

## Teaching Modern World History, Or: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Embrace the Urgency of Climate Change

How can we make history accessible, fascinating, and relevant to non-majors, something that will not be a set of facts but a new frame through which to make sense of the world? As colleagues at a liberal arts college (Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California), we have grappled with the challenges of teaching world history, trying out various thematic approaches and ways of organizing the course. Being keenly aware of the importance and relevance of environmental history as well as the pressing need to engage students with history in new ways, we have both turned to environmental history, as content and as methodology, in teaching our modern global history survey. What benefits and challenges lie in teaching world history through an environmental lens? What happens to world history when we acknowledge our unique moment of climate change and coronavirus, in the broader context of the debate over the Anthropocene, as well as persistent issues of soil, water, disease, and resources in the past?

This essay considers these issues as part of the wider movement to rethink undergraduate history survey courses as introductions to historical and historiographical thinking—that is, to what historians do—and not simply as more or less engaging presentations of a grand chronological sweep through facts or events to memorize. With these issues in mind, we share our ideas about how we use the course to help students approach and question history as *narrative*, as well as how we tackle the problems of sources and assignments. There are certainly challenges: for instance, how to appreciate the variety of different approaches to nature in the past and the contingency of history, even while seeing cause and effect; how to allow that other, non-human agents can provoke change while avoiding biological or geographical determinism; how to not collapse all history into a story of either “all humans destroy their environments” or (equally bad) “only Europeans and/or US-Americans are bad for the environment”; how to help students understand the severity of the environmental crisis while still providing some hope for the future. Despite these

complexities, we conclude that an approach that uses environmental history as a means to rethink the history survey allows for important conversations and can be a successful way of framing world history, garnering a great deal of student interest and deeper understanding of complex problems.

The study of history, environmental history in particular, demands attention to place. Our courses are dedicated to thinking about representation and power, including racism, slavery, and settler colonialism in all of their many forms. We thus begin this essay as we begin our courses, by acknowledging that our university, Loyola Marymount University, sits on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded lands of the Gabrielino/Tongva peoples. Spain, Mexico, and the United States stole their land and attempted in different ways to erase them, but they have resisted and survived—and continue to do so. It is important that we recognize that we continue to benefit from that theft and even from the erasure of that theft from historical narratives, that we do what we can to understand the dynamics of settler colonialism, that we work for justice, and that we acknowledge the Gabrielino/Tongva as the past and present custodians of the lands that make up this place, Tovaangar (the Los Angeles basin and the Southern Channel Islands).



Image 1: Historical extent of various languages and dialects of the Takic branch of the Uto-Aztecan language family, including the Tongva in the Los Angeles basin and Southern Channel Islands. Source: Noahedits, used under CC BY-SA 4.0 license at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=84845562>.

## History in the Time of Crisis: Climate Change & Corona

Both of us had been teaching world history for many years before redesigning our courses around environmental history. Being trained as Europeanists, we knew the difficulty of escaping Eurocentrism, given our areas of expertise but also given the power imbalances due to European colonialism in the modern period that we teach (1500–present). We were both exposed to environmental approaches as undergraduates (one taking a class with John McNeill, the other with Carolyn Merchant), and our awareness of looming environmental crises played a role in deciding to incorporate these approaches into our global history surveys; environmental history seemed more important than ever for our students to understand. As we dug into this approach, it seemed to offer numerous methodological and pedagogical benefits, which we address in this essay. But it also offers a good example of the bind that many humanists currently find ourselves in: the difficulty of how to approach the apparent convergence of past and present in our multiple, integrated, and mutually-reinforcing social, political, cultural, ecological, and economic crises. We both developed our courses during a time overshadowed by the threats of rising nationalism, xenophobia, and ecological collapse. As our study of history shows, however, these forces are not likely to abate soon; in fact, as many experts are currently warning, the next decades will very likely be dominated by precisely these kinds of persistent disruptions.<sup>1</sup> In such times, is it possible or even desirable to maintain a position of disinterested, critical distance to history? What would it mean to teach introductory-level history while also acknowledging our position relative to the past? Our moment of combined crises has provoked our courses to take on these issues directly, and this decision has also opened up new pedagogical and methodological opportunities.

