



H-Environment

H-Environment Roundtable Reviews

Volume 4, No. 1 (2014)

www.h-net.org/~environ/roundtables

Publication date: January 8, 2014

Roundtable Review Editor:

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Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012) ISBN 9780295991672.

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~environ/roundtables/env-roundtable-4-1.pdf>

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Introduction by Jacob Darwin Hamblin, Oregon State University

Should environmental historians confine themselves to subjects that clearly have environmental links, such as stories of pollution, natural degradation, conservation, and wilderness protection? If the answer is “no,” perhaps the field of environmental history implies a deeper commitment. Guided by the premise that nature is the essential part of humanity’s experience, shouldn’t environmental scholars have crucial insights on the fundamental episodes of the past?

So asks Mark Fiege in his ambitious book, *The Republic of Nature*. In what he calls his “quest to find the nature embedded in the iconic moments of American history,” Fiege offers a volume that is rich with reinterpretations. In nine chapters, he paints new pictures of classic topics such as the Salem Witch Trials, the American Revolution, the Cotton South, the life of Abraham Lincoln (“nature’s nobleman”), and the battle of Gettysburg. He treats his readers to a nature-focused discussion of the 1860s transcontinental railroad and the 1970s oil crisis. He proposes an environmental history of racial segregation, and even offers a natural history of the atomic bomb. Throughout, he explores the balance between agency and determinism, and finds that the final limit on the range of human agency, and “the final determinant of human history,” is nature itself.

I invited **Conevery Bolton Valencius**, an assistant professor of History at University of Massachusetts-Boston, to contribute to this roundtable because of her outstanding work on early Americans and their relationships with the natural world. Her book *The Health of the Country*, an exploration of the identification of land with health from the Louisiana Purchase to the Civil War, won the 2003 George Perkins Marsh Award for best book in environmental history. In that book, she explores how the development of differing medical practices and scientific outlooks reinforced regional identities. Her most recent book, *The Lost History of the New Madrid Earthquakes*, will itself be a subject of a future H-Environment Roundtable.¹

Another commentator, **Roderick Frazier Nash**, has written extensively about the idea of wilderness in American history. He was one of the early practitioners of environmental history, and began teaching routinely on the subject at UC Santa Barbara after the 1967 publication of his influential book, *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Like Fiege, he was then keenly interested in the ways that Americans thought about the natural world, and how those ideas informed their actions, from the earliest settlers to the era of national wilderness legislation.²

¹ Conevery Bolton Valencius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (Basic, 2002); Conevery Bolton Valencius, *The Lost History of the New Madrid Earthquakes* (Chicago, 2013).

² Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Yale University Press, 1967).

Eric Foner's comments in this roundtable were first provided at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians in April 2012. A prize-winning historian of the United States, and the DeWitt Clinton Professor of History at Columbia University, Foner has written about many of the subjects in Fiege's book, including both slavery and Abraham Lincoln. I had seen a video of his OAH presentation on a blog maintained by historian Anne M. Little, and I thought that Foner's comments would provide an excellent perspective in our roundtable.³ As it happened, one of our existing roundtable participants bowed out for personal reasons, so I asked Foner if he had a text version of his talk that he would contribute. Fortunately, he did, and he graciously offered to include it here.

Our final commentator, **Christopher C. Sellers**, a professor of history at SUNY Stony Brook, has explored the social and political dimensions of the rise of environmental consciousness. His book *Hazards of the Job* reveals how environmental health science came from the field of industrial hygiene, rooted in the experiences of working people and the professionals who set workplace standards. His latest book, *Crabgrass Crucible*, the subject of a future H-Environment roundtable, goes outside urban areas and locates the roots of environmentalism in the political aims and understandings of the natural world by Americans in the suburbs.⁴

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.

³ The video (and blog by Anne M. Little) is here:
<http://www.historiann.com/2012/04/27/mark-fieges-republic-of-nature-at-the-oah-april-20/>.

⁴ Christopher C. Sellers, *Hazards of the Job: From Industrial Disease to Environmental Health Science* (University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Christopher C. Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

Comments by Conevery Bolton Valencius, University of Massachusetts, Boston

Don't start with the first page, I tell my students. Don't ever just pick up a book, start on the first page, and read every word til the end – not unless you're in a comfy chair relaxing with a novel. If you're reading to get work done, then **WORK** with your book. Pick it up, check out the table of contents, scan the illustrations, flip through the pages (why is clicking still so slow in e-books?), smell the book if it has pages (acrid, glossy, expensive? or cheap, pulpy, already-musty?), see if there's an index or an appendix or anything else that will tell you what kind of a book it is (charts? glossary? testimonials?). Figure out what kind of a book it is and what it might have that you need, and then **DECIDE** how you're going to read it.

My students sometimes look at me like fish when I say this. Eyes and mouths open in perplexity, they start to object: they've spent years learning how to read and now I'm telling them not to. But then people look thoughtful, heads start to nod. Yes, work with a book, then decide what parts to read: this makes sense, as they think about how they've successfully used books in the past. I soften, I admit that I find this way of using books to be difficult. It's a pleasure to fall into a good book, I tell my students, but you can't read everything: you have to decide where and how you can let yourself fall into the satisfaction of a good read.

When I'm reading by myself, I think a lot about my students, hard-working and often embattled people at an urban public university. I read to find material that will help them get traction with the hard subjects we're tackling: U.S. history, environmental history, the U.S. Civil War, the history of medicine and science. I read because I need material to teach my classes—the decade-a-week U.S. history survey, the upper-level seminars, the overview lectures and the in-depth source discussions.

I read with another clear, even ruthless, imperative: get fuel for my own writing. Can this book give me insight into how Americans have taken over or used or been shaped by their environments? Can this chapter help me see how people in the United States have worked with scientific or medical knowledge? or how they have understood the states of their own bodies, their lands, their nation? **CAN I USE THIS?**

Can someone else? I read with an eye for material I can pass along to colleagues. Will this chapter help my buddy in Anthro on a book? Would this article be of use to someone in my writing group?

Finally, I read thinking about the people I see over Thanksgiving tables and at PTO meetings. Is there something that will take the excitement and real-ness that I experience in primary sources and insightful writing about the past and make that accessible and immediate to the people I care about who aren't in a university?

Most of the time, this means I blow through books and articles in a directed haste that makes me a bit sad. I'd like to read more, with slow appreciation, but if I'm going to teach and write I have to get through other people's thoughts and words in much the same way that a fire gets through wood.

In all these ways, for all these reasons, I found Mark Fiege's new book, *The Republic of Nature*, to be a deeply satisfying pleasure. I can **USE** this book in all the ways I need: in my classes, in my teaching, as a resource I have recommended to colleagues, as a set of sources and reflections that are already shaping my own writing, even as a book I have recommended with enthusiasm to people who aren't historians and think they don't like history. This is a book that does all that I need a book to do. And—in a satisfaction so deep and rare that I value it like an amazing meal or a walk in perfect weather or an unexpected shared confidence—I found myself savoring this book, enjoying the pacing, the rhythm, the insights between as well as in each line. I found I could do what I try hard not to let myself do: allow myself to open it at the first page and just relax into it. And oh what pleasure it has been to do so.

