

BOOK REVIEW

Miller, Daegan. 2018. *This Radical Land: A Natural History of American Dissent*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

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Miller, Daegan. (2018). *This Radical Land: A Natural History of American Dissent*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press., 336 pp. \$30.00. ISBN: 9780226336145.

Daegan Miller's book explores concepts such as environmentalism, wilderness, and community development in the context of 19th-century westward expansion and growth in the United States. Miller describes Henry David Thoreau's interpretations of natural environments as a surveyor; the Adirondack land partitioned by Gerrit Smith for antebellum African American farmers; A. J. Russell's photo-narrative of the Union Pacific Railroad; and the socialist Kaweah Colony in California situated at the foot of the "General Sherman" sequoia, briefly renamed "Karl Marx." The tree figures prominently throughout the book as a landmark for, witness to, and victim of human exploits.

Keywords: Manifest Destiny; U.S. Environmental History

Daegan Miller's book *This Radical Land: A Natural History of American Dissent* (2018) opens with the wind toppling the Great Elm in the Boston Commons in 1876. This tree is famous in poetry and prose as it witnessed milestones of a young country being built, The Great Elm remained a still figure on the modernizing map amidst the rapidly changing growth occurring around it. The concept of nature as witness, both testifying to a celebrated past but also potentially a survivor of past crimes, persists throughout the cases highlighted by Miller's comprehensive research efforts. He describes Henry David Thoreau's highly animated and critical riposte to reductionist interpretations of natural environments as a surveyor, and the Adirondack land partitioned by Gerrit Smith for antebellum African American farmers to settle a sustainable community. We also learn the back-story of A. J. Russell's somewhat contradictory photo-narrative of the expansion of the Union Pacific Railroad, and the doomed efforts of the socialist Kaweah Colony in California situated at the foot of the "General Sherman" sequoia, briefly renamed "Karl Marx." These stories showcase dissidents and "countermoderns" in the 19th century who questioned Manifest Destiny, who sought the freedom of the natural world not as an objective resource for monetary enrichment, pristine escapism, or political power, but who rather "refused to let the injustice of objectification go uncontested" (Miller 2018, 11).

The tree, in particular, features prominently as one of the physical and most temporally significant symbols by which to track the human lifespan: what is lost when the tree is compromised, singled out, exploited, exterminated from the land; or what is gained from its protection, its shade, its rootedness in a country experiencing dizzying progress with the expansion of the west, the telegraph, the steam engine, etc. While the bones of this narrative are well-worn by previous accounts of American environmental history, Miller infuses new detail to address timeless questions about our role as steward, peer, child, parent, commander, or merely one species among many when it comes to the human relationship to nature.

Miller describes characters and stories that question binaries such as the separation of humans from nature, the former on a quest for modern progress in the 19th century that shortsightedly quantified the value of the latter for solely its provisional benefits—cords of wood, tons of coal, or acres of productive farmland—at a rapidly industrializing rate. Another conceptualization of this division is the environmentalist touting nature as pure, pristine wilderness until humans sully it. In reality, it is hard to discover any natural area that has not been influenced by humans at some point, according to wilderness historian William Cronon (Miller 2018).

In light of the human histories inherent in natural landscapes, Miller tellingly notes that the justice-blind, “tragedy of wilderness is that all that howling emptiness that many of us now celebrate obscures all that violent history of emptying” (2018, 53). Where the native families once inhabited wild areas, they have all but disappeared due to violent conquests to establish the American way of life we know today. Another shameful chapter of our American history involves slavery as a spatial regime of domination across the landscape, delineating civilization in contrast to the dehumanized labor that powered it. Miller shows us that the trees that remained in the United States during this period were witness to violent othering over time, both between men and between humans and nature, processes that persist today. Such dichotomous thinking oversimplifies our connections to nature and each other, continuing to obscure a collaborative approach to addressing the impact that anthropogenic activity has on the environment and communities globally.

With the historical examples established, Miller alludes to the challenge of humanity’s capacity to slow such an imminent and overwhelming threat as man-made climate change when, for example, we can hardly cooperate as a United States, let alone set aside political, religious, cultural, and economic differences with other countries. Miller cites Naomi Klein’s 2014 book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, for its potential to envision how we can reinvent our relationships with nature and others to address what many believe is society’s biggest environmental challenge. However, whether pessimistic or pragmatic, we may not have the time left to forestall catastrophic climate disaster even if we summoned the will to coexist on a global scale.

Having read Miller’s book, one wonders if attempting to exert control over our potential extinction as a species due to environmental destruction reflects an anthropocentric understanding of nature. Is it also anthropocentric to suggest this is the most reasonable outcome for a species that is unable to overcome its structural, social, and behavioral flaws over time? Miller’s line of research could more specifically illuminate the intersection of social and biological theories of human progress through an evolutionary psychological lens, and how our understanding of the objectives and ethics of life reflect a discourse between them. Additional research opportunities derived from this discussion include how we theorize about the scale, rate, and impact of social change and how we evaluate democratic progress within the eschatological imaginary of environmentalism manifest through apocalyptic narratives about climate change.

Miller’s stories of people who exercise self-reflection and doubt, and who observe and respect the interconnectivity of life to improve the state of things, can inspire others in this vein of resistance. However, students of community change may be left thinking, unless the majority exercises such viewpoints universally, do these thoughtful dissidents trouble themselves in vain as their projects are subverted in favor of a market-friendly fervor, or as political maneuvering overtakes their marginal influence? Indeed, Miller himself admits, “this book, too, is perhaps nostalgic and irrelevant, a tragic history of losers and their dead landscapes, which, added together, signify exactly nothing” (2018, 217).

Nonetheless, Miller’s skillfully woven stories, rich with contextual anecdotes, quotes, and literary references framed by his inquisitive prose, make aspects of America’s legacy of green resistance come alive. The struggles and motivations driving this alternative history become available for the activist today who does not believe business culture should be synonymous with American culture and its democracy. Miller’s book serves as a cogent companion for those who are deeply troubled by the possibility that America’s most democratic function is capitalistic. As he argues: “capitalism, though it may not be very good at ensuring wealth or equality or justice for anyone at all, is an incredibly democratic scheme for spreading pestilence everywhere and to everybody,” the cancer of modern progress (2018, 227). Coming from Miller, a cancer survivor, this is an intentionally grave characterization, one that compels us to understand better from the past and to make radical history ourselves.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

How to cite this article: Nagle, L. 2020. Book Review: This Radical Land: A Natural History of American Dissent by Daegan Miller. *Community Change* 3(1): 4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/cc.v3i1.a.28>

Submitted: 01 November 2019

Accepted: 22 November 2019

Published: 29 May 2020

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