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INTRODUCTION:

Eco-historicism

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Climate has long been the third rail of professional historiography. Climatic determinism, with its roots in Hippocratic theory, figures among the great embarrassments of the early modern history of ideas: an intellectual adjunct to European imperialism and institutionalized racism. Enlightenment writers such as Montesquieu offered climatic rationalizations for the putative “laziness” and inferiority of African, Asian, and Pacific cultures, legitimating their subjection and conceiving, in the process, the embryo of biological race theory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Until very recently, to suggest climate as an influence on human culture and history has been to raise the unwelcome specter of a disgraced ideology.

Now, however, all is changed utterly. With tropical warmth threatening to become a global phenomenon, ushering in an era of chronic drought and desertification, acidifying oceans, coastal inundation, and global food shortages, the necessity of integrating climate and environment into the work of history has become increasingly urgent. Crude climatic determinism remains anathema, but historical materialism without ecological awareness now appears vulnerable to a dangerous determinism of another kind: a grand narrative of class, government, empire, and trade whose anthropocentric terms are no less a product of imperialism and the Enlightenment than the current ecological crisis itself. Climate, long a background constant, is back in the spotlight as a key variable shaping the human story.

Across a variety of academic fields, climate and human history are no longer estranged. In the sciences, the once marginal field of historical climatology, pioneered by Hubert Lamb, now spawns institutes. Given that standardized statistical data for temperature and rainfall are only available

for the mid-nineteenth century on, historical climatologists have mined a multitude of proxy sources—from ice cores, tree rings, and fossilized pollens to ships’ logs and “weather” diaries—to fill out the climate record (albeit incompletely) across a breathtakingly broad temporal range: from a single famine year in, say, eighteenth-century Europe, to the beginnings of sedentary human culture ten thousand years ago (the Holocene Period), and back through the dim, paleo-climatological eras of human evolution. In each case, the propensity of the world climate system to dramatic temperature fluctuation has been a major and consistent finding. The journal *Climatic Change*, which debuted in 1977, is just one example of a high-profile forum for a range of physical and social scientists—climatologists, geographers, economists—to publish not only projections of the future impacts of warming, but accounts of past climate change, both “natural” and those subject to anthropogenic forcing.

In traditional fields within the humanities, too, an historicized ecological consciousness has become the new norm. In the last three decades, environmental history has evolved from its exclusively American focus to a key interdisciplinary element in both regional studies and world history: the work of Alfred Crosby and John Richards has proved especially relevant to early modern studies. The thriving field of environmental history currently boasts two major journals, a professional society, as well as conferences, specialists, and—the ultimate test of viability—faculty lines. Similarly, anthropologists have recognized the untenability of their traditional intradisciplinary divide between “physical” anthropologists—who take seriously the climatic adaptation of pre-historical human communities—and cultural anthropologists who have long been, in the words of Carole Crumley, deeply “suspicious . . . of the determinisms: racial, environmental, social” (3), and who therefore “den[y] environment a meaningful role in human history” (2). Crumley’s landmark 1995 volume, *Historical Ecology*, proposed a new interdisciplinary formation for anthropology, one that would integrate history, geography, and the environmental sciences to create “a laboratory of past human choice and response in which the effects of environmental change can be palpably understood” (7). It now remains for cultural historians to join that interdisciplinary project.

In other words, if academic historians and social anthropologists have recently experienced an ecological awakening, ecocriticism—the realm of ecological scholarship within literary and cultural studies—is still awaiting its own turn to history. While abundant in “green” readings of literary and

philosophical texts and rightly consumed by the politics of the current global ecological crisis, ecocriticism has suffered from a deficiency in historical consciousness. Anthropogenic climate change did not begin sometime in the 1980s, but ten thousand years ago with the development of agriculture and the domestication of hoofed animals. The accelerated global warming now underway is a product of post-1800 industrialization, but the foundations of that industrialization were laid with the economic growth and globalization of the early modern period. When it comes to climate and environmental change, the “gotcha” game of historical origins is infinitely recursive, but also critical. Ecocriticism’s concern for how the human-environment relation has been discursively constructed and politicized, however, has not been adapted to the urgent task of historical revisionism: to illuminate how, in the colonial era for example, specific instances of human ecological agency—land use, agricultural technology and food production, the opening of trade routes, urban planning, and public health policy—were acculturated and rationalized. Likewise absent from ecocritical scholarship have been critical histories of cultural response and adaptation to natural phenomena beyond human control: to seasonal temperature anomalies, extreme weather events, climate change (e.g. the vicissitudes of the Little Ice Age), and natural disaster.

