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Introduction by Mohamed Gamal-Eldin, Rutgers University-Newark

Oil Palm has become ever-present. It is in all types of products found in grocery stores. The story of its historical uses as a foodstuff (wine and oil), a medicinal salve, an industrial lubricant and a wash for tin leads up to the present, where it is found in soaps and candy bars. That story spans centuries and continents, making the global history of oil palm as a commodity an essential reading that weaves together the history of capitalism and environmental history. Jonathon Robins' **Oil Palm: A Global History** asks us to treat palm oil as an individual entity and not just a part of other products. He emphasizes "The fact that palm oil is perceived as being *in* things, rather than as a thing in its own right..." (Robins 261). Robins' history does this by tracing oil palm's evolution as a plant and commodity from West Africa to the plantations of Southeast Asia. It is truly a remarkable history of the palm oil plant. The descriptions of the oil and wine make you wonder how it smelled and tasted to those who first cultivated it so many centuries ago.

Erika Rappaport leads off the roundtable with a discussion of oil palm as a commodity and how Robins' book "straddles," as Rappaport says, a balance between the book becoming just a biography or a history of the commodity through industrial processes. Finally, Rappaport asks questions about the industrial process and its failures in Africa that helped to support the creation of smallholders and the later expansion of oil palm in Southeast Asian plantations. Finally, Rappaport reminds us of the ethical and environmental questions that surround the use of oil palm and the way it has become a contested commodity.

Expanding on this, **Bronwen Everill** connects this history with currents in recent environmental action and nineteenth century calls for the use of oil palm as a means to help end the slave trade. It is these very "tensions," Everill points out, that have become central to the debates on "palm oil's usefulness and its destructiveness." But, Everill contributes an important question to the typical history that looks at a commodity and traces its rise and eventual decline. Everill highlights the ways in which Robins' work contrasts this declensionist narrative with the story of how local and smallholder resistance has fought against imperial, colonial, industrial and finally corporatist logics of extraction.

David Biggs details the strengths of doing history from the scale of the global. Biggs believes that a global history, "asks the reader to consider more nebulous, global flows of trade, technology, laborers and palms and the ways changes in these flows *relate* to changes on the ground." Once again, the challenges of creating an efficient and expansive oil palm industry in Africa is contrasted with the histories of the palm in Southeast Asia during the twentieth century. Yet, even plantation systems of extraction faced resistance, a question that might have gone unanswered if not for a global history of the oil palm. Further, Biggs brings up the question of methodology and the ways in which the story might have been told differently if not for the reliance

on British archival sources. The inevitable challenges of doing history using imperial archives to tell a deep history of the oil palm are laid out here.

It is with clarity and conciseness that **Jonathan Robins** expands on these questions and much more. For instance, he asks how can we move into a future where land is not taken away from individual owners and made into a plantation? In effect, such arrangements leave individual owners in servitude to larger landowners and corporations. Additionally, how can we fight against the proliferation of these commodities in our industries and foodstuffs while also supporting local economies? Essentially, how can we guide environmental activism towards a healthy ecological and consumer future? As such, Robins pushes historians and scholars from across various disciplinary realms to pursue other avenues of thinking about and studying the oil palm and other similar commodities.

Before turning to the first set of comments, I would like to pause here and thank all the roundtable participants for taking part. Finally, I would like to remind readers that as an open-access forum, *H-Environment Roundtable Reviews* is available to scholars and non-scholars alike, around the world, free of charge. Please circulate.

Comments by Erika Rappaport, University of California, Santa Barbara

Jonathan Robins *Oil Palm: A Global History* is an engrossing history that straddles centuries, continents, and modes of production and consumption. He also introduces new themes and perspectives into the study of global commodity history. Commodity biographies of the kind that Robins has written have invigorated agrarian, environmental, labor, industrial, imperial and consumer histories by combining questions and methodologies from each of these large areas of investigation. Commodity biographies have also charted complex yet coherent pathways across space and time that enable readers to comprehend global scale transformations and problems, without losing site of human actions and contingency. Robins' choice of the oil palm and the structure of his narrative underscore the author's deep commitment to breaking down Euro-American centered accounts in favor of highlighting African knowledge systems, actors and ecologies.

Like many important studies of imperial commodities, Robins illuminates how human desires for profits and material goods have launched, funded, justified and challenged the expansion of European empires since the early modern period.¹ It is a welcome addition to a growing library of work on rubber, tobacco, tea, coffee, jute, opium, gold, silver and cotton, and similar goods. Like those books Robins straddles the commodity biography and commodity chain methodology to trace the oil palm tree and palm oil through time, space, and from a primary commodity into industrial and consumer goods.² Robins is implicitly inspired by transcultural anthropology, particularly Sidney Mintz's seminal study, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* and Arjun Appadurai's edited volume, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*.³ Like these authors, Robins writes world history

¹ For the definitions and boundaries of imperial commodities, see the working papers and volumes associates the [Commodities of Empire Research Project](#). Robins work on cotton as well as oil palms has been associated with this group. See for example his chapter, "Coercion and Resistance in the Colonial Market: Cotton in Britain's African Empire," in Jonathan Curry-Machado, *Global Histories, Imperial Commodities, Local Interactions* (Palgrave Macmillan,), 100-120.

