

(IM)POSSIBILITIES

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

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Sustainability: Generational Impact Seen Through Literature Study

This post has been possible through the collaborative effort made by the following members: Nicole Fyvie, Ian Oxman, Neha Marolia, Molly Byrne, Melisha-Li Gatlin, Emily Tsoi, and myself, Andrew Weber.

The topic of sustainability has been increasingly discussed among the current generation, as the environment is crucial to our existence, and yet, is suffering. Recently in class we've started analyzing sustainability and exploring what we can do about it. After a preliminary research, our group found that, "Sustainability focuses on meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs." When discussing sustainability, people commonly think of the three pillars which divide the complex issue into social, economic, and environmental sectors. In further research, we found that the three pillars all have different jobs when it comes to sustainability. The social pillar conveys that as citizens in this world, we all have responsibilities to promote and fix social issues such as poverty, human inequality and social injustice. The social pillar involves both saving our planet and also saving everyone on it. We tend to ignore these issues because it may not affect us directly, however, it will impact future generations. The second pillar we learned about was the environmental pillar, which is about saving us from corporate exploitation and neglect. Many people take our natural resources for granted and use

them however much one would like. The degradation of the environment and its resources by irresponsible companies negatively affects us all. This pillar attempts to raise awareness on ways to decrease our carbon footprints recommending the use of renewable resources, recycling, and ways to reuse our resources that we already have so we don't have to keep retrieving more. The last pillar we learned about is the economic pillar. This pillar is about maintaining a healthy balance of our ecosystems by using fair trade and efficient allocation of all of our resources between companies. This is another important pillar because a lot of people in the U.S. are heavy consumers and we consume an abundance of unsustainable products, which is once again increasing our carbon footprints.

Sustainability revolves around not only the three pillars but connects to literature in many ways. This connection to literature is at first made apparent at the level of our consumption of paper when making books in which we house our ideas. Thus, literature can both hamper and help our environment. Physically, paper consumption itself when books are published is considered the “biggest environmental issue for a book publisher.” Yet, those same books could discuss ways to help the environment. It is important to consider this duality when working with literature and sustainability. Chapter 10 of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* specifically showcases how sustainability plays a role of preserving paint in the narrative. This is yet another example on how this connects to the aspects of reducing our carbon footprint for future generations.

Lucius Brockway in Ellison's *Invisible Man* states “we are the machines inside the machine” (p.18). We see a human interaction through the production of every drop of paint through Lucius. Throughout this chapter, there is a strict focus on the correct way to handle the paint. There is precision in how the paint is used starting from what type of paint down to how many drops should be used. Looking at the paint through a lens of sustainability, we can imagine that the precision necessary in paint mixing is paramount, as well in the way we use our natural resources. Similar to the paint in this chapter, once we use our resources in the environment, we cannot get it back—spoiled paint. This story is a call to action on how we should take better care of the world we live in. Resources are finite and we often forget the extensive processes involved in their sustainable extraction and production, or worse we squander the resources without a

second thought, creating an unsustainable cycle that leaves us with different varieties of spoiled paint. This unsustainable practice will inevitably affect future generations. We believe we live in a world of automation, but Lucius still touches each drop of paint: “Them machines just do the cooking, these here hands right here do the sweetening” (p.19). At every level of sustainability, there is a human being with the capability to act of the sustainability of their practice. In terms of food and sustainability, humans run the machines, meaning that the machines are only as smart as the humans that operate them.

