Introduction

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In the last days of May, 2020, Scott Edwards dipped one of his bicycle tires in the Atlantic Ocean off of Newburyport, Massachusetts and began a westward journey across the continent. A professor of organismic and evolutionary biology and curator of ornithology at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University, Edwards found he had time to bike to the Pacific when his laboratory was shut down by the COVID-19 pandemic. One context for his road trip, then, is the zoonotic pandemic, whose opportunistic spread revealed a globe whose once-separate evolutionary locales now dangerously overlap. Another context is the pair of events that took place on May 25: the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the spurious 911-call made by a white woman who had been asked to leash her dog in a protected area of Manhattan’s Central Park by a Black birder, Christian Cooper. While the murder provoked global demonstrations against police violence and a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, the framing of Cooper as a Black menace (while it was he who was trying to protect birds from roving dogs) stirred up a public conversation about the whites-only exclusions of public green spaces in the US and launched the campaigns: #BlackInNature, #BlackBirdersWeek, and #BlackAFinSTEM. As a citizen, birder, and STEM researcher of biodiversity, who is also Black, Edwards designed his cross-country trip, chronicled on Twitter, as a mobile investigation of American environments – not only physical, but also historical and social – in a time of instant global messaging. His posts, and the posts they generate in turn, are a signature example of how American environmental literature is being produced today.

Edwards records the sights and sounds of many nonhuman species and land features: an Osprey nest in New York, wild coneflowers in Indiana, and the headwaters of the Missouri River. He details his body’s interactions with its environment as he is being dive-bombed by red-winged blackbirds, feeling the rise of hills in his legs and lungs, and sensing in his body’s vibrations the
make of the road. Place names, museums and, on July 11, a major Supreme Court ruling on Muscogee (Creek) sovereignty in Oklahoma, have him noting the ongoing presence of Indigenous human life, alongside the history of “brutal westward expansion.” And he is testing, with every new human interaction, what it means to be a Black man outdoors today. On Juneteenth, as he was riding through western New York with a BLM sign attached to the back of his bicycle, he heard barking dogs, and recalled the 1973 Elton John song, “Have Mercy on the Criminal.” He comments: “I’m not a runaway slave, but I am a black man riding solo through 2020 conservative America.” Despite this historical haunting, which also included two Confederate flags (NY and Idaho) and a racist comment in Indiana, he and his BLM sign otherwise elicit mostly “small acts of kindness”: positive honks, gifts of water, truckers stopping to share their support. Not only, then, is Edwards “birding by ear” as he rides and listening to the avian “soundscape,” getting to know the natural and human-made landscape by feeling it in his lungs and legs, but he also is a mobile probe of the US racescape.

As he moves west, making these mostly positive face-to-face connections on the public thoroughfares, giving interviews to radio and print journalists along the way, gathering more than 11,000 followers on Twitter (who identify specimens he’s photographed or discuss diversity in STEM), the purpose of the journey becomes increasingly clear: against a history in which Black Americans have been denied a sense of belonging or safety in the American outdoors (whether in the Central Park Ramble or a Minneapolis street), Edwards is “creating” biotic, virtual, scientific, and social “community” as he moves. If “whiteness” has naturalized its worth by associating itself with the ascribed freedom, majesty, and innocence of the heartland and the western wilderness, and if “blackness” has, since the early twentieth century, been conflated in the white supremacist imagination with a pathological and menacing urban setting, then Edwards’s cross-continental ride, and its dissemination through social media, confounds the definitions that are based upon such symbolic mapping.

We open with Scott Edwards’s travel tweets as a way to mark our moment in history, but also as an opportune way to approach and assess the three terms of this Companion’s title: “American,” “Literature,” and “Environment.” First: how is his journey, and journal, American? His ride simultaneously traverses both the continent of North America and the nation of the United States. Certain features and species that Edwards encounters – the Mississippi River watershed or the Osprey, for example – have ranges that extend north and south of the US, respectively. Many of the materials that make his ride, and its publicizing, possible – from rubber tires
on his bicycle to rare earth elements in his cell phone–originate outside of the US. The occasions for his trip–both COVID-19 and anti-Black police brutality–are global in origin, scope, and response. His online community stretches internationally. Therefore, while Edwards’s movement is entirely within the nation, and he meditates on national histories of territorial dispossession and slavery–and so is of the US topically and geographically–it also involves histories, materials, systems, and people that exceed the bounds of nationhood. It is precisely this understanding of “American” that informs the contributions to this volume: all address texts written in North America, including the Caribbean, and all are aware that the US is a settler nation of still-contested sovereignties which has an outsized global footprint (carbon, waste, and media emissions) but is also susceptible to and dependent on global flows (of germs, minerals, consumer goods, and capital). As soon as we try to identify something uniquely “American” about Edwards’s journal/journey–its epic romantic westering, its creation of political belonging through territorial survey, for example–we must admit those practices precede and exceed the nation. Ultimately then, what “American” signifies is how global, transhistorical cultural practices and materials dynamically meet with North American space.

