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Introduction by Kara Murphy Schlichting, Queens College CUNY

In Camping Grounds: Public Nature in American Life from the Civil War to the Occupy Movement, Phoebe S.K. Young reveals how a night spent in a tent can be much more than escapist leisure. While the idea of camping might evoke visions of parkland, campfires, and night skies, Young cautions us from assuming a history of camping is only a study of these archetypes. As all four roundtable participants explore, sleeping in a tent on vacation is but one type of camping. Young offers a broad definition that includes not just recreationalists, but itinerate workers, Depression-era “tramps,” and Occupy Wall Street protesters. In her innovative history, Young explores how non-recreational camps were often presumed to be illegitimate uses of public space. William P. Philpott reflects on Young’s use two concepts, “public nature” and the social contract, to study camping. Using questions of access to nature and community-building in nature recreation, Young investigates camping through the social injustices of how people of color were denied access to camping (Chapter 4), and the politics of sleeping outside in social movements like Occupy Wall Street (Chapter 6). Philpott reflects on the issues of who can access nature, on what terms, and in pursuit of what public good in Camping Grounds. Philpott also asks Young several questions about her use of public nature, as does the second roundtable contributor, Marsha Weisiger. How does the concept of public nature shape ideas of environment and citizenship among working-class subsistence hunters and anglers? Among Hoovervilles residents during the Depression? Weisiger commends Young for uniting the histories of non-recreational camping and urban homelessness. Beyond the landscapes typically associated with recreational camping, the lines of public and private and the right to sleep outside challenge dominant notions of curative time spent in a tent in (assumedly nonurban) nature.

Following the themes that Philpott and Weisiger raise, Robert Hoberman compliments Young for transforming recreational camping “into a persistent site of contestation over the meaning of civic life, participation in political society, and who is deemed worthy of access to American nature.” Hoberman reflects on the longstanding trope of nature as something “out there,” separate from politics and power relations, situating Young’s work in the historiographic traditions that challenge this idea. Hoberman argues that Young’s dismantling of camping as “apolitical” is a key contribution to environmental histories of nature recreation and public parks. Rachel S. Gross also highlights Young’s attention to disparaged forms of camping in her roundtable reply. A tent could be celebrated as a tool to connect with nature, and its users welcomed, Gross points out, if it was but a temporary abode. Campers without homes to return to, “functional” rather than recreational campers, were often unwelcome in campgrounds.

In her reply, Young reflects on both the material spaces of public land and cultural beliefs about access to them. Drawing contemporary links to Camping Grounds, Young expands her thinking on public nature in the context of the pandemic. She points to two salient issues, the celebration of peoples’ supposedly biological need to
experience nature and the neoliberal “self-care” movement that commends those who make time to access it. The latter’s individualistic framing, Young argues, sidesteps the concept of the social contract; both topics fail to address the reasons why certain populations have traditionally faced unequal time and unwelcome in public lands. Playing on William Cronon’s canonical essay “The Trouble with Wilderness,” Young also replies to Gross’s questions about consumerism. Gross reminds us that tents are part of the big business of camping gear. Young points out that purveyors of outdoor recreation clothing and gear, like Patagonia, often try to balance profit and “green” politics. In early fall, 2022, Yvon Chouinard announced he would donate all future profits from Patagonia to nonprofits that will “defend nature.” Young asks us, as she asked her students after this news broke, to reckon with the unsustainable consumerism at the heart of the outdoor recreation economy. What type of defense does nature need? Can corporations meet capitalist dividends and pursue environmental protections? Is it possible to consume our way to a better-defended planet, one fleece, one tent, and one trip to a camping ground at a time?

Before turning to the first set of comments, I would like to pause here and thank all the roundtable participants for taking part. In addition, 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.
Judging a Book by Its Cover

When I first sat down to read Phoebe Young’s *Camping Grounds*, it looked for all the world like a history of recreational camping. The cover illustration suggests as much: a detail from one of those classic 1930s Park Service posters, advertising vacations in the great American outdoors. A tan canvas pup tent, a cozy little home-away-from-home, nestles in a thicket of giant sequoias, their trunks rendered in reassuring chocolate brown and their foliage in forest green. I sighed, imagining the sound of the wind through the sheltering branches high overhead. And ready to dive into a history of tenting and cooking out and enjoying the respite of remote and scenic landscapes, I opened the book...

...and immediately crashed into a congressional hearing about protesters in Washington, DC, in 2012. Far from the calming breezes and sheltering trees of Sequoia, here was the braying Trey Gowdy, badgering a hapless Park Service official about why he was allowing Occupy Wall Street activists to camp out on McPherson Square. What the—?

I kid. I actually knew this wasn’t going to be a book just about recreational camping, because I’ve been following Phoebe Young’s highly original work in articles and conference presentations the past several years. And she isn’t really trying to pull a fast one with the book cover; the Occupy movement is mentioned right there in her title (right above the pup tent). So are other nonrecreational things, like the Civil War and “public nature.” But that’s the first thing to know about this remarkable book: It’s not a history of camping-as-escapist-leisure. Not a history of pitching tents and kindling cookfires for fun in scenic settings. That kind of camping figures very importantly here, to be sure—the cover image isn’t a lie—but it exists in tension, contradiction, and outright conflict with other forms of camping. In particular, camping out of necessity, and camping to make political points. One key element of Young’s argument, in fact, is that the seemingly simple idea of “camping,” or sleeping outside, has taken on many meanings since the Civil War era. Moreover, these meanings have taken shape in particular historical contexts and changed as the times did, always reflecting evolving relations of power and marginalization.

In the 2012 congressional hearing, Trey Gowdy tried to get the beleaguered Park Service director to settle on a single, universal definition of “camping.” But Phoebe Young absolutely refuses to do that. As a happy result, you don’t have to care all that much about the history of tourism or recreation—or even the broader field of environmental history—to find interest and insight in this book. It has much to teach those of us in those fields, yes. But anyone interested in the histories of American race relations, domesticity, family, housing, labor, the role of the state, patriotism, poverty, counterculture, protest, class identities, and notions of citizenship and nationhood will also find scintillating insights here. Camping, Young shows us, has far more to tell
us about American history, about the central tensions in the American experiment, than we ever would have known.