In this book, Mark Fiege takes on a fundamental “So, what?” challenge, and he does it head-on. This environmental history business is all very well and good, two long-ago students told him, but what does it really change about the central business of American history? What do these national parks or fisheries or sharecropping contracts have to say about the Big Conflicts, the Big Moments, the decisive shaping periods that have made the modern world what it is, not something different?

The answer, Fiege shows, is, plenty. He takes central conflicts and forces in American history and asks what about them is environmental. What difference has nature made? In nine chapters, Fiege takes key moments or themes in American history and demonstrates how they have been shaped by American environments.

A reader seeking the central argument could do no better than to look at the map on page 319, opening the chapter on the 1954 *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court case that outlawed school segregation in the United States. This small map encapsulates much of Fiege's insight about this case – and about U.S. history broadly. The map shows the home of Linda Brown, an eight-year-old African-American child in Topeka, Kansas, along with the location of her school bus stop, the home of a nearby white child, and the distance she had to travel to her school compared with the proximity of the all-white school nearby. This map shows the heavy industries near the Brown home and the rail lines along which this elementary schooler had to walk on cold mornings to get to the bus that would take her to her all-black school. Safe streets of a residential neighborhood in one direction, a much longer walk along multiple railroad tracks and through a district of heavy industry in another. This clearly-mapped difference speaks the racial geography of the post-War United States, and it speaks Fiege's argument: racism creates geography in the U.S., and it shaped the structures of segregation.

Geography also shaped the arguments against segregation, he points out, rescuing from obscurity the profoundly environmental arguments made in the original court case. As argued before the Supreme Court, the legal argument was one of sociological research. As lived by the Browns and their neighbors and as first argued by NAACP lawyers in the original case, the argument was one of unjust environments and a geography of differentiation. Putting that site-specific argument back into this foundational event in American legal and social history shows how profoundly place has shaped the frameworks of American life.

Throughout, gender. People are always embodied in Fiege's book, and it makes a difference which ones of them are bearing and nursing children. The plaintiff in *Brown v. Board* was Linda's father Oliver Brown, Fiege points out, though her mother, Leola Brown, was initially more involved in resisting the racial segregation that shaped their children's lives. Mr. Brown had a union job that (everyone hoped) shielded him from retaliation; Mrs. Brown was pregnant during the trial, which would've made her participation more difficult. The robust strides and powerful musculature of female field hands impressed Northern traveler Frederick Law Olmsted as he toured pre-Civil War plantations, though their pregnancies did not protect them (or their growing children-to-be) from brutal punishment. Noisy and argumentative women became targets of neighbors' anger and of witchcraft accusations in early Salem.

In a beautiful chapter on the development of the atomic bomb, Fiege argues that women created the Los Alamos National Laboratory and enabled development of the bomb not only through work as technicians, scientists, accountants, and secretaries, but also through work as mothers. I was at first skeptical of the seeming romanticism of Fiege's approach, but as I read further I was convinced by his argument that the creative forces of procreation – the Los Alamos baby boom that provided the immediate and pressing context for the people who were simultaneously having babies and creating weapons of immense lethal power—are integral to understanding the creative forces enabling destruction. People who cherished the smell of their newborn's head and the smell of pine branches in a mountain breeze developed the bomb not in spite of that love for the places and people around them, but because of it: not separate from the babies of Los Alamos, but in the midst of and because of them, scientists and engineers created devices that would devastate cities full of children. Bringing us close to the historical reality of the creation of the bomb and to the philosophical struggles faced by those historically-situated people and by all of us in our present day, Fiege asks big questions through the specific details, and he does so with poetic force and persuasive passion.

Even as Fiege shows us readers how the details of bodies matter – gas station owners got tight stomachs facing lines of angry commuters during the 1973 gas crisis, railroad tycoons used control over train cars bearing food to quell incipient labor unrest during construction of the transcontinental railroads – he also shows us how abstract ideas shape bodies and places. In two chapters, Fiege demonstrates

that ideals of agricultural democracy expressed famously in the work of Thomas Jefferson and ideals of “improvement” that found fruition in in the career of Abraham Lincoln drew from work that Americans did with each other and on the land. These chapters on early politics and cultural ideas demonstrate how agriculture, physical commodities, and physical labor shape foundational American ideas of work, justice, and political organization.

The section on Lincoln and labor does a better job than anything I’ve ever read at encapsulating the foundational difference between ideals of the Confederate aristocracy and that of an industrializing North. Diffuse cultural ideals mattered, and in Fiege’s book they take shape in telling details: in the story, for instance, of the pride of a lawyer president who could show army doctors how strong his arms were even after a long afternoon of shaking hands with wounded Union soldiers by furiously chopping wood and then holding the axe steady at arm’s length by the bottom of its handle. In Abraham Lincoln’s knotty sinews, and in the appreciative understanding of the Union physicians gathered around him, Mark Fiege shows us a whole culture’s value of manual labor and how it could shape a presidency—and the course of a nation.

In a chapter on the Gettysburg battle, Fiege re-interprets that Civil War turning point as an environmental struggle. Lee and the Confederacy needed military victory to win their war of independence. They also needed grass, grain, shoes, and salt. Men and horses were debilitated and weakened by salt-poor diets, thirsty and undernourished as they eagerly sought to capture the resources of Pennsylvania fields and farms. The Union forces arrayed against them on those beautifully-suited defensive hills overlooking a small Pennsylvania town were strengthened by secure supply lines, factory production of their rifles and uniforms, and by immunological systems accustomed to city living and bolstered by proper nourishment. The Union won that battle because it controlled the high ground, not just of those Pennsylvania fields but in a broader sense, high ground consisting of a vast network of canals, railroads, wagon trains, and port cities that enabled Federal troops to be well-supplied, well-fed, and well-equipped. Terrain mattered in ways vast and fine in that crucial three-day military catastrophe. I have already read some of this argument in an earlier collection and have seen how thrilled my students have been to see how this brief piece brings together so many of the larger arguments about environment and war that run beneath other writings on the Civil War but are rarely pulled clearly to the surface.⁵ I cannot wait to see what students in my environmental history survey will say about Fiege’s analysis of Gettysburg in the context of this sweep of U.S. history.

⁵ Mark Fiege, “Gettysburg and the Organic Nature of the American Civil War,” in Richard P. Tucker and Edmund Russell, eds., *Natural Enemy, Natural Ally: Toward an Environmental History of Warfare* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2004), pp. 93-109.

Such insights matter to me because of the gritty nature of my campus. Many of my students are returning to school after children, after financial struggle, after getting sober or just figuring out what they want. Many are veterans of our current American wars. Some are right out of high school, aiming for the background and the credentials that will help them build a better future. Showing them how history matters makes a powerful difference in how fully my classes will give themselves over to the project of studying abstract concepts from long ago. This Gettysburg chapter shows so well how history matters, in terms that speak to the people I work with.