² There is a now a large literature on imperial commodities. Some of the most influential studies have been Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985); Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi. *Opium Regimes : China, Britain, and Japan, 1839-1952* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); William Gervase Clarence-Smith, *Cocoa and Chocolate, 1765–1914* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Marcy Norton, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014); Erika Rappaport, *A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). Important edited volumes, include William G. Clarence-Smith and Steven Topik, eds. *The Global Coffee Economy in Africa, Asia and Latin America: 1500–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr L. Frank, eds. *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500-2000* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2006); Sandip Hazareesingh and Harro Maat, eds. *Local Subversions of Colonial Cultures: Commodities and Anti-Commodities in Global History* (Houndmills, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

³ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* and Arun Appadurai, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

from a human perspective. Mintz, for example, insisted that we see the violence of slavery and factory work as central to the making of modern economies, nation states, empires, diets, and bodies. Mintz, Appadurai, and the contributors to *Social Life of Things* also revealed how desire and taste were simply “demand,” but were deeply historical, culturally and socially embedded “local” processes. Robins is also joining a group of scholars who have examined the environment as a factor in shaping the commodity and being shaped by its production.⁴

In *Oil Palm: A Global History* Robins follows the history of the oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) and palm oil from Africa to Europe, the Americas, and Asia. This is not a one directional study, however, since Robins revisits activities and places throughout the book to avoid presenting Africa as merely a source of labor or extraction. In this book Africans make but do not always control or profit from markets and systems of production and consumption. Throughout the narrative, Robins emphasizes in equal measure how desire, tastes, and smells as well as labor, state power, science, technology, ideologies and environments interacted to produce one of the most widely consumed and debated fats on the planet. The palm oil enters our lives in many guises. It is eaten as a cooking oil and a key ingredient in industrial foods such as margarine and crackers. It has been used to manufacture industrial lubricants, explosives, illuminants, plastics, tin cans, and biodiesels. As soap, cosmetics and toiletries, palm oil helped sustain a culture of cleanliness that took hold in the nineteenth century. Though Robins does not dwell on this fact, other scholars have pointed out that advertising and marketing of palm-based soaps relied on and reinforced popular notions of racism and contributed to a form of cultural imperialism in twentieth century Africa as well.⁵

Despite its ubiquity consumers are typically unaware of palm oil’s presence or history. At times, political movements tried to teach and then manipulate consumer knowledge. For example, nineteenth-century abolitionists rebranded post-slavery palm oil production and trade as “legitimate.” In the mid twentieth century, powerful soybean and cottonseed industries tried to shape public policies by emphasising to consumers the dangerous health effects of palm oil. Yet, as Robins points out consumers most often don’t think about this commodity, even when bottles of Palmolive dish soap sit on kitchen counters throughout the world. *Oil Palm: A Global History* attempts to encourage readers to think about and with palm oil to understand the forces that produced unhealthy cultures and environments in the past and present.

Robins begins with the production and consumption of the oil palm tree and its many uses in West and Central Africa. He describes cultivating, harvesting, manufacturing,

⁴ See, for example, Corey Ross, *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire: Europe and the Transformation of the Tropical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁵ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and Timothy Burke, *Lifebuy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

and consuming cultures in Africa to challenge racist and Eurocentric narratives that have had a great deal of staying power. When Europeans first encountered the oil palm, for example, they described it as growing naturally in forests until European ingenuity and capital transformed palm oil into a profitable commodity. Using linguistic, ethnographic, oral, archeological and published evidence, Robins shows that the opposite was true. People living in Western and Central Africa were responsible for advancing forests and shaping the life cycle of the oil palm and its material culture for thousands of years. Long before palm kernels entered global trade, they were part of long-distance trade within Africa. African men and women transformed the kernels into oils, nuts, flours, medicines, soaps, cosmetics and illuminants. Fronds and fibers were used in arrow making, handicrafts, and building materials. Sap was fermented into wines, which became popularly used in religious practices. All parts of the tree were consumed, and little was wasted. Europeans failed to incorporate this material culture though they were aware of it since the 15th century. Palm oil production and consumption did spread to the West primarily as a food that sustained captives during the horrific Middle Passage across the Atlantic, as rations on plantations, and to mark and market enslaved bodies. Though many seem to have refused to ever eat palm oil again after it was used to brand their bodies, enslaved people did continue to consume palm oil and create new “neo-African landscapes” and culinary knowledge in the Americas (33).