Young frames her analysis around two key themes: her own concept of “public nature” and the more familiar idea of the social contract. By public nature, she means outdoor spaces like public parks, national preserves, and the like, but also liminal zones like roadsides, where the public/private distinction is less clear. She’s interested in the claims that different groups have placed on such spaces—and that other groups have tried to deny. Who gets access to public nature, and on whose terms? And what public good(s) should public nature serve? Through the ways Americans construct and use public nature, they have advanced different environmental values, ideals of home and family, and notions of identity, citizenship, and social inclusion and exclusion. Not least, they have pressed competing visions of the social contract, of what citizens and their government owe each other. A crucial story Young tells is how, over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a social contract originally grounded in agrarianism evolved into one that centered on the consumption of outdoor recreation. That is, while the federal government initially worked to open land for people to settle and “improve” through agricultural labor, it increasingly shifted over to the task of creating outdoor spaces where city dwellers could find respite from urban-industrial anxieties, renewing themselves by temporarily reestablishing contact with “nature.”

As Young shows, camping helped shape this new social contract—and in turn took shape from it. Perhaps no one did more than the naturalist John Muir to popularize the idea that Americans needed time outside to restore their spiritual and psychological well-being, and in a fascinating chapter 2, Young tells how Muir came to that idea through his own camping. Rereading Muir’s own accounts of his travels around the South and West, she argues that his belief in recreation as the highest value of nature stemmed not just from his finding personal inspiration in the Sierras, but also from his revulsion at other folks he found sleeping outside for more functional reasons: Black freedpeople in the Reconstruction South seeking out woods and wetlands to escape forced labor, and Natives in California whose complex interdependencies with the land Muir found dirty and degraded. Here we have our first example of how recreational camping sprang from a specific historical context—not as some timeless and universal yearning—and how it depended upon the marginalization of others who camped in different ways for different reasons. Chapter 3 takes up similar themes. Here, Young examines the broader enthusiasm for recreational camping that emerged in the later nineteenth century, as industrialization created a white-collar workforce whose participants had money and free time to go on vacation. They too found exhilarating personal fulfillment in camping. But they too asserted their legitimacy at the expense of others who slept outside—in this case, the legions of itinerant workers and displaced “tramps” who were also products of industrialization, and who were presumed shiftless and dangerous. Young uses recreational campers’ writings to show how, even as they savored their taste of the “tramp style,” they took pains to distance themselves from tramps themselves, by turning their campsites into respectable spaces of domesticity
and by reminding themselves and others that when the camping trip was over, they could return to a proper home. Camping for fun, by choice, was assumed to improve individuals, families, and society, but camping out of necessity rendered one socially suspect.

This dichotomy gave rise to an emerging new social contract, in which government provided the spaces for people to consume outdoor leisure, and people using those spaces gained a sense of serving the national good and belonging to a national community—but those who camped outside those bounds were marginalized from membership. Chapter 4 narrates the creation of what Young calls the “camper’s republic,” as public lands agencies like the Park Service and New Deal programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps took responsibility for accommodating and encouraging the burgeoning popularity of outdoor leisure in the automobile age. Primarily they did so by constructing public campgrounds and other recreational facilities. Like Terence Young in his recent history of recreational camping, Phoebe Young pays particular attention to the work of Emilio Meinecke, a botanist whom the Park Service tasked in the late 1920s with protecting trees from the growing hordes of car campers in parks like Sequoia. Meinecke responded by inventing the now-familiar “loop campground,” in which parking pullouts and their accompanying campsite clearings were spaced around a loop drive, controlling where campers set down, minimizing the damage to the land.

Young points out how strongly the loop campground, with its curving lanes and car pullouts (which Meinecke called “garage-spurs”), resembled another quintessential landscape design of the automobile age: the suburban subdivision. This comparison certainly piqued my interest, because in my own work I’ve been intrigued by the ways recreational planners and tourist developers built off stereotypically suburban ways of relating to the outdoors. In their motels, ski resorts, parks and scenic highways, they packaged parcels what I call “suburban nature,” catering to suburbanites’ taste for outdoor thrills that were casual and car-convenient, and that came with a minimum of discomfort or risk. For her part, Young uses the likeness between loop campground and suburb to advance her argument about the social contract, and whom it excluded. She suggests a link between the emerging new right to outdoor recreation and the contemporaneous emergence of the notion that Americans had a right to a decent home. And she rightly points that such “rights” were matters of very unequal access. No reader will need reminding how the suburban “American dream” excluded people of color, and Young in chapter 4 shows how they were excluded from the “camper’s republic” too. Echoing the groundbreaking work of Susan Rugh, among others, she reminds us that Black tourists faced segregated facilities in southern national parks, and she reveals that in the 1920s the Park Service actually discouraged African Americans from visiting national parks. And she notes the longer history that

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for Black people in America, sleeping outside was rarely a recreational choice, but rather a result of being barred from indoor accommodations. Again we see how the different kinds of camping helped define social difference, limiting how public nature really was.

In the last two chapters, camping becomes more subversive. Chapter 5, really the only one that’s wholly devoted to recreational camping, focuses on the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), founded in 1965 in Wyoming. Its backcountry programs played to young people’s countercultural ideals, like their critique of inauthenticity, their search for cooperative community and “self-discovery,” and their yearning for close contact with nature—and by the early 1970s, their growing ecological consciousness. The NOLS approach helped popularize new forms of camping, like backpacking, in backcountry settings where self-defined expert wilderness adventurers could get away from crowds. And Young also notes that it helped spawn a new market in outdoor equipment. So while it challenged the mass-access “camper’s republic,” it still reflected a vision of the social contract that was grounded in the recreational consumption of public nature. And sadly, in the elitism of people who could amass all that expertise and afford all that gear.