Controlling the high ground is not an abstract concept in my classrooms: almost half my Civil War students are going through college on the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill. Stretching before class one day, a student in my U.S. history survey sighed heavily. In response to my inquiring glance, he shrugged. "A wall fell on me in Afghanistan, and my neck hurts," he said. It took me a while, walking back home that evening, to think through what that meant: "Someone was trying to kill me, and the missile they shot hit the wall next to me instead." Like that man, many of the veterans in my classes are younger than I am, but groan like old people when they get up or sit down. When I was first settling in to this campus last year, I remember thinking that I had never before seen so many young people with hearing aids. An argument about the Civil War that tells my students that their experiences are real – that who has the heights, who has effective communication, who has good canteens, who has the supply lines is crucial not in an abstract historical sense but to who will return back to base safely that night – is an argument they can learn from.

Perhaps my students, many of them schooled in rough neighborhoods, will find the opening chapter on the Salem witch trials equally persuasive. Somewhat to my surprise, I found it the weakest. Yes, there was an environmental basis for the witch trials. Yes, resource stress exploded into violence both within communities, as in this 1692 episode, and between communities, as in settler-on-Indian violence. There's a relationship there, but I did not find the pieces knit together well. Violence against women and violence against indigenous people do have a connection, but I did not follow in all respects why violence would explode in the particular form of witchcraft. In some sense, I was less surprised at the linkages made in this chapter. People fighting over land get nasty to each other: this was less unexpected than some of the other connections made in other chapters. This is a main challenge of all historical assessment of Salem: why exactly here? Why exactly now?

Ironically, one question I had about this chapter indicates the theoretical depth and richness of the overall book. I wondered what Fiege made of earlier analysts' claims about direct and less subtle environmental influences on the European settlements of 1692: that the sensations of witchcraft may have had something to do with ergotism, caused by a fungus that can grow on rye.⁶ This is the kind of medical

⁶ Mary K. Matossian, "Views: Ergot and the Salem Witchcraft Affair: An outbreak of a type of food poisoning known as convulsive ergotism may have led to the 1692

whodunit that as a historian of medicine I generally find unconvincing: dramatic physical sensations experienced by teenagers as a result of witchcraft or of fungus-infested rye wheat would not be compelling evidence to people around them unless there were larger social and cultural forces that made them so. Nonetheless, the argument that fungus-infested wheat is partly to blame for the frenzy of witch-finding in colonial Salem might seem to be one answer to the question, “so what difference does environmental history make?” Because Fiege is such a subtle and persuasive thinker and writer, I suspect that reading his response to this kind of argument would have helped me frame persuasive responses when people ask me, as a historian of medicine, “well, wasn’t that just because that king was crazy? Or just because the Indians all died of smallpox?” Physical reality is powerful!—that’s one main argument of Fiege’s book. At the same time, the ‘just because’ aspect of such queries is the problem: whodunit responses tend to reduce historical complexity to one phrase or a quick answer, when we need a set of phrases and a host of answers. I would like to have had Fiege’s example for how to craft a response to this kind of challenge, and a brief discussion of the wheat of Salem might have been one place he could have done that.

That this would even be a frustration indicates in some measure how I value this book. I have already buttonholed colleagues in the hall, enthusing about how *Republic of Nature* might help us teach the U.S. history survey differently. I have recommended chapters to colleagues working on seemingly unrelated projects. I have talked about this book with non-academic friends who like to read good books: my father-in-law, a retired pipefitter, should expect to find one under the Christmas tree. As I contemplate a new research project of my own, on fracking and earthquake fears, I find myself thinking in terms that are at once more abstract and more tangible about the bodies and spaces I am researching: I am sure that I will ask different questions of my sources having just read this book.

For all of this, I am grateful, but perhaps most of all for giving me respite from the imperative of work and use that governs my reading life. I found myself sitting outside on New England early autumn afternoons with this book, staring off into the oak branches waving overhead and thinking about sentences I’d just read, points Fiege had just made. I would unconsciously weigh in my hands the two portions of the book, the just-read and the still-to-read. Doing so, I found myself thinking something I rarely have with nonfiction: oh no, is it really almost done?

At the opening and again at the closing of this project, I found myself reading not simply as a historian, but as an American. I am moved and heartened by the patriotism of this book. Mark Fiege identifies profound and multi-layered challenges in American resource use, ideas about the natural world, and the long-standing embodiment of some of our toughest problems. Yet his analysis also shows

us that places and people and ideas all matter, and his book ends with an abiding hope that we—as Americans—can indeed find ways forward.

Never start with the first page, I tell my students, unless you decide to or you're reading for pleasure. If you pick up *Republic of Nature*, starting on that first page, with Mark Fiege on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, is to fall into an intellectual pleasure that is deep, abiding, and sustaining-- and that will help us do the work we need to do, in our intellectual projects, our classrooms, our communities, and our shared world.

Comments by Roderick Frazier Nash, University of California, Santa Barbara

It seems to me there are two principal pigments which we use to paint the past. One is the cultural context in which events took place. Its main component is ideas. What did a society value? What did it fear and hate? Who were its heroes and why? Often questions like these are discussed under the banner of the history of ideas or “intellectual history.” My mentor at the University of Wisconsin, Professor Merle Curti, wrote a synthesis of the subject entitled *The Growth of American Thought*. It won a Pulitzer Prize in 1944. When I started the research in the early 1960s that ultimately became *Wilderness and the American Mind*, intellectual history was what I thought I was doing. But somewhere along the line it acquired a new name.

The other fundamental context in which history unfolded is environmental. Like all life, people are inevitably shaped by their environment. Not all of it now is *natural*; the synthetic or built environment is dominant in the lives of most humans today. “Environmental history” focuses on the mutual interaction of people and nature. It has been around a while, at least since Frederick Jackson Turner (who, at the end of his career, taught Merle Curti at Harvard), but under different names. It’s nice to see it emerge as a distinct field of history and to acquire sufficient mass to warrant the writing of text-type books like Mark Fiege’s.

Professor Fiege’s book purports to be “an environmental history of the United States” (subtitle). That’s likely a publisher’s fantasy. Both Fiege and William Cronon, who wrote his introduction, immediately explain that the book is “not a single synthetic narrative covering all of American history” (13). Instead Fiege has chosen a few subjects to treat from the perspective of environmental history, which is to say that nature is regarded as a dominant, driving factor. As Cronon points out, the hope is that students and teachers will come away with a sense of the importance of including the environment in their effort to understand the American past.

Despite the breathlessness of Cronon’s introduction, this mission does not strike me as particularly revolutionary. The book opens with a chapter on the 17th Century Puritan colony and the witchcraft trials. It’s pretty much the standard story, albeit abbreviated, suitable for a book that might be assigned along with a standard American history text. If you really wanted to learn about the witches, there are a half dozen monographs on the subject, including some that understand the importance of ideas dating to the Old Testament. If, as a professor, you wanted to give students a “feel” for Puritan ideas about wildness and savagery you would need to probe the emotions of what it was like to live at the edge of the Northeastern forest. There’s no indication in Fiege’s book that he’s ever camped out in the woods. Environmental historians, especially, should do appropriate research out there in the environment. That’s their primary archive. From my perspective, Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) would be a better place to direct an

interested student.