Slowly in the 17th and 18th centuries Europeans also began to consume palm oil, first as a medicine, making it into soothing poultices and salves. In the nineteenth century, the abolition of the slave trade reconfigured production and meanings, as abolitionists defined palm oil as a “legitimate” commodity, but we also learn how slave traders entered the palm oil business. At the same time, African entrepreneurs also profited from and advanced the growing trade in the nineteenth century. For example, Robins tells us about Charles Heddle, a trader of Scottish and Senegalese descent who claimed to have been the first to ship palm kernels from Sierra Leone to the UK in 1846. He made a huge fortune by embracing the abolitionist rhetoric of “legitimate commerce (59),” and yet also criticized widespread racist beliefs that African would only labor if compelled by violence. Men and women like Heddle appear throughout the book, adding a great deal to our understanding of Africans in global history.

Despite the presence of African capital and expertise, European colonial states, industrialization, and corporations shifted the balance of power in favor of Europe and the United States so that by the twentieth century European empires controlled the oil palm belt. Companies such as Lever Brothers and Proctor and Gamble then used new technologies to produce an “endless array of industrial commodities (75).” At times the oil palm was highly visible and smelly as an axel grease, and other times it disappeared into the manufacturing of tin cans or as an adulterant in butter, as animal feed and fertilizer. Robins stressed the desire to introduce industrial machinery in palm oil production often led to numerous failures. This however often encouraged colonial states to advance new forms of labor coercion, which in turn produced growing resistance in Africa. The plantation system as such never took hold

in full in Africa, but it did develop in Southeast Asia, where planters seemed to try to solve any problem “with more land, more labor, more chemicals and machines (168).”

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the ethical, environmental and health problems associated with cultivating, producing, and consuming the oil palm might have been solved with decolonization, but instead became more entrenched. Robins shows how “national and local politics, economics, and ecologies” made or broke new palm oil projects, but he concludes that colonial ideas and structures are still with us. Consumer activism and NGOs around the world have failed to improve the unhealthy and unequal ways in which we continue grow, trade and consume oil palm today.

The book then raises numerous ethical and environmental questions, which scholars and activists need to continue to pursue. African scholars have already, and will no doubt continue to explore with greater specificity the ecologies, material cultures, and attitudes towards the environment and economy that shaped this history. They likely will also look more at African consumer and culinary cultures, along the lines of Timothy Burke’s important book, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women, Commodification, Consumption and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (1996). Burke showed how in the late nineteenth and twentieth century European and American missionaries and marketers changed attitudes towards bodies, foods, health and consumerism.⁶ These changes inevitably contributed to the exploitation of workers across the Global South to this day.

Robins also raises questions about the boundaries and nature of food history. He teaches us about how people resisted but then learned to eat industrial foods, a topic that has primarily been explored only in the United States. In *Oil Palm*, Robins briefly covers topics that merit more study. He mentions, for example, how in the 1990s palm oil has accounted for nearly all domestic fat consumption in India and how at the same time Chinese firms began importing large amounts of palm oil products to replace hydrogenated oils in prepared foods in China. Future food historians could use palm oil then to trace the impact of neoliberalism on the global industrialization of foods and diets. And yet at the same time, Robins book also warns that in the twentieth century at least a neat border between foods and other things, including packaging, simply does not exist. Robins implies then that to reduce the ecological footprint involved in the growing of oil palms and making and use of palm oil, we need to do much more than become aware of this history. Rather, we need to transform global consumer cultures as well. Reading *Oil Palms: A Global History* is nevertheless a good place to start.

⁶ Burke, *Lifebuoy Men and Lux Women*.

The road from Kota Kinabalu, in Malaysian Borneo, wound through row after row of squat oil palms. In the distance, bare reddish earth had been churned by excavators, pulling up trees to make room for more oil palms. The sight was shocking, but it wasn't news. It was 2009 and for the past couple of years, a handful of American Girl Scouts had been making it their mission to warn consumers about the environmental damage that their cookies were causing. Palm oil had been out of the global spotlight for more than a century, a silent ingredient that no one really thought about. Now, it was back on people's minds.

Palm oil was on my mind as I sat in the back of that speeding taxi towards Mount Kinabalu because I was in the midst of writing a dissertation on Sierra Leone and Liberia and the transition away from the slave trade to 'legitimate commerce' – something that most historians agree was at least partially achieved through the success of palm oil exports from West Africa. Palm oil was used in margarine, candles, in soap. In his *Economic History of West Africa*, A.G. Hopkins notes, "Manufacturers, happily uniting material and moral motives, urged the public to 'buy our candles and help stop the slave trade'."¹ Basically the opposite of the Girl Scouts' campaign.