Chapter 6 is where camping becomes truly political, and the social contract really frays. Young returns us to the Occupy Wall Street movement, whose activists protested neoliberalism and petitioned the state for a renewed social contract. To press these issues, their primary tactic was to pitch tents in public spaces where “camping” was ostensibly banned. They denied they were actually camping—because camping was recreational, right?—instead insisting their tent-pitching was protected political speech. Young helpfully compares Occupy to earlier efforts to claim public nature for political ends, from tent-dwelling protestors against the Vietnam War, to Resurrection City on the National Mall in 1968, to the Bonus Army of 1932, to Coxeys Army in 1894. (And as she shows in Chapter 1, an even earlier example of political camping came in the wake of the Civil War, when Union veterans participating in the Grand Army of the Republic’s annual National Encampments sought to shape the national memory of the war, highlighting their own sacrifices and the presumed debt the nation owed them.) To be honest, Chapter 6 gets difficult to follow in parts, as Young recounts the legal wrangling over issues like: Do the symbolic uses of tents constitute protected speech? Where camping is banned, are overnight protestors allowed to sleep? (Young includes an especially creepy vignette of police using thermal imaging to peer inside tents to see if Occupiers were violating a rule that they could hold an overnight vigil but not fall asleep.) But ultimately, the confusing legal tussles underscore Young’s point: that sleeping outside forces the constant renegotiation of public nature, and that the perceived aberrance of people camping for nonrecreational ends was so deeply entrenched by the 2010s that the state twisted itself into pretzels trying to squelch it. To that end, this chapter also tells how, in recent decades, the sight of growing numbers of homeless Americans sleeping

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outside has sparked a similar backlash. Cities like my hometown of Denver—and surrounding suburbs—have enacted “camping bans” so indigent outdoor sleepers can be cleared away and public spaces made to look cleaner and nicer again, in keeping with the idea that public nature is most valuable for its recreational and consumerist qualities.

So many fascinating stories and frankly brilliant observations are packed into this book that it seems churlish to complain about what else it might have said. And I think I know better than to fault an author for what they didn’t write about! I will say, though, that I’d love to hear Phoebe Young’s insights on children’s camping, like scouting and sleepaway camps. She mentions these in her introduction, explaining how she chose not to address them. But given the fresh insights she offers on every other topic she covers, I’d be eager to hear how she might fit children’s camping into her analytical framework. What notions of public nature did scouting or sleepaway camps instill in children? How did they bear on evolving ideas of the social contract? Have they perpetuated the same sorts of exclusion or marginalization—and in the same ways—that other forms of recreational camping have? How about Jewish or Christian camps, or others that are geared toward bonding communities and passing on religious and cultural traditions?

Finally, I’m interested in what might come out of this book, in terms of lessons learned, solutions sought, and future research pursued. In terms of future scholarship, I’m immensely intrigued by Young’s analytical framework, which it seems to me carries wonderful potential for topics besides camping. How, for example, might the analysis of “public nature” shed new light on the history of suburbia, another setting intertwined with ideas of “nature,” another that has become central to notions of American national identity and belonging, and another where access has historically been deeply unequal? And one where private property has been the rule but people have so often claimed a stake in what their neighbors did with their space? Another example: how might thinking about “public nature” shed new light on the history of religion, another realm where controversy is constant over whose beliefs should apply in what spaces—and where, almost in reverse of the primacy placed on recreational nature, there’s a long American history of disparaging religious practices that take place outdoors? These are just two possibilities that sprang to my mind for how Young’s framework might help historians of topics other than camping. What are some others? Likewise, I wonder what people working on the present-day issues Young addresses—the vexing crisis of homelessness, problems of unequal access to “nature” and the outdoors, struggles over civil discourse and the rights of protesters—might take from this book? Just to seize on one example, I was intrigued by Young’s critique, in the book’s epilogue, of the notion now in vogue that humans have a biological need for contact with nature. I can anticipate advocates of the “nature fix” reacting angrily to this critique, much as many wilderness advocates did when historians began challenging their core assumptions. That’s of course not a reason not to offer such a critique—but it does leave me wondering what the practical and political applications of Young’s findings might be. What would it look like to
revise (or revive) public nature, as Young suggests? What new social contract might it point us toward?

A pathbreaking book should open exciting new areas of inquiry, but also unsettle our thinking, raise questions not easily answered, and leave some people upset. This is a pathbreaking book.
Until recently, near my home in Eugene, Oregon, a substantial population pitched their tents in a grassy park under a highway overpass, which the city designated as a camp for homeless people. The sagging shelters, soggy sleeping bags, and shopping carts of belongings reminded passers-by that our fair city—with more than three thousand unhoused citizens—has the nation’s largest homeless population per capita. Today, that park lies vacant, surrounded by a tall chain-link fence with a sign reading: “No trespassing. Site restoration in progress.” As the city’s leaders prepared to host an international sporting event, they pushed all evidence of a seemingly intractable social problem to the far margins. Out of sight, out of mind.

Those visions of homeless people below the overpass often brought to mind my mother’s stories of Great Depression-era Hoovervilles sprawling under bridges that crossed the Canadian River in Oklahoma City. Community Camp—which swelled to two thousand residents—and May Avenue Camp, two miles to the east atop an abandoned town dump, comprised a hodgepodge of shacks made of wood scraps, cardboard, tin, and other castoffs. “So foul were these human habitations and so vast their extent,” noted one observer, that city authorities reluctantly acknowledged them as “the largest and worst congregation of migrant hovels between the Mississippi River and the Sierras.”

Camps like these, of course, are not what Americans usually picture when they think of “camping.” For most of us, as Phoebe S. K. Young notes in her insightful study, *Camping Grounds*, “to camp means to abandon one’s indoor home, voluntarily and temporarily, for outdoor recreation” (2). Yet, as she explains, that definition is a relatively new, middle-class idea. Indeed, although Young could have crafted a much narrower but fascinating study of camping as a leisurely pastime, she instead expertly embeds that story within a capacious history that reveals how camping became entangled with the American sense of nationhood. Americans, she argues, have negotiated and demonstrated their relationships to one another through camping in “public nature.”