The book gets better as it progresses. Fiege is an excellent writer and the chapters on southern slavery and the Civil War battle at Gettysburg succeed in his mission of showing familiar subjects in a new light. The reader comes away impressed with how cotton plants (nature) shaped ideas and institutions (main line American history), and with the biomedical realities of nineteenth century trench warfare. Bottom line realization: the North won because it was a bigger and better fed dog. Fiege's point about the lack of shoes in the Confederate ranks is particularly telling.

I found Chapters Six and Seven the most interesting in the book. The first tells the story of the transcontinental railway. There's a good "feel" for the space and the hardships involved and for the national euphoria that followed the May 10, 1869 driving of the golden spike in the Utah outback. Coupled with Bill Cronon's superb book *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991), Fiege has opened doors for students to understand westward expansion. The next chapter concerns what Fiege nicely calls "the natural history of the bomb." (317). It's about the people who lived and worked in Los Alamos, New Mexico where the atomic age began. In their own way, argues Fiege, they were pioneers entering a wilderness and changing their environment for better and for worse. Of course there is lots of monographic writing about the events leading up to the summer of 1945, but as an invitation to students to think about humans and nature in a new way this chapter works well.

Fiege concludes with a catch-all chapter on opportunities in American environmental history. After reading the samples presented in this book, I would be surprised if many students would not wish to take advantage of them.

Comments by Eric Foner, Columbia University

**Note of explanation: these comments were first delivered orally by Eric Foner during a panel about Mark Fiege's book at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians (OAH) on April 20, 2012. Other participants in that panel included Mary Beth Norton, Linda Gordon, and (chair) William Cronon. When one of our H-Environment roundtable participants had to bow out, I asked Prof. Foner to make his OAH comments available for inclusion here, and he graciously agreed. -JDH*

As we are in the midst of a presidential election campaign, I thought I would begin by reminding you of Admiral James Stockdale. Remember him? Ross Perot's running mate in 1992. That year he participated in the televised vice-presidential debate, which pitted him against Al Gore and Dan Quayle. His only memorable remark came at the outset – "I don't know why I am here." I can relate. I am not an environmental historian nor do I consider myself an expert on this flourishing field. But perhaps that is why I was invited -- to see what an outsider makes of Professor Fiege's effort to write what he audaciously calls "an environmental history of the United States." As you have already heard, this is not a full narrative of American history, but instead a careful look at several key episodes, from the Salem witch trials to the civil rights movement and economic crisis of the 1970s, in order to demonstrate the value, indeed indispensability, of thinking about them in environmental terms. Nature, Fiege writes, is "embedded in the iconic moments of American history."

Fiege's book arrives adorned with a forward by our distinguished chair and blurbs that are striking for their enthusiasm, even in these grade-inflated times. It is, we are told, a watershed, a cure for the fragmentation of historical scholarship, a radically new account of the American past after which we can never go back to our old ways. And, let me say at the outset, that I myself really enjoyed reading the book. It is beautifully written, comprehensive, interpretively interesting, and ambitious. Its bibliography is a treasure trove of recent historical scholarship. I particularly admire what in New York we call Fiege's chutzpah. It is easy to write learned essays – as many have done – calling upon scholars to write works that demonstrate the centrality of nature to understanding the American past. It is much harder to try to actually do it – and that is what Professor Fiege has attempted.

Why then, did I finish the book with a sense of unease? Because in end, *The Republic of Nature* adds up to less than the sum of its excellent parts. The problem is not simply that the book's structure – a series of discrete and unrelated episodes – seems at war with its purpose – to make us rethink how we see the entire American past. Ultimately, while I greatly admire Fiege's ambition, I found the book not ambitious enough. It adds a dimension, a vital one, to our writing of history, but the individual narratives, well-written as they are, seem remarkably familiar. I wish Fiege had altered our view of the past more than he actually has.

First, however, there is a problem of definition. Sometimes, “nature” seems to be another word for the environment within which human action takes place. Often, however, the term is used so broadly as to encompass everything in the world, indeed, the cosmos. At the outset, Fiege defines nature as all “the matter, energy, and forces that constitute the universe.” It thus includes human beings as well, including the carbon and other elements that compose our bodies and brains. Man is part of nature, yet the laws of nature put limits on what man can accomplish (he cannot go faster than the speed for light, for example). Thus, nature is “the ultimate limit” on the possibilities of human action and “the final determinant of human history.” It is difficult to see from this definition what in history would not constitute nature in some way or another, rendering the concept almost unusable as an analytical category.

Sometimes, as in a discussion toward the end of the book when Fiege moves from the rise of bicycling after the oil shocks of the 1970s (human muscle power replacing other forms of propulsion) to the universal law of entropy – the inexorable dissipation of thermodynamic energy, which dictates the decline of hydrocarbon energy and, one might add, the eventual end of the universe hundreds of billions of years in the future – the juxtaposition of levels of analysis leave the reader confused.

Fortunately, the individual chapters are much more, as it were, down to earth, and offer fascinating and valuable insights. Fiege links the Salem witchcraft crisis with colonists’ troubled relationship to nature – the land, animals, diseases, and Native Americas (remember, people are part of nature too). Belief in supernatural forces helped them to explain their inability to reconstruct or even understand natural developments. In the end, however, the interpretation essentially falls back on psychology – the “unstable social and environmental bases of colonial society” produced a series of “stresses and fears” that led to the witchcraft disaster. This is hardly a new interpretation. And since, as he acknowledges, Salem was hardly alone in confronting these challenges, it is difficult to explain why the crisis broke out there and not in other towns.

The discussion of the revolutionary era suffers, I think, from a conflation of belief in natural law with environmental history. Fiege offers an excellent discussion of the meaning of natural rights as espoused in the Declaration of Independence, and of the invocation of nature to explain the subordinate position of women, but these are pretty familiar. More concrete and interesting is his discussion of how nature complicated the designs of Thomas Jefferson, who at Monticello attempted to impose symmetry on a very irregular topography, requiring a giant effort to reshape the physical environment that never quite succeeded. In his first book, *Irrigated Eden*, Fiege showed how man’s conquest of nature is never complete – how nature fights back against efforts to control it. Jefferson, too, found his best efforts stymied by the constraints of nature.