Even as historians strive to communicate the importance and relevance of our field, and even as we engage with historiography in our advanced courses and our own scholarship, we are deeply afraid of what detractors dismiss as “presentism.” That is, even as we acknowledge in some arenas of our work that historical interpretations change over time, we tend to present history to beginners as a series of settled facts, and rarely if ever acknowledge how our own present might affect how we approach them. Especially in introductory courses, we emphasize historicism, that is, wanting to understand the past on its own terms. We know that we cannot fully escape our biases or the fact that we bring questions shaped by our own context, but we want to try to be aware of those as much as possible, and engage with different times and cultures precisely as different.<sup>2</sup> Lower-division courses frequently make use of primary and “tertiary” sources, that is, sources from the time and synthetic textbooks, rather than with debates in the secondary literature or problems of changing or controversial historical interpretation. But as we discuss below, environmental history provided the perfect opportunity to rethink this strategy, inspiring us to put the problem of our particular perspective as well as the nature of environmental

history itself front and center. This approach began with acknowledging the problem of the Anthropocene, but over 2020–2021 has included the new challenge of teaching online in the midst of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

As aware as we had been that we were teaching modern global environmental history in the midst of interconnecting environmental crises over the last few years (including the problem of human-caused climate change), nothing quite prepared us for teaching history online during the multiple emergencies of 2020, many of which hit Southern California particularly hard. This awareness of reaching an inflection point gave a new (and reversed) meaning to what Herbert Butterfield referred to ninety years ago as the “Whig interpretation of history,” in which historians impose order on history by interpreting the past through the present, using an overarching theory of progress.<sup>3</sup> The Whig historian, according to Butterfield,

stands on the summit of the 20th century, and organises his scheme of history from the point of view of his own day . . . [t]he fallacy lies in the fact that if the historian working on the 16th century keeps the 20th century in his mind . . . this immediate juxtaposition of past and present . . . is bound to lead to an over-simplification of the relations between events and a complete misapprehension of the relations between past and present.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, Butterfield cautioned that when we speak of the importance of history, we need to be careful about whether we mean what was important to the people of the past, or important “from the point of view of the present.”<sup>5</sup> Certainly, the nationalist and often imperialist historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries frequently fit history into a narrative of *progress*, not least the progress of industrialized “Western” societies. In our case, we frequently find a strange version of this presentism in our students: the sense that modern, “westernized,” industrial, capitalist society, with its current divisions

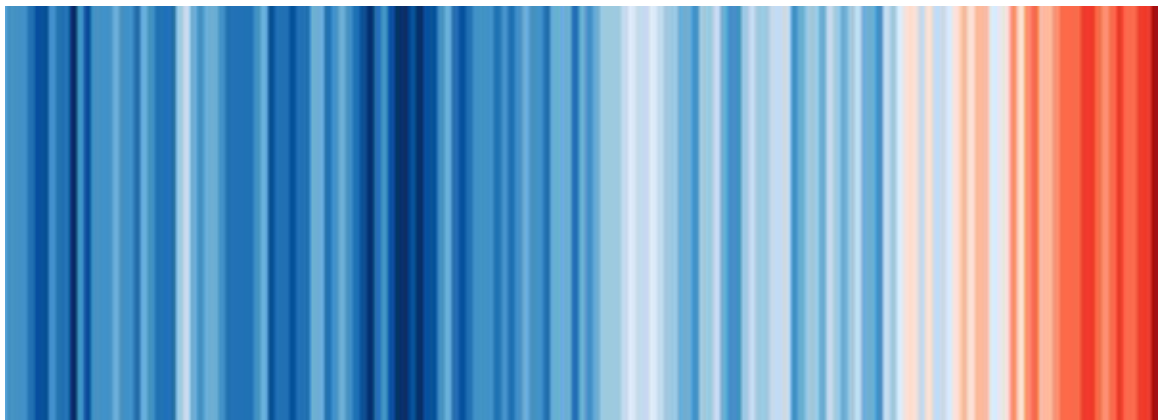


Image 2: Warming stripes depicting annual mean global temperatures, 1850–2018, from World Meteorological Organization data. Source: Visualization created by Ed Hawkins, climate scientist at the University of Reading, 2018, used under CC BY-SA 4.0 license at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=80976980>.