Young defines “public nature” as “outdoor spaces and ideas about those spaces as settings where people work out relationships to nature, nation, and each other” (5), a concept that strikes me as imprecise. It encompasses not only public lands like national parks and urban green spaces, but also the expanses of bare ground where

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the homeless created Hoovervilles. “Nature,” to be sure, is a complex concept. And yet it seems like a stretch to argue that those living in Hoovervilles were working out their relationships with nature. Perhaps “public lands” would have been sufficiently broad, with the added benefit of encouraging Young to eliminate some of her least persuasive examples. But terminology aside, Young offers a compelling argument that Americans have asserted a claim to democracy, at least in part, by camping outdoors. She begins with a sly bit of misdirection: Camping Grounds’ cover features a small tent among the redwoods. But instead of opening with an account of, say, tent-camping in the Adirondacks, she startles her readers by laying her groundwork with the history of the encampments of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), nostalgic gatherings designed to rekindle camaraderie and build a sense of veteran identity. By the end of Reconstruction, the GAR made sleeping outdoors respectable and produced a template for a proper tent and a manual to guide middle-class campers. Young next turns to the story of John Muir, warts and all, and the early rise of recreational camping in Yosemite. Subsequent chapters relate the entwined histories of “tramp” and tourist camps, the design of the campground loop, the role of the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) in sparking a countercultural backpacking movement, and the emergence of camping as a form of protest. Young analyzes indigeneity, race, class, and gender throughout the book, noting, for example, that the GAR repudiated the segregation of Black veterans within their encampments, while the National Park Service largely complied with segregation in the Jim Crow South. Surprisingly, however, she all but ignores working-class campers, such as subsistence hunters and anglers. Their stories might have both corroborated and complicated her claim that Americans worked out their relationships to nature and nation through camping on public lands.

And yet Camping Grounds is not merely about elite and middle-class campers. Throughout this history, she interweaves the stories of those for whom camping was neither voluntary nor recreational, but “functional.” In her most significant contribution to the historiography, Young draws an analytical thread from hobo jungles through the Hoovervilles and New Deal camps for migratory farm workers to the makeshift camps that today make mass homelessness visible in most cities across the country. In doing so, she challenges the notion that camping outdoors is a biological imperative, as REI, Outside magazine, and even some physicians have suggested during the pandemic. If, indeed, camping is the key to bodily and mental health, Young avers, “then why are those without homes, who camp as a regular mode of living, not the healthiest among us?” (300).

Transient camps for itinerant workers and unemployed men emerged in tandem with recreational camping in the late nineteenth century. The elite and middle-class men and women who promoted the value of sleeping outdoors took care to distinguish their tidy tent sites from “tramp camps” and “hobo jungles.” It was one thing to

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temporarily leave the comforts of home and “rough it” in the woods and another to camp without a home to return to. The comfortable class deemed some modes of sleeping outdoors “proper,” but ostracized and criminalized others. Vilified as “vagrants,” “vagabonds,” and “tramps,” migrant workers thus camped on the outskirts of towns, largely out of sight.

In the twentieth century, however, the unemployed and homeless made themselves visible when they camped on public grounds to make political claims on the nation. In 1932, “an immense hobo jungle” (159), in the words of one observer, arose in the shadow of the Capitol as thousands of unemployed veterans—who dubbed themselves the Bonus Expeditionary Force—marched on Washington to demand early payment of a promised bonus for their service in World War I. That encampment looked much like the many Hoovervilles that simultaneously sprang up in Oklahoma City and urban centers across the nation and brought widespread homelessness into public view. Under orders from President Herbert Hoover, the army torched the Bonus Marchers’ camp, to which Franklin D. Roosevelt credited his presidential victory. Savvy politicians would not make that public-relations mistake again. When in 1968 Martin Luther King Jr., emulating the Bonus Marchers, erected Resurrection City on the Washington Mall, Lyndon Baines Johnson redefined such political theater as Constitutionally protected protest. The federal position on protest camps oscillated over the years. But by 2012, when the Occupy Movement demonstrated against America’s extreme economic inequality by setting up tents in McPherson Square, near the White House, the National Park Service recognized the camp as a symbolic and legitimate form of political assembly.

*Camping Grounds,* in short, reveals the historical role of camping—whether politically, functionally, or recreationally—as a forum for staking a claim to citizenship and “negotiating the terms of the social contract” (p. 301), the responsibilities of citizens and governments to one another. How then, she asks, might we reconceive public nature—public lands—to serve all Americans? In an age of polarized politics, might we rekindle a sense of the public good through our use of public lands? How we answer those questions has profound implications for the future of our nation.
While it might be incredibly frustrating for most people, nothing is more exciting or promising for a historian than the realization that an idea or event you thought you understood is actually more complicated and elusive than you imagined. Certain practices can become so thoroughly embedded in our minds by personal experience and depictions in culture that we may not even be aware that our assumptions have narrowed our understanding of them. These are the subjects that almost demand the attention and explication of historians, and the ones that can prove most conducive to innovative scholarship. Phoebe S.K. Young’s *Camping Grounds: Public Nature in American Life from the Civil War to the Occupy Movement* is a compelling recent example of the possibilities offered by reorienting the familiar. By expanding both the timeframe in which we consider camping and the sorts of people we usually consider its practitioners, Young transforms a seemingly straightforward leisure activity into a persistent site of contestation over the meaning of civic life, participation in political society, and who is deemed worthy of access to American nature.

Young’s most immediate intervention into the history of camping is to remove the modifier “recreational,” which many readers might not even realize they intuitively add to the subject. As when a brand name becomes so familiar that it ceases to signify a trademark and represents a generic product type — think Kleenex or Aspirin — it has become difficult to remember that camping can serve a function beyond leisure. That sleeping outside, in a tent or otherwise, might serve a functional rather than voluntary purpose or that it might be the expression of a political opinion and a means of staking a claim to both physical and ideological space can feel a bit surreal. These things might look like camping, but the cultural ubiquity of its recreational form makes them feel like something else. The very success of recreational camping’s monopolization of the term has served, Young argues, to obscure its own history. The average American doesn’t associate camping with leisure because there is some pure, unchanging set of values and practices that forces them to do so, but because a set of historical processes and choices have led them to forget the possibility of a more expansive definition. Camping for pleasure “sometimes masquerades as universal, the one form of camping that is without politics,” Young writes, but arose from specific and complex circumstances in the late-19th and early-20th centuries (14).

Historians, of course, have not up to now accepted the idea of camping as apolitical or unchanging. Scholars of outdoor recreation have long highlighted how leisure activities in nature exhibit, implicitly and explicitly, their participants’ racialized, gendered, and class-based assumptions. Terence Young’s *Heading Out: A History of American Camping* strictly concerned itself with recreational camping but placed the subject in the context of the anti-modernist anxieties around urbanization, industrialization, and authenticity which dominated the thoughts of American elites in the late-nineteenth century and which formed a persistent theme in contemporary American environmentalism. Entire subfields of recreation history and
environmental sociology have sought to address and explain the racial gap in rates of outdoor recreation as well as reassert the frequently ignored tradition of African American leisure in nature. Environmental historians have been especially attuned to the wider effects of recreation. Americans have physically altered geographies and removed entire Indigenous communities in the name of conservation and in the pursuit of a very specific model of recreation.

