

Living in a Material World

Gregg Mitman

As delegates gathered in Tampa, Florida, for the 2012 Republican National Convention, the uncertain threat of Tropical Storm Isaac threw a monkey wrench into the carefully choreographed events and eventually cut the convention short by one day. The *Washington Post* columnist Dana Milbank wondered whether God had “forsaken the Republican Party,” but when Isaac shifted course, veering west, others affirmed that the grace of God was indeed on the Republican party’s side. Eerily hitting New Orleans within one day of the seventh anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, Isaac thankfully failed to evolve into the type of storm that in 2005 had wrought tragedy upon a city and a nation, and had proved an embarrassment to an American presidency that was too slow in responding. As Isaac passed, the media refocused its attention on the convention. On the last evening of the meeting, the Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney took the platform to deliver one of the most memorable lines of his acceptance speech: “President Obama promised to begin to slow the rise of the oceans and heal the planet. My promise . . . is to help you and your family.” The audience roared with laughter, as if global warming was a joke they were all in on. Only four years before, however, in the run-up to both the Republican and Democratic conventions, both presidential nominees had stated their belief in the realities of climate change and their commitment to some form of cap-and-trade policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promote clean energy. How could the mood of a nation swing so quickly and so dramatically? The shift was as pronounced as when, in 1986, Ronald Reagan removed the solar panels installed by his predecessor, Jimmy Carter, on the roof of the White House.¹

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¹ Dana Milbank, “Signs of Divine Intervention for Republicans?,” *Washington Post*, Aug. 21, 2012, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-08-21/opinions/35490031_1_republican-presidential-candidate-influential-conservative-broadcaster-house-republicans.b; “Gov. Mitt Romney Acceptance Speech at the Republican National Convention—Full Transcript,” Aug. 30, 2012, *2012 Presidential Candidates*, <http://2012.presidential-candidates.org/?news=Gov.-Mitt-Romney-Acceptance-Speech-at-the-Republican-National-Convention-%E2%80%93-Full-Transcript>. On Ronald Reagan’s removal of solar panels from the roof of the White House, see David Biello, “Where Did the Carter White House’s Solar Panels Go?,” *Scientific American*, Aug. 6, 2010, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=carter-white-house-solar-panel-array>.

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Such events and questions are the stuff of environmental history, and they suggest the extent to which, as Paul Sutter argues, environmental history has found “its way into almost every American landscape.” It is easy to imagine the different causal explanations that will be brought to bear by future historians in narrating this episode. Their explanations will shed different light on the importance of politics, business, economics, foreign relations, race, religion, and science in American life. Whether narrating the history of American politics or the economy; contemplating American history across regional, national, or transnational scales; adding new twists in understanding the struggles of social movements—from labor to civil rights; or exploring the historical place of science and religion in American culture, it is difficult to comprehend where the methods and approaches of environmental history would not uncover new material and creative insights in ground well explored and well trodden by American historians.²

Environmental history is, after all, about seeing interrelationships in the world that extend beyond the human condition but that are entangled in human experience. The interactions of human beings with the material world shape and, in turn, are transformed by human thought, belief, and action. Certainly the explication of environmental causation in the unfolding of human history has long been a tenet of environmental history, as Sutter suggests. Even so, as his essay compellingly demonstrates (with some trepidation, I might note), the embrace of hybridity in environmental history has brought into question the mandate to give voice to a set of “autonomous, independent energies that do not derive from the drives and intentions of any culture” that Donald Worster laid out in the 1990 *Journal of American History* environmental history round table. The age of the Anthropocene, in which humans are now recognized as a geomorphic force on Earth, has brought that point home. Nature is no longer the universal actor it once was in environmental history. Rather, its energy—its force—assumes multifaceted forms, channeled through patterns of production and consumption, realized in natural and social disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, and contested in its meanings through relations of race, class, and gender.³

