American culture is grounded in the specific relationships of humans with the natural world, which reveal their inextricable connection.

4. Conclusions.

The cognitive discourse analysis of the African American nature poetry of the XVIII-XXI centuries within the framework of the ecocritical studies reveals all the complexity of the relationships of African Americans and the natural world. The results of the research prove the existence of the strong bond between African Americans and the natural environment, which is rooted into the process of their historical development. Thus, the African American conception of nature regarded as an autonomous cultural construct is based on the dichotomy of such notions as *LIFE* and *DEATH*, *HOSTILITY/ALIENATION* and *HOME/REFUGE*. In addition to this, nature's *WILDERNESS* is often perceived as a way to *FREEDOM* and *SALVATION* for the enslaved, and despite its perception as an *ETERNITY* and *PARADISE*, it still needs human protection because of its *VULNERABILITY*. The diachronic scope of the study extended the frames of the research and showed that the fundamental principles of the African American relationships with nature have not been dramatically changed over the centuries. However, due to the rise of ecological concerns in the XXI century the motif of the necessity to protect the natural environment has become one of the leading ones. On the linguistic level the concept *NATURE* and its constituent elements are actualized by means of tropes (metaphors, comparisons, etc.) and figures of speech (antitheses, oxymora, rhetorical questions, etc.), that is characteristic for the poetic discourse. However, the representation of the concept *NATURE* is also achieved on the level of nominative linguistic units that gain connotative meanings in the context of a whole poetic work. The use of proper names (the names of Greek and Roman gods, and numerous place names) as bearers of culturally significant information should also not to be overlooked. As a result of the generalization of the conceptions about nature by African Americans within poetic works, the conducted analysis opens new perspectives for the investigation of the human-nature relationships within linguistics by the involvement into the research process other types of discourse, and by scrupulous study of the cognitive potential of proper names, place names in particular, within the framework of the conceptual picture of the world of African Americans and other linguistic and social communities.

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