

## *Book Review*

### **AGAINST SUSTAINABILITY: Reading Nineteenth-Century America in the Age of Climate Crisis. By Michelle C. Neely. New York: Fordham University Press. 2020.**

Michelle C. Neely's *Against Sustainability: Reading Nineteenth-Century America in the Age of Climate Crisis* opens with one of the most compelling gambits in recent ecocriticism: that the roots of the contemporary US's inability to respond to the climate crisis lie not only in the problems that we have inherited from our forebears, but also in the solutions that they have passed down to us. Taking up the nineteenth-century origins of contemporary environmental solutions including recycling, preservation, and sustainability, Neely shows how these concept-practices have been imbricated from the beginning with settler colonialism, slavery, anthropocentrism, and unbridled consumption. If we are to develop an environmental ethic more suitable for our age of crisis, Neely argues, we will have to look for other possibilities lying latent in the past that can "guide us toward more genuine forms of solidarity and community—with each other and with other forms of life" (2).

The book is structured to facilitate a dialogical relationship between the critique of received environmental practices and potential alternatives, and between past and present. In the first half of the book, Neely ingeniously reads Walt Whitman's vision of recycling and composting as an appetitive approach that reduces both the land and the other to objects of voracious consumerism. Through a powerful reading of Lucille Clifton's twenty-first century poetic responses to Whitman, Neely argues for the importance of finality, death, and non-fungibility for an environmental ethic that can move away from the ideal of self-renewing nature as a license to consume. In the second chapter, Neely returns to the nineteenth century to find an alternative to Whitman's recycling-enabled consumerism in the work of Henry David Thoreau and Emily Dickinson. Putting their literary work in conversation with broader nineteenth-century conversations

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about frugality and political being, Neely extracts a counterhistory of “joyful frugality” that stands against “capitalist imperatives” and “[relocates]... pleasure to sites other than consumption” (84). The second half of the book repeats this structure. In the third chapter, the genocidal preservationism of nineteenth century figures including George Catlin and Francis Parkman Jr. is put into conversation with contemporary critiques of its logics by Louise Erdrich and A.S. Byatt. The fourth chapter turns to novels by Hannah Crafts and Harriet Wilson to excavate “radical pet keeping” as an alternative model for thinking about being and relationality, one which depends, as does more recent work in Black feminisms, on troubling the foundational distinction between human and animal that has structured so much of both racialized violence and ecocide in the United States.

*Against Sustainability* is a beautifully written book with a compelling and important argument about the need to interrogate our received solutions as well as our inherited problems. While there were moments where I was less convinced by Neely’s analyses—I identified more with the poor family who did not take well to Thoreau telling them to eat less to become more independent even as I accepted Neely’s argument that Thoreau did really see frugality as a route to political liberation, and the status of the pet as property remained troubling to me if pet keeping is to become a model for responsible human-animal encounters and an ethic of care—the book offers both a useful recuperation of latent modes of ecological being and a model for thinking about the past in relation to the present in a time of crisis. In the book’s powerful conclusion, Neely writes that “there is action left to take, if we imagine that other futures are possible. If we can believe that we are traveling and have not yet arrived” (155). *Against Sustainability* weaves the past and present together to animate this journey, modeling an engagement with the past as a vital aspect of utopian visioning and collective care.

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