THE CROSSROADS OF U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY AND MIGRATION HISTORY

Colin Fisher
University of San Diego

It is a great honor to introduce this issue of *Jam It!*, especially since the topic the authors address—the environmental history of modern migration—is simultaneously so very relevant and yet so understudied. Over a billion people alive today have moved within or without their nation of birth. The vast majority of these people moved from rural areas of the Global South to cities, a pattern of migration which in 2007 pushed the Earth's urban population past fifty percent. Warfare, the growth of agribusiness, lack of opportunity, and grinding poverty pushed people from home. But they also moved because of the beginning phase of climate change and its many environmental side effects: crop failure, drought, floods, erosion, desertification, wildfire, deforestation, and sea-level rise, among others. Simultaneously, as Marco Armiero and Richard Tucker explain in their indispensable anthology *Environmental History of Modern Migrations*, the figure of the "climate refugee" is fueling a strong nativist backlash in Europe, Australia, and the United States and the rise of right-wing nationalist politicians who campaign on building bigger walls while sometimes celebrating the blood and soil of the homeland.[1]

Given the topic's obvious relevance, why is the environmental context of historical migration so understudied? U.S. immigration history's first big book, Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted* (1951), did in fact address nature. Handlin argued that the European peasants regarded the natural world as magical and animate, and they included the land in their sense of community. But migration uprooted them from the

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[1] On the environmental context for contemporary migration, see for instance Swing 2017, vi-vii; Myers 2002; Hugo 1996; Armiero and Tucker 2017.

soil that had long sustained them, breaking "the ties with nature." Peasants formerly rooted in the earth now found themselves hemmed in by tall buildings and "fenced off from the realm of growing things." According to Handlin, immersion in this mechanical artificial environment resulted in dislocation and alienation. It was a world where rocks, streams, and trees only came back as memories "to be summoned up to rouse the curiosity and stir the wonder" of their American-born children (Handlin 1951, 110).

In the 1960s, a new generation of immigration historians broke from Handlin. They found his generalizations about European peasant life overly simplistic and were troubled by the way *The Uprooted* rendered immigrants passive, socially disorganized victims of circumstance who had been yanked from the soil that had long sustained them. Inspired by the new social movements of the decade, younger scholars stressed the agency of newcomers and their significant role in making American history. That said, many of these scholars continued to address environmental themes, especially agriculture. On the one hand, they documented the role that enclosure of common lands, commercialization of farming, and competition for land played in convincing farmers to leave homelands; on the other, they explored extensively the considerable role of the foreign born in American agriculture.[2]

While U.S. immigration historians took up nature as a theme (although rarely with ecological sophistication), U.S. environmental historians largely ignored modern migration. Certainly, the environmental effect of settler colonialism was addressed extensively in the seminal work of Alfred Crosby and those he inspired. And some addressed how natural disasters, such as the dust bowl, led to internal migrations. But none until recently took up one of the most important topics in American history: the arrival of waves of migrants from Europe, East Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, starting in the mid nineteenth century and continuing to the present.[3]

One reason for environmental historians' blindness to modern migration was that until recently, they lacked tools for exploring unequal power relationships within human society. As historian Alan Taylor explained in 1996, social historians are "splitters" who

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[2] For an excellent synthesis of this work, see Bodnar 1985. On immigrants in American agriculture, see Cannon 1991.
[3] Crosby 1986; Worster 1979.

are attentive to difference and power while "environmental historians tended to be 'lumpers,' prone to a holism that washes out the human diversity of experience and identity" (7). There was little conceptual space for understanding immigrant communities such as Italian Americans, who not only were internally divided along lines of region, class, gender, and generation but who as a group experienced stark exploitation and racism while also enjoying some privileges of whiteness or probationary whiteness denied non-European migrants, such as the Chinese or Mexicans, or racialized groups, such as African Americans.[4]