and inequalities, has been naturalized to the point of seeming inevitable, on the one hand; and, on the other, the sense that this narrative is not one of progress, but of an inevitable rise and fall, and that we are now on the brink of catastrophe.

That sense of looming collapse, and that studying the environmental history of the last 500 years means studying the beginnings of our own decline, only became worse as we taught online in the midst of the COVID and climate crises. We are located in Southern California, and while many of our students are currently elsewhere, we were all affected in some way by the unprecedented wildfires of 2020, the catastrophic spread of COVID, and the deeply segregated and unequal distribution of death and disease due to continuing systemic racism. The presence and fear of social, economic, and ecological disaster (not to mention the political storms we have recently faced) have made the intertwining local and global histories of exploitation, slavery, racism, and imperialism all the more real: the dislocation and violence against Indigenous populations in settler societies, the related history of racial segregation, the exponential exploitation of natural resources of the twentieth century. Even as many students still uncritically accept nationalist narratives of progress, for others it can be difficult to fight against this narrative riptide of civilizational collapse, and even more difficult when studying online in a pandemic, under skies orange with smoke. Indeed, many of our students in 2020 struggled, as we did, with the unreality of our current moment; studying modern global environmental history for many of them could too often confirm a sense of dread and futility. Thus, we found ourselves adding new goals to the course: to acknowledge our present, but to encourage students to connect to past societies on their own terms; to consider some of our current crises as simultaneously real, relatively recent, and manageable; and to take seriously environmental causes and consequences, as well as human practices and ideas about nature. As we will discuss below, thinking about historical narratives and framing has also become an important tool in facing and managing climate anxiety, demoralization, and grief.

## Rethinking the Survey Course

Our turn to global environmental history has taken place not just in a time of environmental crisis but also in the context of a crisis in history and the humanities: a stark decline in the number of history majors in our own program and nationwide and, more generally, a questioning of the value of a degree in the humanities and even of a liberal arts education. The students whom we encounter in introductory history surveys are often there to fulfill a Core or general education requirement and struggle to understand the relevance of history for their chosen majors or future careers. In response to this “crisis” and perceptions about the value of a history degree, the American Historical Association’s Tuning the History Discipline project has worked to articulate the significance of studying history for understanding the world and to identify the knowledge, skills, and core values that

animate the history major.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, and long overdue, the academy has begun to grapple with its own histories of racism and exclusion. In history, that means acknowledging the origins of the modern discipline in connection to European projects of nation- and empire-building. It also means acknowledging the ways that traditional pedagogical and curricular approaches to teaching history can disadvantage students from historically excluded populations. As studies by the Gardner Institute for Undergraduate Studies have shown, students from underrepresented and underserved populations disproportionately receive grades of D, F, I, and W in introductory history surveys that focus on coverage and on mastering large amounts of information, with those grades having implications for their success in college more generally.<sup>7</sup>

In response to such developments, and inspired by efforts at other universities to re-think the survey course, in particular the University of Michigan's development of a History 101 course, we have reframed our introductory survey courses in European and world history to focus first and foremost on introducing students to historical and historiographical thinking—that is, to the work that historians do.<sup>8</sup> This reframing has meant



Image 3: Many modern relationships to “nature” involve complex colonial legacies. Golden Gate Hotel in the Golden Gate Highlands National Park, South Africa. Source: In the Public Domain at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Brandwag\\_Hotel.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Brandwag_Hotel.JPG).

sacrificing coverage (willingly) in favor of thematically-focused courses, with an emphasis on thinking about history in terms of sources, key historical questions, and interpretation. Rather than embarking on a “march through time,” we engage with historiography, the construction of historical narratives, and the nature of the discipline of history itself from the beginning.

