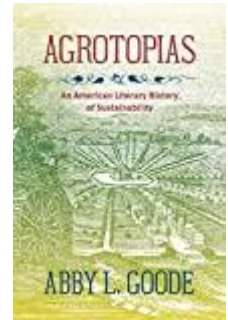




Abby L. Goode. *Agrotopias: An American Literary History of Sustainability.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022. 294 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-6982-3.



Reviewed by Camden Burd (Eastern Illinois University)

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Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

When Thomas Jefferson wrote *Notes on the State of Virginia* in 1795, he sought to reimagine what the American landscape *might* look like in the future. He hoped Americans would push west and settle the North American landscape, creating democratic communities along the way. He saw an idyllic, almost utopian future. Of course, this vision was informed by his own racist beliefs. Committed to the notion that Black and white bodies could not coexist in this imagined future, he laid out an explicit vision of racial separation. In *Notes*, Jefferson imagined a sustainable agrarian future while embracing noxious racial and prejudiced ideas. Though Jefferson's *Notes* was written for a particular moment, the text's core themes have reverberated for centuries. As Abbey L. Goode points out in *Agrotopias: An American Literary History of Sustainability*, Jefferson helped to create a literary tradition that would continue to shape how reformers, political activists, romantics, poets, novelists, localists, and sustainability advocates would frame their arguments. In *Agrotopias*, Goode tracks a disturbing through line in

American sustainability literature—a style that both imagines a utopian agrarian future while embracing particular eugenicist and racialized ideas.

Goode argues that agrotopias appear throughout a variety of texts and “are seemingly ideal worlds of agrarian stability and productive labor, speculative visions that both represent *eutopia* (the ‘good place’) and *utopia* (no place)” (p. 3). The works included in this agrotopian tradition are wide-ranging though they do share similar features. The visions they describe are always imagined, a response to some political, demographic, environmental, or social crisis of the moment. As such, their authors either look backward toward some idyllic past or to the future, where a “new society” might emerge that has solved the problems in the writer's contemporary world. At first glance these writings appear quasi-environmental—many are still embraced by modern environmental organizations. But Goode asks readers to revisit these texts and consider the unsettling underpinnings of the agrotopia. Because many of the authors “identified a range of demographic dis-

asters that appeared to threaten the agrarian ideal,” they began to imagine new communities and, more significantly, who would or would not be included in those spaces: “Agrotopias are thus characterized as much by racial purity and reproductive stability as they are by small farming and independent labor” (p. 3). Examining a range of texts across the nineteenth century, Goode recovers a coherent thread of literary thought that both imagines sustainable societies and expresses clear prejudices of racial exclusion and a prioritization of particular reproductive practices.

Turning to fictional works, Goode finds elements of Jeffersonian thinking throughout the nineteenth century. The cast of writers and texts in *Agrotopias* is wide-ranging and includes Herman Melville’s *Pierre* (1852)—a work that is preoccupied with an unsustainable society defined by the overpopulation of urban areas, sexual excess, and racial degeneracy. Goode situates Melville within a society enamored with the language of agricultural reform—a response to diminishing yields, demographic shifts, and the increased influence of commercial agriculture. In doing so, Goode rightly notes that Melville valorizes many of the same ideals laid out in Jefferson’s *Notes* (sustainable agrarian societies made up of an imagined righteous, moral, and uniform society). Similar themes can be found in a host of Walt Whitman’s writings including “This Compost” (1856), “The Eighteenth Presidency!” (1928), and *Leaves of Grass* (1855-1892). Across these texts, Whitman blends a celebration of western expansion and of agrarian values, all while focusing on particular aspects of sexual reproduction.

The appeal of the agrotopia also resonated with authors representing groups often excluded from the aforementioned authors’ works. Take for instance the work of Martin Delany, whose writings imagined a Black nationalist utopia in antebellum and postbellum society. In *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852) Delaney began

to envision a “racially homogenous, agriculturally prolific, new ‘New World’ removed from the debilitating conditions of enslavement and oppression” (p. 87). Later, he would expand on this vision while embracing an emigrationist outlook, as seen in *Principia of Ethnology* (1879), a text that downplayed agrarian-based society while remaining committed to racial separation and racial regeneration in Africa. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915) also demonstrates the fluidity of the agrotopian genre. Though it is definitively a Progressive-Era text—a work that “synthesized eugenics, conservationism, and new agrarianism” into one—it still carries the hallmarks of an agrotopia (p. 152). *Herland*, like many agrotopian texts before, imagined a sustainable society removed from an overcrowded and polluted world. Though the text is more communal and anti-capitalist than other mentioned texts, Gilman describes Herland as an asexual society, demonstrating, yet again, the agrotopian genre’s preoccupation with reproduction. Though writing for different audiences, at different times, and with different goals, both authors share rhetorical similarities across their works.

Agrotopias marks an important addition to a broader wave of scholarship focused on the social, economic, demographic, and cultural components of American agrarianism over the course of the long nineteenth century. Goode’s work could—and should—be read alongside Philip J. Pauly’s *Fruits and Plains: The Horticultural Transformation of America* (2008), Emily Pawley’s *The Nature of the Future: Agriculture, Science, and Capitalism in the Antebellum North* (2020), and Ariel Ron’s *Grassroots Leviathan: Agricultural Reform and the Rural North in the Slaveholding Republic* (2023). Considered together, these books provide readers with an understanding of how the material, political, and cultural components of American agrarian thought took hold in nineteenth-century society. Though boosters, agricultural reformers, and politicians regularly expressed particular visions for American agrarianism, Goode considers how

novels, poetry, and other cultural productions further cemented a particular American disposition—one that celebrated agricultural practices while selectively defining who ought to be included in this new, sustainable society.

Perhaps most significantly, Goode's *Agrotopias* asks all readers to reflect on their own relationship to the rhetoric of sustainability and environmentalism. In a brief but effective epilogue, Goode finds agrotopian themes in modern texts including the Sierra Club's defining *This is the American Earth* (1960) and Michelle Obama's *American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens across America* (2012). In both texts, agrotopian themes persist. *This is the American Earth* openly argues that a major threat to American environments comes from global overpopulation and outside threats. Though Obama's text does not celebrate the "expansionist, nativist, and eugenic agrotopias of old," it still follows familiar arguments for imagining a more sustainable society (p. 195). Most notably, Obama celebrates Jefferson's agricultural vision and believes that a future nation of gardeners can provide "more productive bodies for the future" (p. 196). As Goode correctly notes, the agrotopian tradition unfortunately cannot—and will not—answer the biggest environmental questions of the day. In order to seriously address the climate crisis, Americans must shed the vestiges of agrotopian thinking and center an environmental justice movement that prioritizes political agency, complete human dignity, and ecological communities as they exist now. The message in Goode's *Agrotopias* is clear—these imagined communities are dangerous fantasies.

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