Environmental historians were also limited by the place-based nature of their field. They typically made a rural place—a river, forest, mountain range, bioregion, or national park—their object of study. The spatial constraints imposed on the past made it difficult to follow migrant communities who might move seasonally in and out of a given landscape or who might settle in one area but express profound love for a homeland thousands of miles away. A related restraint was that U.S. environmental historians did not study cities, the new home for the majority of immigrants who settled in the United States after the Civil War. Scholars fell prey to binary thinking. Nature, the central and conceptually slippery object of the field, supposedly existed in rural and wild areas far from seemingly artificial cities and the immigrants who lived there.[5]

Fortunately, these theoretical limitations are largely a thing of the past and some path-breaking environmental scholarship—much of it inspired by the environmental justice movement—is considerably enriching our understanding of the environmental dimension of modern migration. One important avenue of research is top-down, notably how Anglo Americans and later self-identified white Americans understood the relationship been nature and immigration. Researchers such as Susan Schrepfer, Garland Allen, Jonathan Spiro, and Miles Powell show that anti-immigrant scientific racism and Progressive Era conservation and preservation were not only compatible but sometimes mutually reinforcing.

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[4] On Italians' complicated position within American race relations, see Guglielmo 2003.
[5] On the city and environmental history, see Melosi 1993.

In other notable work on the subject, Peter Coates demonstrates that nativist scientists often conflated American immigrants with non-native invasive species. Adam Rome shows how Anglo Americans, some of whom were self-professed environmentalists, simultaneously criticized immigrants for their failure to appreciate American scenery while bemoaning the ways that the lives of the foreign born were embedded in the messiness of urban nature. The links between environmentalism and nativism continued long after the Progressive Era. As political scientist John Hultgren notes, contemporary environmentalism (supposedly a central concern of the left) and nativism (taken as a preoccupation of the right) continue to cross-pollinate today. Environmental sociologists David Naguib Pellow and Lisa Sun-Hee Park give us an illuminating example: Aspen, Colorado, where privileged white environmentalists blamed the city's exploited Latino immigrant workforce for despoiling their mountain paradise.[6]

While U.S. environmental historians have given us fresh and sophisticated interpretations of American nativism, they have largely ignored the environmental context for emigration. Luckily U.S. immigration historians as well as environmental historians who focus on Europe, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa have us partially covered. Thanks to their work, we know the biological context for out migration during the Irish Potato famine; the role of floods, drought, deforestation, erosion, land scarcity, and famine in prompting the Cantonese to migrate to Gold Rush California; the importance of natural disasters, crop failure, and diseases such as malaria in convincing some southern Italians to leave their homeland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and the significance of drought and famine coupled with political oppression in pushing Ethiopians from their homeland in the 1970s and 80s.

We also know from immigration historians that agricultural capitalism, which fundamentally reorganized farmers' relationship with nature, played a dramatic role in fueling emigration. As immigration historian John Bodnar notes, "wherever agriculture tended to become commercial and affect existing patterns of landownership, the

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[6] Schrepfer 2003; Allen 2013; Spiro 2008; Powell 2016; Coates 2007; Rome2008; Hultgren, 2015; Sun-Hee Park and Pellow 2011.

beginnings of mass emigration became visible." What was true in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continues to be true throughout the rural Global South today.[7]

U.S. environmental historians, like their counterparts in U.S. immigration history, have paid significantly more attention to migrants once they arrived in the United States. Drawing inspiration from the environmental justice movement, a number of scholars explore how the foreign born and their children confronted environmental inequalities, in particular disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards. In rural areas, migrants from around the world picked crops, felled trees, ranched animals, mined the earth, and diverted rivers and built dams for companies that often exploited their labor. Environmental historians, such as Thomas Andrews, Linda Nash, Chad Montrie, Connie Chiang, and Douglas Sackman document how sites of labor — "workscapes," as Andrews calls them — shaped the bodies of immigrant workers, damaging their health and sometimes prematurely ending their lives. Migrants also confronted environmental inequalities in urban and suburban environments. As scholars such as Andrew Hurley, Chris Sellers, Sylvia Hood Washington, Monica Perales, Carl A. Zimring, David N. Pellow, Lisa Sun-Hee Park and others illustrate, a steel mill, meatpacking facility, copper smelter, or semiconductor plant could be every bit as dangerous as a mine, corporate farm, or logging camp. In addition, toxins from dangerous urban workscapes sometimes contaminated adjacent neighborhoods where the foreign born and their children lived and played.[8]