While I share Sutter’s anxiety about giving up stories that have moral relevance amid narratives of hybridity and complexity, I resist the hasty retreat to biology and the universal sense of “we” that ends his essay. “Over a relatively short period of time, humans have spread across the planet and transformed it to serve their ends,” he writes. Which humans? Which nations? Which cultures? This one sentence erases all the historical richness of diverse human experience and the accompanying issues of power, class, religion, gender, and race that have created environmental and social inequalities throughout the world. The angst reflected in Sutter’s essay is, to me, symptomatic of an inherent tension at the very core of environmental history. Where does the explanatory weight of environmental history reside: in biology, in culture, or in an adamant rejection of what Donna Haraway refers to as the “Great Divide”? As a field deeply committed to relationality, environmental history is also a field deeply resistant to embracing a relational ontology in which things exist not in themselves, or, in Haraway’s words, “partners do not precede their relating,” but, instead, as Scott Kirsch and Don Mitchell argue, takes seriously “the materiality of

² Paul S. Sutter, “The World with Us: The State of American Environmental History,” *Journal of American History*, 100 (June 2013), 94–119, esp. 95.

³ Donald Worster, “Transformations of the Earth: Toward an Agroecological Perspective in History,” *ibid.*, 76 (March 1990), 1087–1106, esp. 1089.

things in lived social relations.” Why should such philosophical diversions matter for writing history?⁴

Let me illustrate with a concrete example from Sutter’s essay. I wholly endorse his enthusiasm for scholarship that has opened up health, disease, and bodies as important analytic categories in environmental history. I am also grateful for his generous acknowledgment of my work in this area. But the essay glosses over fundamental differences among the books he discusses. Those differences turn on questions of scientific knowledge and its place in environmental history, and are exemplified in the wide disparity between, for example, John McNeill’s *Mosquito Empires* and Conevery Bolton Valencius’s *The Health of the Country*. McNeill’s book spans four centuries and three continents to unravel the ecological changes brought about by the establishment of plantation economies in the greater Caribbean region and to discern how those changes helped the mosquito—and its fellow travelers, yellow fever and malaria—“become key actors in the geopolitical struggles of the early modern Atlantic world.” To narrate that story *Mosquito Empires* is beholden to the science of disease ecology, an interdisciplinary field that itself came into being and was, along with its scientific objects, historically contingent upon the vagaries of global capital, commerce, and war. That history is unimportant in McNeill’s account, however, where yellow fever and malaria exist in and of themselves, separate from the institutional, economic, technological, and social forces that made them visible in the world. Past medical theories and practices such as bloodletting and purging, and the use of antimony compounds are discussed largely in jest. Contrast this to *The Health of the Country*, where Valencius uses the illness experience of nineteenth-century settlers in the Arkansas and Missouri Territories to illuminate the intimate relationships between body and place that shaped interactions with and knowledge of the environment. In her account, knowledge and the objects that come into being with it are always changing, dependent upon dynamic material, social, and symbolic relations between and among human and nonhuman actors.⁵

Sutter’s essay is far-reaching, and he touches upon some of the most difficult challenges facing a field that is remarkably vibrant and urgently needed. Even so, the historical moment that gave birth to the field has passed. Today, there is not just one environmental movement, if ever there was a single movement. Environmental historians dare not go back to the nature-culture divide that drove so much of the field’s early scholarship, even if it seemed to offer firmer political ground on which to stand. Dichotomies rest on exclusion; they lend themselves to a politics of fear. For all the uncertainty and messiness of entanglement, I would rather live in a world where history leaves open the possibility of endless becoming and would prefer to acknowledge that even as human beings, we exist only as a result of symbiotic relationships, with each other, and with other living and non-living things on this earth.

⁴ Sutter, “World with Us,” 119; Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, 2008), 10, 17; Scott Kirsch and Don Mitchell, “The Nature of Things: Dead Labor, Nonhuman Actors, and the Persistence of Marxism,” *Antipode*, 36 (Sept. 2004), 687–705, esp. 695.

⁵ J. R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620–1914* (Cambridge, Eng., 2010), 3. Conevery Bolton Valencius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (New York, 2002).

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