An early modern cultural studies that integrated ecology and history would demand detailed description, at the outset, of the environmental impacts of the transition on the European continent from small subsistence agricultural economies to maritime, trade-based urban and manufacturing societies, backed by expansive nation-states and enriched by Asian contact and satellite colonies. The task of the ecological historian would then be to trace the mutual influences between Europeans and their various global environments, and to show how the historical integration of European and colonial agriculture, mining, and manufacture within a sophisticated intercontinental trading network facilitated western contact with “exotic” climates and ecosystems, not just peoples.

Call it *eco-historicism*: the study of climate and environment as objects of knowledge and desire, analyzed through “thick” description of specific episodes of ecological micro-contact. The critical tasks of eco-historicism lie adjacent to but beyond the rhetorical reach of environmental history and historical anthropology as currently configured. The goal of a specifically early modern eco-historicism would be to better understand the impact of four hundred years of economic growth and globalization on the creation both of

Western modernity and the Malthusian ecological consciousness that is its guilty residue. The environmental effects of globalized trade and migration belong within the domain of the physical and social sciences, but the rationalizations for their impact—the intentionality of globalization, the psychocultural formations enabling the exploitation and trade of earth’s agricultural and mineral resources, as well as the cultural forms of an embryonic ecological consciousness—are natural subjects for eco-historicists equipped with the tools of discourse analysis developed in literary and cultural studies over the last thirty years. Analysis of the *social* consequences of past climate and environmental change likewise falls within the ambit of eco-historicism as case studies in human cultural adaptation—or failure to adapt—to environmental conditions, degradation, and not infrequent disaster.

Eco-historicism is, by its nature, interdisciplinary. In the very grammar of its construction, eco-historicism challenges the cultural historian to make a crossing—a kind of blind, backward leap—into the ecological sciences and toward a working technical literacy in one or more of the disciplines of climatology, geology, geography, and environmental science. The potential rewards for this interdisciplinary crossing are great. An advanced eco-historicism would seek to explain, in a way no other discipline yet fully does, what the hard data of historical climatology *meant* in cultural terms, in the minds and lived experience of the people who endured or benefited from a specific meteorological regime, and how human cultures have both adapted to and shaped environmental change. Environmental history, like historical climatology, finds both its resources and its limits in quantitative data. Social anthropology, meanwhile, is bound to synchronic models and the discrete description of individual communities. Eco-historicism, by contrast, operating within an expanded matrix of political, economic, and cultural phenomena, would be licensed to speculate upon qualitative sources of all kinds—poems, diaries, newspapers, paintings, folklore, etc.—across a broad temporal spectrum. The goal of this inclusive critical and archival approach would be to reconstruct the rationalizations of historical actors in their relation to specific ecosystems, and to trace the ways in which various providential, instrumentalist, and proto-ecological views of the world and its natural resources first gained discursive currency and found expression in specific episodes of ecological contact.

The guiding questions of the eco-historicist would thus be: How have climate, environment, and human culture been interlinked in the past? How have these dynamic relations been understood, historically? And what is the

relevance of a given eco-historical case study to the current emergency period of environmental degradation and global warming?

Each of the essays in this special issue, “Climate and Crisis,” poses variations of these questions, and I have coined the term “eco-historicism” to describe their collective trajectory. Each author makes the argument for climate discourse as a significant element in texts and historical formations crucial to the early modern period. First, in his “Hard Frost, 1684,” Alvin Snider traces the influence of the Hippocratic tradition on the meteorological researches of the Royal Society and their significance, in turn, to discourses of English melancholy, exceptionalism, and identity. His case study is the epic winter of 1684, which brought frost fairs to the Thames and a spate of published speculations on climate, politics, and providence. My essay, “The Volcano Lover: Climate, Colonialism, and the Slave Trade in Raffles’s *History of Java* (1817),” is an eco-historical case study drawn from an early nineteenth-century event—the eruption of Mt. Tambora near Java in 1815—which likewise explores the viral potency of Hippocratic discourse in the colonial period. In his *History of Java*, Stamford Raffles, a would-be empire builder in Indonesia, engages in a complicated tussle with the Hippocratic legacy of Montesquieu in his attempt to prove the economic viability of a permanent British colony in the Dutch East Indies. Raffles’s tropico-georgic representation of Javanese agriculture is haunted, however, by the island’s volcanic geology and its cataclysmic manifestation in Tambora’s eruption, the scope and human devastation of which entirely overawed his reformist colonial statecraft based on the promise of personal liberty and free trade.