In addition to disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards, environmental historians also explore how new arrivals sometimes lost access to natural resources. Louis Warren, for instance, uses the murder of a game warden to explore how the state of Pennsylvania enclosed the commons and turned Italian immigrant deer hunters into poachers. Similarly, Benjamin Heber Johnson documents how in the creation of Superior National Forest, the state seized forests that striking Slovenian and Finish

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[7] Crawford 1989; Ó Murchadha 2011; June 1979; Marks 2017; LeMay 2015, 16; Parrinello 2012; Shelemay and Kaplan 2015; Bodnar 1985. On agricultural modernization's impact on contemporary migration, see World Bank Publications 2007; Bhandari and Ghimire 2016.

[8] Sackman 2009; Nash 2006; Chiang 2018; Montrie 2009; Andrews 2008; Sellers1997; Zimring 2015; Hurley 1995; Hood Washington 2005; Perales 2010; Pellow and Sun-Hee Park 2003.

iron miners used to hunt, fish, and log. In *Shaping the Shoreline,* Connie Chiang shows how those intent on turning Monterey, California into a tourist destination drove Italian, Portuguese, Japanese, and Chinese fishermen from nearby waters and even removed a Chinese fishing village; and in her recent book, *Nature Behind Barbed Wire*, she documents how nefarious efforts to displace Japanese Americans from their place in the valuable agricultural and fishing industries fueled calls for internment during World War II. Sometimes enclosure of common lands took place in the heart of great metropolitan areas. Matthew Klingle documents how Seattle elites tried to privatize the waterfront used by marginalized people, including the foreign born; Catherine McNeur shows how Manhattan city officials banned hogs from city streets and destroyed immigrant shantytowns to make way for the creation of Central Park; and Jennifer Dyl reveals how San Francisco health officers, alarmed by an outbreak of bubonic plague, removed chickens and other animals, some of which were kept by Chinese residents. Pushed out of their rural homelands, Europeans, Asians, and Mexicans migrated to the United States and secured access to American natural resources, only to sometimes face dispossession once again.[9]

While mapping unjust appropriation of natural resources and disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards is critically important work, focus on environmental inequality and victimization risks running afoul of arguably the most important objective of contemporary migration studies: moving well beyond Handlin's account of immigrants as passive victims and documenting their agency under difficult circumstances. If we are to build on our colleagues' work in immigration history, environmental historians must consider the significant limitations of the environmental justice framework, use non-traditional foreign-language primary sources, and write richer "bottom-up" accounts in which migrants are three-dimensional characters who make choices in response to environmental and other restraints and operate in a world of intersecting and unequal power relationships. More specifically, we must acknowledge that despite exploitation,

[9] Warren 1999; Johnson 1999; Chiang 2008; Chiang 2018; Klingle 2007; McNeur 2014; Dyl 2017.

racism, and environmental injustice, migrants were also environmental actors who left a significant imprint on the land and sometimes operated in ecologically destructive ways.