For our introductory world history surveys, we have found environmental history a useful frame for encouraging students to think about the nature of historical change and the relationship between the past and the present. While taking climate change as a given, something not at all up for debate, we introduce students to a variety of issues in environmental history, challenging them to see how different questions, approaches, sources, and methodologies can produce different historical narratives. We ask students to think about changing understandings of “nature” and what those understandings mean for ideas about the relationship between humans and ecosystems. In exploring ideas about nature, we also analyze how some peoples are framed as “primitive,” static, and “in and of the past” (indeed, as “in and of nature”), while others are “modern,” dynamic, and oriented towards “the future.” We explore how humans, animals, and science and technology have shaped the environment; how historical developments such as migration, empire, trade, industrialization, and urbanization have affected humans’ relationships with nature; and how the environment and the climate have shaped historical developments. Further, we introduce these multiple approaches as part of the ongoing development and multiple interpretations of environmental historical methodologies. Environmental history is particularly well suited as an approach to world history because so many of the issues central to it—disease, climate change, pollution, and so on—transcend national and continental borders. Environmental history has therefore meant rethinking our global history surveys around new topics and sources as well as reframing these courses around new historiographical topics and questions. Both of these approaches invite students into history in a new way, in line with broader pedagogical changes in the discipline. We discuss specific approaches to these issues below.

## **Global Environmental History: Questions, Sources, and Assignments**

Using the lens of environmental history to examine modern world history has enabled us to introduce students to a variety of questions related to the nature of historical narratives, including ideas like framing the object of historical study, periodization, emplotment, and historical agency and causality. What does it look like to introduce lower-division students to these kinds of historiographical and methodological questions? One way to do this is to begin the course with specific framing material before leaping into the usual “march through time.” Devoting a few weeks at the outset to these kinds of questions invites students to

approach history from a critical point of view while attuning them to questions of employment and the construction of narrative.

Starting with questions about the object of study—what *is* environmental history?—and introducing students to debates like the naming of the Anthropocene or how different communities approach environmental restoration projects invites students to think about history differently from the beginning of the course. To introduce students to the debate over the Anthropocene invites students to reconsider their own relationship to nature and the *concept* of nature. This debate also gets students thinking about doing history from the point of view of this particular moment in time, and the differences between historical and geological (or ecological) time. Viewing historical developments through a prism that emphasizes economic and environmental factors can lead students to identify different “turning points,” thus challenging a periodization based on European political history. When tackling these difficult concepts, it can be helpful to combine different kinds of sources. When considering the question of the Anthropocene—what is it? has it started? if so, when?—this might mean pairing a Guardian Audio Longread podcast with a short selection from a readable monograph.<sup>9</sup> Using popular sources can introduce students to accessible material as well as to journals, newspapers, and magazines they might continue to use; it has the added benefit of highlighting the current relevance of these issues.



Image 4: A dust storm approaches Stratford, Texas, in 1935. Source: NOAA, George E. Marsh Album. In the Public Domain at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=235911>.



As many environmental historians have noted for a long time—for example, William Cronon’s work on the way we tell the story of the Dust Bowl—environmental history can also help students start to recognize and understand the idea of *emplotment*.<sup>10</sup> What does it mean to think about history as a “narrative,” with a beginning, middle, and end? How do we “plot” environmental histories into tragedies and triumphs? When considering the issue of “emplotment,” we have productively raised these issues by combining Cronon’s classic scholarly article, a recent example of environmental policy, a TedTalk on YouTube, and a podcast.<sup>11</sup> Asking students to consider the problems of nationalism, imperialism, Eurocentrism, and the legacies of racism in historical narratives from the outset can get students thinking about how we tell the past as a story with happy or tragic endings, heroes, villains, and victims. Likewise, inviting students to use environmental history to think about the long legacies of settler colonialism in historical narratives about “primitive” and “modern” peoples can help them rethink those assumptions.<sup>12</sup> Alternately, graphic histories based on primary sources—for example, about the effects of atomic testing—also engage students with questions of narrative and representation (both textual and visual).<sup>13</sup> Employing examples from public history and historical writing for broad audiences is often a particularly effective way of challenging students to think about narrative and how we constantly transform our past into legible stories.

