



REVIEW ESSAY

Indigenous Sustainabilities as Analytic and Identity

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Abstract This review essay interrogates the conceptual foundations of sustainability discourse by examining three recent monographs in American literary studies: Michelle Neely's *Against Sustainability* (2020), Abby Goode's *Agrotopias* (2022), and Mary Kuhn's *The Garden Politic* (2023). While contemporary sustainability rhetoric is often dismissed as co-opted by corporate and institutional interests, these studies collectively seek to recover alternative genealogies of sustainable thought rooted in early and nineteenth-century American literature. Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck's conceptual history, the essay situates sustainability alongside other modern collective singulars—abstract, future-oriented terms such as *progress* and *history*—to reveal its ideological valences and vulnerability to politicization. Through their distinct yet intersecting analyses of sustainability, agrarianism, and botany, Neely, Goode, and Kuhn expose how environmental imaginaries in the American tradition have been entwined with racialized, gendered, and class-based hierarchies, while also recuperating counterdiscourses grounded in reciprocity, minimalism, and collectivity. The essay foregrounds these authors' shared turn toward Indigenous studies as a vital framework for reorienting sustainability politics. By engaging Indigenous epistemologies that emphasize relationality and embodied knowledge, they challenge the liberal individualism underlying mainstream environmental thought. Yet the essay also cautions that Indigeneity, like sustainability itself, might come to function as a Koselleckian collective singular—an inherently ambiguous, globally circulating category that risks idealization even as it offers transformative critique. Ultimately, the essay proposes a renewed historical ontology attentive to insights from Indigenous studies as a means of reinvigorating the political potential of sustainability discourse.

Keywords: sustainability discourse, Indigeneity, historical semantics, American literature

It is often claimed that talk of the sustainable transition has become so ubiquitous that it has more or less been emptied of all transformative potential. Sustainability rhetoric is now mainly used by governments, businesses, and institutions to upgrade their environmental profiles, often without truly addressing the deeper concerns that called the

movement into being.¹ Yet, while critiques of greenwashing practices are prevalent, a more interesting question is where we may turn for alternatives. How do we create more robust narratives less amenable to co-optation by commercial and other interests? One way to address such questions is by exploring the historical roots of sustainability discourse. While the word itself is a relatively recent coinage, models for living sustainably long predate the Brundtland report of 1987, which is often referenced as a watershed moment for the rise of the movement.

In this review essay, I discuss three recent monographs in the field of American literary studies—by Michelle Neely, Abby Goode, and Mary Kuhn—that in parallel but distinct ways contribute to the project of unearthing the historical roots of sustainability. These studies hint at alternative frameworks for a more impactful politics, for which they draw inspiration from critical Indigenous studies. This review article asks what we can learn from this movement to historicize and reorient sustainability thinking in the context of early and nineteenth-century American literary studies. Writing as a non-Indigenous scholar hailing from a nation-state with a long and complicated colonial history in both Asia and the Americas, I am interested in the potential of Indigenous perspectives in reinvigorating sustainable discourses. The aim here is an exploratory analysis of the rhetorical entailments of sustainable politics, specifically in a US framework, by way of a review of three recent monographs on this topic.

For my approach, I draw inspiration from a brand of conceptual history practiced by the late Reinhart Koselleck. This methodological framework—more a heuristic than a discipline—was designed to critically interrogate the ideological valences of and temporal presuppositions encoded in the concepts organizing “modern” political life.² Koselleck was most attentive to modern coinages such as history, revolution, and progress, which all started to be used as freestanding concepts in most European languages (as singular expressions without articles or postmodifiers) over the course of the eighteenth century. These collective singulars, as Koselleck called them, came to function as catchwords expressing the new political realities of the postrevolutionary age. While denoting a totality of sorts, such concepts contain various, often conflicting meaning layers and are, for this reason, profoundly ideological and partisan. That is to say, once we start talking about history pure and simple rather than just histories in the plural, we embrace a specific understanding of temporality that can be studied in its own right, develop into an academic discipline or profession, and articulate specific narratives or teleologies. As Koselleck insisted, this understanding of historical time is not natural but contingent; it is a product of modern societies’ reliance on a future-oriented linear temporality for its legitimation.