It is the sense of this enduring tension between palm oil's usefulness and its destructiveness that sits at the heart of Jonathan Robins' *Oil Palm: A Global History*. "The positive case for oil palm," he explains, is its versatility, as well as the fact that "it makes more fat per hectare than any other domesticated plant or animal can manage" (7). But the destruction caused by its cultivation – ranging from the deforestation of Borneo to the paramilitary terror employed by oil palm cultivators against indigenous Filipinos – is undeniable. Robins suggests with his book that there are "alternative ways of living with oil palms" that could help to reduce those tensions.

This book is an example of global environmental history at its best. Robins's chapters are deeply rooted in stories of how people have interacted with the environment, and how that has changed over time. This is also the crux of his argument about alternative ways of living with oil palms: it doesn't have to be like it is now. It's not "oil palm's fault" that it is associated with the destruction of habitats. It is people's ways of interacting with the oil palm that have led to these abuses.

Beginning with palm oil's uses in West African cultures, Robins details the slow, hard work that was put into making the valuable product. He is careful with sources, which range widely in their estimation of how much time it might take to produce a ton of palm oil in pre-industrial West Africa: maybe 120 hours, or maybe 420 work days. What was clear was that by the time the first Europeans started writing about West

¹ A.G. Hopkins, *Economic History of West Africa* (London, 1973), 129.

Africa, in the late fifteenth century, palm oil was part of the urban-rural nexus that tied together different human environments through “regional markets, trading foodstuffs, salt, and other goods across long distances” (18). In other words, this was a cultivated and processed product that was linked to market economies long before it became a problem for the environment. To European eyes, oil palms may have looked like “natural” abundance, or like unexploited forests, but across Western Africa, their existence was anthropogenic.

The rise of palm oil as an industrial commodity, produced for a global market, was the unexpected byproduct of the anti-slavery movement. Robins narrates this turn of events with the sardonic tone that this particular episode almost inevitably produces in all writers: the switch to palm oil exports merely shifted the violence and exploitation, rather than ending it. Repeatedly, the spread of oil palms brought with it land alienation and dispossession, the proletarianization of a formerly self-sufficient labor force, and, eventually, the collapse of palm product prices as more and more areas were brought under cultivation. That price collapse made palm products a cheap alternative to more expensive fats and lubricants, which fed demand, and started the process over again.

Oil palm products were everywhere by the turn of the twentieth century. The first really industrial food, palm kernels were used to feed cows, but also to color their butter, and replace it with margarine. By adding hydrogen atoms to palm oil’s fatty acids, they could make palm oil last longer, giving products with palm oil fats a longer shelf life. Margarine went from being produced with 70 percent animal fats in 1899 to 6 percent by 1928.

Environmental commodity histories have a tendency towards a particular metanarrative: we once had this abundant natural resource and then the discovery of that resource launched a period of human flourishing as industries, towns, and livelihoods were shaped by it. But then there was a decline, as abundance gave way to scarcity, and eventually collapse. To a certain extent, Robins’ book falls within that expected narrative. And it’s hard to imagine an environmental commodity history that wouldn’t. Robins’ later chapters, though, both explain what is *particular* about oil palm and how *people* have resisted this narrative of inevitability.

For instance, the spread of palm oil as an early imperial commodity does not fully conform to the “ghost acres” model employed by other environmental commodity histories. Yes, “roughly 280,000 acres” were appended to Britain through its dependency on African colonial palm production (95). But as Robins explains, “unlike the extractive practices that characterized many of Europe’s ‘ghost acres,’” palm products were truly global and, at that point, still surprisingly sustainable. In West Africa, oil palms were still grown in “forest-fallow systems” rather than in plantations. And “kernels fed tallow- and butter-producing cattle, easing the burden on Europe’s ecosystems” while “leftover skim milk, practically a waste product in the early industrial era,” could be turned into margarine (95). The land-extensive production of the oil palm came later, when the palms were planted in Southeast Asia in the

1920s, and Latin America (as a plan for agricultural diversification – that tension again!) in the 1950s. In Africa, Robins notes, it was labor exploitation, rather than land exploitation, that made colonial palm oil production morally problematic.

Smallholding, on the other hand, is the force of both land and labor that continually resists the pressures of global capitalism in the production of oil palms. Robins cites a 2010 survey of Nigerian smallholders that found the majority live comfortably. In Papua New Guinea, for instance, the establishment of new oil palm settlements gave way to smallholder projects and other innovations that adapted the project to the cultural and political realities on the ground (228-229). Robins takes aim at industrial, commodity capitalism, but also at conservation-only focused NGO campaigns – the “Save the Orangutans” model of the Girl Scout activists – which offers “no consideration of farmers’ or workers’ livelihoods” (255).

