

## Walker, "Sustainability: A Love Story"

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## Book Review

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Walker, Nicole. *Sustainability: A Love Story*. Ohio State University Press, 2018.

Nicole Walker's (2018) *Sustainability: A Love Story* is a lyrical exploration of what it means to sustain and survive on an earth that is threatened by the devastation of climate change. The book opens with a prelude addressed to rain. Much of the novel takes place in the desert of Flagstaff, Arizona. The effects in climate change appear in many forms throughout, ranging from droughts to fires to melting ice caps. The text questions sustainability on several levels: the personal, the social, and the ecological. The central question of the book is, how do we live sustainably while also surviving? Part of survival, the text suggests, comes through enjoying the little things like eating cheese and using the internet. Two opposing truths become evident: the little choices we make to survive the day-to-day can sometimes be at odds with the long-term sustainability of the earth. Walker acknowledges "what is sustainable to the human is not always what is sustainable to the otter" (12). The text does not pose one single road to solving the climate crisis, but rather explores many little ways we can survive each day by leaning into love.

In addition to imagining routes towards survival, Walker's text explores the web of life that connects all human and nonhuman beings. Everything is connected, and scientific research is presented along the personal. The personal is essential because there is no separation between human flesh and the earth, and the text describes itself as a "combination of lyric essay and research about sustainability and abundance and scarcity" (8). The interweaving of personal histories with ecological histories, and the seamless transitions from lyrical musings to scientific research are integral to the argument made by the text that everything is interconnected. When read through a petrocultural lens, *Sustainability: A Love Story* allows us to see the pervasive, all-penetrating reach of oil. Our reliance on oil and oil by-products has proven devastating for the earth. The little choices we make — using canvas shopping bags, biking to work — ultimately cannot reverse the effects of climate change caused by consumer culture and extractive capitalism. We are all caught in the web. No matter how much we may want to isolate things or erase ourselves, we are always inescapably a part of it.

Much of the book focuses on the question of suicide: the desire to extricate oneself from the narrative. One person's sustainability, Walker suggests, is another person's suicide. How do we choose to stay when the state of the earth and the state of our lives seems to be a devastating, irreversible mess? Yet suicide, much of the book asserts, is an impossibility. Our traces linger, and, whether we want to be or not, we are always a part of the web. Walker notes that "you think you can eliminate yourself but you can't. Your self echoes, not only metaphorically, but literally through everything touched, alleles on bathroom door knobs" (156). This interweaving of life is represented in the text itself as the narrative shifts from personal investigations to

ecological research. Even when Walker dives into research about bats, the prose is infused with traces of her self as writer-human-wife-mother. The book perhaps leans too heavily into the personal at times, and does not provide enough solutions to the many posed problems. The comic voice used throughout the book could come off as malapropos, but it does provide some much-needed levity. Comedy is not an answer, but can provide some necessary relief from the heavy, exhausting questions that plague our world today.

*Sustainability: A Love Story* becomes a stunning example of energo-poetics, a wonderfully wound tangle of testimony, research, and ecocriticism. The book asserts, again and again, that everything is connected. Diminishing resources impact our internal landscapes as well as our external landscapes. Walker deftly navigates between a myriad of personal and ecological conundrums from her alcoholic father to the Keystone Pipeline to the Sandy Hook Shooting. Despite the gruesome realities of our world — many of which can be traced back to the repercussions of extractive capitalism — there are still small pockets of beauty that can be appreciated. It is these little moments of love and appreciation in these pockets of beauty that will sustain us. The interconnectivity is depressing, yes — nobody can escape the web — but it is also beautiful. In many ways, Walker poses interconnectivity as both the problem and the antidote. We are not alone; we are connected, and we must find ways to sustain and survive together. The book asserts that there is no one clear path to survival. It is a murky and complicated road, and yet we cannot give up: we must persist.

Aiden Baker