Andrew Lyndon Kington’s *Idle Threats* is a thoughtful, well-researched study of nineteenth-century America’s fixation on both productivity and idleness. Using a broad interdisciplinary approach that includes critical cultural theory, literary analysis, Marxist theory, and gender analysis, he aims to shed light on the battle surrounding unproductivity in an increasingly capitalist system. Kinghton argues that in the era where the demand for industriousness increased and the American work ethic was born it was impossible to separate productivity from the contradictory element of idleness. In essence his book questions what resulted from a hyper-focused struggle to balance the constructed binary between the inactivity and productivity.

*Idle Threats* begins with a critical examination of what the author contends is “the single most profound work about idleness in the whole of American literature” and also acknowledges is also “badly overworked,” Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” (p. 25). Kinghton then moves on to chapters that analyze landscape paintings and their visual expressions of “repose,” the prominence of the unproductive frontier in both artistic and written forms, the post-bellum leisure economy through advertisements and literature such as Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, and finishes with a concluding chapter on the significance of idleness within the American Renaissance of the nineteenth century and beyond. Together they provide
significant insight into the struggle to establish a strong capitalist productive nature even on activities that on the surface appear to lack any meaningful productive outcome.

In the Introduction Knighton wrote “the emphasis of this work will be largely placed on the way that men struggled with, or celebrated the value of, their idle activity,” and “Idle Threats seeks to explore exemplary models of manhood that, flourishing beyond the limits of normative productivity, unraveled the surety of the linkage between “man” and “management” and opened the question of productive activity’s ultimate value” (p. 19-20). While to book does focus on men, or white men to be accurate, almost exclusively, readers of this journal may find themselves disappointed with the books muted attention to gender analysis. Aside from the Introduction and a portion of chapter three that addresses Washington Irving’s 1832 A Tour of the Prairies (p. 98), analysis of the nineteenth-century gendered masculine form is somewhat sporadic. Based on his introductory comments it would seem that the struggle Knighton does analyze, industry vs. idleness, would fit well within the hegemony/subordination paradigm.

Some might also question Knighton’s choice to neglect a large portion of the male population that for much of the century labored vigorously but were consistently accused of being indolent, enslaved black men. He wrote that “the dynamic economic transformation that characterized the nineteenth century” included “the Civil War’s abolition of inefficient slave labor,” which appears to gloss over some of the historical realities. It is true that slaves of course only had motivation to work as hard as they needed to without getting harmed; in that regard, like communism and socialism it was an ineffective labor system. That said, cotton exports alone in 1860 represented 50% of all US exports and represented nearly two-thirds of the worlds cotton production. Including the issue of race and slavery would have made a study of “Men and The Limits of Productivity” much more well rounded.
Idle Threats is at its best as a literary analysis. So, it may be that the book’s only failing is that it tried to do too much. Knighton successfully integrate, the works of literary giants such as Melville, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Washington Irving, and Theodore Drieser, along with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s feminist home economics and Washington Allston’s painting, together within a critical Marxist analysis to provide a nuanced view of nineteenth century America. While Idle Threats’ analysis of masculinity is limited and it lacks attention to the issue of race, it may be that this might be asking too much of one book.

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(678 words)