

## BOOK REVIEW

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*Coral Lives: Literature, Labor, and the Making of America.* By Michele Currie Navakas. Princeton UP, 2023. 240 pp. \$89.95 Hardcover. \$39.95 Paper.

Imagine a time when coral spoke not of scarcity but of abundance; not of extinction but of industriousness and progress; not of Man's domination but of the power of the world beyond the human. These are some of the nineteenth-century narratives Michele Currie Navakas recovers in *Coral Lives*. Over five chapters, four interchapters, and an epilogue, Navakas tracks the diffuse set of meanings that accrued to coral in the wake of its mid-eighteenth-century reclassification as an animal, rather than a mineral or plant. Granted the status of an animal, coral came alive with significance. The grand formations secreted by the tiny coral polyps—which were commonly imagined as “insects,” working busily on structures that would not be completed until long after their deaths—were celebrated as testimony to “coral’s power to find a way forward” (51).

Navakas describes *Coral Lives* as a biographical approach to the substance, yet coral’s story is closer to that of a picaresque novel: its path is wide-ranging, divergent, and sometimes contradictory. The history of coral, Navakas observes, “is inseparable from colonial violence at almost every turn” (7). Although many writers employed coral, as did Marx, as a figure for collectivity and a just redistribution of the fruits of labor, the story of tireless, anonymous dedication to a larger purpose that coral was frequently employed to tell, especially by evangelical writers, “collides with and founders on a darker vision of life-consuming labor performed by the many for the benefit of the few” (3). “The Story of a Coral Bracelet,” an 1861 children’s tale by Sophy Moody, narrates the history of a red coral object’s violent extraction and transportation in terms that recall narratives of enslavement. Indeed, as Navakas reminds us, coral was intimately bound up with slavery, both materially and ideologically. Red coral, which was highly valued in indigenous African cultures, was used by Western slave traders as payment for human chattel. Meanwhile, the romance of

“coral insects” as perpetually dedicated, innately tireless workers reflected “an extractive labor logic that is strikingly continuous with one that arose to rationalize slavery” (55).

Coral imaginaries could also challenge extant power arrangements. Although nineteenth-century scientists and writers often imagined the growth of coral reefs as an essentially linear process, Charles Darwin’s work on coral, Navakas claims, generated a more dynamic understanding of the growth of the substance; his account of coral’s “nonteleological change” made room for the possibility of “a different future” (92, 93). In a powerful move, the final chapter of *Coral Lives* departs from Western scientific frameworks to explore the survival of African meanings of coral in North America. Indigenous cultures in West and Central Africa prized red coral in particular, which was believed to possess vital powers and hence was much in desire as an ornament. Historians of the African diaspora note that the persistence of red coral in Black women’s dress in the Caribbean and the southern United States reflected “complexly informed diasporic identities” (130). Navakas tracks the significance that accrues to Black women—especially those of mixed race—wearing red coral in fictions by nineteenth-century Black and white writers. Whether or not these writers knew anything of African traditions, she suggests, red coral retained a certain power in the American imagination, suggesting “multiple histories inflected, but not defined, by US slavery” (133).

*Coral Lives* takes an unexpected approach to the environmental humanities. It does not trace a genealogy of coral as a vanishing object reflecting increasing anthropogenic damage to the natural world; Instead, it recollects meanings that are all but lost to us today. But it is the potential inspiration that inheres in the act of recovering lost narratives that gives this book value in the current crisis. Following Elisa Tamarkin, Navakas argues against demanding that the past appear as an immediately “useful” resource. Even in today’s urgent conditions, we still need moments of contemplation, moments that may permit things unforeseen to emerge, and coral’s histories provide us with these. Coral’s ability to “slow us down,” both in its arresting strangeness and in the complex, all-but-buried stories that Navakas retrieves, opens this urgently needed perspective (151).

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*ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (2024), pp. 1–2  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isae001>

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