Environmental agency is most clear when it comes to agriculture. Whether immigrants imported Old World crops and farming techniques or, as was most often the case, quickly adopted American seeds, technologies, and farming practices, they altered the land around them. Consider the Chinese in California. Despite extraordinary hostility from white Americans, they mined the earth for gold, cleared forests, tunneled through mountains, and turned wetlands such as the Joaquin/Sacramento Delta into productive farmland, an achievement celebrated by Chinese leaders at the time and some subsequent historians. But as Patricia Limerick asks, "before it grew crops, the Central Valley grew carpets of wildflowers that dazzled John Muir and others. Should the loss of wildlife and wildflowers, as well as the costs of imposing intensive, irrigated agriculture in a semiarid landscape, figure in the writing of the history of the Chinese in California?.... What place did Asian immigrants occupy in the broadest picture of the conquest of both nature and natives in North America?" The complexity of the immigrant experience in rural America reminds us that we cannot simply divide people into environmental victims and environmental perpetrators but must instead pay attention to multiple axes of power, including unequal relationships with powerful Anglo-Americans as well as with other migrants groups, African Americans, Mexican Americans, and First Peoples; internal inequalities within migrant communities along lines of gender, class, ethnicity, language, nation, religion, and generation; and dynamic and sometimes destructive interactions with ecosystems.[10]

We also need to better address how migrants altered cityscapes. We know that migrants were stripped of access to urban natural resources and often experienced disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards. We also know that immigrants and their allies sometimes responded with collective political action, demanding an early version of environmental justice. But the Italian, Polish, Chinese, Mexican, and Puerto

[10] For a useful overview of the literature on immigrant farming, see Cannon 1991. On the importance of thinking about multiple axes of power, see Armiero and Tucker 2017; Armiero 2017; Limerick 1992. Some of the best work on migrant farming, fishing, and mining, focuses on California. See in particular, Armiero 2017; Mitchell 1996; Chan 1989; Chiang 2008; Limerick 1992; Sackman 2008; Ivey 2018.

Rican relationship with nature was often more complicated than the environmental justice paradigm allows. Some immigrants turned urban and suburban truck gardens into thriving businesses while others made careers in the messy work of maintaining the city's metabolism: laying sewers, collecting trash and recyclables, plumbing homes, stringing electric lines, killing cockroaches and rats, moving produce, and turning natural resources like animals, trees, and wheat into sausage, bread, and lumber. We also know that migrants used their wages to participate in American consumer culture, purchasing food, energy, and clothing but also sometimes more expensive items such as automobiles and real estate. In so doing, immigrants played a significant role in altering both urban and hinterland ecologies.

Precisely because they were a marginalized and frequently racialized population, migrants and their children often had a front-row seat to the workings of urban metabolism. Unlike privileged Anglo and later white Americans who decamped for bucolic suburbs and had the luxury of drawing a clear line between the supposedly artificial city and the seemingly natural suburb and wilderness beyond, Poles, Chinese, Mexicans and others were confronted at home and work with the messy interpenetration of nature and culture. Given this embedded experience of knowing nature at work and home, it is tempting to paint late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigrants as proto-ecologists who saw the lie of dualistic thinking and insisted on seeing the city as a networked nature/culture artefact. But if we pay attention to how migrants knew nature not only where they worked and lived but also where they played, things become more complicated. As I show in *Urban Green*, during their scant leisure, large numbers of foreign-born Chicagoans sought to escape an industrial urban environment that they saw as artificial and unhealthy and retreat to green places that they saw as natural: urban parks, Lake Michigan beaches, ethnic picnic grounds, and forest preserves. In other words, like the well-to-do, marginalized Chicagoans often drew a line between city and country, which they tried to cross during their leisure. They, too, were often nature romantics who longed for Sunday outings in forest preserves or along the Lake Michigan shore and who waxed nostalgically about the pre-industrial rural homelands they had left behind in Mexico, Ireland, Italy, or Greece. In other words, when it comes to the nature/culture binary, migrants sometimes could be every bit as dualistic in their thinking as Teddy Roosevelt (Fisher 2015; Fisher forthcoming).