Where palm oil’s story has been told in fragments – the legitimate commerce episode; the industrial foods episode; the burning of the rainforests episode – Robins weaves them all together to show the history of a remarkable, versatile plant that has inspired creative approaches to the problems caused by global environmental commodification since the start of the early modern period, while repeatedly, also, causing those same problems. I had to keep my eyes closed for a lot of the taxi ride along winding cliff edges. But when my eyes were open, the palm oil problem stared back at me.

This book is an historian's book and a magnificent accomplishment, a compilation of the history of the oil palm industry across dozens of African nations, European industrial sites, the Americas, India and Southeast Asia. Environmental historians with specific area specialties or historians of plant or other sciences might quibble with selections of the work covering oil palms in specific places or in different moments, but that is to be expected. The book includes generous notes and a wonderful bibliography that provide a sufficient documentary trail for history and plant nerds. I'm not qualified to evaluate the palm oil-specific or Africa-specific literature, and while I am a specialist on Southeast Asian environmental history, I don't know a whole lot about oil palms. Despite their recent meteoric rise in prominence since the 1990s, most of the environmental literature on Southeast Asian forests and trees is dedicated to rubber. Besides learning much about the dura palm avenues and how oil palm plantations dovetailed with rubber plantations in colonial-era Indonesia and Malaysia, what I am most impressed with in this book are the ways it connects a more familiar Southeast Asian history of the oil palm with a wholly unfamiliar history of it in west Africa. I suspect Africanists will have the same feeling reading about the oil palm's travels to Southeast Asia.

Only a handful of environmental historians have endeavored to work outside their original area specialties or to develop comparative studies examining the environmental and social history surrounding a plant in two or more local regions. This is largely because site-based study requires extensive training in languages and travel, studying history-in-place. This is hard to pull off in graduate school, and perhaps even harder mid-career; and *Oil Palm* achieves it in part by relying extensively on a wealth of published work and colonial and corporate archives. Robins acknowledges the shortcomings of privileging these archival sources over various sorts of local knowledge one might gather by choosing to focus on palm oil in one place. Gregg Mitman's recently published *Empire of Rubber: Firestone's Scramble for Land and Power in Liberia* (New Press, 2023) is a fine example of a synthesis of locally acquired sources and in-depth, site-based research, and this is more common in environmental history.

Robins' "global approach" is interesting for a different reason: it asks the reader to consider more nebulous, global flows of trade, technology, laborers and palms and the ways changes in these flows *relate* to changes on the ground. A good example of these push-pull relations can be found in multiple trials and failures to build an *extractive* palm oil industry in Africa. Multinational companies like Lever and its subsidiaries like Huileries Congo Belge relied on colonial power to acquire ridiculous land grants in "circles" of more than a million hectares each, but actually turning existing palm groves to a profitable business required negotiation with local farmers, even acceptance of their practices. (111-113) And the usual "plantationocene" narrative centered on the introduction of machines and the industrialization of farm work does not proceed in any linear fashion here.

Southeast Asia enters the story in about 1900, and Robins cites one Dutch scientist who claimed that like other introduced crops, “history would repeat itself” with oil palm (151), what’s fascinating is that, like in Africa, it initially did not. However, unlike in Africa, it is for very different reasons. Palm oil competed with coconut oil which, thanks to American trade policies in the Philippines, was the major food oil shipped across the Pacific. Also, despite scientific advances in producing a coveted *tenera* variety with a thinner skin and more oil, palm oil plantations competed with rubber plantations as certain plantation belts became more crowded and land more expensive. I first read sections of this part when Jonathan presented them at a small conference in 2018; but placed here in the whole book, especially with the final chapters covering developmentalist politics and the transformation from colonial to state-backed development schemes, I can better appreciate the full impact of the project. *Oil Palm* challenges environmental historians of Southeast Asia to view specific sites and species such as tobacco, rubber, coconut and oil palms as co-existing in plantation ecosystems and in the shifting global commodity markets.

Since Jonathan will reply to these reviews, I include a few questions and the mildest of critiques about the global-writing style in hopes he can expand on them. For one, I was hoping to get a bit more global-level theorization connecting the history of this plant to modern era transformations including the growth of global capital flows, multinational corporations (like Unilever) and the specific materialities of the Anthropocene. The book sticks pretty closely to the sources, which is of course wise; but at various points in the story I was hoping for some bigger, bolder statements. This passage seemed to me a perfect jumping off spot (214) for statements regarding the big-picture, Anthropocene story:

Whether it takes the form of a fuel or food, palm oil enters most of our lives unnoticed. It moves in bulk tankers, sold by the ton, a uniform commodity that even manufacturers can’t trace back to a single plantations or smallholder plot. As consumers, we have no idea where the palm oil in a bottle of shampoo or stick of margarine came from, who grew it, and under what conditions. And with no sensory connection to palm oil—we don’t see it, taste it, smell it, feel it in the manufactured products we use—we have little to remind us about the oily stuff.