Rather than a break with these other approaches to recreation, _Camping Grounds_ adds functional and politically expressive outdoor sleeping as equally valid forms of camping, with a shared history. The key insight in Young's work for historians of outdoor recreation is not simply that recreation is complex in its origins, but that recreation's rise to dominance of the idea of camping was effectively accomplished by recreationists purposefully defining their pursuits in opposition to other forms of camping. Recreational camping, in Young's argument, doesn't just reflect anti-modernist anxieties (though those anxieties remain real). The anxieties themselves shaped the form taken by leisure camping and the way elite recreationists represented their activities to the wider public. Young follows these animating anxieties as a nation of industrial and agrarian producers gave way to a consumerism more comfortable with leisure camping than any other form. According to Young, leisure camping was uniquely positioned to capture the American imagination and public approbation not by rejecting modernity, but by offering a way to reconcile emergent consumerism and traditional ideas about nature. “For many Americans who remained suspicious of...leisure and consumption,” Young argues, “camping and outdoor recreation seemed to blend...modern practices with time-honored agrarian values” (9). Contrary to Terence Young’s characterization of leisure camping as distinctly anti-modern, _Camping Grounds_ asserts that recreational camping did not so much allow Americans to escape the enervating effects of industrial life as much as it allowed them to transplant modern conveniences to the outdoors and “rough it in comfort.”

As the Progressive Era American state began to take seriously the idea of conservation of natural resources in the name of the public good, it carved out a role for the government in the promotion and protection of Americans’ opportunities for outdoor leisure. This is one of the key turning points for Young’s argument in _Camping Grounds_, as it fully introduces her framework for looking at the relationship between American citizens and American nature as a series of shifting social contracts. The dominant expression of the social contract for most _Camping Grounds_ is what Young terms “the Camper’s Republic;” a social arrangement by which the government was obliged to guarantee access to the outdoors (and its presumed psychological, physical, and political benefits) as all citizens could claim ownership to the nation's public nature. The Camper’s Republic helped make sense of the upheavals of Depression-Era and Postwar American life, allowing Americans who could no longer stake claims to property based on the Lockean doctrine of mixing their labor with nature to do so by mixing their leisure with nature instead.
Though *Camping Grounds* covers over a century and a half of American history and its subjects range across ethnic, gender, and class lines from Civil War veterans to African American recreationists and from genteel Victorian mothers to the vocal protestors of Occupy encampments, Young’s thematic focus on shifting social contracts and public nature allow her to render these disparate actors part of the same narrative. Though never explicitly explored in *Camping Grounds*, much of the cultural power of recreational camping rests on academically discredited but still popular notions of nature as distinct from human civilization. Even the most modern camping experiences, from car camping in a National Park in one of Emilio Meinecke’s loop campgrounds to a complete luxury glamping experience, are sold as escapes from modern life just as they were in the late 19th century. But as *Camping Grounds* demonstrates, the elite leisure campers of that earlier era relied on a more ambiguous relationship to the outdoors than their contemporary counterparts. Domesticity runs through the entirety of *Camping Grounds*, tying together many of the seemingly irreconcilable subjects Young identifies. In order to distinguish leisure camping from other, seemingly less worthy, forms of outdoor sleeping, recreationists had to do something so modern that current campers do it with much less clarity: blend nature and the home. Over and over, Young’s campers privilege the transference of idealized domestic arrangements to “wild” nature. The Civil War veterans who encamped with the Grand Army of the Republic valued the order and cleanliness that helped them present themselves as worthy citizens. The upper- and middle-class early adopters of leisure camping saw the rhetorical value of importing Victorian domesticity to nature to differentiate themselves from the nation’s tramps and market hunters. Leisure camping’s first victory was combining the home and American nature through leisure; its second and longer-lasting triumph was convincing Americans that nature and the home were actually different spheres entirely.

The final thread linking all of the elements of Young’s argument is the idea of American citizens claiming a special political relationship to American nature through camping. As the Camper’s Republic coalesced into a coherent social contract, it had to hold together in the face of an inherent tension: citizens deserved access to nature by virtue of their citizenship, but that access had to be managed to prevent the overuse or destruction of public nature. This was embodied in the National Park Services twin missions to preserve nature and promote its use. Young’s social contracts, even the mighty Camper’s Republic, are constantly subject to negotiation and the drawing of lines that include some Americans and not others. John Muir and wilderness seeking Romantics get their access at the expense of the Indigenous communities the Parks forcibly displaced; families camping for middle-class leisure are accommodated while the homeless and unemployed are criminalized and stigmatized; tourists’ use of public space in Washington D.C. are assumed legitimate while Occupy protestors are regarded as violators of the social contract.

It is appropriate then that *Camping Grounds* is bookended by thematic chapter that center on the encampments of military veterans. Former soldiers’ claims to physical space based on their service to the nation have been common as far back as Antiquity. Though the literal payment of veterans in land for settlement is no longer the norm,
military service remains intimately connected to nature and space in America. Though the Civil War veterans, Bonus Army marchers, and protesting Vietnam veterans in *Camping Grounds* inhabited vastly different cultural and political worlds, their uses of camping each expressed a demand for the benefits of collective action taken in public space. However, the idea of veterans seeking the benefits of nature has become as drained of politics as any other form of camping Young examines. Outdoor recreation is now a popular and promising form of therapy for veterans suffering from the physical and psychological effects of war, supported directly by the U.S. government. While more and more research supports the efficacy of nature therapy for a variety of conditions, the practice remains an example of an easy answer to a difficult problem. It rests upon the ahistorical notion that human relations with the natural world are universal across social groups and purely beneficial. *Camping Grounds* serves as a valuable model for how environmental historians can address contemporary environmental issues in all their complexity; offering context without nostalgia.