In addition to exploring how migrants materially altered natural systems, we also must address the creative ways that they used American environments to build community and forge identity. U.S. environmental historians have long documented the meanings that Anglo Americans gave nature. We know that the American landscape (imagined as the garden, the frontier, and the wilderness) was a critically important foil for the cultural construction of American (although in reality Anglo-American and later white) identity in "nature's nation." But what about marginalized newcomers? To what cultural purpose did they put the environments that they encountered? Did they also use American nature to imagine community? As Patricia Limerick noted in 1992, conventional studies of American landscape "concentrated wholeheartedly on the thinking of English-speaking, westward-moving, literate, record-keeping, middle- and upper-class, pre-twentieth-century, white men. Offered as studies of American attitudes toward landscape, the standard works were in fact investigations into the minds of a minority. In the late twentieth century, such exclusivity in scholarly inquiry is no longer tenable." But, as Limerick noted, it is one thing to identify what is missing from the published historical literature and another thing entirely to address the vacancy.

Luckily, in addition to Limerick's own important work on Chinese- and Japanese-American perceptions of the western landscape, there are other insightful accounts on how marginalized Americans grounded ethnic identity in nature. We know that Mexican Americans articulated Chicano identities during the 1960s and 70s in part by referencing land: the mythical Aztec homeland Aztlán as well as the dangerous and exploitative corporate farms of the Southwest. We know that Jamaican immigrant Marcus Garvey and his followers in the United Negro Improvement Association imagined a Pan-African identity in part by evoking the lush vegetation of the African homeland, which Garvey symbolized with a green stripe on his famous Pan-African flag. We know that European immigrant leaders not only invoked the sacred soil of Germany, Ireland, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Norway, but publically celebrated their community's role in American history, including the settlement of the frontier wilderness. As immigration historian Orm Øverland notes, these "homemaking myths" did dual service: they at once reminded

nativist Anglo Americans of immigrants' role in the discovery and making of America while forging American ethnic identity across lines of difference.[11]

Migrants also referenced urban environments to build community. Drawing on theorist of nationalism Benedict Anderson, Julie Sze argues that New Yorkers turned opposition to incinerators and sludge and sewage treatment plants into moments for imagining new inter-ethnic environmental justice coalitions. Residents in impacted neighborhoods, she writes, "created a shared sense of place and identity, centered on the belief that they were targeted as victims of environmental racism…. [Residents] also shared an imagined community with other urban localities that used environmental justice as their new language and approach to old problems of race and urban poverty." In *Urban Green*, I show how migrants in industrial Chicago used urban green spaces and nearby wilderness parks as places to remember distant homelands and imagine ethnicity. Ironic as it might seem, marginalized Chicagoans made park landscapes in "nature's nation" into important cites for producing and reproducing Irish, German, Italian, Mexican, Japanese, and Filipino identity and building community (Fisher 2015). In exploring these complicated questions of how the foreign born made rural and urban landscapes essential for producing and reproducing identity and community, environmental historians are poised to help answer some of the trickiest and most important questions in migration historiography (Sze 2006).

Environmental history and modern migration history — fields that address, respectively, place and movement through space — seemingly have little in common, but a number of scholars are exploring crossroads and in the process invigorating both fields. This is an important development not only because environmental and migration historians have so much to teach each other but because the present moment demands a reexamination of the past. The crossroads of the two fields must be explored in order to better understand the environmental context of contemporary migration and provide tools to activists working on climate and migration justice. It is precisely for these reasons that we should applaud not only the outstanding essays in Armiero's and Tucker's

[11] On Chicano identity and landscape, see Gutiérrez 1993; Lint Sagarena 2014. On Garvey and the green stripe, see Fisher 2015, 106; Øverland 2000.

anthology *Environmental History of Modern Migrations* but also the exciting articles published here in this issue of *JAm It!*.

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Colin Fisher is professor of history at the University of San Diego and author of the book *Urban Green: Nature, Recreation, and the Working Class in Industrial Chicago* (University of North Carolina Press, 2015). He is currently working on a project

exploring the environmental vision of black nationalist Marcus Garvey. E-mail: colinf@sandiego.edu.