I found particularly valuable Fiege’s discussion of the cotton kingdom of the Old

South. He explains how the physical requirements of the plant and its crop cycle from planting and germination to harvest shaped the nature of settlement and cultivation and even encouraged certain forms of slave resistance. Dealing with unwanted vegetation – what we amateur gardeners call weeds – emerged as a continual point of struggle between master and slave. Moreover the physical nature of slaves' bodies made the total efficiency demanded by owners impossible, since their diets of corn and pork offered insufficient nourishment for constant work. Slaves had to supplement their diets from livestock and garden plots of their own, leading to further conflicts over time and work. Here nature emerges as a key element in a familiar story. But what is absent is as important as the new insights. Fiege says nothing about ideology (master or slave), about slave culture, the world market in cotton, the credit system, etc. The wider world has slipped from view, making it impossible to assess the importance of the factors he emphasizes.

I was particularly interested in Fiege's discussion of Abraham Lincoln, and especially his emphasis on Lincoln's 1850s speech on discoveries and inventions – one of his favorites, which always seemed to bore his audiences when he delivered it. Lincoln spoke frequently about nature, within a developmental outlook. Nature was there to be conquered. Having grown up on the frontier, Lincoln disliked physical toil; improvement – new technologies, better transportation, etc – would reduce the need for it, producing abundance for all in a free labor society. Fiege makes the point that Lincoln experienced the American landscape directly as a settler, boatman, and surveyor, and had traveled extensively in the nation's heartland before becoming president. He saw the physical unity of the country as underpinning its political unity. All this is insightful; but when the discussion turns to the road to emancipation the narrative again becomes familiar, nature seems to disappear, and Lincoln appears to be the only historical actor, with Congress, radicals, and the slaves themselves relegated to the sidelines.

Again, when the discussion becomes most concrete – an account of the battle of Gettysburg – the invocation of nature is most persuasive. Everyone knows of the fields, ridges and dens that made up the battlefield but Fiege describes the physical topography of the battlefield in vivid detail and demonstrates, as he writes, that “the terrain is never neutral,” affecting the strategies of both sides in the battle.

The narrative makes a giant lap from the transcontinental railroad to the building of the atomic bomb in the early 1940s, certainly one of the most dramatic efforts to harness the power of nature. Fiege emphasizes that many of the atomic scientists at Los Alamos, such as J. Robert Oppenheimer, loved the region's mountains and forests – one reason they did not mind being holed up in this remote area. But other than a compelling irony – people who love nature using its awe-inspiring power to destroy – the point is not entirely clear. The civil rights chapter focuses interestingly on Linda Brown and her daily walk to school through an unsafe environment as one catalyst of the landmark Supreme Court case, and the book then moves to the oil crisis, offering an excellent account of where oil comes from, and how its intensive use has reshaped the American environment and social outlook,

promoting what he calls “automobile individualism” over any notion of common purpose.

In the final chapter, Fiege looks briefly at a few other moments in American history, mostly through questions – some interesting, others quixotic. Here the discussion seems much more reductionist than the rest of the book. Can Reconstruction really be “explained as environmental history”? Fiege notes that access to common land, the right to hunt, and ownership of dogs were one site of struggle between former masters and former slaves. But these were hardly the central questions in the titanic battles of that era. Seeking to find a link between modern feminism and environmentalism, he asks “Did Betty Friedan’s suburban women also experience the spraying of their homes with DDT?” And was it a coincidence that the founding of NOW took place “at the zenith of the nation’s petroleum exuberance?” My answers – no and yes. It seems doubtful that these questions offer a foretaste of a new interpretation of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

Overall, my first piece of advice to those in this room is – go out and read this book. You will be enlightened, entertained, and fascinated. You may also wish that Professor Fiege had offered less in the way of familiar narratives of events, and been more precise as to what exactly he was claiming about the role of nature in explaining some of the key episodes of our history. But any pioneering work is probably open to similar criticisms, and in the end, I congratulate him for producing a book that anyone interested in the American past will have to reckon with.

Comments by Christopher C. Sellers, SUNY Stony Brook

Mark Fiege's recent *The Republic of Nature* takes the American history textbook to task in environmental history's name. His native field, so he contends, offers an indispensable lens on even the most "iconic" of its episodes. Fiege's volume has already sparked a useful dialogue between us environmental historians and our less environmentally minded colleagues about just how central our field is, or should be, to that high ground of "general" American history. While it serves Fiege's purpose to present environmental history as unified and consistent in content, I am not so sure that the many variegated thrusts of the book square so easily with one another. So kaleidoscopic are the theses and arguments of *The Republic of Nature* that for me, it provides a revealing indication of the tensions within our field as it now stands. Our field is actually more riven by contradiction and debate than he lets on—and happily so. And his case for the importance of the natural world to "iconic" episodes in American history may work better for those long immersed in our field's evolving debates—especially those seeking a fusion of environmental with social history--than for those outside environmental history proper. For non-environmental historians, the argument and narrative may well prove more puzzling than penetrating.

The many virtues of this book begin with its opening, about a visit to the Lincoln Memorial. With literary precision and flourish, Fiege attends to the physical details not just of this place and its making but of his own and others' experience of it. He leads his reader in a well-nigh philosophical direction, into big and challenging questions about humanity's historical relationship with the natural world. The nine episodes he then considers range across a chronological as well as thematic gamut of topics popular in American history surveys: the Salem witchcraft trials, the Revolution, the cotton-and-slavery dependent antebellum South, Abraham Lincoln and Gettysburg, all the way through to the atomic bomb, *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the 1970s energy crisis. To make his case, Fiege draws upon that impressive range of meanings for and analyses of nature that have evolved in the field of environmental history over the last couple of decades, both older and newer. Most familiarly, focus falls most often on agriculture and its environmental contingencies and impacts. We get many reminders of how differences in climate and resources as well as other physical aspects of the environment shape historical outcomes. The focus ranges down as well as up the social scale, from presidents down to industrial workers, housewives and slaves. His attention to "worksapes" and to the physicality of the human body is more systematic and thorough-going than in any earlier survey or textbook of which I am aware. The newest, arguably most innovative ways in which Fiege seeks to write nature into human history come in the realm of ideas: the "naturalness" of natural law and sociability, of class or racial equality (and inequality), of the scientific and sublime experience with nature among twentieth-century physicists.

The resulting work splits the difference between an environmentally attuned survey of American history and a series of original essays. What do all these rewritings of “iconic” episodes add up to? It is a refrain familiar to us environmental historians, dating back at least as far as a 1990 roundtable in the *Journal of American History*, that throughout America’s past, “nature mattered.”⁷ But Fiege’s demonstration raises questions about just how consistent or uniform—dare I say “monolithic”?—the underlying impulses of this environmental history enterprise have become. Already in 1990, that roundtable revealed a hotly debated diversity of approaches to “the role and place of nature” in human history⁸ (p. 9 in Fiege). Arguably, more than twenty years and many a methodological innovation later, the prospects of a single unifying thesis have eroded still further.