While Koselleck was mostly interested in the age of revolutions between roughly 1750 and 1850 when the old European order collapsed to make room for modernity, his

1. For a useful historical overview, see Caradonna, *Sustainability*.

2. Koselleck, *Futures Past*.

approach may equally be applied to more recent ecological concepts which stand in a fraught relation with the modernization narrative.³ For instance, an abstract entity like *environment*—as opposed to plural *environs* to be found in older texts—is a linguistic product of the mid-nineteenth century and, as Paul Warde, Libby Robin, and Sverker Sörlin have shown, only hardened into its current meaning about a century later.⁴ A similar tendency toward singularization can be discerned in spatial denominators such as *earth*, *desert*, or *atmosphere*. We now seldom use these terms in the plural, and we instead comprehend them as planetary entities, which suggests they have acquired the properties of collective singulars as theorized by Koselleck. Instead of orienting us in space, as they originally did, these concepts now denote temporal processes (e.g., desertification) to which specific knowledge formations are attached (e.g., atmospherology, Earth System science). As abstract umbrella terms, they often require modalization: We distinguish between the natural and built environment, or we posit degrowth as an alternative political and economic program to the growth logic.

Even if its semantic trajectory differs from that of *environment* and cognate terms, *sustainability*—transformed from a verb that can denote “to endure” as well as “to uphold” or “cause to continue”—can similarly be approached as a collective singular in Koselleck’s sense. This raises the question what kind of work such a concept, which now yields more hits on Google than, say, *democracy*, is or can be doing for society, what kind of realities it calls into being, and what expectations it encapsulates. While there is no denying that we need such abstract nominalizations to organize political debate, create purchase, draw up international agreements, and institute agencies dedicated to shared causes, the tendency toward linguistic singularization and abstraction also makes sustainability discourse highly vulnerable to politicization. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt famously argued that plurality is the foundation of political action.⁵ To what extent does a collective singular like *sustainability*, which is so amenable to greenwashing, lead us to disavow that foundational plurality? Can we repluralize our political vocabulary, for instance by attuning ourselves to the multiple uses to which the rhetoric of sustainability has been put in the past, or by tapping alternative idioms and worldviews that have been neglected or forgotten?

Historicizing Sustainability

Such questions are central to the three recent monographs under review here. In distinct but similar ways, they propose to tease out the complicated legacies of the sustainability movement as expressed in the American literary tradition. In *Against Sustainability* (2020), Michelle Neely unearths the early roots of ideas about recycling and preservation, which

3. For more on this methodological angle, I refer to my monograph *Climate and the Picturesque in the American Tropics*, chap. 1.

4. Warde et al., *Environment*.

5. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 175.

are normally framed in relation to the first major nature conservation efforts toward the end of the nineteenth century. By going further back in time, Neely reveals this to be a misguided and even damaging paradigm, the bedrock of which is stasis rather than change or interrelation. In paired chapters that shuttle back and forth between the nineteenth century and later periods, Neely shows the pervasiveness of spurious ideas regarding environmental stasis, while also pointing to the potential for more radical, alternative visions. Thus her study opens with the theme of composting in Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, arguing that the book is at heart antireformist in spite of its rhetoric of inclusivity. While ecocritics have analyzed, for instance, Whitman's poem "Song of the Redwood Tree" as a prescient example of environmental awareness, Neely contends that we should consider it a damaging "greenwashing fantasy" that served to underwrite existing exclusions and inequities in American society.⁶

