

(IM)POSSIBILITIES

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

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Sustainability: The Problems that Arise when We Neglect to Notice Invisible Labor

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MOVE ONE. We'd like to start with a simple definition of sustainability synthesized from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) website and the official website of the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). According to the [EPA](#), "sustainability is based on a simple principle: everything that we need for our survival and well-being depends, either directly or indirectly, on our natural environment. To pursue sustainability is to create and maintain the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony to support present and future generations" (it's also important to note the political bias of the current head of the EPA, Andrew Wheeler. Wheeler has been described as a [climate denier](#)). The EPA statement gives a good picture of the ways in which sustainability pertains to the environment, especially considering this is where our group discussion began, but it neglects to consider all the pillars of sustainability. The [UCLA Sustainability Committee](#) defines sustainability as: "the physical development and institutional operating practices that meet the needs of present users without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, particularly with regard to use and waste of natural resources. Sustainable practices support ecological, human, and economic health and vitality." This definition

acknowledges the remaining two pillars of sustainability as well: the economic and social.

Often times when sustainability is discussed, it is analyzed using a pillar analogy. We recognize that this system may be problematic, as it does not give room for the ways in which these three facets overlap. Someone who is unfamiliar with the concepts of sustainability, may look at the pillar diagram and think that each of the pillars is separate and do not interact with one another. We have included a Venn-diagram that shows the ways in which this overlap occurs. Similarly, when one thinks of sustainability, they often think of the environmental “pillar” and neglect to recognize the social and economic aspects. This is largely due to media influence which makes climate change the primary focus. We are bombarded with the images of melting ice caps and starving Polar Bears, and this is an unfortunate reality. But the bigger question is: *What does it say about society that we think of animals before we think of the residents of Flint Michigan or the Mexican women in Tijuana Mexico?*

When considering the economic and social aspects of sustainability, it becomes easier to see the connection between sustainability and literature. Taking into consideration how these two “pillars” interact with environmental issues, their influence on an author’s work becomes more clear. Problems with the environment are not evenly distributed, as marginalized groups (low-income and people of color) are impacted to a greater degree. The experiences an author has, in terms of environmental impact, can influence their novels. This can be seen in the example of Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man*, whose novel explores the dilemma in America regarding the racial bias inherent in society.

MOVE TWO. In chapter 10 of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, it seems as though Ellison is simply depicting a black man trying to make a living at a paint plant. Doing a closer reading, exposes the connections he draws between the three pillars of sustainability and the invisibility of black labor. In this chapter, Ellison depicts the paint factory as a business that is constantly trying to cut costs and make a profit. The impact of the company on the environment is the most obvious. One of the first things the unnamed (invisible) narrator notices, is the “endless cans, buckets, and drums labeled with the

company's trademark." The invisibility of black labor is brought up in a situation where the narrator is told to mix the black liquid into the white paint and "stir it 'til it disappears." This can be seen as a symbolic way in which black labor, represented by the black liquid, is invisible in the end product, the white paint. In addition, the narrator is told to "just do what [he's] told!" further exemplifying how the labor is invisible in the eye of a capitalistic system. This sentiment could also be seen as a reference to Marx and his view of capitalism as an all-encompassing process of "alienation."

His interactions with Lucius Brockway also suggest this, as Brockway (a black old man) works in the basement on the base of the paint. He is literally making the foundation of the paint while being at the bottom of the company. He is essential for the profit of the company, yet he does not have any social interactions with other employees since he is hidden away from the rest of the company. Brockway expresses his distress about being replaced by a younger more "educated" white man. He says, "usually they sends down some young white fellow who thinks he's going to watch me a few days and ask me a heap of questions and then take over." His skills are not easily replicated though and all of these attempts have failed. The slogan of the company we can read as a way in which white labor is valued: If it's optic white, it's the right white." But as Brockway shows, it is not sustainable for them. There needs to be a balance between the company's profit, productivity, and employee happiness. In this way, the invisibility of Brockway's labor intertwines with the ideas of sustainability.

MOVE THREE. Moving from a structural analysis of sustainability through Ellison's *Invisible Man*, we'd like to look at sustainability on an individual level. During our discussion about food and sustainability, we talked about which diets are more environmentally friendly and what our individual impact when it comes to deciding what foods we want to consume. Specifically, we discussed the sustainability of meat and its harmful impact on the environment. According to the Environmental Working Group (EWG), "the production, processing and distribution of meat requires huge outlays of pesticides, fertilizer, fuel, feed and water while releasing greenhouse gases, manure and a range of toxic chemicals into our air and water." We discussed how we need to find a balance of food and consider how much and how little we eat of a product. According to a study done by the University of Oxford, "ditching animal products could reduce your

food carbon footprint by 73 percent.” We as humans and consumers have a responsibility to take care of the Earth. This attitude that we will not be alive to face the consequences of the damage we executed is detrimental to the well-being of the environment.