Environmental history also helps us consider questions of historical agency and causality. What causes historical change? What does it mean to turn your attention away from the “Great Men” of history to biological and economic forces—for example, to disease or climate change as causative factors? Including sources that discuss disease and climate change, as well as contemporary debates over resource management, can shift questions over agency.<sup>14</sup>

Thankfully, there is a rich, and ever-growing, secondary literature in environmental history, including surveys appropriate for use in an introductory course.<sup>15</sup> These secondary sources offer a model of what it means to do environmental history. They also expose students to how environmental historians have used primary sources, often expanding students’ views of what constitutes a primary source and the kinds of methods that historians employ. But as is the case with most history programs, one of the learning outcomes of our introductory surveys is for students to learn how to analyze primary sources and use them as evidence in support of their own arguments. How, then, can we approach the problem of primary sources? While there is not yet a reader in global environmental history, a wide range of sources are open to environmental questions and interpretation.

One way to teach students how to read primary sources for questions of environmental history is to encourage them to look for how different people, in different times and contexts, represented nature in texts and art, both as landscape and as resources. For example, in assigning the writings of European explorers, colonizers, and missionaries, we ask students to read these sources for descriptions of the natural world, to focus not just

on Europeans' encounters with foreign peoples but also with foreign landscapes—how Europeans saw these foreign landscapes as wild, enticing, dangerous, and ripe for exploitation. Our library's Department of Archives and Special Collections includes a number of writings from Jesuits in the early-modern period. In working with these artifacts, paired with selections from *The Jesuit Relations*, we encourage students to analyze how the Jesuits wrote natural history and how they connected ideas about nature and the “wildness” of the landscapes and the people who inhabited them to their mission of evangelization.<sup>16</sup> As part of this, students consider not merely texts, but also visual sources such as maps and paintings to understand how people saw nature.<sup>17</sup> We ask students to do this kind of analysis even when the source does not initially appear to be about nature. This kind of careful reading of sources encourages students to dig beneath the surface of sources, to look both for images of nature and metaphors of nature—for how writers have “naturalized” other historical phenomena, deployed the nature/culture dichotomy, or used metaphors of pests and pollution when talking about human society.<sup>18</sup>

Another way of inviting students to read sources for environmental questions is to treat economic history as environmental history and vice versa. This also opens up new



Image 5: Map by Heinrich Scherer, S.J. depicting the spread of the Catholic religion in North America, with California represented as an island. Source: Heinrich Scherer, S.J., “Religionis Catholicae in America: boreali disseminatae repraesentatio geographica,” plate from *Geographia hierarchica sive status Ecclesiastici Romano-Catholici per orbem universum*, 1703. Used with permission from the Department of Archives & Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, California.

possibilities for primary sources and allows students to see environmental history beyond the history of “pristine wilderness” or even human-nature interactions; this approach assumes that all human societies are necessarily related to the use of natural resources and human choices around their interactions with natural systems. Even considering the relationship between economic and environmental history helps students to look at both in a new way. How are they different? How are they related? Given this approach, and given the lack of global environmental history readers, using a social history reader can be eye-opening.<sup>19</sup> While at first students may struggle to analyze primary sources that rarely if ever explicitly address “environmental” issues, most come to see how sources from around the world since the fifteenth century consistently discuss resources, agriculture, distribution, wealth, technology, and power—all key factors in environmental history. *Discovering the Global Past*, for instance, includes sources that present a variety of approaches to trade, consider village restrictions on the use of natural resources, show different systems of taxation, and illustrate