While Neely is not the first to point to the limitations of Whitmanian sympathy—several other scholars already commented on Whitman's unfeeling treatment of the demise of the redwoods—but few have so deliberately unpacked the linked trajectories of racism and environmentalism in the author. Rather than treating Whitman's fascination with health reform and phrenology as separate from his environmentalism, Neely shows that they are intimately entwined, thus revealing fundamental problems inherent in American politics of sustainability. In a paired chapter, Neely counterbalances this spurious tradition, as represented by Whitman's expansionist poetics, with the minimalist environmental ethics of Henry David Thoreau and Emily Dickinson, which are framed as alternative visions of sustainability prefiguring the simple living movements of later periods. In similar fashion, the final two chapters discuss radical ideas about pet keeping in the antislavery narratives of Hannah Crafts and Harriet Wilson in counterpoint to a specious model of preservation as evidenced in the work of, among others, George Catlin, Francis Parkman, and Herman Melville. The latter authors, Neely asserts, campaigned for wilderness or wildlife preservation for the wrong reasons, romanticizing the vastness of the prairies and the seas. At its most successful, Neely's contrastive approach brings out historical continuities stretching back to the early 1800s, thus illustrating the tenaciousness of problematic assumptions embedded in mainstream Anglo-American sustainability discourse while holding out the possibility of a more transformative politics.

Like Neely, Abby Goode's *Agrotopias* (2022) presents itself as a critique of the problematic roots of American sustainability as a fantasy of future stability.⁷ Goode's main theme is the unspoken conjunction between agrarian reform and population management, which she traces back to Thomas Jefferson's idealization of the small farmer as the linchpin of American democracy. Presenting America as a land of plenty and democratic fulfillment in opposition to Old World politics, Jefferson cultivated a myth of agrarian self-sufficiency that continues to energize locavore and organic farming movements

6. Neely, *Against Sustainability*, 47.

7. Goode, *Agrotopias*.

to this day. As Goode emphasizes, Jefferson's overt racism toward the Black population cannot be cordoned off from his agricultural vision. Since his vision was based on the expectation of limitless New World expansion, it fed on and amplified nativist and xenophobic tendencies in American society. Far from an innocuous or noble ideal, therefore, Jefferson's conception of a democratic farming nation indirectly reproduced racist, proto-eugenic assumptions that linger on today in sustainable rhetoric.

While her study does not engage as substantially with contemporary literature as Neely's, Goode uses a similar method of juxtaposition to develop her historical critique. Thus, she reads Melville's *Pierre* as a dystopian enactment of the reproductive anxieties that drove the reform movements of the 1840s and also underlie a little-known agricultural report ghostwritten by the author. Similarly, Goode pairs Crèvecoeur's writings on the American tropics with *Secret History*, Leonora Sansay's epistolary novel of the Haitian Revolution, suggesting that these texts express the fears of tropical degeneracy that underlie Jefferson's conception of a farming nation. Further, in a chapter on Black agrotopias, Goode interprets Sutton Griggs's novel *Imperium in Imperio* as a commentary on Martin Delany's emigrationism, while W. E. B. Du Bois's short story "The Comet" is read against the author's own ideas on racial sustainability as developed in *Principia of Ethnology*. The chapter on Whitman interprets the poet's unpublished poem "The Eighteenth Presidency" in light of his disillusionment with Jeffersonian agrarianism and his turn toward racial science. The final case study centers on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's agrotopia *Herland* and the less famous sequel *With Her in Ourland*, which in Goode's reading both negate and further Whitman's vision of global sustainability. The epilogue, finally, traces the legacy of nineteenth-century agrotopias in two very different manifestations of neoagrarian rhetoric—namely, the Sierra Club's preservationism and Michelle Obama's promotion of community gardens.