As Chapter 10 of *Invisible Man* explores food and sustainability, poetry helps build connections to these generational struggles. Individual actions and institutional structures both play roles in the poems “generations” by Lucille Clifton and “Queen Anne’s Lace” by June Jordan when discussing our obligation to uphold the environment. In Clifton’s poem “generations,” she begins the poem with a strong message. The first lines read, “people who are going to be / in a few years / bottoms of trees / bear a responsibility to something / besides people.” Clifton beautifully conveys the idea that people have an obligation to maintain the world. Additionally, Clifton hints at the generational struggle. By referring to the new generations as the “bottoms of trees,” Clifton emphasizes that we are a natural part of the world and inevitably will all suffer due to the previous generations’ poor treatment of the world. Additionally, we can view Clifton’s line “bottoms of trees” as referring to the roots of a new generation and their duty to maintain the environment, or as alluding to the mortality of the past generations and their obligation to respect and sustain the land in which their descendants will grow up, live, love, connect, and eventually pass beyond. This cyclic relationship between generations demonstrates that our current actions *will* affect the next generation in some way. The environmental pillar of sustainability reminds us to reduce our carbon footprints for this reason. Similar to Clifton’s poem “generations,” Jordan’s poem “Queen Anne’s Lace” touches on the idea of a generational footprint by saying “Repeatedly / you do revive / arouse alive // a suffering.” Through these lines, Jordan portrays the beauty and the pain that comes with the birth of a new generation. A new generation has the hopeful potential to fix issues that have risen in previous generations. New generations will fill institutional structures in the future, and while in office, could generate a positive change. However, at the same time, they could add to

the destruction that already exists. We had the privilege to go to our schools' heating plant which brought our attention to different avenues for change in a more sustainable direction.

Our visit to the heating plant forced us to become more aware of the the underground work that goes into heating the campus' academic buildings. The employees explained to us that the process of how the buildings are heated is one that is responsive to the current environment of the room. For example, if we open a window in a room, then the temperature drops which then causes more heat to be produced. The current digital technology is, without a doubt, more sustainable and efficient than the pneumatic valve system currently being used in Welles Hall where this class meets. The employees at the heating plant explained to our class that they wish to update the pneumatic valve system in Welles to become digitized and more efficient like some of the newer buildings on campus. While this would certainly improve the energy efficiency of Welles, this upgrade likely will not take place until three to five years from now, when there is a potential for a newer and more efficient technology to take the main stage. While we are not actively involved in the field of sustainable energy in buildings, we still believe it is important to consider new technologies as possible options for creating a sustainable campus. The heating plant visit has certainly brought the complexity of sustainability issues into the light of day for us, as did Leah Penniman's *Farming While Black*.

Penniman works to explain the practices that were used in the past when farming and producing. Chapters 3 discuss the processes of honoring the land through spiritual traditions before farming such as asking permission from the land to begin farming. Chapter 5 discusses how to care for the soil so that it is ready for farming. Overtime, these practices started to diminish because of the changes to our growing and advancing society today. The complexity of sustainability is revealed as today's society has the need to produce as much as possible, as quickly as possible in order to feed the growing population. On the other hand, using these traditional practices would help to better conserve our environment because we would be taking more time and caution when producing. An example that stuck out to us from Penniman was compost. Penniman describes compost as "proof of life after death". This exemplified that we can

use our resources to their fullest potential, even after it's served its' original purpose.

As our generation grows older and fills leadership positions, it is important to consider our footprint on the environment and notice our effect on the world. A course epigraph that came to mind while working through this post was Dionne Brand's "My job is to notice...and to notice that you can notice." Like Brand reminds us, it is important to notice the ways in which we affect the environment. Literature, both through its physical paper makeup and through its content reminds us of our responsibility to uphold and assist the environment. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the poems "generations" by Lucille Clifton and "Queen Anne's Lace" by June Jordan, and the book *Farming While Black* by Leah Penniman all serve as pieces of literature which remind us of the practice of sustainability and how our actions affect the environment. On top of the literature which we have encountered thus far, our food logs allowed us to consider our daily, quotidian impact on the planet. Every individual's actions, including something as simple as diet, connects to the health of our environment. It is important to notice how something seemingly so small is part of a cycle so big and detrimental. Through our food blogs, we noticed that we tend to take our food for granted. Some of us ate meat every single day on break; you don't think about it at the time, but meat takes up a lot of water before it even gets to our fridges, and uses even more water when you cook it. Even the simple act of having a burger uses an abundance of water which is not as sustainable as eating other protein sources. After writing this blog post, it is clear that we need to share the realities which we have discovered with our own generation. By increasing awareness and opening others' eyes, we hope that our generation will help, rather than hurt, the next generation. The environment is clearly suffering—we all just have to notice that we can start making an impact. Literature, among other mediums, calls us to act on this, and our generation has to begin to notice.

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