*Camping Grounds* leaves room for a number of productive questions for future environmental and recreation historians. What competing visions existed as alternatives to the growing Camper’s Republic in the mid-20th century? Why did they fail to garner the public and institutional support that middle-class leisure camping obtained? To what extent was the dominant consumerist recreational paradigm the product of choices made by recreators as opposed to being imposed by producers and the government? What did American attitudes toward public nature, especially among the military veterans presented here, owe to the unique historical context of American imperial expansion at home and abroad?
"Bring tent." The phrase comes directly from the Occupy Movement, but the 2011 protesters were hardly unique in their call. The Grand Army of the Republic encampments in the nineteenth century and the Vietnam Veterans Against the War protests of the twentieth century both used tents as a means of political discourse and claiming space. “Bring tent” is also what young scouts or a family of vacationers might say to each other en-route to a weekend in the woods. In all of these examples, tents connote camping, but the meaning of those tents and the very act of sleeping outdoors differs wildly depending on if the end destination is a park in the middle of Washington D.C. or a mountaintop.

In Phoebe S.K. Young’s *Camping Grounds: Public Nature in American Life from the Civil War to the Occupy Movement*, camping is far more complicated and meaningful than it first appears. Young divides camping in three ways. There is recreational camping, likely what most readers will expect when picking up the book with a cover image of a canvas tent dwarfed by giant trees. The other two forms of camping that Young puts alongside recreational camping are what makes her argument novel. She examines functional and political camping as well, other forms of being outdoors that haven’t always counted. Some modes of sleeping outside are celebrated; others are marginalized and criminalized. This matters because what camping counts as acceptable or even legal depends not just on the reasoning behind it but also who is doing it. At stake in Young’s story of a generation of American tent-toters is belonging in the American nation, and the social contract, which Young defines as questioning what citizens and the government owe each other. Young convincingly argues that camping from the Civil War to the twenty-first century there has been a shift from a public nature to a recreational nature. Who has access? Is camping a right or a privilege (277)? Young explains public nature as the place where people work out their “relationship to nature, nation, and each other” (4). The shift to recreational nature represented a new social contract, wherein the government provided leisure space at a preserved park or campground.

*Camping Grounds* contributes to the extensive literature that already exists on recreation, parks, and camping. In environmental history, the act of camping as a marker of national identity or shifting environmental politics has appeared in works by William Cronon and James Morton Turner, as well as newer works by historians such as Terence Young and Silas Chamberlin. Beyond environmental history, plenty of social historians writing about vacations have captured its national significance as well. Young isn’t simply suggesting that a more diverse set of Americans went camping that the white male elite, as Colin Fisher and Connie Chiang have recently argued. Young does something new here: she shows that camping has never been only
recreational. The stories of soldiers, tramps, protesters, and the unhoused show as much.7

Given the centrality of tents as both physical object and symbol, I will focus on tents here as a way of enumerating the strength of Young’s many insights. Young poses the question: “Should tents indicate transience or persistence, leisure or poverty, consumer comfort or political protest” (14)? Her answer, of course, is all of the above, in different contexts and eras. In the first section of the book, covering the 1850-1890s, the tents soldiers used during the Civil War took on new meanings and uses in the years after. The tent was one of the objects that allowed veterans to create a “public performance of the rituals of camp” (19). Alongside eating hardtack and drinking coffee, pitching a tent was a respectable and accessible way to remember life during the war. For some veterans, part of the joy of remembrance including fussing over equipment such as tents in the off season, a familiar move to contemporary gear users. Ultimately, the tent was one means of transforming war memories into honorable political encampments.

In the early twentieth century, as the second section of the book shows, tents symbolized a very different set of politics. Itinerant workers who slept outdoors were categorized as “tramps” and “hoboes” (96). Casual lodging of this kind was not publically acceptable if there was no home to anchor a journey away. The recreational ethos emerged as a way to gauge who was using nature the right way. Consumer citizens seeking leisure and using commercially produced tents were in the right, while Bonus Army marchers or Dust Bowl migrants whose presence, and whose need for camping, “caused public alarm,” were in the wrong (136). Tents were a clear marker of status differentiating these groups. For recreational campers, the question was how to avoid mistaken identity, how not to seem a hobo. The answer was to buy gear.

Later in the twentieth century, the acquisition of tents took on yet another meaning. Buying a tent came to serve as a “sign of one’s environmental outlook and identity,” as Young argues in the third section of the book (230). Backpackers of the 1970s saw themselves as supporters of public nature, and part of recreating responsibly was buying the gear necessary for these community-oriented activities. By the turn of the century, protesters were able to recognize and make use of the multivalent history of camping and use of tents. When Occupy protestors were prompted to bring tents, the

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goal was to subvert the mobile structures by distinguishing them both from recreationists and those experiencing homelessness. Especially when the tents were unoccupied so as to comply with new rules barring using the protest sites as living accommodations, “these performative uses of tents functioned as uncanny, eye-catching symbols of the impulse to occupy.” 2011 was indeed the year of the tent (281).

A variety of questions arise from this focus on tents as symbol and practical tool of camping. First, Young shows the clear evolution of military shelter halves and A-frames for functionality to mechanism for protest. Are there similar patterns in the twentieth century? For instance, how do tents come to be in the hands of functional and political campers? Have they also been recreational campers in the past, bringing the goods at hand to new uses? Or is there a hidden reuse economy, whereby the cast-offs of recreational campers get repurposed via consignment shops or Goodwill stores? One possible direction here is the role outdoor retailers and brands play in donating equipment in response to disasters such as fires, but not in response to the slow violence of homelessness. How might that industry focus on some causes over others help us understand the evolving distinctions between recreational and other forms of camping as defined in the business world?

Another question comes out of Young’s examination of Petzoldt’s company as a seller of ideology as well as gear. Are there other companies that weighed in on public nature? Have there been official corporate responses to the central role of outdoor equipment in protest movements or in the daily lives of the unhoused? What was the role of companies in shaping whose nature it was before the Petzoldt era of the 1970s?

Finally, mistaken identity is an important theme that unites different eras of camping. Young offers stories of mistaking honest hikers for unambitious tramps (104), but dwells less on how the tramp became a kind of style or aesthetic. This complicates the tales of mistaken identity, especially as fashion trends shifted later in the twentieth century to encompass outdoor clothing for everyday life. What is the line between a functional camper and a recreational one? How can you tell, and who wants to make sure the difference is clear? I am interested in hearing how Young would unpack that tension after outdoor style became widespread after the 1970s. What implications did the consumption of camping goods have for functional campers’ views of themselves and what they were doing?