That we call Scott Edwards’s Twitter stream–a participatory, multi-authored travelogue whose audio-visual element is as important as its verbal composition, and whose content is driven by location as much as by authorial imagination–“literature” is a sign of the widening boundaries of that category. If English departments traditionally focused on belletristic and imaginative forms written or printed on paper, they have in recent decades come to consider digital, visual, and material cultures, the social performance of everyday life, and so on. While environmental literature–in the forms of georgic poem, travel narrative, natural history, or almanac–was immensely popular before 1900, it took the increasing green activism of the 1960s and the early stirrings of the field of ecocriticism in the 1970s, to define it as a category of widespread academic interest. The American environmental literature receiving attention at this early stage tended to describe human interaction with rural and wilderness locales. Since the 1990s, and amid a growing sense that “nature” does not only exist in patently green spaces, but is also in our faucets and our weapons, on monoculture plantations and poultry plants, texts that were not initially seen as “environmental”–urban novels, slave narratives, labor exposés, cancer diaries, horror films–have become visible as such. Because almost every cultural production involves embodiment and place, or some kind of interplay between consciousness and its material foundations, it has in fact
become hard to say what isn’t environmental literature. Indeed, in as much as our environments mediate human capacity, they themselves are now understood to be media producers, or “ecomedia.” Edwards’s narrative draws both from traditions we have long seen as green (the wilderness narrative or the natural history account) as well as from sources more newly recognizable as environmental (mobile performances of civil rights protests or Black autobiography). Moreover, as we’ve said, rubber, titanium, and rare earth elements mediate his experience. In the chapters to follow, you will find genres such as natural history and cli-fi (climate fiction), but also Jazz Age fiction and western film noir; you will find cotton and wood pulp paper, but also silver-coated film and digital transmission; you will see the human at the center and also on the edge.

While an “environment” is crucial to any culture’s formation and mythification, environments play an especially active role in settler nations where the material changes settlers bring drastically alter the existing world. After peoples, pathogens, species, and land practices from Africa, Europe, and America collided in North America, each of these peoples responded culturally to make sense of these material novelties and changes, even if access to what became the dominant recording medium—alphabetical print—was drastically unequal. In post-contact literature, attention to nonhuman nature was constant. Environments appeared in surveys for extractable goods and scientific dispatches, but also in divine warnings, migration stories, and captivity tales. For all writers, faced either with diminishing or expanding sovereignty, and with challenged cosmologies, nature mattered.

As we have suggested, the category bundle that is “American environmental literature” is always subject to change, because of its experimental practitioners and its always shifting media, and because of scholars who keep redefining it. Before previewing what the ecocritics in this Companion are doing here and now, we want to situate them in their evolving field. Scholarly commentators seeking to define what the nation was, or could be, have long looked to nonhuman American land and space—its immensity, its “emptiness,” its “virginity”—for clues. Beginning in the 1970s, ecofeminists built on this long attention as they brought a more critical eye to how imperial powers’ figuration of American nature—as female and virgin—justified white patriarchal possession. Ecocritics in the 1980s and 1990s wrote of wilderness seers such as Thoreau, Leopold, and Dillard, who, while part of settler culture, lovingly mucked about in the tangible and divine particulars of nature to reveal it as a guide for a more biocentric nation. Since the 1990s, ecocritics have gradually absorbed the commitments of numerous preexisting environmental and social justice movements as well as
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a variety of critical orientations. Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers’ movement for unionization, fair wages, and working conditions begun in the 1960s; the environmental justice movement, which brought attention to environmental racism starting in 1987; decolonization and postcolonial studies; anti-nuclear activism and urban ecology: all these have opened up the field of ecocriticism to attend to the ways in which environments, resources, and spatial design subtext issues of social justice, labor, urban living conditions, global politics, and modern technology. The sometimes frictional, sometimes playful encounter between queer theory and environmental thought has encouraged ecocritics to consider everything from the pleasures of environmental contact to how to grieve ungrievable losses in the face of climate change. Awareness of human-caused, planetary-scale environmental alteration in the form of global climate change, ocean acidification, sea level rise – captured in the redefinition of the post-1800 era as “the Anthropocene” – has more recently swept across the practices of ecocriticism, forcing the field to work at the scale of both the bioregion and the planet, and to consider the gravity but also the incapacities of human agency. Animal studies, plant studies, actor-network-theory, posthumanism, and other fields attending to the interactive mesh of materialities constituting existence have introduced new texts, methods, and ontological models in recent years. Finally, as suggested earlier, critics are now attending to how media themselves have environmental impacts, while environments mediate human life.