Mary Kuhn's *The Garden Politic* (2023), while less directly engaging sustainability issues, similarly offers new perspectives on nineteenth-century American literature specifically through the lens of botanical culture. Kuhn's study starts in the 1820s, a time of intense nationalism and nativism but also of the democratization of horticulture as a national pastime.⁸ In Kuhn's estimate, these developments were profoundly entangled. Her study thus focuses on the multifarious political uses of botanical practices and vocabulary in the nineteenth-century United States. As with sustainability rhetoric, the botanical craze did not come out of nowhere but rather sprang from anxieties regarding the future of the American republic in a period of intense social change. If botany was a vehicle of nationalism and jingoism, it equally served to disrupt parochial narratives of belonging, thus gesturing toward alternative forms of community. As Kuhn suggests, the domestic activity of caring for plants gave expression to a powerful, polyvalent discourse that allowed the new republic to imagine itself in biotic terms. Since plant culture was at once national and global, imperial and homegrown, rooted and strangely mobile, it could be employed as an instrument of both control and critique.

8. Kuhn, *Garden Politic*.

Kuhn unpacks this argument in a series of well-crafted chapters dealing for the most part with canonical literary texts produced during the middle decades of the 1800s. In a chapter on Lydia Maria Child, for instance, Kuhn argues that the author used botany to both further (particularly in her debut *Hobomok* and *Evenings in New England*) and interrogate (in *A Romance of the Republic*, which uses floral imagery to thematize racial mixing) nationalist rhetoric. Consequent chapters on Hawthorne and Dickinson both reaffirm these writers' reputations as otherworldly recluses and actively deprovincialize them by showing how they keenly engaged with botany as a global knowledge network, among other things through their connection with such figures as Robert Manning Jr., Hawthorne's cousin, and Edward Hitchcock, the president of Amherst College who exchanged horticultural wisdom with Dickinson. The international dimension can also be inferred from the fact that both Hawthorne and Dickinson avidly read *Picciola*, a tremendously popular novel by the French writer X. B. Saintine that might have been a source of inspiration for "Rappaccini's Daughter." The final two chapters link botany to antislavery activism on both sides of the sectional divide. In Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred*, the protagonist is presented not just as a Jeffersonian small farmer whose diverse swamp garden contrasts with plantation monocropping but also as a horticulturalist whose interest in plant crossing and diversity indirectly undermined governing conceptions of race. Kuhn convincingly shows that Frederick Douglass's political writings were similarly informed by horticultural practices and ideas, which supplied him with arguments to critique the exceptionalist rhetoric underpinning Western agrotopias.

Two common threads connect the studies I have briefly introduced here. First, all three carefully unpack the political uses of preservation, agriculture, and horticulture, analyzing how these practices came with a developed rhetorical infrastructure that served to underwrite—and at times critique—racial, gender, and class privileges in the American nation during the long nineteenth century and after. If anything, this should make us wary of the ways in which sustainability discourse is mobilized today, in however well-intentioned or idealistic fashion. As Goode aptly phrases it in her introduction, "[I]t is not just that some of the nation's environmental leaders happened to espouse racist views or lead eugenic societies. It is that these ideas are imaginatively interwoven and mutually dependent, and have been for centuries."⁹ Such fraught legacies cannot just be shaken off overnight. Symptomatically, the fact that we keep on framing sustainability in a language of impact and outcomes—as evidenced in low impact or zero waste movements—illustrates how we remain indebted to a logic of growth and profit that goes back at least in part to the Jeffersonian vision of abundant land as the cornerstone of American democracy and citizenship.

The reader might interject that tracking the *longue durée* of American sustainability in this way is to lapse into anachronism, since this term was obviously not around in the nineteenth century. However, this is to confuse concepts with the words that

9. Goode, *Agrotopias*, 29.

express them. While the vocabulary has shifted dramatically, the conceptual infrastructure underpinning that vocabulary is like the proverbial submerged iceberg. These three studies allow us to discern deeper lineages that too often remain implicit in current debates on sustainable transformations. To be sure, one cannot develop such historical critiques of sustainability without also articulating alternative modes of making sense of our relation to the nonhuman world that do not perpetuate inherited sexist, racist, classist, and speciesist fantasies. Historically, farming, food, and botany have not only been sources of environmentally destructive and genocidal practices in what has come to be called the Plantacionocene; they have also been sources of emancipatory imaginaries, from the landraces of corn in Chiapas, to victory gardens, to the Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom Farm Cooperative. How, then, do we disentangle these opposed tendencies? How can we recognize truly sustainable and inclusive agricultural and horticultural practices? The three monographs do not answer these questions head-on, but they do point in similar directions.