Fiege does make a valiant stab at one: that environmental history insists on the import of the material, of physicality, to history. It serves to remind how even “the highest of ideals” “cannot rise, godlike, above its creators, materials, and environment” (p. 5). Environmental historians thereby provide the antidote to their colleagues’ presumed penchant for abstraction—a kind of anti-idealist philosophy that echoes the mature thought of Marx. The nature of environmental history, he summarizes, is not “monolithic, static, or abstract, but [as] complex, active, and material, a multifarious biophysical reality that both enabled and limited people’s efforts to shape the future” (p. 408). Not surprisingly, coherent as such summaries sound, they downplay some of the more novel and creative analyses of nature across the individual essays. The hunt for nature’s role and place can take Fiege into empyrean realms of abstraction as well—and not just in his own near-philosophic statements of principle. His practice of environmental history finds prominence in nature-related ideas and ideology, for instance, about “natural law” and “human nature” through which American leaders from Jefferson to Lincoln challenged legacies of the human past. Fiege’s conclusion, though still insisting on a materialist lesson overall, more clearly acknowledge the field’s rich if unwieldy diversity, by devolving into a loosely connected string of possibilities and questions. That this book-length statement of what environmental history has to offer veritably bursts at the seams with so many different topics and directions bodes well for our field, but is not so conducive to any particular take-home point.

Ever since environmental historians first inveigled their way into history departments, most of us environmental historians have had the occasion to argue that “nature matters”; it’s a stock in trade of our field. But Fiege’s book clarifies for me some dilemmas with this move which have been building over the more than two decades that I have watched environmental history evolve. I for one certainly welcome Fiege’s more innovative analyses, from a suggested environmental version

⁷ Donald Worster et al., “Roundtable on Environmental History,” *Journal of American History* 76, no. 4 (March 1990): 1087–1147.

⁸ William Cronon, “Modes of Prophecy and Production: Placing Nature in History,” *The Journal of American History* 76, no. 4 (March 1990): 1122.

of intellectual history to his recovery of workers' experiences to an emphasis on "the importance of the physical body." But these moves may well furrow the brows of non-environmental historians. Likely less aware of on-going work over the last few years to expand the bounds of the "nature" that "matters" in environmental history, they may well see this blurring of boundaries between EH and other historical fields the other way around from how Fiege wishes. Whereas he and others of us who buy these newer arguments see a broadening demonstrating of how "environment" or "nature" mattered, the non-environmental historian may well see, instead, a species of labor or economic or medical or science history.

Beyond this question of audience lies another one internal to our field itself. What happens to environmental history when it shucks off those narratives and moral critiques so closely associated with environmentalism itself? Fiege's is hardly the first work in our field to do so: for the last two decades and more, the quest has been on for alternatives to "declension"—that narrative and ethical mode most favored by the mid-century environmental movement itself. Through this search, environmental history has largely defined itself as a separate academic field of history, distinct from, and frequently critical of, the needs and preferences of environmental or conservation politics. That moral purpose which Fiege suggests for his field, to serve up reminders of the biophysical dimensions of history, strips the content of environmentalism down to a bare principle, one flexible and nimble enough to ground a host of future articles and theses. But if that's all we're about, then what's to keep our field from becoming, say, a recrudescence of the *Annales* school, or the historians' version of science writing? Not that either outcome would necessarily be bad. But I am wary that our field might become known for seeking its own intellectual empire within American history simply for empire's sake. I do hope we will all feel compelled to seek our own, and other rationales, for why it matters that "nature matters."

The moral potential of environmental history might be illuminated at least as clearly for non-environmental historians, I think, through explorations of how and why nature has been so repeatedly written out or excluded from so many Americans' perceptions and experiences. Ignorance, neglect, or misinterpretation of the natural world, and the ensuing consequences, have long supplied a moral edge to environmental historians' work, and will no doubt continue to do so. One other trajectory, lost in an emphasis mainly on the ways that biophysical reality *was* important to historical events, is the history of line-drawing by past actors, between what was considered "nature" or "natural" and what was not. Before we environmental historians turn such questions on the past, though, we might seek greater clarity about our own answers on this front. Like many of us, Fiege readily equates "biophysical reality" with "nature" in theory, yet his own selections of topic suggest a more limited equivalence. Most of his stories about where "nature matters" revolve around extractive or agricultural landscapes, most of these in the West. Western industrial landscapes do figure prominently, but less so cities or suburbs. After the colonial period, we return to the northeast only in the final chapter; and only that and a chapter on *Brown versus Board of Education* have a

recognizably urban setting. I don't mean to blame Fiege here. He has to strike some kind of a balance between the different, opposing positions of his colleagues (and at least one of whom has fingered his *Brown* chapter as not environmental enough⁹). My point is: assumptions differ within our own field over just what the "nature" is that we environmental historians can persuasively argue to "matter." These tensions deserve a more explicit airing and debate.

Other of the larger narratives that Fiege threads through various of his chapters strike me as aligning the moral and analytical thrust of environmental history with those of other historical subfields, social history in particular. He unpacks nature-related themes and questions in a familiar progression of racial politics and ideology: from the contradictions over slavery among the founding fathers through the emancipatory impetus of Abraham Lincoln through W.E.B. Dubois and the NAACP. Through histories of southern plantations and their slaves, and the transcontinental railroad and its builders, he melds the environmental dimensions of large-scale industrial enterprise with experiences of laborers, harrowing and perilous as these often were. Overall, his materialist pitch and chosen mixture of actors and episodes suggest a narrative of secularization, in which an early religiously mediated perspective on the natural world, exemplified by the Salem Puritans, gives way to a nature seen more or less solely through a natural scientific lens. Nevertheless, his occasional broaching of "sublime" or "transcendent" experiences, whether in mountains or at historical monuments, suggests a historical relationship between nature, science, and religion that is less unidirectional and more complex.

One last set of questions that this book posed to me was about just how peculiarly *American* this republic of nature has been. Fiege's predecessors in this kind of argument, from Perry Miller in *Nature's Nation* to Frederick J. Turner, nowadays look to have simply assumed that America's history was exceptional, without much scrutiny of other nations' experiences.¹⁰ Fiege makes no such claim; I looked hard but was unable to come up with any statement about how America's "republic of nature" might compare with any other. Could the history of the American republic have been any less "of nature" than that of any other nation? It does seem in keeping with Fiege's project that if you were so inclined, you could write a "republic of nature" for France, or for Brazil. But once you start, the more comparative questions about America's wranglings with nature that arise may well shift the gist of the enterprise. You no longer need to prove that "nature mattered"; you just assume it does. Your inquiry will then center more, instead, on just how nature mattered, and especially, how differently in this nation versus that one. Perhaps

⁹ J. R. McNeill, "The Environment Makes History," *Science* 336, no. 6081 (May 3, 2012): 543–543.

¹⁰ Perry Miller, *Nature's Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967); Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1920).

ultimately, that is the direction in which this new vein of environmental history pioneered by Mark Fiege will take us.