Emerging out of this history of ecocriticism, what distinguishes and unifies the chapters collected here? We’ve already suggested that it is a broad, multimedia definition of “literature,” a transnational, settler-colonial comprehension of “America,” and a more-than-green definition of “environment.” Beyond these parameters, perhaps the common thread is an insistence that we face the trouble with the human – or that version of humanity figured so aptly in 1726 by Jonathan Swift in his giant, Gulliver, who assumes a tremendous wrecking power when he takes his English norms and engines out into the seas. Although our contributors generally share this understanding of the conceptual and behavioral source of the trouble, they perform but also move beyond historical diagnosis and condemnation. They consider how the authors and artists they study provide alternative models for dwelling in the world we have made, and are making. Many of these chapters – like Scott Edwards’s journey – are thus surprisingly hopeful, tracing epistemological habits, practices of community, and paradigms of resilience forged within the trouble itself. And for us, as editors, some of the hopefulness comes from the critical methodologies of – and the methodological surprises in – the chapters themselves.
Our contributors are unafraid to tackle the challenges of the present – which are also the challenges of America’s ongoing histories – head-on; at the same time, they trust that ethical, efficacious responses to these challenges may be necessarily indirect. After taking stock of the sheer scale, depth, and spread of the trouble that unequally confronts us, they often place their faith in small things: in early American naturalists’ attention to insects too miniscule to be seen individually, or in a single word hovering on a contemporary poet’s page. In the face of challenges whose urgency often encourages people to focus on the present, or set their sights on the solutions and catastrophes that the future might yet bring, the Companion’s contributors often turn their attention to the past: to historical genres, to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century habits of thought, to events that, while nominally “over,” continue to wield their effects today. And, while never underestimating the power of direct action, they model alternate forms of ethical engagement, whether poking fun at the most serious problems or lingering in library archives as part of the project of restoring the environments and communities outside. Indeed, such faith in indirection may be as much a part of what makes this volume “literary” as is the training of its contributors or the object(s) of study at its core.

The collection unfolds in three parts: Environmental Histories; Environmental Genres and Media; and Environmental Spaces, Environmental Methods. The opening section turns to the plural histories of American environmental literature, so as both to describe forms of ecological engagement exemplified in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts and to offer us a present rendered unfamiliar via its uncanny intimacies with the past. Whereas the first three chapters in this section analyze the contemporary relevance (and persistence) of particular historical periods and texts, its final two pieces track key environmental paradigms – extinction and pastoral, respectively – across a sweeping historical scope.

Christoph Irmscher’s “Scenes of Human Diminishment in Early American Natural History” reads work by William Bartram, John James Audubon, and Susan Fenimore Cooper, identifying “a strand of early American natural history writing that challenges [human] exceptionalism” by shrinking the observer and enlarging the natural world. The resulting ethical implications are startling, both within an early American context which often looked to nature for reassuring lessons about human experience, and in the context of the contemporary environmental movement, which often renders the planet familiar/familial (think “Mother Earth”) and encourages stewardship predicated on empathy, recognition, and love. By modeling the limits of human understanding and human power,
Irmscher suggests, early American natural historians can train us in humility and “critical self-consciousness,” helping us learn to “withhold our power to dominate” and perceive the world anew.

In “Slavery and the Anthropocene,” Paul Outka argues for placing US chattel slavery at the center of how we comprehend the Anthropocene. By analyzing how the institution of slavery “naturalized the absolute dominance of those considered fully human over whatever they considered natural,” he demonstrates both how “racial and environmental politics [are] inseparable” and how the very ability to assume a categorical distinction between natural and human history is a marker of whiteness, and a tool of white supremacy. Through readings of slave narratives by Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, he not only traces how the ideological relationship between humanity and nature was foundational to the brutal power dynamics of slavery, but also traces the contemporary ethical implications of this fact, demonstrating how many of the conventionalities of Anthropocene discourse become untenable when we reckon thoroughly with chattel slavery.

