Coral today is an icon of environmental crisis, its disappearance from the world's oceans an emblem for the richness of forms and habitats either lost to us or at risk. Yet, as Michelle Currie Navakas shows in her eloquent book, *Coral Lives: Literature, Labor, and the Making of America*, our accounts today of coral as beauty, loss, and precarious future depend on an inherited language from the nineteenth century. In a remarkable set of readings of literature and art, coral artifacts, and popular natural history, Navakas traces how coral became the material with which writers, poets, and artists debated community, labor, and polity in the United States. The coral reef produced a compelling teleological vision of the nation: just as the minute coral “insect,” working invisibly under the waves, built immense structures that accumulated through efforts of countless others, living and dead, so the nation's developing form depended on the countless workers whose individuality was almost impossible to detect. This identification of coral with human communities, Navakas shows, was not only revisited but also revised and challenged throughout the century. Coral had a global biography, a history as currency and ornament that linked it to the violence of slavery. It was also already a talisman—readymade for a modern symbol because of its ancient associations with protective magic and, in some traditions, fertility. Not least, for nineteenth-century readers in the United States, it was also an artifact of knowledge and discovery, with coral fans and branches brought back from the Pacific and Indian Oceans to sit in American parlors and museums.

The book begins with material culture analysis, discussing three common early American coral artifacts, familiar objects that made coral as a substance much more familiar to the nineteenth century than today: red coral beads for jewelry, the coral teething toy, and the natural history specimen. This chapter is a visual tour de force, bringing together a fascinating range of representations of coral in nineteenth-century painting and sculptures. With the material presence of coral firmly in place, Navakas returns us to its place in texts as metaphor for labor, with close readings of poetry.
and ephemeral literature up to the Civil War era. The third chapter focuses on the contributions of natural history to the meanings of coral, examining two different aspects in particular: the taxonomic ambiguity of the organism and the development of coral reefs. This chapter includes an intriguing examination of the posthumous reputation of the eighteenth-century French naturalist Jean-André Peyssonnel who first claimed that coral should be classed as an animal (or “insect”), not plant. Navakas then turns to writers who used coral to imagine new forms of the collective. This chapter considers white reformers, both male and female, and Black authors and activists, including James McCune Smith and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and a singular Black charitable association in Cleveland, Ohio, at the end of the century, called the Coral Builders’ Society. The last chapter returns to material culture and red coral beads, pursuing their place in fictions of race and slavery from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) to the short story “Her Virginia Mammy” (1899) by Charles W. Chestnutt.

With these diverse materials, Navakas tackles the interpretations of coral—which she describes as its cultural biography—with sophistication and sensitivity. She invokes Robin Bernstein’s notion of “scriptive things” to show how material objects, texts, and images circulated a complex repertoire of meanings about coral that surfaced and resurfaced throughout the century (p. 10). Most strikingly, her attention to layered knowledge allows her to examine the subversions of coral imagery that arose from the intermingling of diverse traditions. Obviously, the mid-nineteenth-century poems that lauded coral as a metaphor for laboring men who raised solid structures for a collective future also sought to naturalize a system that kept some kinds of labor and some kinds of people firmly pressed beneath the surface. Coral’s biography, she notes, was “inseparable from colonial violence at almost every turn” (p. 7). Yet coral was also part of the material history of the Black Atlantic: red coral beads were currency that pursued slaves, beads that traveled to the United States on Black bodies, so identified with “Africa” that they provided a conventional iconography for the continent and Blackness in sculptures and paintings. Thus, a children’s Christmas story, “The Story of a Coral Bracelet” (1861), written by a West Indian writer, Sophy Moody, described the coral trade in the structure of a slave narrative. The bracelet began a form violently torn from the seas by cruel men in ships, reshaped for sale, but whose obdurate beauty and value survives the transformation. In addition, coral’s protean shapes and ambiguity—rock, plant, or animal?—gave Americans a model for the difficulty of defining essential qualities from surface appearance, a message that troubled biological essentialists but attracted abolitionists. Navakas thus repeatedly brings into view the racialized and gendered meanings of coral that reclaimed ideas of labor and community for marginalized groups.

