

## REVIEW

**MICHELE CURRIE NAVAKAS.** *Coral Lives: Literature, Labor, and the Making of America.* Pp. xii+218. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. Hardback, £70.00.

To think of coral today is to think of little more than coral bleaching and reef collapse, one more entry in the long list of ‘canaries in the coal mine’ warning us away from poisoning our planet by the burning of fossil fuels. But as Michele Currie Navakas tells us in this smart and fascinating book, throughout the nineteenth century Americans thought a lot about coral, not as a warning of collective doom but as a model of collective hope—a hope based firmly in the promise and power of human agency, by even the humblest of lives, to build a future together. *Coral Lives*, based on ten years of research across an astonishing variety of media and genres—from natural history to essays, fictions, poems, and songs, to paintings, decorative objects, and stereograph cards—offers a ‘cultural biography’ of coral, detailing the histories and uses that generated its multifarious cultural meanings (p. 4). Coral emerges here as what cultural historian Robin Bernstein calls a ‘“scriptive thing”’ bearing multiple meanings, which it transmits ‘beyond the intent or understanding of any given actor or author’ (p. 10). What its scripts are strikingly diverse accounts of the ‘colonial logics of race, gender, and class’ (p. 5), as the material bodies and social histories of coral inspired and shaped novel ways of thinking—ways that both concealed and revealed the internal logic of a nation founded on freedom, but based on slave labour.

Navakas opens with an account of the extractive coral industry, which harvested wild coral from Africa, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, and the Pacific for decorative and ornamental uses. As she details, since coral had long been both currency and a trading item in Africa, the popularity of coral bracelets and necklaces spoke both to the exploitation of African slaves and the pride of African peoples, as well as the domestication of phallic and fertility symbols in the prized ‘coral and bells’ children’s teething amulets. As her final chapter shows, images of Black women adorned with coral jewelry could both signal their status as slaves and affirm a diasporic Black Atlantic identity beyond the frame of slavery—a productive ambiguity featured in wide swath of American fiction, including novels by George Washington Cable, Epes Sargent, Mark Twain, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Why, for instance, did so many illustrations show Topsy wearing Eva’s coral ornaments, which Topsy never so much as touches? Perhaps, Navakas suggests, because readers hear ‘a provocative script of self-determination’ in Topsy’s defiant accounts of her nature and origin (p. 145). Eva may own the coral, but Topsy owns its meaning.

Extraction requires labour, and in her most ambitious and provocative chapter, ‘Labors of the Coral,’ Navakas details the era’s fascination with the growth of coral reefs, built as they are by the embodied ‘labor’ of untold numbers of tiny ‘coral insects’. Ambiguity reigns here, too: Margaret Fuller could describe the Transcendentalist utopian community of Brook Farm as ‘coral insects at work’, figuring coral as collective labour toward the common good (p. 53). Yet coral

was also used to normalize the extractive labour of the faceless and nameless many for the material benefit and spiritual elevation of the deserving few. The era's habit of calling coral polyps 'insects' associated them with bees, whose useful labours build a community structure enjoyed by all. But unlike bees, coral polyps must die to produce a structure literally built of their bodies, supporting those who never contributed to it. Thus, 'Coral insects [...] modeled a reality that many Americans found notoriously difficult to openly state: a country formally dedicated to the ideal of individual liberty for all had always required the disproportionate labor of those it excluded' (p. 71). Coral, in short, proved good to think with. From poems by Lowell millworkers to Rebecca Harding Davis's figure of the 'kork woman' in 'Life in the Iron Mills' (1861), coral helped humans conceptualize the capitalist ideologies of labour, including the contradictions which capitalism labours to conceal: the numbing routinization of exploitative labour, the violence entailed by 'reducing persons to matter' (p. 72).

As Chapter 3 recounts, the true nature of coral had long preoccupied natural historians, who eventually revealed coral to be neither stone nor plant but animal. Biological appearances, that is, can be deceiving: what looks like dead stone is in fact living animal; what appears lowly is in fact the builder of great islands and entire systems of atolls—a lesson encoded everywhere in coral jewelry and decorative specimens. Charles Darwin added new dimensions to popular thought when he showed that coral reefs were not dead accumulations but essentially alive, constantly building and replenishing themselves across time in interrelationship with winds and currents, sand and ocean detritus, other species, and their remains. Navakas suggests that Darwin's coral thinking contributed to *On the Origin of Species* (1859) by offering a conception of life as a ceaseless becoming, a dynamic process of collective change, challenging capitalist claims of individualism as well as of teleological growth. Chapter 4 tracks how such challenges enabled marginalized writers to declare themselves 'coral collectives,' working out coral-inspired alternatives that reframed their labour as a bond-building interdependence by which the many worked together to build a new world for all—an anticipation of Nikole Hannah-Jones's *1619 Project* (p. 117). In a tradition of Black writing about coral that began with James McCune Smith and continued through the Black literary society 'The Coral Builders,' coral became a model for civic identity and participation toward the mutual creation of an emergent community.

Closer to our own time, Rachel Carson could stand on a coral reef and reflect on how the present always carries the past, how the past is always part of 'the living present.' As Navakas reflects in turn, coral attuned Carson 'to her place within a multilayered time that passes and accumulates at once' (p. 147). The same is true of Navakas, and it becomes true for the reader as well, who sets this book down with a fresh awareness of the weight of an unfolding past in our own present, and how each of us is implicated in the shouldering of that weight—or in our refusal to acknowledge its existence. To see coral through the eyes of the myriad sources brought together here is to be stunned by what we have lost, are losing—not merely coral itself, but our memory and knowledge of it, our relationship to the very past the coral lives of our ancestors built and bequeathed to us, trusting us to keep building, to keep alive, the surprises of life's ceaseless becomings. That we are not—that we are failing the most basic gift of all the coral life we live on—is a disquieting realization. Navakas asks us to use her study as a model and pathway toward 'a historically oriented environmental humanities' (p. 151), in which the past becomes not an escape from the present but the very ground under our feet, that bears us up and challenges us to read the scripts written by everything around us, concealed only by the immensity of our forgetting. Her book is a welcome if chastening reminder of all the lost worlds under our feet, and a reminder that we, too, are the coral builders of the only future we have.

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