Response by Mark Fiege, Colorado State University

Writing *The Republic of Nature* and Rethinking American (Environmental) History

I thank Eric Foner, Roderick Frazier Nash, Christopher Sellers, and Conevery Bolton Valencius for their trenchant critiques of *The Republic of Nature*. Their incisive observations and questions highlight a series of issues central to the book and, to a degree, to environmental history and to the study of American history in general. These include the definition of nature that informs my book as well as environmental history; whether or not the approach I have taken is truly new; the moral purpose of my approach; and the tension in the book between narration and analysis. I will address each issue in the order listed here. Finally, I will speak to the implications of Foner's criticism that the book is "not ambitious enough." I don't completely agree with Foner, but more important, whatever my book does not do, it does go well beyond the vast majority of conventional histories in bringing to bear a material perspective on the past. A far more pressing problem than any shortcoming of my book is the propensity of most historians to assume a "human exceptionalism," to borrow a concept from the ethicist Clive Hamilton, that downplays if not ignores the ways in which the Earth conditioned the past choices and actions of people.

Foner, Sellers, and, to a lesser extent, Nash, raise the crucially important question of nature and its definition. Foner proposes that my use of the word is so broad as to be nearly meaningless, while Sellers suggests that my overarching emphasis on the materiality or physicality of all human experience obscures the disagreements among environmental historians over the word and its purposes, disagreements that, in many ways, have defined our field. These are fair criticisms, and maybe the book should have done more to make explicit the problem of nature and its definition and the intellectual vitality that it has fostered among environmental historians. Nature perennially—some might say eternally—resists easy resolution, but to my mind that is an invitation to inquiry, not a problem to be avoided, and my intent was to embrace its wonderful heterogeneity and see what turned up when I examined it in the context of major American history topics. My desire for dramatic narrative exposition (more on this below), however, may have deprived me of opportunities to address conceptual and historiographical issues ranging from general notions of nature to disagreements over more specific topics such as the claim about fungus-infested grain in colonial New England.

As much as I'm sensitive to the danger inherent in defining nature so broadly that it becomes useless, I don't believe my handling of it is quite so clumsy as that. Although my definition of nature generally means the material totality that conditions the human experience, I avoid crude simplifications and reductionisms—

for example, that ergot caused the colonial witchcraft scares, American Indians had no immunity to disease, or warm climate and cotton plants determined the expansion of slavery.¹¹ In every case, I describe nature not as a monolith but as something that took many physical forms, and I explain how people's experience of those forms shaped their ideas (including ideas of nature, and monist ideas of "Nature" at that), emotions, social relationships, technologies, and other things.

If in fact I go too far, if in fact readers think my handling of nature is so broad as to be virtually meaningless, then it might be worthwhile to contemplate for a moment the widespread propensity of historians to go to the opposite extreme by downplaying or ignoring nature altogether. Many historians, for example, remain so invested in culture as a category of analysis that they habitually reify it into the primary, if not exclusive, ground of human life and all else. In their interpretations, culture and its many variations—words, texts, signs, symbols, mind, consciousness, thought, ideas, representations, meaning, identity, and unstable definitions of everything—threaten to become a disembodied, dematerialized, decontextualized all. Another example is the work of social and labor historians who interpret past events only within the shifting relationships of production. If these accounts even address nature, they tend to construe it as something that capitalism "produces." My point is not that culture and production are invalid categories for studying the past; rather, my point is that all analytical approaches have strengths and weaknesses, nature no more than culture, production, or any other.

The newness—or not—of my emphasis on nature is fundamental to the book, and I thank Foner and Nash especially for their attention to that issue. Part of their perception likely stems from my choice of topics—I deliberately chose well-known ones, but any potential problem inherent in that decision is no greater for me than for any historian who revisits the same events. After thousands upon thousands of books and articles on American history, can another treatment of any major event satisfy every reader, especially academicians, that it is completely new? After tens of thousands of books on slavery, the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, and the unfolding of the concept of freedom, how much more remains to be said? Having spent the better part of a decade surveying vast swaths of American history, I'm inclined to believe that there is room for much more, and I'm always pleased to open another volume on slavery, the Civil War, Lincoln, freedom or, for that matter, wilderness. Ongoing historical inquiry, and the curiosity, enthusiasm, dissatisfaction, and outrage that drive it, is a sign of the intellectual vibrancy that an open society must have. I sincerely hope that the stream continues unabated and that I'm not the last historian to wonder about the role and place of nature in all events in the American past.

Another part of the newness issue likely stems from my use of sources written or edited by non-environmental historians (if I might call them that). When I began the

¹¹ On this matter, see the review by James Morton Turner in *The Journal of American History* 99 (December 2012): 865-867.

project, part of the challenge was to see if any of them had addressed the nature (literally) of history. Often, to my surprise, they had. Imagine my delight, for example, when I opened Daniel Boorstin's classic *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (1948) and encountered a chapter titled "The Natural History of a New Society." Despite his reputation as an intellectual historian, Boorstin was not so idealist after all, and his book seemed richly suggestive. Discovering (or rediscovering) Boorstin in this way reminded me of a moment in graduate school when my doctoral adviser opened Fred Shannon's *The Farmers' Last Frontier* (1945) and showed me the title of the first chapter: "Nature and the Farmer."¹² It's not as if historians have never thought about nature, my adviser said; it's just that environmental historians go to much greater lengths to make nature central.¹³ And that is what I do in *The Republic of Nature*. Even though I draw insights and information from Boorstin and many other non-environmental historians, I go much further than any of them in explaining how nature mattered to the Revolution and other key events in the American past.

Audience—a factor to which Sellers points—also might influence whether or not readers perceive my approach to be new. Readers respond differently, depending on their age, expertise, and many other factors, as even the critiques in this roundtable demonstrate. Foner says my discussion of natural law and natural rights in the Revolution is "pretty familiar"; Sellers says that this feature is among the "newest, arguably most innovative" in the book. What seems familiar to senior historians steeped in the history of ideas might seem much fresher to others. I wonder if many academic historians who never have given natural law or natural rights much thought will find, as does Sellers, something worthwhile in my discussion of those concepts and their material groundings. Certainly this is likely to be true of younger readers. At a Barnes and Noble bookstore in Philadelphia, a community college student picked up *The Republic of Nature* and was thrilled to see connections between ideas she was studying in one of her courses and my account of nature and the Revolution. She certainly thought my approach was new, and that was gratifying because I also had people such as her in mind when I wrote the book. Does her response matter less than that of senior academicians? Not necessarily, and I suspect that Valencius, attuned as she is to her own students, might agree with me.

Sellers perceptively points to field differences as an important factor in how people read the book and, more important, respond to developments in environmental history as a whole. I would say that the reception of *The Republic of Nature* has been more enthusiastic among environmental historians than among others. Yet I'm not sure this assessment alone is sufficient, especially as concerns the discipline in

¹² Daniel Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Henry Holt, 1948), 167 (quotation); Fred Shannon, *The Farmer's Last Frontier: Agriculture, 1860-1897* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1945).

¹³ I can't help but think of my adviser's abiding interest in contingency and wonder what direction my work might have taken had his hand paused over Shannon's book, but then reached for Boorstin's instead.

general. For me, one of the exciting outcomes of working on this book was to learn of colleagues in other fields who are taking environmental history seriously. Even as I completed the manuscript, a number of scholars—and they seem to be predominantly younger ones—had recently published or were preparing to publish works on slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and colonial- and Revolutionary-era women that either consciously used environmental history or could be read as highly consistent with the field.¹⁴ Even as I was trying to move environmental history outward, so to speak, other scholars were adapting its perspectives to their own purposes.

