

(IM)POSSIBILITIES

A blog for SUNY Geneseo students and faculty interested in American Studies

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Is Sustainable Attainable?

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The International Institute for Sustainable Development defines sustainable development as, “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” When considering sustainability, there are many markers that determine whether or not an action or means of production is sustainable. The three pillars of sustainability include economic visibility, social equity, and economic viability. According to this definition, something cannot be sustainable unless it meets all three factors. However, this is the question we kept coming back to: is it possible to meet all three of these pillars? It is hard to visualize a solution because we are bound by systems already in place which we may not even know we participate in.

The heating plant is a strong example of a complex system that many people on campus are unaware of but are simultaneously benefitting from. Prior to our visit, none of us had ever been inside of the heating plant, with the smokestack being our only indication that *something* was there. We weren't even cognizant of the level of organization that heating a campus takes. As students, we often take for granted that we will be given the heat we need to be comfortable in our daily lives. As a group, this visit led us to consider the layers of production and the ways we passively participate in

systems of consumption. Without having considered exactly where our heat was coming from, we also overlooked who was responsible for heating the campus. The quality of our heat is dependent upon the labor of the workers in the heating plant, yet because we operate in different spheres on the same campus, we are unaware of the work that goes into such a process. This is comparable to the interaction between the protagonist and Mr. Brockway in chapter ten of *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. Before speaking with Mr. Brockway, the protagonist was unaware of the systematic layers that existed in the paint factory. Initially, he assumes the paint is made upstairs, to which Mr. Brockway responds, “Naw, they just mixes in the color, make it look pretty. Right down here is where the real paint is made.” In this instance, the protagonist was only aware of the process that he was shown when he first arrives at the paint factory and has no understanding of things taking place beneath the surface.

Production and consumption as a system often operate under class barriers. The producers of a system are rarely the consumers of the products that they develop. This can be attributed to class differences between people on each end of a transaction—those who manufacture and those who consume. This concept is illustrated through Mr. Brockway and his position within the hierarchy of the paint factory. Brockway is reflective of the class divide as well as the systems of production that enforce it. He seems to single-handedly run the lower level of the factory and is intimately familiar with the whole system. Despite his knowledge and understanding, he is abjectly poor and in bad health: “The man who moved out of the shadow and looked at me sullenly was small, wiry and very natty in his dirty overalls. And as I approached him I saw his drawn face and the cottony white hair showing beneath his tight, striped engineer’s cap.” His description suggests that he is a member of a disadvantaged economic class. Despite this status, Brockway makes paint for the government—a wealthy and powerful entity. Ellison uses markers of class distinction such as clothing and physical/dental health to draw a sharp comparison between Brockway, the means of production, and the government. Mr. Brockway represents the implicit, “ugly” practices and details that go on beyond the surface of food production. He embodies the things that the consumer does not know—and might not want to know.

When considering food production, *Farming While Black* describes these small and

easily-missed details of farming: “Farmers test the soils by looking at environmental factors such as vegetation and fauna, topsoil morphology properties such as color, texture, density, and taste, and secondary factors including slope, workability, and stickiness” (90). While our large-scale food production systems are obviously different from this, small farmers and their connections to farming reflect the small, intimate details that people often miss. As food production becomes more globalized and sprawling, it seems like some of these practices—which emphasize human and land connection—will not be sustained.

Ultimately, food sustainability and its accessibility to all people are a reflection of what Lucille Clifton says in her poem “Generations,” as she writes, “people who are going to be / in a few years / bottoms of trees / bear a responsibility to something / besides people.” Everyone bears the burden of sustainable production, and that responsibility seems to extend beyond just future generations of people. The description of “generations of rice / of coal / of grasshoppers” decentralizes human experience of generations, another example of a reciprocal system. Understanding the various layers of sustainability helps people become actively sustainable. For example, having recycling options at Geneseo has made us more aware of environmentally conscious practices. At the same time, that comes with the privilege of being in an institution which will do most of that work—sorting, making options accessible—for us. We had a whole conversation about whose neighborhoods provided recycling collection and who had to take the extra step to bring the recycling to a center for collection. At the same time, being privileged with information—“knowing better”—doesn’t mean that we actually practice sustainability more than others. We started to wonder which is more influential—learning about these practices in a classroom, or having them passed down generationally?

SUSTAINABILITY

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