Indigenizing Sustainability

While there are many other relevant aspects of these interesting studies that beg further discussion, I here zoom in on their embrace of Indigenous studies as their key enabling methodology for articulating a more viable sustainable politics. It is this shared turn toward *Indigeneity*—a term (now usually capitalized) that, like *sustainability*, first started to circulate globally during the 1970s in the cenacles and bureaucratic arms of various IGOs and NGOs—that I seek to elucidate in somewhat more detail below.

The authors linger on the radical promise of Indigenous approaches for shedding the problematic legacies of “mainstream” sustainable rhetoric. Thus, in the coda to her book, Neely explicitly opposes the Anglo-American sustainable paradigm to Indigenous epistemologies as espoused by environmental philosophers Kyle Powys Whyte (Citizen Potawatomi Nation), Melissa K. Nelson (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians), and Robin Wall Kimmerer (Citizen Potawatomi Nation). Neely suggests that we should look to Indigenous knowledge systems, with their emphasis on reciprocity and interrelation with the nonhuman world, instead of cultivating fantasies of stasis. In similar fashion, Goode argues that we can draw inspiration from anti-colonial environmental justice movements, and particularly notions of place-based continuance and flourishing entertained by Indigenous philosophers Kyle Whyte, Chris Caldwell (Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin), and Marie Schaefer (Odawa), in order to offset the persistent “fantasies of elsewhere” that Goode critiques in her book.¹⁰ Echoing Neely and Goode, Kuhn concludes her study by pointing to the promise of Robin Wall Kimmerer’s ethos of collectivity as a viable model for engaging with the nonhuman world—one that recognizes our connection with and responsibility toward other life forms.

10. Goode, *Agrotopias*, 28.

In accounting for this shared investment in Indigenous perspectives, we can distill three overlapping motivations that in my reading explain the attraction of Indigeneity as a category of action and critique. First, whereas “mainstream” sustainability rhetoric easily gets absorbed into slick corporate language, Indigenous sustainabilities emanate from collectivities that define themselves in opposition to oppressive settler regimes that continue to threaten their identities and cultures. Second, these collectivities are rooted in particular places in relation to which they have developed dynamic and resilient cultures dating back to precontact periods.¹¹ Third, in contrast to the jaded sustainability rhetoric in wide circulation today, Indigenous biophilosophies emerge from nondualist, embodied ontologies that refuse received divisions between subject and object, human and nonhuman nature, or societies and the landscapes from which they emerge. In other words, where “mainstream” sustainability as typically vaunted by institutions and corporations remains largely compatible with liberal conceptions of identity and statehood, Indigenous wisdom destabilizes such notions, thus suggesting a completely different way of organizing society. The impact of this “Indigenous turn,” then, goes far beyond the study of cultures and societies that are said to fit the Indigenous assignation. For the purposes of this review article, I wish to sketch the contours of, as well as some of the dilemmas emerging from, this generalized embrace of Indigeneity as a framework for reinvigorating the sustainability movement.

A first step in understanding this paradigm shift, I believe, is to realize that each of the three distinguishing features of Indigeneity sketched out above (situatedness, collectivity, and embodiedness) finds expression in the context of a highly differentiated world society. This togetherness of particularism and globalism results in dynamic tensions that, in my view, explain much of the vitality of current theorizing in critical Indigenous studies. Thus, while political calls for Indigenous self-determination do indeed take shape in opposition to ongoing settler injustices, these calls issue from the politico-jural institutions of modern society. Similarly, however motivated by long attachment to particular places, Indigenous sustainabilities circulate in a potentially global framework, which allows for political mobilization across a wide cultural and geographical spectrum. It is such transcultural coalitions that explain the particular force as well as some of the confusions built into the global Indigenous movement. Finally, when sustainability scholars and activists cultivate the orally transmitted holistic wisdom of Indigenous elders for conceptualizing alternative futurities in the face of worldwide environmental disruption and climate change, they rely on standardized vernaculars, global dissemination media, and the disembedding mechanisms of modern bureaucratic systems to bring their message across on the world stage.