Image 6: Kitagawa Utamaro, “The Making of Silk Floss.” Woodcut, c. 1790. Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Howard Mansfield Collection. In the Public Domain at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%E5%A5%B3%E7%B9%94%E8%9A%95%E6%89%8B%E6%A5%AD%E8%8D%89\\_%E5%8D%81-The\\_Making\\_of\\_Silk\\_Floss\\_MET\\_DP141293.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%E5%A5%B3%E7%B9%94%E8%9A%95%E6%89%8B%E6%A5%AD%E8%8D%89_%E5%8D%81-The_Making_of_Silk_Floss_MET_DP141293.jpg).

questions of labor and property in China, the Incan Empire, Japan, England, Vietnam, Java, the Philippines, Sumatra, Austria, and the Cape of Good Hope. Considering these sources in terms of the distribution of wealth, decisions about the use of land and limited resources, systems of labor, and tensions between local and regional or transregional systems of regulation allows students to see the multiple commonalities across the early modern world and helps break down narratives that assume European cultural, social, or technological “superiority.” As with the rest of this approach, this helps break down ideas about what counts as “nature” and challenges the idea that human systems are fundamentally separate from natural ones. Moreover, this approach allows instructors to use source readers that they may already know well, while reading the documents and images in a new way.

As with modern world history in general, we also tackle the challenge of de-centering Europe and the United States in our discussions of these sources. We begin with an acknowledgment of the power dynamics that have shaped modern history—settler colonialism, empire, industrial capitalism. Environmental history enables us to reframe nationalist and imperialist narratives of cultural, political, and technological “superiority,” noting—as Alfred Crosby does—that supposed technological superiority was not the reason for European conquest but a result of it.<sup>20</sup> We also make transparent to students how a reliance on published sources in English can often mean a reliance on sources from European, North American, and colonial archives. We train students to read both “with the grain” and “against it,” in an attempt to find a diversity of voices, perspectives, and experiences. We also encourage them to resist recapitulating imperialist ideas of a culture/nature dichotomy, which fixes Indigenous peoples as “primitive” peoples “rooted in” and “of” nature. As ever, many students wish that we could hear more from those disempowered and silent in the archival record (enslaved persons, peasants, women, et al.), but they can also see that historians can gain insights into the agency and lives of those who have not left written sources. At the same time, we work to highlight the knowledge, voices, and experiences of Indigenous and subaltern peoples. For example, in our discussions of industrialization, we focus not just on Europe and North America but also the transformation of textile production in Asia (silks in China and Japan, cotton in India). We use secondary sources to highlight the differences between European and local approaches to land, natural resources, animals, and agriculture.<sup>21</sup> Literature can also be helpful in giving voice to perspectives often not represented in the archive.<sup>22</sup>

By shifting our focus away from the nation-state to the environment, we get students to think about the interconnectedness of local landscapes to transnational and even global environmental forces. Introducing human activities like farming, mining, and manufacturing as both ecological *and* economic practices helps students move beyond traditional objects of history. Moreover, paying attention to how humans interact with natural systems like soil and forests, and explaining how technologies like crop rotation, charcoal, and blast furnaces work help students make connections between material and cultural processes.<sup>23</sup> Explaining metallurgy and blast furnaces using African and Chinese examples

can also help dispel the idea that these were only “western” technologies and inventions.<sup>24</sup> Numerous resources exist online to help explain and illustrate ecological systems as well as specific agricultural and manufacturing processes that can help reconnect students with the material basis of human societies (including our own). We also encourage students to “read” their own local landscapes, as well as the landscape of our LMU campus and think about the “nature” around them.<sup>25</sup>

