

Minor Field #2 proposal

Disease and Environmental Decay in the Atlantic World, 1500-2000

Throughout the last five centuries, Western Europeans and later, Americans have colonized or conquered large amounts of territory in the Atlantic World, including much of the Americas, Caribbean, and most of Africa. Historians have long debated the reasons for those conquests and the Euro-American successes in them. Over the past four decades, however, the explanations have shifted dramatically to include biological and environmental determinants. Thus, the historical questions have transitioned from the standard “why did this happen” to other, more pointed questions. For example, what effects did Euro-Americans have on the local populations in the Americas and Africa? In other words, what role did disease play in the European, then American conquests of the Atlantic World? Also, how did these colonizers affect the land itself? These questions have been explored in an extensive body of historical scholarship that will be discussed in this minor field statement.

Part I: Microbes and Degradation in America and Africa

Until the 1970s, historians had pointed to technological or ideological superiority, i.e. Western weapons of war and systems of government, as the preeminent forces behind Euro-American domination of the Americas and Africa. Beginning with William McNeil’s *Plagues and Peoples* and Alfred Crosby’s *Ecological Imperialism*, however, this prevailing line of inquiry began to shift as studies of disease became a crucial explanatory factor in analyzing European conquests of the Americas during the two centuries following European-American contact. In the twenty years since Crosby’s path-breaking study, many historians have questioned the saliency of his reliance on disease as the instrumental vector for European control of the

Americas. Recently, Paul Kelton's *Epidemics and Enslavement* and Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* have introduced issues like trade and biological determinism as other possible explanations for European imperial domination.

Conversely, diseases have played a much different role in the historiography of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a period of increased Euro-American hegemony over large parts of the Atlantic World. The forces of modernity, urbanization and industrialization helped new diseases incubate in both the Americas and Africa that proved very difficult to cure. Western biomedicine and the ideologies of individual diagnosis and treatment have been mostly contradictory saviors, causing just as much hardship as it solved, especially for nonwhites. For example, in *Contagious Divides*, Nayan Shah shows how race and politics shaped public health concerns in San Francisco's Chinatown, while Alan Bewell's *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* explores the sources of toxic environments throughout the Western imperialized world of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹

The twentieth-century Western diet has also drawn severe criticism for its effects on the body and the environment (the latter of which will be discussed below). Rachel Carson began this diatribe back in the early 1960s with *Silent Spring*, a popular rebuke of American industrial capitalism's affects on the environment and food sources, but the industrialization of the Western diet has been taken on since then by more popular authors such as Michael Pollan, in *Omnivore's Dilemma* and his latest work, *In Defense of Food*.

Part II: Disaster and Environmental Engineering in the Atlantic World

¹ Although not necessarily part of the Atlantic World defined by most current scholarship, several works of African environmental history (focusing mainly on southern and eastern Africa) address this issue of Western biomedicine, healing practices, and their affects on indigenous populations during colonialism. Some of these include *Debility and Moral Imagination in Botswana* (2005) by Julie Livingston and *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (1991) by Megan Vaughan.

One of the most debated subjects of early colonialism in America has been the condition of the northern continent prior to European “discovery” and settlement. Were pre-contact Native Americans conservationists or even “America’s first ecologists” as Wilbur Jacobs, echoing Native advocates Vine Deloria and Joseph Epes Brown, called them in a 1980 article? Shepard Krech would answer definitively in the negative as his 1999 book, *The Ecological Indian*, makes clear. Other scholars were less condemning of their conservationist tendencies than Krech, like, for example, Richard White in *The Roots of Dependency* and Andrew Isenberg in *The Destruction of the Bison*. White and Isenberg claim Amerindians were compelled to manipulate the environment, including hunting the bison to near-extinction, due to market pressures of an emerging proto-capitalist system.² Nevertheless, all three conclude that Native Indians were in no way “conservators” or true environmentalists, at least in the modern, Western sense of the word.