Ultimately, the strength of Young’s work is to make aficionados of recreational camping think more deeply about the practices around them. In Colorado mountain towns, I’ve camped for a weekend at sites directly adjacent to permanently parked RVs that allow affordable housing close to the town center. I’ve also camped in state parks close to cities where I was sharing the space with an unhoused person in the next site. What Young explains is the links between these seemingly different forms of sleeping outdoors. My recreational habits, and the personal opinions I hold dear
about what my tent might symbolize, come into relief as Young unpacks the “complex relationships between functional and recreational camping” (293).
Response by Phoebe S.K. Young, University of Colorado Boulder

The Trouble with Patagonia

Outdoor recreation is having a moment. The COVID-19 pandemic elevated spending time in nature to the status of an essential activity. As Americans clamored to camp, hike, ski, climb, bike, kayak, paddleboard, or any number of other pursuits in the great outdoors, timed entry slots and campground reservations became near impossible to come by. Add to this a recent spate of studies claiming that outdoor leisure is crucial for our physical and mental health. Communing with “nature,” popular beliefs and controlled experiments assert, is a universal biological imperative. And just recently, Yvon Chouinard announced that he is giving one of the world’s most recognizable outdoor clothing and gear brands, Patagonia, to “the planet.” All future profits from the sales of their all-time best-selling Synchilla® Snap-T® Fleece pullovers, and everything else they make, will be directed to two nonprofit trusts “dedicated to fighting the environmental crisis and defending nature.”

Apparently, nature needs outdoor recreation too.

This was not an angle I expected to emerge when I began the research that led to *Camping Grounds*. Back in the mid-2000s, the popular press was filled with articles bemoaning the demise of camping, hiking, and other traditional outdoor pursuits. Commentators tended to blame the usual suspects – “kids today” – whether it was millennials or their video games. Such laments about the apparent decline in outdoor recreation share more with the recent frenzy for nature than one might expect. Both rely upon a longstanding attachment to “public nature” in American history. By public nature, I mean both the material spaces of public lands and beliefs about and access to those spaces; this concept provides a useful tool for analyzing varied historical connections to the outdoors, recreational and otherwise. Charting how public nature has formed a crucial grounds for our changing social contract represented my central goal for this book. I appreciate that the reviewers who contributed to this roundtable engaged with this concept in their generous and compelling essays, and I am grateful to have the chance for this conversation.

I agree with each of these writers that public nature implied even more than I was able to explore in the book. They raise a multitude of intriguing questions, many of which I would be eager to see others investigate further. How might public nature, with its entangled recreational, functional, and political uses of the outdoors, shed new light on studies of children’s camps, subsistence hunters, and working-class campers? On questions of religion, suburbia, the military, or the outdoor clothing and gear industry? Though I don’t have fully-baked answers to any of these issues, it’s rewarding to see scholars I admire thinking creatively about a concept that emerged from my work in thinking across traditional boundaries. I’m eager to learn more from their own forthcoming work on related topics.

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Reading their pieces prompts me to share a bit about where my own thinking has gone since *Camping Grounds* hit the shelves 18 months ago. Here, I want to build on some of the points raised in these commentaries and extend some of the intellectual and practical applications of the insights of the book. How can public nature help us to understand the current ballyhoo about the outdoor recreation economy and the biological need for nature? What histories lie beneath these common refrains? Initial research suggests that the contemporary obsession with a “nature fix” or a “nature cure” rests on complex historical roots as much, if not more than, the biological universalities that appear to drive current understandings. These claims echo both troubling alignments between preservationists and eugenicists in the early twentieth century and neoliberal discourse that emerged in its latter decades, recasting the outdoors as ripe for personal investments in self-expression and well-being. These also intertwine with a cultural fascination with individuals’ wilderness journeys in search of personal redemption and an authentic self, recently exemplified in Cheryl Strayed’s bestselling memoir, *Wild.*

The epilogue of *Camping Grounds*, which hints at these developments, prompted the contributors to ask, as Bill Philpott did, what the “practical and political applications” of my findings might be. Adherents of the nature cure, and those who are coming to rely on that discourse to defend wilderness preservation, he rightly notes, are likely to balk at these challenges in ways that remind of reactions to the troubling of wilderness definitions, begun by Bill Cronon more than two decades ago. How can a critique of the assumptions of a universal nature fix help to “revise (or revive) public nature?” My initial analysis is that the neoliberal framings of the nature cure have ironically undermined concepts of public nature and collective responsibility. Instead, neoliberal visions for nature presume that we are all individual agents, responsible for self-care in the outdoors, and that those who have neither the time, money, or inclination to engage in outdoor recreation are not leading a well-managed life. Preserving outdoor spaces and public lands on this basis is unlikely to engender ways of thinking about how we share space, or what might be the historical reasons not everyone is likely to experience nature as stress-reducing. This can certainly apply to unhoused folks (for whom living outdoors is distinctly non-recreational), Black and Latinx Americans (for whom historical exclusions and surveillance have made the outdoors a less than welcoming space), or the working-class campers and hunters that Marsha Weisiger mentions (whose outdoor practices often deviate from the privileged forms of non-mechanized, leave-no-trace imperatives). History suggests that there has never been one correct, biologically appropriate, way of recreating in, much less relating to, nature; creating public lands based on that assumption will most certainly lead to new tensions and exclusions.

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10 William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), 69-90. In part, the ballyhoo over Patagonia’s announcement suggests the ways in which we still struggle to address the important questions Cronon raised in this landmark piece.
Moreover, as Robert Hoberman points out, attending to the history of veterans and public nature suggests a shift between claiming political voice as citizens and seeking therapy for the physical and psychological trauma of war. The current “ahistorical notion that human relations with the natural world are universal across social groups and purely beneficial,” is public nature “now drained of politics... an easy answer to a difficult problem.” Assuming a stable, timeless nature has in fact produced a multitude of political effects in history, from impetus for dispossession of Indigenous people to overconsumption of natural resources. Framings of outdoor recreation still tend to rely upon and reinforce, as Hoberman notes, the “academically discredited but still popular notions of nature as distinct from human civilization.” In a way, arguments for the “nature cure” reanimate this notion for a new generation, again providing an easy answer to the difficult – and distinctly political – challenges of how we relate to and use nature in a time of climate crisis.