Our rethinking of the introductory history survey through the prism of environmental history has also led to a rethinking of assignments, to move beyond the traditional essay to embrace more creative projects. For example, in one version of Modern Global Environmental History, students undertake a research project that results in both an essay for a public-facing blog post and an “unessay,” where they translate their research into more creative forms. Students have produced a variety of projects for the “unessay”: a student working on ocean waste created a collage of a sea turtle from trash; a student who wrote about the effects of mining on Indigenous American societies produced an altar in the tradition of Day of the Dead altars; a dance major translated her research about how Jewish refugees and partisans used the forest to survive World War II into a dance. In another non-traditional assignment, students wrote a magazine article and designed a related cover modeled on the *Washington Post Magazine*’s “24 Magazine Covers about Climate Change.”<sup>26</sup> This led to wonderful work on a wide variety of subjects, including the introduction of the color mauve in Victorian fashion and the environmental impacts of chemical dyes; the environmental consequences of mining for “healing” crystals; and the global dimensions of sanitation in urban planning. Other students have investigated environmental narratives in fiction, considering video games, films, and fiction, from Jane Austen to Young Adult fantasy. Students have also gotten a lot out of a “Build a World” exercise, based on the work of author N.K. Jemisin, in which they put what they have learned about environmental history into a fictional world.<sup>27</sup> For this last assignment, students showed their built worlds through SimCity, Minecraft, maps, fictional documents, and short works of fiction. All of these assignments challenge students not just to put their environmental history to use, but to have fun and see the multiple applications of their new understanding of the interconnectedness of human and natural systems as well as their new appreciation for the work of narratives and emplotment.

## Conclusion

So what does it mean to teach history in a time of multiple, converging crises? And to teach environmental history specifically in the shadow and smoke of climate change and a global pandemic as well as the ongoing need to show the relevance and importance of history? We have found environmental history to be an effective way to introduce students to the idea of history not merely as a collection of facts and events to memorize or a chronicle of the passing of time, but as narrative and interpretation—to introduce students to historical

and historiographical thinking and to train them in what historians do and how they do it. As with any approach to teaching history, there are challenges, but our efforts suggest possible approaches to address them:

- We help our students resist the urge to collapse all of history into monolithic narratives about “all” humans as “always” bad for the environment or simple dichotomies between “bad” Europeans and white Americans and “good” Indigenous peoples by helping them to analyze the variety of different approaches to nature in the past, emphasizing the specific contexts in which those relationships to nature emerged.
- We try to ensure that students do not see the present environmental crisis as the inevitable result of earlier forms of resource extraction or exploitation by stressing the contingency of the past, while also examining dynamics of cause and effect around particularly important turning points (for example, the radical shift in the nineteenth century and the great acceleration of global warming in our own lifetimes).
- We urge students to consider the role of non-human actors in causing historical change, while also steering them away from biological or geographical determinism.
- We help students put crucial modern technological, economic, and social developments in Europe and North America into context, even while cautioning them against a Eurocentric understanding of history and challenging them to think both about the conventions of the discipline of history and how we can integrate a diversity of voices and experiences.

By getting students to embrace the complexity of the past, to think about the nature of historical narratives and the production of historical knowledge, and to question who and what shapes history and how, we hope to help students not just to think historically but also to think of themselves as historical actors. Environmental history can help students make sense of the severity of our environmental crisis, and while there is a danger of falling into a sense of fatalism, we hope that our emphasis on the contingency of the past can offer students some hope for the future. At the same time, environmental history, with its examination of the interconnectedness of racism, poverty, ecological collapse, and climate change, can help students think about questions of justice in their own communities, both racial justice and environmental justice, as well as how environmental justice is central to racial justice. Our world is facing multiple and interconnected crises; the examples we have given show that an approach that embraces that complexity and intersectionality may have the best chance of bringing more students into history and giving them the opportunity to see the value of a global perspective.

Sample syllabi for Elizabeth Drummond’s and Amy Woodson-Boulton’s modern global environmental history courses are available online.<sup>28</sup>

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Shane Harris, “Intelligence forecast sees a post-coronavirus world upended by climate change and splintering societies,” *Washington Post*, April 8, 2021, accessed April 8, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/intelligence-globe-future-crises-/2021/04/08/303c350e-97df-11eb-962b-78c1d8228819\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/intelligence-globe-future-crises-/2021/04/08/303c350e-97df-11eb-962b-78c1d8228819_story.html).