For her eco-historical case studies, Rajani Sudan analyzes two climatological curiosities two centuries apart—a summer ice cave in early modern France, and a Royal Society fellow’s encounter with manufactured ice in colonial Bengal. In her “Chilling Allahabad: Climate Control and the Production of Anglicized Weather in Early Modern India,” Sudan analyzes how these encounters, in their sublime and uncanny forms, defy Hippocratic logic and its deterministic worldview based on climatic difference. The Bengal ice, in particular, as an example of both native technology and colonial luxury, offers the utopian promise of climatic engineering as the answer to problems of European adaptation (or non-adaptation) to its colonial hot zones. Eric Gidal is likewise absorbed with climatic utopias in his essay on Shelley. In “‘O happy Earth! reality of Heaven!’: Melancholy and Utopia in Romantic Climatology” he reads Malthusian melancholy in Burton and Keats as an ecopoetic counterpoint to Romantic utopianism, in particular to

Shelley and Godwin's instrumentalist fantasy of a world renovated for the advance of human perfectibility. From the viewpoint of our own understanding of a dynamic, fragile climate system, Shelley's utopian allegories of nature in "Queen Mab" read suspiciously like climate denial or a geo-engineer's fantasy. For example, there is no room in "Queen Mab" for an actual historical event like the Great Storm of 1703, which Daniel Defoe described as "the dreadfullest and most universal judgment that ever Almighty Power thought fit to bring upon this part of the world" (Preface). In the concluding essay to the "Climate and Crisis" issue, Robert Markley's "Casualties and Disasters: Defoe and the Interpretation of Climatic Instability" presents Defoe's *The Storm* (1704) as the first significant work of popular climatology, a journalistic compilation of eyewitness accounts in which the tension between eschatological and scientific interpretations of an extreme climatic event exposes the historicity of weather, its inseparability from specific cultural moments and their ideological frames. Markley's reading of *The Storm* also offers an implicit rebuke to the ecocritical canons of nature writing. At odds with the georgic image of ecological stability, with which eighteenth-century aesthetics of landscape are traditionally associated, Defoe's text advances a theory of anthropogenic climate change *avant la lettre*, in a work of popular history that presumes the ecosystemic interconnectedness of weather, environment, and human culture.

Hippocrates *Redivivus*? And Malthus, too? Not exactly. Eco-historicism stands for a critical, non-deterministic cultural historiography that at the same time revives the interdisciplinary spirit of Enlightenment natural philosophy, finding itself, in Snider's words, "equally at home with computer simulations of atmospheric systems and hand-written documents in the archive." The implications of ecological thinking for cultural studies are manifold. It will be necessary, as Sudan argues, to actively resist anthropocentric habits of thought, to re-balance, for example, "ideologies of domination and conquest that have structured postcolonial inquiry . . . [with] circumstances putatively out of human control." The eco-historicist method historicizes our current crisis moment by making ecological languages of the past speak to the present. Gidal, for example, locates in the utopian language of the early nineteenth century an adumbration of corporate "sustainability," the eco-buzzword of today. That is, the Romantic utopians anticipated the fashionable pro-growth argument for adaptation to global warming, which in Gidal's words "reconcil[es] a faith in endless progress with a recognition of natural limits by deferring their resolution to

an indefinite future.” Gidal’s eco-historical juxtaposition of the texts exposes their ideological dimension.

Which brings us to the rhetoric of weather itself, of which Defoe is so keenly aware in his preface to *The Storm*: “I confess here’s room for abundance of Romance.” The weather always finds its way into language, though its meanings remain elusive. In its diurnal form, meteorology is rhetorically empty, the verbal equivalent of eye contact or a handshake. The folkloric mode, however, devoted to extreme weather events, is a hyperbolic affair like no other, a language-in-full overdetermined by superstition, hysteria, and biblical foreboding. In each case, the discursive trenches are deep, the habits of thought and language seemingly impossible to shake, the effects as numbing as an hour spent watching The Weather Channel. It is not enough that global warming is now the subject of everyday conversation, nor that reading the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report reminds us of the plagues of Egypt and of exhortations for change left unregarded. This is not eco-historical thinking. It is because of the unprecedented threat of current global warming, for which no historical analogies are truly apt, that neither mere “awareness” nor cautionary tales are adequate to the moment. For their part, eco-historians must develop a wholly new historiography: one in which the relative success or failure of human dwelling in the ecosystems of the world is not the setting of the stage, but the point of the story itself.

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