A poem that we felt spoke to the relationship between individual actors, food, and sustainability was “generations” by Lucille Clifton. Clifton does a good job of showing the ways in which people and the earth are and should be better connected. She alludes to a “responsibility” that we “bear” “to something/besides people,” meaning that we need to take responsibility for the damage we have created. It takes years to destroy an environment and it takes even longer to restore one. These lines show how every time we take from the earth we affect the earth, and that we have a responsibility to take care of the very thing that sustains us. Another important grouping of lines is: “And the generations of rice/of coal/of grasshoppers/by their invisibility/denounce us.” These lines play on the invisibility theme that we as a group picked up on. Not only are these “generations” invisible, but it is their “invisibility” that creates an animosity. Another skillful thing that Clifton does is humanize and make common the experiences of seemingly disparate things– “rice,” “coal,” “grasshoppers.” Clifton’s language acts to humanize inanimate objects and animals. Clifton also references the generations of people who will come after us who are here now: “If it was only/you and me/sharing the consequences/it would be different.” She elaborates on the idea that we are accountable for the destroyed Earth later generations will face. We “bear a responsibility” to future human generations as well. Clifton’s poem “generations” will be applicable for generations to come and now with about 10 years to save the planet, her poem is more crucial than ever before.

MOVE FOUR. When it was first announced that we would be having class in the heating plant it seemed that the general consensus was confusion. *Why were we going there? What does it have to do with African-American Literature?* After discussing as a group what connections were created after visiting the plant, reading the nature poems, and reading *Invisible Man* and *Farming While Black* there were a select few ideas that we shared. An immediate connection that we established between the heating plant and *Invisible Man* was that both settings are very similar, with industrial settings, machinery,

and workers maintaining the plant, even though the heating plant workers we unionized and the paint factory workers in *Invisible Man* were attempting to unionize. Another connection that we discovered between the heating plant and *Invisible Man* is that we (the college community) are reaping the benefits of invisible labor. We'd like to introduce a relevant course epigraph by Dionne Brand: *'My job is to notice... and to notice that you can notice.'* This epigraph reflects how we as student interact with invisible labor and laborers. The job of the people who work in the heating plant is to notice changes in weather, in machinery, in the lives of us, the students. They are constantly thinking and noticing the changes and they are monitoring the ways that we might notice the changes as well. This epigraph doesn't apply when we try to flip it, to connect how students might notice the heating plant and the people who work there. We notice the heat and that's it, we complain and we reap the benefits of this invisible unnoticed labor. We are provided heat and electricity, but we do not see all the labor, attention, and organization that goes into making sure our needs are met.

Another important aspect that we discussed in our group that the *Invisible Man* paragraph discusses is invisible labor. We talked a lot about the food industry and how many food laborers are often underpaid, underappreciated, or not noticed en masse. Our conversation shifted to discuss how people from Hispanic backgrounds are often the individuals who provide essential functions to our food industry but are "invisible." An article from *St. Louis* magazine called "The Invisible Minority: Mexican Kitchen Workers Are Ubiquitous But Unheralded" highlights a lot of what our group talked about.

In the article, Jenny Agnew highlights how people from Hispanic backgrounds are considered the food industry's "backbone." She ties in with an idea expressed by the late Anthony Bourdain, saying that "Mexican immigrants—whom many call "the invisible minority"—work in the industry, [and] they continue to go unrecognized for their contributions and accomplishments." In addition, Agnew mentions how Bourdain noted to the *Houston Press* that the restaurant industry in America would "close down overnight, would never recover" without the contributions of immigrant Hispanic-Americans. This is especially worrisome considering Hispanic dishes are often appropriated by non-Hispanic Americans, something Agnew also points out in the

article—the work Hispanic immigrants and Hispanic-Americans provide to the food industry is not noticed, yet the dishes are appreciated without an awareness of where it is coming from. The article builds on this point: “it’s easy to overlook many food industry workers because they’re literally invisible, working behind the scenes, out of sight, or because they’re metaphorically invisible, hailing from another culture, representing ‘the other’ in race, ethnicity, or class.” This invisibility contributes to the overall view of Hispanic people in the eyes of the larger United States social and political culture.