<sup>2</sup> In an Anglo-American context, much of this framing of historicism and presentism comes out of foundational works like Herbert Butterfield’s 1931 book *The Whig Interpretation of History*, discussed below.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: G. Bell, 1931), 9–26, excerpted in Adam Budd, ed., *The Modern Historiography Reader: Western Sources* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 190.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>6</sup> American Historical Association, “Tuning the History Discipline in the United States,” accessed February 14, 2021, <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/tuning-the-history-discipline>. In particular, see the 2016 History Discipline Core, accessed February 14, 2021, <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/tuning-the-history-discipline/2016-history-discipline-core>.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew K. Koch, “Many Thousands Failed: A Wake-up Call to History Educators,” *Perspectives on History*, May 1, 2017, accessed February 14, 2021, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2017/many-thousands-failed-a-wakeup-call-to-history-educators>.

<sup>8</sup> Paulina L. Alberto and Farina Mir, “History 101: What It Is and Why We Need It Now,” *Perspectives on History*, April 2, 2018, accessed February 14, 2021, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2018/history-101-what-it-is-and-why-we-need-it-now>.

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<sup>10</sup> William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *Journal of American History* 78: 4 (1992): 1347–1376.

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<sup>16</sup> Allan Greer, ed., *The Jesuit Relations: Natives and Missionaries in Seventeenth-Century North America*, 2nd ed. (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2019); and Jesuit Rare Book and Manuscript Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, Loyola Marymount University, for example, Miguel Venegas, *A Natural and Civil History of California* (London, 1759).

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<sup>18</sup> Edmund P. Russell, "'Speaking of Annihilation': Mobilizing for War Against Human and Insect Enemies, 1914–1945," *Journal of American History* 82, no. 4 (March 1996): 1505–1529 and Mary E. Mendoza, "La Tierra Pica/The Soil Bites: Hazardous Environments and the Degeneration of Bracero Health, 1942–1964," in *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*, edited by Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 474–501.

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<sup>20</sup> Alfred Crosby, "Afterword," in Jeffrey Diefendorf and Kurk Dorsey, *City, Country, Empire* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 226–232.

<sup>21</sup> Beinart and Hughes, *Environment and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), esp. "Hunting, Wildlife, and Imperialism in Southern Africa" (58–75), "Water, Irrigation, and Agrarian Society in India and Egypt" (130–147), "Imperial Scientists, Ecology, and Conservation" (200–213); Vandana Shiva, *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002) and *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Bessie Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969).

<sup>23</sup> There are lots of examples out there, but here are some that students have found helpful: "Primitive Technologies: Charcoal," accessed February 24, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzLvqCTvOQY>; "How was Coal Formed?" accessed February 24, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukz8ZaaN8XA>; "Ancient Iron, Experimental Technology in Sudan" (UCL Qatar), accessed February 24, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPU8Uwa-jBQ>; and "Iron and Steel Production [in China]" accessed February 24, 2021 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9Tyarfg2kY>.

<sup>24</sup> Taglia Telly and Tim Tyson Short, "The Lost Libraries of Timbuktu" (BBC4, 2011; 60 minutes), on vimeo, accessed February 24, 2021, <https://vimeo.com/23791585>.

<sup>25</sup> William Cronon, "How to Read a Landscape," Learning Historical Research, accessed February 17, 2021, <http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/landscapes.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> "24 Magazine Covers about Climate Change," *Washington Post*, April 21, 2019, accessed April 14, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/lifestyle/magazine/climate-change-covers/>.

<sup>27</sup> The inspiration for this assignment came from an interview of N.K. Jemisin by Ezra Klein, "I build a world with fantasy master N.K. Jemisin," *Vox Conversations* podcast (August 27, 2018), accessed February 20 2021 at <https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/vox-conversations/best-of-nk-jemisin-2LBoKHr5kTy/>.

<sup>28</sup> See Elizabeth Drummond's course syllabus at <https://eadhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/HIST-1060-01-EVST-1998-01-Modern-World-History-Drummond.pdf>. See Amy Woodson-Boulton's course syllabus at <http://awbhistory.lmu.build/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Woodson-Boulton-world-hist-syllabus.pdf>.