Sarah Ensor’s “(In)conceivable Futures: Henry David Thoreau and Reproduction’s Queer Ecology” refracts contemporary environmentalism’s preoccupation with reproductive futurity – a topic that appears repeatedly in this collection – through Henry David Thoreau’s engagement with nurse insects and trees in his journals. Arguing that Thoreau’s complex, multispecies understanding of reproduction distinguishes him from both twenty-first-century environmentalists, whose rhetoric often relies on normative logics of reproductivity, and queer theorists, who often critique such logics, Ensor theorizes an environmental ethic informed by the extant queerness of reproduction itself. In contrast to the organization “Conceivable Future,” which helps women decide whether to have children in a time of climate catastrophe, Ensor’s reading of Thoreau offers possibilities for solidarity and social change that customary definitions of reproduction have rendered inconceivable.

In “Narrating Animal Extinction from the Pleistocene to the Anthropocene,” Timothy Sweet uses three case studies – of the mammoth, the passenger pigeon, and the monarch butterfly – to track extinctions linked to Pleistocene and post-Columbian colonizations. Engaging a range of cultural objects – among them, Thomas Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia, artist Maya Lin’s multimedia project What Is Missing?, Penobscot historian Joseph Nicolar’s Life and Traditions of the Red Man, and Donna Haraway’s “The Camille Stories” – Sweet historicizes the complex relationship between Indigenous life and species death, reads the colonial violence of North American history via animal extinction (and vice versa), and tracks not only elegiac responses to species loss but also their
alternatives. Ultimately, he demonstrates that even in the global context of the Anthropocene, North America remains “a critical theater for understanding extinctions, . . . not least because here we often find narratives from two pulses of colonization in dialog.”

Wai Chee Dimock’s “Pastoral Reborn in the Anthropocene: Henry David Thoreau to Kyle Powys Whyte” responds to contemporary crisis via historical genre analysis, offering pastoral as a “poetry of desperation” (William Empson’s phrase) that has achieved persistence precisely through its attention to loss. By reading scholars and practitioners of pastoral from the seventeenth century to the present, and engaging Thoreau’s “Indian books” alongside contemporary Indigenous cultural production, she identifies a version of pastoral for the twenty-first century: “an indigenous pastoral, not a hide-bound genre but a crisis-responsive mode, intimate with the forces of catastrophe and able to project hope out of the company it keeps.” In finding such “pastoral reborn” — exemplified by the work of Indigenous artists and activists — in music and live performances, in political campaigns and educational programs, in resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline and the work of academic philosophy, she offers us a genre reimagined, one brimming with “sights, sounds, and tastes” and political promise alike.

The second section of the volume further expands the volume’s range of genres and media — turning to petrofiction, cli-fi, metafiction, poetry, and photography, as well as activist practices, cookbooks, and blogs — in order to trace the many shapes of American environmental literature. Offering both keen rereadings of texts already within the environmental canon and ecocritical readings of texts often considered beyond the purview of environmental thought, our contributors not only expand our sense of what is germane to the field but also blur the boundaries between environmental literature and environmental criticism, insisting upon the self-reflexivity and theoretical power of literary and cultural objects themselves.

Lingering over the references to driving, automobiles, and oil that famously suffuse The Great Gatsby, Harilaos Stecopoulos’s “The Heat of Modernity: The Great Gatsby as Petrofiction” not only manages to give a familiar book back to us in new terms, but also alters our understanding of petrofiction itself. Indeed, through close readings of Gatsby and its historical context (specifically the Teapot Dome Scandal of 1921–1923), Stecopoulos insists that “resource capitalism can incite an aesthetic vision [and] a social critique,” and demonstrates the extent to which the novel “engages with petroculture at the level of character.” For Stecopoulos, oil, far from simply an object appearing in the text, is a discourse, a relational mode, a way of “comprehend[ing] . . . characters’ relationship to the possibilities
and dangers of twentieth-century life.” Under his critical gaze, oil becomes a resource not only for the exploitative structures of extractive capitalism but also for the ethical practice of literary criticism itself.