The larger meanings of oil palm in world history are thus very different than a commodity like sugar that Sydney Mintz describes in his classic *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern World History* (Penguin, 1986). Mintz’ argument is instagram-ready: sugar propelled European colonization of the Caribbean, fueled the transatlantic slave trade and transformed modern diets. Robins’ more global argument is very different, and in many ways more compelling, more complex; so I’d really appreciate his thoughts and possibly some expansions on what the palm oil story tells us about the Great Acceleration, the Anthropocene, globalization, etc.

Response by Jonathan Robins, Michigan Technological College

I am grateful to David Biggs, Bronwen Everill, and Erika Rappaport for their generous reviews of *Oil Palm*, and to Mohamed Gamal-Eldin for facilitating this *H-Environment* roundtable. I appreciate the opportunity to respond to questions and to suggest a few new directions—because this book is a global history of the oil palm, not *the* global history and I know there are many other ways to tell environmental histories involving oil palms in a global context.

As the reviewers point out, *Oil Palm* was written as a commodity biography. In pursuit of a non-academic readership, I skipped the customary historiographic essay that might have said more about my methods and scholarly influences. Only one paragraph in the introduction explains my sources—colonial and corporate, mostly—and hints at the uneven nature of the archives and the need to “read against the grain” in these sources.

David Biggs comments that there are significant obstacles to doing global environmental history. My aim at the beginning was more modest, extending Martin Lynn’s economic history of the nineteenth century palm oil trade in West Africa up to the era of decolonization in Africa, with a deeper look at the consuming side of the industry in Europe and North America.¹ The focus was initially on palm oil, but I found palm kernels too interesting, and too different, even though they moved in the same imperial and industrial circuits as palm oil. I didn’t go looking for palm wine, but it was everywhere in the records as an “anti-commodity” and it became an important part of the story.² By this point (around 2015) I had decided to frame the project as environmental history rather than economic or business history, and I chose the oil palm itself rather than its commodities as the central focus.

Doing imperial history was my way to do global history. I was already working on British colonies in West Africa, the focus of the nineteenth century palm oil trade. The epicenter of the Asian palm oil industry, at least until the 1990s, was Malaysia—also a former British colony. Colonial archives, and records of scientific and business organizations that worked with and across the British empire, allowed me to cover a lot of ground. A few lucky late-colonial archival finds pointed toward ways to extend the study past the 1960s, largely through US and World Bank records and industry publications. A history that started in the French empire would look different. So too would a history that prioritizes local and regional experience over globe-trotting companies, plants, and scientists. I am excited to see new work showing what I got wrong in trying to tell a global history from a (mostly) British imperial set of records. Bronwen Everill’s review connects *Oil Palm* with a long-standing theme of decline and collapse in environmental history. If there is one environmental theme in the book, it is the exploitation of tropical regions to fuel northern consumption. But as I argue in

¹ Martin Lynn, *Commerce and Economic Change in West Africa: The Palm Oil Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

² Harro Maat and Sandip Hazareesingh, *Local Subversions of Colonial Cultures: Commodities and Anti-Commodities in Global History* (Springer, 2016).

the book, palm oil is not unique in this respect. The question I attempted to answer was “why oil palm?” when it could well have been rubber, coffee, cocoa, soybeans, etc. As Bronwen points out, this where the particularity of each time and place, and of the oil palm itself, becomes so important.

While there were historical patterns in plantation development, exceptions to the pattern were everywhere, and everywhere important in determining whether oil palm worked at all in a given place, who worked with it, and how they worked and lived. The “colonial plantation” was an idea that meant many different things in reality. As the manuscript grew in scope, I felt pressure to focus on what many readers saw as the main event, the Southeast Asian oil palm boom after 1960. I did cut early chapters on Africa significantly, but I thought what remains was essential in capturing the big picture, and particularly in demonstrating that the Southeast Asian plantation pattern was the result of conditions specific to the region, not an inevitable or necessary development.

I also wanted to keep the chapters on Africa to challenge regional specialists, to create those experiences of unfamiliarity that David Biggs calls attention to. One of my goals in writing the book was to narrate the rise of the Southeast Asian oil palm industry in a way that emphasized continuity and connections with African histories. Much of the social science literature on oil palm in Southeast Asia pays little or no attention to the long history of oil palm in Africa. The message, at least to me, is that there’s nothing to learn from history about the present. But how can this be when the plants, the technologies, the organizations, at times even the same people, were active in both world regions?³