11. See, in this regard, the oft-cited but contested definition of Indigeneity by Taiaiake Alfred (Kahnawake Mohawk) and Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee), which conceives it as an “oppositional, place-based existence” infused with “the consciousness of being in struggle against the dispossessing and demeaning fact of colonization by foreign peoples” (“Being Indigenous,” 597).

This is to say that Indigeneity operates under what legal scholar Geoffrey Benjamin calls conditions of “covert *exogeny*,” meaning that when mounting their claims to land and self-determination Indigenous groups depend on the technologies, juridical systems, and political institutions of societal modernity.¹² Being Indigenous, in this sense, entails having forfeited conditions of *indigeny*, defined narrowly as continued habitation in a specific locale. Pointing out this apparent contradiction is not to deny the legitimacy of Indigenous coalitional politics. Nor is it meant to reinstall a false dichotomy between “true” and “false” Indigeneity—suggesting that there is a pure mode of Indigenous existence somehow untainted by modernity that, however, only becomes legible as such after it has been touched by the latter. Rather, to underscore the covertly exogenous nature of Indigeneity is to recognize that the meanings of this expansive category are complex and constantly evolving. What particularly interests me in this regard is the extent to which Indigenism—conceived as political advocacy by and for specific groups that in whatever way are categorized as indigenous—can or should be approached as constituting a new, global category of political mobilization, which, while sharing some features with conventional forms of minority politics, is really something new and different. As Ronald Niezen has argued, what we are experiencing is really “a global cultural revolution,” the precise lineaments of which remain, as of yet, dimly understood.¹³

This global dimension of Indigeneity returns us to the question to what extent it aligns with similarly inclusive concepts such as sustainability. While responding to very different social forces and conditions, the semantic history of *Indigeneity* runs largely parallel to that of *sustainability*. Even as they point to deeper lineages pitting modernity against inherited knowledge systems and lifeways, these terms gained traction in the framework of international governance and diplomacy during the Cold War period (consider the roughly coterminous creation of UN agencies dedicated to Indigenous and sustainable movements). This historical convergence is mirrored in the semantic properties of the two neologisms. In both cases, we are looking at future-oriented counterconcepts to “modernity” that promise “traditional” alternatives to dominant narratives of unbridled economic growth and development. Both concepts, moreover, hinge on a pronounced we-they binary, dividing the world between those who live sustainably or in accordance with Indigenous lifeways, and those who fail to live up to these expectations. Finally, Indigeneity is like sustainability in that it defies comprehensive definition, making it both highly malleable and vulnerable to mainstreaming and romanticization. In other words, like sustainability, Indigeneity operates as a Koselleckian collective singular, a highly politicized principle of action in today’s world society.

If this interpretation holds, several insights follow. To begin, it would reveal that Indigeneity, like other key concepts such as democracy, is inherently ambiguous and ideological. As Koselleck insisted, “[A] concept must remain ambiguous in order to be a