Urbanization and industrialization have also played large parts in the history of environmental engineering in a few different ways. Works such as William Wilson’s *The City Beautiful Movement* and John Meyer’s article “Gifford Pinchot, John Muir, and the Boundaries of Politics in American Thought,” have confined their analyses to the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century debates between Pinchot-styled conservationism and Muir-styled environmentalism. Others, like Philip Fradkin’s *The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906* and Craig Colten’s *An Unnatural Metropolis*, deal uneasily with the interrelation of race and environmental policy, especially in urban areas during the same turn-of-the-century period.

These themes of “modernity” also find their way into African historical scholarship as well, examining environmental engineering, animal extinctions and the effects of colonial

² A similar, albeit later, African response to a more developed form of Euro-American capitalism can be seen in several books on African environmental policy in histories such as James C. McCann’s *Green Land, Brown Land, Black Land: An Environmental History of Africa, 1800-1990* (Heinemann, 1999).

conservation policies. In *The Myth of Wild Africa*, authored by Jonathan Adams and Thomas McShane, Western notions of conservationism come under attack as the authors reveal how colonizers often romanticized the African continent's pristine wilderness, while correspondingly blaming indigenous Africans for wrecking it. And, not surprisingly, the issue of race, culture and environmental usage is dealt with more substantively in works like Emmanuel Akyeampong's *Between Sea & Lagoon: An Eco-Social History of the Anlo of Southeastern Ghana* as the people of Keta come under ecological hardship due to their perceived participation in European colonial markets.

Western science also fits into this section of the paper as well, as many authors in this survey debate whether science, in the form of disaster prevention and industrial agriculture has truly been helpful or harmful. Attempts to tame the massive Mississippi River feature prominently in both *An Unnatural Metropolis* and John Barry's *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*.³ Furthermore, Western capitalism comes under additional fire for the ways it altered yeoman agriculture in favor of more market-driven, industrial farming, the disastrous effects of which are seen clearly in Donald Worster's *Dust Bowl* and William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis*.

Finally, the issue of governmental response to "natural" disasters in the Americas must be discussed, for it weaves its way throughout much of the history of the Euro-American domination of the Western Hemisphere. While this topic can be seen in many of the works already mentioned, like Barry, Fradkin and Worster just to name a few, governmental aid can be charted back to colonial times as seen in Matthew Mulcahy's *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean*. In fact, the very notion of environmental disasters being labeled

³ The issue of environmental manipulation and degradation through Western scientific endeavors is also highlighted in the studies of Akyeampong and McCann.

“natural” instead of the more appropriate moniker “man-made” is at the heart of Ted Steinberg’s *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*.

In conclusion, disease and disaster have long been ignored (or at least downplayed) in the histories of the West, whether in the context of colonialism in the Americas or imperialism in Africa. Most of the sources in this field statement, whatever their differences in approach or interpretation, challenged, often successfully, this glaring omission. Environmental manipulation and control are at the heart of these issues, whether originating in a Western belief that indigenous peoples are unworthy of their pristine environment or that natives are too harmful to their own lands to be allowed to govern them freely. No matter which paternalistic view is taken by colonialists, these beliefs have had significant consequences for the lands and the peoples throughout the Atlantic World.

Bibliography

American

1. John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (Simon & Schuster, 1997).
2. Jamie Benidickson, *The Culture of Flushing: A Social and Legal History of Sewage* (UBC Press, 2007).
3. Alan Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (Johns Hopkins, 1999).
4. Joseph Epes Brown, *Animals of the Soul: Sacred Animals of the Oglala Sioux* (Element, 1992).
5. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 40th anniversary ed. (Mariner Books, 2002).
6. Craig E. Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* (LSU Press, 2005).
7. William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England* (Hill and Wang, 1983).
8. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (Norton, 1992).
9. Alfred W. Crosby, *America's Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2003).
10. Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge, 1986).
11. Vine Deloria, *We Talk, You Listen: New Tribes, New Turf* (Macmillan, 1970).
12. Jared M Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, (Norton, 1997).
13. Philip L Fradkin, *The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906: How San Francisco Nearly Destroyed Itself* (Berkeley, 2005).
14. Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (Cambridge, 1989).
15. Samuel P Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (University of Pittsburgh, 1999).
16. Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920* (Cambridge, 2000).