As David points out, *Oil Palm* looks at these circulating sets of people and things as they “relate to changes on the ground.” I am gratified that all three reviewers noted tensions in the book between the global and local, between things in motion and specific places where plants and people set down roots.⁴ But as James Parker’s review of *Oil Palm* for H-Environment notes, there is a “textual flatness” in my discussion of specific oil palm landscapes.⁵ Writing global environmental history poses a risk of writing about nowhere in particular, of privileging mobility over roots dug into one

³ One person I traced from Africa to Asia was scientist Ernst Fickendey; as new research shows he also worked in the Nazi empire’s eastern colonization schemes, though not with oil palm. Michael B. Miller, “When East Met East: Dutch East Indies Planters and the Ukraine Project (1942–1944),” *Central European History* 53, no. 3 (September 2020): 613–35, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938919000967>; Moritz von Brescius and Christof Dejung, “The Plantation Gaze: Imperial Careering and Agronomic Knowledge between Europe and the Tropics,” *Comparativ* 31, no. 5–6 (2021): 572–90, <https://doi.org/10.26014/j.comp.2021.05-06.04>. In this case, the focus on oil palm provided a way to give myself permission to stop following people and things, when they moved out of the oil palm context.

⁴ Much has been written about global history as method, but I still find inspiration in Tony Hopkins’ introduction to *Global History: Interactions Between the Universal and the Local* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁵ James Parker, “Review of Robins, Jonathan, *Oil Palm: A Global History*,” *H-Environment*, 2023, <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58870>.

place. I spent most of the time researching this book in archives or staring at computer screens, looking for traces of a plant and its products as they moved around the world. I visited real, living oil palms as a tourist. I learned a lot, but not enough to speak confidently about the experience of any particular place or community.⁶

Erika Rappaport addresses the book's treatment of the consumer end of the commodity chain, a subject in which I felt more comfortable speaking from experience (as a habitual ingredients label-reader and an avid consumer of instant noodles and other snacks). I intended to write a book that balanced storytelling, agency, and contingency across the commodity chain. My aim was to avoid a weakness I saw in some other commodity histories, which describe systems of production while treating consumption as an exogenous factor. Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* and Erika Rappaport's own *Thirst for Empire* are exemplary at avoiding this trap: they show how completely consumption patterns were entangled with evolving systems of production. I didn't find this balance in *Oil Palm*, at least not in terms of chapters and archival sources.

As David Biggs points out, I let the sources tell much of the story. These sources, the largest share of which came from British colonial archives, had a wealth of information about growing and harvesting oil palms. They had less to say about what happened once the palm oil left the farm or plantation. Corporate records, trade publications, and advertising filled some of the gaps, but not as richly as I hoped. The world of bulk storage and tankers and commodity futures markets and consumer experiences in the shopping aisle are important parts of the evolution of the oil palm industry after 1950, but these things just didn't feature in the records I had access to. I could periodize and describe them, but not make them a bigger part of the narrative. That's not to say it can't be done. I had limited time with Unilever's voluminous archive; Procter & Gamble and Colgate-Palmolive never responded to repeated requests for access to their archives.

I hope to someday address Erika's comments about race, sex, and empire in advertising with a piece on Palmolive's marketing in the 1910s-1930s. It didn't make it into the book for want of more substantial evidence.⁷ A deeper dive into Unilever's collections (especially the materials on Jurgens, Van den Bergh, and other European firms which seem underutilized compared to Lever Bros.) might be promising on the

⁶ Other authors are far more successful in creating feelings of place: see, among others, Michael Taussig, *Palma Africana* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Case Watkins, *Palm Oil Diaspora: Afro-Brazilian Landscapes and Economies on Bahia's Dendê Coast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Sophie Chao, *In the Shadow of the Palms: More-Than-Human Becomings in West Papua* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022); Tania Murray Li and Pujo Semedi, *Plantation Life: Corporate Occupation in Indonesia's Oil Palm Zone* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021); Alice Rudge, *Sensing Others: Voicing Batek Ethical Lives at the Edge of a Malaysian Rainforest* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023), <https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/nebraska/9781496235466>.

⁷ A short version of this work can be read here: <https://commodityhistory.com/2021/04/24/palm-oil-and-soap-marketing/>, along with an image from Palmolive's "ancient Egyptian beauty secret" marketing campaign.

consumer side of the commodity chain. There are other collections and other ways to study the histories of food, soap, and other consumer products—though these would in most cases not be histories of palm oil, but of the world of interchangeable industrial fats.

There is also much to write about histories of consumption in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. When I started the book project, China was the world's largest importer of palm oil. Within a few years India shot ahead, and I realized I was not going to be able to do more than review the literature for India and China. Jocelyn Zuckerman's *Planet Palm* has a great chapter on the recent growth of palm oil markets in India that I wish I had been available before I sent the last draft of *Oil Palm* to the publisher.⁸ A history of the reception of the western scientific consensus on saturated fat and heart health in Africa would be fascinating, as well as a study of the impact of Southeast Asian palm oil imports beginning in the 1990s (yellow jugs of Indonesian and Malaysian palm oil and palm olein were everywhere when I was working in Ghana in 2014-2015).⁹ There is a lot of exciting new work on oils and fats globally,¹⁰ but it's a subject that still lags behind the literature on the Green Revolution and cereal crops.