The treatment that the article points out regarding Hispanic-Americans is not a sustainable view, as there comes a point when the invisible laborers and their artificial “otherness” allows dehumanizations to occur (separating a group from the whole makes it easier for power structures to unjustly dehumanize the smaller, marginalized group), especially in spite of the current US political and social climate where immigration is a contentious issue. Looking at how Hispanic immigrants are treated in America right now, what would happen if the current administration actually acknowledged the benefits these groups provide? Rather than stereotyping entire groups with negative perspectives, we as a group talked about how it’s necessary to not only acknowledge necessary services, but also who provides them—there is no “other” in American society and we need to validate everyone’s work.

One way the complexity of sustainability is shown is in the variety of the activities that we as a class were involved in a short period of time. It might be the most obvious answer, but the ways in which we were exploring so many (seemingly) disparate things under the common theme of sustainability shows how complex and overarching it is.

MOVE FIVE. After all of our discussion surrounding and exploration of sustainability, we have some final thoughts. We’d like to end by indicating what we hope to do moving forward in our individual lives to positively affect the environment. We’d also like to show the larger truths that we have come to terms with through this exploration. In terms of individual commitment to food, we did not give much thought to the business aspect of food and exactly what labor goes into everything we eat. This is especially relevant to the exercise of writing down our food intake. Before this, we wouldn’t have

given much thought into food choices or what invisible labor went into what ends up on a plate.

It is especially interesting to consider the role of the restaurant. In terms of restaurants, a lot of that labor could also be considered invisible in the way that we do not often consider everything that goes into the operation of food production in restaurants and consequently how sustainable aspects of a restaurant are. The literature pertaining to sustainability and food and the exercise have allowed us to think about food on a deeper level. It is no longer just about convenience and availability

We also talked about veganism and the ways in which climate change and environmental issues are often blamed on the individual. We came to the conclusion that this wasn't a fair assertion. Environmental issues in relation to food consumption and production, specifically "biotechnology and genetically engineered food production," is a product of the ways in which corporations "[follow] a profit motive."

Mass production and consumption contribute more to environmental issues than the individual does. The solution requires drastic changes to the ways corporations produce food. *Farming While Black* touches on the issues of soil depletion, and the ways they attempt to "[restore] organic matter to the soil" as a "part of healing from colonialism" (87). The depletion of organic material occurs in other environmental habitats, like the ocean for example. Those whose farming practices are spoken of in *Farming While Black* still consume meat, the difference is that these individuals make it a point to "[create] a partnership with nature" in order to solve the problems of industrialization and capitalism that came with the colonial rise to power (87). On the individual level, things can be done to better the environment on a very small scale, but the blame for the environmental issues shouldn't be placed on the individual.

Something we spoke about was a "meatless Monday" type of diet where you essentially attempt to eat meat products less than you normally would. *Farming While Black* offers loads of examples of how to better the environment on the individual level.

Something we also discussed which wavers from the food theme is how much paper that we as students use while at school. A lot of us expressed a common sentiment regarding reading on a computer versus reading a physical book or physical paper.

Through our discussion of books online versus books IRL (in real life), we realized there's a fine line between where technology is good versus where it is bad. We all agreed that we would not want to see a world where there were no longer paper options of books, only Kindle for example. This ties back to the *Invisible Man* reading, where we discussed the problems pertaining to hiring practices. Where in the *Invisible Man* anxiety surrounds being fired and replaced by a whiter, younger more educated man now it seems the worry is being replaced by a robot or a machine. There are lots of complexities within sustainability and productivity when we consider the social and economic pillars as they relate to human beings with jobs, families, and incomes.

Through our discussion of all the seemingly disjointed assignments of the past few weeks, we tried to make sense of everything. We realized that something that spanned over all of what we were doing was the act of “noticing,” or often the lack thereof. We'd like to point again to the course epigraph by Dionne Brand: *‘My job is to notice... and to notice that you can notice.’* This epigraph could be applied by the people whose lives we've been learning about to us as students. As individuals that form a larger society, there is value in learning the importance of our ability to *notice*. Being able to notice and not just push aspects of sustainability to the back of our minds by a means of ease becomes a more important practice as our environment around us changes. Before our discussion, we did not give much thought to the way our systems of sustainability balances out and impacts certain groups and individuals. Noticing the way that labor goes into every aspect of our lives, specifically a sense of invisible labor, has major importance that draws us together as a society.

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