17. Wilbur Jacobs, "Indians as Ecologists and other Environmental Themes in American Frontier History" in *American Indian Environments*, Christopher Vecsey and R.W. Venables, eds. (Syracuse, 1980), 46-65.
18. Paul Kelton, *Epidemics and Enslavement: Biological Catastrophe in the Native Southeast, 1492-1715* (University of Nebraska, 2007).
19. Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (Anchor Books, 1997).
20. Shepard Krech, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (Norton, 1999).
21. Calvin Martin, "The European Impact on the Culture of a Northeastern Algonquian Tribe: An Ecological Interpretation," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 31, no. 1, Third Series (January 1974): 4-26.
22. _____, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade* (Berkeley, 1978).
23. William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (Anchor Press, 1976).
24. Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill, 1989).
25. John M. Meyer, "Gifford Pinchot, John Muir, and the Boundaries of Politics in American Thought," *Polity* 30, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 267-284.
26. Matthew Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624-1783, Early America* (Johns Hopkins, 2006).
27. Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind, Fourth Edition*, 4th ed. (Yale, 2001).
28. David M Oshinsky, *Polio: An American Story* (Oxford, 2005).
29. Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (Penguin, 2007).
30. _____, *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (Penguin Press, 2008).
31. Bonham C Richardson, *Igniting the Caribbean's Past: Fire in British West Indian History* (Chapel Hill, 2004).
32. Charles E Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (University of Chicago, 1962).
33. Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

34. Timothy Silver, *A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in South Atlantic Forests, 1500-1800* (Cambridge, 1990).
35. Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley, 2001).
36. Theodore Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (Oxford University, 2000).
37. _____, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
38. Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (University of Nebraska, 1983).
39. William H Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Johns Hopkins, 1989).
40. Donald Worster, "Transformations of the Earth: Toward an Agroecological Perspective in History," *The Journal of American History* 76, no. 4 (March 1990): 1087-1106.
41. Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 25th ed. (Oxford, 2004).

African

1. Jonathan S. Adams and Thomas O. McShane, *The Myth of Wild Africa: Conservation Without Illusion* (Berkeley, 1996).
2. Emmanuel Kwaku Akyeampong, *Between Sea & Lagoon: An Eco-Social History of the Anlo of Southeastern Ghana* (Ohio University, 2002).
3. Benedict Carton, "'We Are Made Quiet by This Annihilation': Historicizing Concepts of Bodily Pollution and Dangerous Sexuality in South Africa," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 39, no. 1 (2006): 85-106.
4. Malcolm Draper and Gerhard Mare, "Going in: The Garden of England's Gaming Zookeeper and Zululand," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29, no. 2 (June 2003): 551-569.
5. Steven Feierman and John Janzen, *The Social Basis of Health and Healing in Africa* (Berkeley, 1992).
6. Julie Livingston, *Debility and Moral Imagination in Botswana* (Indiana University, 2005).
7. James C. McCann, *Green Land, Brown Land, Black Land: An Environmental History of Africa, 1800-1990* (Heinemann, 1999).
8. Gregory Maddox et al, *Custodians of the Land Ecology & Culture in the History of Tanzania* (Ohio University, 1996).
9. J. B Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle- Killing Movement of 1856-7* (Indiana University, 1989).
10. Lynn M Thomas, *Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction, and the State in Kenya* (Berkeley, 2003).
11. Megan Vaughan, *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Stanford University, 1991).