The economics of the outdoor industry complicate these issues, of course, as Rachel Gross highlights. She raises pertinent issues: do unhoused campers acquire their gear through a “hidden reuse economy where castoffs of recreational campers get repurposed via Goodwill?” How do outdoor retailers and brands strategize equipment donations “in response to disasters but not the slow violence of homelessness?” These questions point to the tricky dilemmas at the heart of outdoor consumerism and corporate management in the wake of neoliberalism. We might look for the historical roots of this tension within what Hoberman calls out as the “consumerist recreational paradigm” – which is both the “product of choices made by recreators” and those “imposed by producers and the government.” That outdoor recreation nearly always requires engagement with a consumer economy suggests that it sits in a less simple relationship to environmental advocacy than it might appear at first glance.

Which brings me back to Patagonia. The September morning after Chouinard made his announcement, students in my Environmental History of North America class were bubbling over with excitement to talk about it. It seemed to them a thrilling development, a billionaire doing the right thing, for once prioritizing climate change over quarterly profits. They hoped it would inspire more leaders to do the same. As we started to unpack what the ripple effects of this decision might be, students began applying concepts we had worked through in the first four weeks of the semester, new frameworks that had unsettled their assumptions about wilderness and Indigenous relationships to nature. Chouinard’s move, they agreed, would certainly increase the brand cachet of Patagonia, but they wondered what that would mean. As one student who worked at an outdoor retailer over the summer pondered: if the mechanism of generating more profits for the planet meant increasing sales of puffy jackets and waterproof duffels, was this a good thing or did it compound the problem by intensifying consumerism itself? Patagonia’s CEO, Ryan Gellert, did just that in the days following the announcement, reiterating that the company in “the past and today and the future, is... unapologetically a for-profit business. We are extremely competitive. The Chouinards are extremely competitive about the business. We focus on making high-quality products, standing behind that product for the usable life of
it. We compete with every other company in our space, aggressively. I don’t think we have lost that instinct.”

How competitively to act in the marketplace clearly sits within the realm of a company’s decision-making; the question my students and I got stumped on was whether that decision is compatible with the ultimate goal “to combat climate change and protect undeveloped land around the globe.” No matter how sustainably those products might be made, and Patagonia’s practices are arguably among the best in the business, giving the company away does little to interrupt the cycle of consumer desires. If consumerism is part of how we got into this pickle, can more consumerism – wherever the profits go – get us out of it? It’s not my favorite role as a teacher to burst students’ bubbles, but rather than being demoralized, these history, ecology, economics, biology, political science, environmental studies, engineering, communication, and art majors wanted to explore how to challenge simplistic popular understandings of nature and the planet.

A concept like “public nature” helps us do that by suggesting key “practical and political applications.” Given the current climate crisis, continuing to rely upon older wilderness ideals that revolve around the separation between human use and pristine nature is clearly insufficient. If we don’t unpack the tools and mindsets that we use to address our challenges, we are likely to default to the reigning, culturally embedded paradigms of neoliberalism and individualism. Outdoor recreation and green consumerism – however mindful, however dedicated to broader environmental goals – remain firmly entrenched in those frameworks. The Patagonia move seems only to double down on a formula that fetishizes wilderness as a place apart and invites individuals to purchase gear for outdoor adventures. If Chouinard inspires a movement of companies both striving for sustainable production and redirecting profits towards environmental projects, perhaps that may start to shift some impacts of consumerism. Ultimately, however, what we must shift are mindsets: to consider how we share the outdoors, beyond recreational uses. Moving forward, my hope is that environmental historians and humanists can build on a concept like public nature to shape our relationships to nature.

Just the day before Chouinard’s statement made the front pages, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) announced – to considerably less fanfare – new guidance for tribal co-stewardship of public lands aimed in part to address the effects of climate change. “Indigenous knowledge will benefit the Department’s efforts to bolster resilience and protect all communities. By acknowledging and empowering Tribes as partners in co-stewardship of our country’s lands and waters, every American will benefit from strengthened management of our federal land and

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resources.”\textsuperscript{13} Perhaps this suggests one path towards a revised and revived, shared and regenerative public nature.

About the Contributors

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Robert Hoberman is a PhD. Candidate at the University of California, Davis. He is currently working on a dissertation on the history of American military veterans’ use of nature and recreation as a form of physical and psychological therapy. He has an essay forthcoming in the collected volume New Jersey’s Natures scheduled for publication in 2023.

William Philpott is an environmental historian with especially strong interests in tourism and outdoor recreation, cities and suburbs, disasters and risk exposure, consumer culture, and Colorado and the wider American West. He is currently associate professor of history at the University of Denver, where he has been since 2009. Earlier, he taught at Illinois State University. His book Vacationland: Tourism and Environment in the Colorado High Country (University of Washington Press, 2013) tells how remote and rugged central Colorado became a mass-market vacation destination in the decades after World War II, and how the explosion of outdoor leisure in such places reshaped American lifestyles, land use patterns, and environmental attitudes and politics. Currently Bill is working on a new book about the environmental neglect and social marginalization of Denver’s riverside neighborhoods, which culminated with the devastating South Platte River flood of 1965 but tragically did not end there. His other ongoing projects concern the politics of highway planning, and Denver’s vanished food-production landscapes.

Kara Murphy Schlichting is Associate Professor of History at Queens College, City University of New York. Her work in late-19th and 20th-century American history sits at the intersection of urban and environmental history. She is the author of New York Recentered: Building the Metropolis from the Shore (University of Chicago Press, 2019).

Marsha Weisiger is the Julie and Rocky Dixon Chair of U.S. Western History, an associate professor of history and environmental studies, and co-director of the Center for Environmental Futures at the University of Oregon. She is the author of Buildings of Wisconsin (University of Virginia Press, 2017), Dreaming of Sheep in Navajo Country (University of Washington Press, 2009), and Land of Plenty: Oklahomans in the Cotton Fields of Arizona, 1933-1942 (University of Oklahoma Press,
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