Min Hyoung Song’s “Children in Transit/Children in Peril: The Contemporary US Novel in a Time of Climate Crisis” takes the (real and figural) Child as a site at which to examine the relationship among migration, race, futurity, and the environment in contemporary fiction. Song focuses on two post-apocalyptic novels, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and Métis writer Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves*, demonstrating how both works— for all of their important differences— throw the figural Child into a state of crisis. Song finds in *The Marrow Thieves* characters who, in being excluded from the normative future, focus on caring in the present; he finds in *The Road* language that draws readers outside their “ordinary notions of time,” and insists upon a common “now” as the realm in which meaning is made. Indeed, amid its attention to displacement, the chief contribution of Song’s chapter might be to our understanding of the temporality of care, which, if we heed his readings, involves less protecting the planet for future generations than trusting the transformative power of “bonds of love in the here and now.”

Richard Crownshaw picks up on Song’s interest in the Child in “Meta-Critical Climate Change Fiction: Claire Vaye Watkins’s *Gold Fame Citrus,*” this time putting reproductive futurism in conversation with questions of nonhuman agency and scale. Making a case that Watkins’s novel is as theoretically informed as it is self-reflexive, Crownshaw argues that we read it as a form of meta-critical cli-fi, engaged with not only the socioenvironmental challenges of our present but also the ways in which critical theory tends to respond to them. In readings that recall Song’s engagement with the racialization of childhood and Stecopoulos’s interest in extractivism and the gendered body, Crownshaw demonstrates how Watkins’s attention to the “histories of colonialism, settlement, and expansion”— as inscribed both in the land and on the bodies that inhabit them— resists the abstracting, dehistoricizing tendencies of some Anthropocene discourse.

Nicole Seymour’s “*Junk* Food for Thought: Decolonizing Diets in Tommy Pico’s *Poetry*” lingers with the politics of embodiment, reading the queer Kumeyaay poet Pico’s collection *Junk* as a complex engagement with the “deep intersectionalities of eating” and demonstrating how, for Pico, food is “a source of comfort, . . . a source of shame, . . . an indicator of settler colonial trauma— and a related, explicit engagement with queer sexuality.” As the juxtaposition of comfort and shame begins to indicate, Seymour lingers over the critical use to which Pico puts his ambivalence; throughout, Seymour
traces Pico’s simultaneously serious and satiric response to the interrelated problems of food insecurity, queer body image, Indigenous dispossession, and environmental degradation. Together, poet and critic perform an ecocriticism willing to veer from the earnestness so long at its core.

In “Tender Woods: Looking for the Black Outdoors with Dawoud Bey,” Susan Scott Parrish traces the emergence of “a Black environmental imaginary” (Carolyn Finney’s term) simultaneously attentive and irreducible to the legacies of harm of settler colonialism, chattel slavery/the plantation, and environmental injustice. She demonstrates how photographer Bey tinkers with specific visual technologies—as well as the technology of vision itself—in order to alter his audience’s understanding of racialized bodies, natural spaces, and the historical and ideological relationship between the two. Attuning our attention to the ethics of tenderness—as noun and verb and adjective, as site of vulnerability and source of mutual aid, as a practice of vision and care, as “the act of offering,” as the soreness after a blow—Parrish offers a heuristic for understanding both the histories and the many possible futures of Black environmentality.

The contributors in the final part of the volume, Environmental Spaces, Environmental Methods, find the ground for environmental criticism in a wide range of locations, including the city, the “outdoors,” public lands, the refuge, the internment camp, the settler nation, the family, the archive, the island, the desiring body, and the queer home. In the process, they “trouble” not only the conventional sense of where the environment is but also ecocriticism’s historical interest in locality itself. For our authors turn as often to transit as to stasis—not only because, as Song reminded us, we live in a time increasingly populated by climate refugees, but also because the history of American place has always been the history of Indigenous displacement and dispossession. Placemaking, in other words, can never be separated from the forcible unmaking of communities. In order to inhabit this dialectic, and to understand its implications for environmental thought, these chapters engage methods drawn from literary studies, political ecology, Indigenous studies, Black feminism, Latinx studies, Asian American studies, comparative race studies, and queer theory. Altering the “what” and “where” and “who” of environmental criticism, they insist, has significant implications for its “how”—and vice versa.

Mika Kennedy’s “Japanese American Incarceration and the Turn to Earth: Looking for a Man Named Komako in Bad Day at Black Rock” demonstrates how John Sturges’s 1955 (post)western makes Japanese incarceration “physically and hauntingly manifest . . . even in the absence of human forms” and how “the film’s environment, its landscape, speaks...