All the reviewers expressed, to different degrees, a desire for more analytical claims. One lesson I've learned from post-publication interviews and correspondence is that the historian's craft—carefully weaving together evidence to support a claim, often letting the sources do the talking—doesn't work for communicating outside the discipline. People often want to hear a story about historical determinism: why palm oil made the modern world or why colonialism explains everything that's bad about palm oil today. It's harder to tell a story about contingency, which is ultimately what *Oil Palm* is about. The unfolding story of oil palm in Latin America, for example, is not going to follow the Southeast Asian template because these places are different.¹¹

⁸ Jocelyn C. Zuckerman, *Planet Palm: How Palm Oil Ended Up in Everything—and Endangered the World* (New York: The New Press, 2021).

⁹ For an overview of SE Asian export growth, see Susan Martin, "An Edible Oil for the World: Malaysian and Indonesian Competition in the Palm Oil Trade, 1945-2000," in *Intra-Asian Trade and the World Market*, ed. A. J. H. Latham and Heita Kawakatsu (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 209–30.

¹⁰ E.g. Claiton Marcio da Silva and Claudio de Majo, eds., *The Age of the Soybean: An Environmental History of Soy During the Great Acceleration* (White Horse Press, 2022), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv309h1fx>; Jayson Maurice Porter, "Oilseeds and Slippery Slopes: Economy, Ecology, and Violence in Coastal Guerrero, 1930-1970.," *Mexico & Central America* (blog), September 14, 2020, <https://noria-research.com/mxac/oilseeds-and-slippery-slopes/>.

¹¹ For some examples of the growing scholarship on oil palm in Latin America see Andrés León Araya, *The Coup and the Palm Trees: Agrarian Conflict and Political Power in Honduras* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2023), <https://ugapress.org/book/9780820365374/the-coup-and-the-palm-trees>; Edna Yiced Martínez, "Imperialism and Labour: Palm Industry in the Territories of Black Communities in the Border Areas of Colombia and Ecuador (Tumaco-San Lorenzo)," in *Handbook of Research on the Global Political Economy of Work* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 536–45, <https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/book/9781839106583/book-part-9781839106583-61.xml>; Antonio Chamorro Cristóbal, "La expansión de la palma aceitera en Ecuador desde la revolución verde, 1961-2021," *Historia agraria: Revista de agricultura e historia rural*, no. 91 (2023): 191–221.

The same is true for Africa, where Southeast Asia-based multinationals have struggled to control land and labor.

But contingency is about power and choices. Monoculture and commodity substitution, the two key themes of the book, are two sides of the same coin, of a process of flattening or simplification. It's a process that reduces power and choice at one end of the commodity chain and maximizes it at the other, something that facilitates extraction and consumption but results in highly uneven social and environmental costs and rewards. If premodern palm oil was a valued, unique product made by a tree growing in particular socioecological niches with power distributed widely across the commodity chain, capitalist palm oil aspired to be featureless and interchangeable, produced by what were imagined to be featureless, powerless, and interchangeable people and environments. The plantation side of this idea is well developed in the literature; the commodity-consuming side less so.¹² But there were so many points of friction (borrowing here from Anna Tsing) where reality resisted simplification.¹³ Monocrops and commodities are works in progress, rather than descriptions of things as they exist in the world.

I may be too optimistic about smallholder oil palm as an alternative to, or a form or resistance against, this flattening. Smallholding is and has historically been associated with plenty of environmental and social harm (think about contemporary deforestation and child labor in parts of West Africa's cocoa industry, for example). But I do think it's preferable to the alternative: taking land away from people, reducing their choices, and simplifying complex ecosystems into monoculture.

¹² On palm oil as an ur-commodity, see Taussig, *Palma Africana*; and also the literature on "flex crops," Saturnino M. Borrás et al., "The Rise of Flex Crops and Commodities: Implications for Research," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 43, no. 1 (2016): 93–115, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2015.1036417>; on oil palm plantations in particular, see Li and Semedi, *Plantation Life*; Michael Dove, *The Banana Tree at the Gate: A History of Marginal Peoples and Global Markets in Borneo* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Ann Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870-1979*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); and for plantations as simplifications of nature in general I owe much to Michitake Aso, *Rubber and the Making of Vietnam: An Ecological History, 1897-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Carol A. MacLennan, *Sovereign Sugar: Industry and Environment in Hawaii* (University of Hawaii Press, 2014); Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City* (London: Icon, 2010) and many others.

¹³ Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

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