One mark of a stimulating book is that every reader will have questions and desires. Some readers from the blue humanities will want more attention, for example, to the place of different oceans in the coral imaginary of the United States: Navakas’s gaze is clearly eastward to the Atlantic and Mediterranean and (to a degree) to the Caribbean. Many of her sources keep her to the northern and southeastern United States and its vision of America, even though much of the natural historical explorations, not to mention the missionary interest in coral islands, turns decidedly to the Pacific. I have two main questions. Neither undermine the book’s claims, but like the Pacific question, each points to the process of selection Navakas has made in assembling her materials.

First, under my hat as a historian of science, I note some puzzles in her account of how contemporaries read and engaged with the science of coral reefs. Navakas argues that, for the American public, Charles Darwin’s book about coral reefs carried a message of open-ended, unpredictable futures; the precise form of a reef was unknow-
able, shaped by many factors and minute variations. This is a remarkable reading, since Darwin's vaunted contribution to geological theory in 1842 was to speculate that the apparent diversity of Pacific reef forms shared a pattern of development that unified their strikingly different appearances. Of course, it does not matter whether or not the popular accounts that Navakas examines displayed an accurate or full understanding of Darwin's coral reef theory. Indeed, it may be revealing that the important influence for readers was Darwin's entirely predictable descriptions of the beauty and variability of reef forms: he was himself following the script that is Navakas's subject. Her larger argument that natural history shaped how coral surfaced and resurfaced for nineteenth-century readers is certainly convincing. Yet why avoid the well-known controversial nature of Darwin's theory throughout the century—particularly the debates about whether and how coral reefs rise up or sink down beneath the ocean surface, and what this means for the grander relations of land and sea over time? Questions about the structure of coral islands among naturalists for the rest of the century pitted supporters of Darwinian evolutionary theory against his opponents, and American naturalists against British ones. These disputes surely sustained the liveliness of coral—its teleology and its ambiguities—in popular American literature. As Navakas skillfully traces the mounting interest in Peyssonnel as an outsider, mistakenly rejected by other European naturalists, it is hard to avoid seeing his story, and that of coral in general, intertwined with American anti-evolutionary arguments and personalities by the later decades of the century.

My second desire, from the standpoint of Victorian studies, is for a more specific account of religious traditions and coral. While Navakas identifies many writers of coral poetry and fables, both British and American, as “evangelical,” she avoids detailed analysis of the theological context that would be relevant, such as the millennial fascination with chaos and reconstruction and the intense Anglo-American missionary interest in the Pacific. Two reasons for this move are quickly apparent. First, her focus on coral as an icon that enabled explicit discussion of labor and community means that she takes the more familiar arguments connecting natural history and Christianity in this period as a given. Second, and perhaps more importantly, her insistence that coral—and coral objects in particular—need to be understood as a global subject suggests another reason to avoid weighting her analysis toward Christian traditions. Coral, she argues, is most significant as an object of/in translation, mediating across the Black Atlantic and between many particular cultures. These critical strategies are easy to understand and accept, and yet the word—the script, in her terms—that I kept waiting for her to take up was “monuments”: a favorite nineteenth-century description of coral. Navakas does often refer to the awareness of coral “temporalities”—how coral served as metaphor for the bridges between past, present, and future. Yet the way that a coral reef was understood as a literal graveyard, in an age that made death practices and new forms of cemeteries so vital a part of social and civic bonds, seems to deserve a place in this study.

These are a greedy reader's questions, wanting more. As Navakas notes in a thoughtful coda, the method of the environmental humanities is to understand our present circumstances as framed by legacies from the past, legacies that are never smooth but point us to friction and complexity. Navakas integrates so many sources so well and with such a sharp eye on the complexities of race, cultural patterns, and global subjects that this book will become a ready model for scholarship in the environmental humanities.
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