12. Benjamin, “Indigenous Peoples,” 364.

13. Niezen, *Origins of Indigenism*, 12.

concept.”¹⁴ From this perspective, any attempt at disambiguation—of the sort insisted upon by legal scholars and political administrations—is futile insofar as it denies the function of collective singulars in organizing the incommensurabilities of modern political life. Further, approaching Indigeneity as a collective singular is to see it first and foremost as a model form that opens out the modern experience of reality and time. Questions of time, of course, occupy a central place in Indigenous studies, which insists that Indigenous experiences of time depart from those of “Western” modernity. Conceptual history allows us to understand how such heterogeneous temporalities are articulated through expectation concepts that capture what Koselleck called, in a well-known phrase, “the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneity.”¹⁵ The point to note here is not so much that alternative temporalities exist in opposition to modern notions of historicity but rather that these asynchronicities co-exist in a conflictual space of experience that is quintessentially “modern.” Finally, and most crucially, historical semantics allows us to develop a critique of utopian reflexes as encoded in concepts such as Indigeneity. While it is true that, historically, many utopias—including the agrotopias analyzed by Goode—are “fantasies of elsewhere,” Koselleck’s work shows how, in a globalized society, such spatial counterworlds are subject to a process of progressive temporalization.¹⁶ Modernity, Koselleck insisted, labors under a surplus of expectation. There can be no denying that the Indigenous turn, for all its insistence on place-based epistemologies, participates in this generalized embrace of futurity as a site of “true” indigeneity.

In offering these reflections, I do not mean to suggest Indigenous studies scholarship has not reflected on the assumptions clinging to the category of Indigeneity; quite the contrary, critical Indigenous theory was born out of discomfort with this contentious term. Over time, the field has developed a number of strategies for resisting its homogenizing pull. One such strategy is to relativize the assumption of prior inhabitation as a vital criterion of Indigenous peoplehood. We can observe this trend in intergovernmental agencies, which in response to ongoing criticism have settled on pragmatic criteria of inclusion, such as self-ascription and recognition. Such a pragmatic approach, however, is of limited use in judicial deliberations over land rights and the like. Another strategy is to differentiate between various, sometimes conflictual articulations or modes of Indigeneity. The work of Kimberley TallBear (Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate) on the role of genomics in tribal membership might count as an instance of this approach, which acknowledges that definitions of Indigeneity often emerge in a conflictual public arena.¹⁷ A final promising avenue is to reconceive Indigeneity as an analytic allowing us to interrogate the shifting boundaries between indigeneity and exogeneity. Among others, Maile Arvin (Kanaka Maoli) favors such a reorientation, which might not only

14. Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 85.

15. Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 95.

16. See, in particular, Koselleck, *Practice of Conceptual History*, chap. 5.

17. See TallBear, *Native American DNA*.

relieve some of the pressure over “being Indigenous” but also facilitate the integration of Indigenous theories in other fields and disciplines.¹⁸ The question here is whether it is really feasible to bracket identity in this way, given that most Indigenous scholars tend to present themselves, as Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw Nation) and Michael Rothberg have noted, as Gramscian “organic intellectuals” strongly invested in the communities whose collective rights they advocate.¹⁹

In my view, such unresolved tensions over the meanings and applications of Indigeneity shine through in the monographs by Neely, Goode, and Kuhn. These books invoke Indigeneity to articulate alternative, potentially more sustainable articulations of the future in a US context. In some instances, this leads them to embrace understandings of Indigeneity that are subject to enduring controversy. Consider, for example, Neely’s claim that “Indigenous sustainabilities (North American and otherwise) frequently draw upon noncapitalist and precolonial lifeways and traditions and have been shaped by centuries of anticapitalist, antiracist, and anticolonial struggle.”²⁰ In spite of the fact that Neely here insists on the plurality of Indigenous perspectives, she at the same time lumps together a broad array of such traditions and populations, as the parenthetical “North American and otherwise” suggests. If this rhetorical move allows Neely to approach Indigeneity as a global entity with significant clout to combat a number of interlinked injustices, it also necessarily papers over some of the differences among Indigenous groups, all of which are understood as contributing to “anticapitalist, antiracist and anticolonial struggle.” In practice, however, there is seldom such neat alignment among self-declared Indigenous groups, as the recurrent definitional disputes already touched on testify. If we direct our gaze away from North America, we can find a number of instances of Indigenous groups that do not define themselves in opposition to, but rather in tandem with, a dominant state, such as the Indigismo of Mexico and Pribumi of Indonesia. The economist Albert Hirschman referred to this assumption of a mutually supportive relation between various progressive causes as the “synergy illusion.”²¹

While the studies reviewed here occasionally submit to such synergetic fantasies, in other respects they actively work against them by highlighting the complex valences of Indigeneity. Kuhn, for instance, insists that an awareness of the multiple political uses of horticultural language in nineteenth-century America does not only help to reimagine our relation to the nonhuman world today but should also alert us to the ontological and ethical pitfalls inherent in the recent plant turn and the ways in which it draws on Indigenous forms of knowledge making. As she phrases it, where focusing on the liveliness of plant “might unsettle assumptions that help perpetuate political capitulation to

18. Arvin, “Analytics of Indigeneity.”

19. Byrd and Rothberg, “Between Subalternity and Indigeneity,” 10. Byrd and Rothberg refer to a moral commitment to being Indigenous—which, I would add, goes hand in glove with marked tolerance for definitional ambiguity—as a critical point of divergence with some versions of postcolonial or subaltern studies.

20. Neely, *Against Sustainability*, 152.

21. Hirschman, *Rhetoric of Reaction*, 149.

extractive capitalism,” it might also, quite contradictorily, “consolidate an idea of the human, flattening difference and the ways that political policies exacerbate inequalities among human beings.”²² In my view, such reflections illustrate both the potentialities and some of the difficulties involved in applying Indigenous theories, particularly when dealing with the formative stages of a national cultural tradition grounded in liberal principles of personhood and state sovereignty. Given their insistence on self-determination and collective rights in relation to oppressive settler states, many Indigenous groups reject such liberal principles as viable markers of belonging and action. At their best, then, the three monographs bring out the ways in which Indigeneity—as identity and optic—can be employed to refigure the American literary tradition along alternative, more sustainable lines. But their illuminating historical inquiries also show that such alternative futurities necessarily take shape in a highly politicized arena, in which control and critique are sometimes difficult to disentangle.

Coda: Historical Semantics 2.0?

The methodological focus on cultural semantics in a handful of European vernaculars, to the neglect of orally transmitted, embodied, and communal practices, will strike many Indigenous scholars and peoples as extremely limiting. It is a truism that Koselleck’s conceptual history springs from a specific cultural constellation that is deeply Eurocentric. *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, the multivolume historical lexicon that Koselleck and his team assembled over a period of twenty years (and on which Michel Foucault drew liberally for his studies on governmentality), now seems irreparably tainted by the failed imperial ambitions of the twentieth century.²³ Their lexicon betrays little awareness of the role played by Indigenous populations in the constitution of modern understandings of the state or citizenship. But, as Benedict Anderson famously argues in *Imagined Communities*, we cannot fully grasp the origins of the modern nation-state without considering the politics of creole elites in the Americas, which cultivated myths of “primitive” origins even as they actively engaged in exterminating or displacing tribal communities.²⁴

If we follow Anderson’s line of argumentation, Indigeneity was deeply entangled with the emergence of modern political categories long before it hardened into a singularized, multiply ambiguous identity category. Indigenous critical theory can bring out the blind spots of classical conceptual history while also pointing to new lines of inquiry that recenter Indigenous perspectives and their traces in modern sociopolitical language. And just as it was a decisive factor in the making of the nation-state, Indigeneity might be no less consequential in the remaking of political structures at the present juncture. As Elizabeth Povinelli has argued, the promise of Indigenous studies as a

22. Kuhn, *Garden Politic*, 180.

23. Brunner et al., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*.

24. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, chap. 4.

critical project goes beyond anthropological research in that it helps us to unravel taken-for-granted oppositions deeply embedded in “Western” political and legal systems, such as particularism and universalism, the human and the nonhuman, and travel and settlement.²⁵ The recent emergence of global Indigeneity—an apparent oxymoron that conforms to neither the politics of postcolonial movements nor the Kantian ideals of cosmopolitanism and moral universalism—suggests that we may be crossing a new epochal threshold releasing new modes of governance, vocabularies, and ways of being.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors of *Environmental Humanities* for their valuable comments on versions of this essay.

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