The study of the Civil War and Reconstruction is a good example. While working on my book, I was fortunate to make the acquaintance of Lisa Brady, then a graduate student at the University of Kansas and a capable and eclectic historian as comfortable with the Civil War and other military topics as with environmental themes. I couldn't have been happier to find a kindred spirit. Brady, of course, went on to publish *War Upon the Land*, the first full-fledged environmental history of the Civil War.¹⁵ Later, I received an invitation to speak at the University of Illinois-Springfield and the Lincoln Home National Historic Site, where a committee—on its own, without direct input from an environmental historian—had decided to organize a lecture and symposium on “The Nature of Lincoln.” I was pleased to share my ideas with interested audiences of several hundred people in total, and I was grateful for a generous and helpful critique from Michael Burlingame and other Lincoln scholars.¹⁶ And this was only the beginning.

¹⁴ Among many other works, see, for example, Martha Finch, “‘Civilized Bodies’ and the ‘Savage’ Environment of Early New Plymouth,” in *A Centre of Wonders: The Body in Early America*, ed. Janet Moore Lindman and Michele Lise Tarter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 43-59; Richard Follett, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); and Andrew McIlwaine Bell, *Mosquito Soldiers: Malaria, Yellow Fever, and the Course of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010). One of my favorites is Susan E. Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), a work I have assigned to good effect in my course on American environmental history.

¹⁵ Lisa M. Brady, *War upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes during the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

¹⁶ Mark Fiege, “Land of Lincoln: Environmental History and the Sixteenth President,” Lincoln Legacy Lecture Series, Center for State Policy and Leadership, University of Illinois, Springfield, 15 October 2009; Mark Fiege, “Our Broad National Homestead: Lincoln and the Nature of the United States,” 24th Annual Lincoln Colloquium, Lincoln Home National Historic Site, Springfield, Illinois, 17 October 2009. Other presenters at the Lincoln Colloquium included James Davis, Rolf Diamant, Dwight Pitcaithley, and Douglas Wilson, with commentary by Michael Burlingame.

Independent of me, the trend has continued right down to the present, and is well represented by works such as Jim Downs's *Sick from Freedom: African American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction*.¹⁷ This book, which appeared at virtually the same time as *The Republic of Nature*, makes an arresting claim—that smallpox and other diseases constrained the freed people's initial experience of life after slavery.¹⁸ Downs underscored his analysis in an interview with Jennifer Schuessler of the *New York Times*, who quoted Downs as saying that “if you have smallpox, you don't have agency”—a statement of no surprise to environmental historians but astonishing coming from a social historian.¹⁹ One of social history's most important methodological commitments has been to the analysis of agency, the capacity of oppressed people to exert some influence over their existence. In no uncertain terms, Downs identified a powerful limitation on it, thereby bringing his book into dialogue with mine. “People are agents of their histories,” I state in *The Republic of Nature* (p. 11); “they are willful, purposeful, discerning beings who choose among many potential actions. Yet their capacity to act is not boundless; they shape events only within a range of what is possible. The ultimate limit on that range of possibilities, and thus the final determinant of human history, is nature.” I don't know if Downs would agree with me, but the story he tells in *Sick from Freedom* is exactly what I had in mind.

Here is an opportunity to reflect for a moment on one of Foner's comments about the conclusion to *The Republic of Nature*. Some of the speculative questions in that section of the book are “interesting,” he says, and “some quixotic,” and he wonders if Reconstruction really can be explained as environmental history. It seems that if Downs doesn't do that, then he makes a significant stride toward it, and I have to wonder about Foner's comments in light of the fact that Downs's book originated as a doctoral thesis at Columbia University under Foner's direction. Perhaps the crux of this problem—or misunderstanding—is the definition of environmental history. How “environmental” must a work of history be for a reader to consider it environmental history? How much nature must such a work have in it? Must the author use the word nature? Perhaps more important, how much do labels matter? Does it matter how Downs's work is categorized? Isn't it enough that a scholar had the imagination, resourcefulness, and courage to write a book in which he took seriously the power of smallpox and other organisms to constrain human actions? Is

¹⁷ Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁸ Another work that makes a striking claim about American history and that can be read in relationship to Downs is Mariola Espinosa, *Epidemic Invasions: Yellow Fever and the Limits of Cuban Independence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Again, is it environmental history? I would say that it is, but does the question really matter?

¹⁹ Jennifer Schuessler, “Liberation as Death Sentence,” *New York Times*, 10 June 2012, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/11/books/sick-from-freedom-by-jim-downs-about-freed-slaves.html>.

it possible that I'm not tilting at windmills, and Foner and I are not so far apart after all?

This issue cuts both ways, as much against environmental historians as non-environmental ones. I wonder if my friends and colleagues in environmental history will embrace the work of Downs and the growing number of historians who, if they don't explicitly align themselves with environmental history, incorporate elements of it into their analyses. What is the fine line that differentiates one work as environmental history and reads another out of the field?²⁰ And let me go deeper. One of the great accomplishments of environmental historians has been to point out the vulnerability of armies, refugees, and other mobile populations to disease. Why did we not think to apply this insight to the story of the freed people at the end of the Civil War? Why did a social historian do it before any of us attempted it? (How did I miss this?) Then again, maybe these questions are irrelevant, and environmental historians should be pleased that colleagues in other fields are producing work that, if not environmental history in some exclusive or pure sense, is consistent with much of what we do.

To return to the original question—whether anything in *The Republic of Nature* is new or not—I would say that the answer is plenty, and I appreciate the extent to which the scholars assembled here, Sellers and Valencius especially, acknowledge as much. Let me add a few things, however. There is newness in my effort to synthesize old stories in fresh ways. Even chapter one, on witchcraft, which by far has absorbed the most pummeling from critics, is different in its premise, in its incorporation, arrangement, and linking of evidence, and in its narrative structure from any other essay of comparable length on the same topic. There is newness in my attention to particular themes, such as bodies, animals, energy, and the material grounding of ideas. To take but one example, how many explanations of Lincoln treat him as a kind of abstract, disembodied mind, as if he were the sum of the books that he read, as if the materiality of those books and Lincoln's physical experience of labor in difficult landscapes had nothing to do with what he thought? Does any other work address the concept of improvement in quite the same way?

There is newness, finally, in the many small stories that I tell in the book. When I write about Charles Ball and his escape from slavery (p. 129), for example, and say that he “proved himself to be a consummate outdoorsman and survivalist,” I draw on my own original knowledge and insights—contrary to Nash's criticism of me, knowledge and insights gleaned less from books and documents and the work of other historians than from my personal experience camping, backpacking, hiking, canoeing, and fishing (and, on one hungry occasion, failing to catch fish) in

²⁰ I am reminded of the geographer Carl Sauer's warning: “When a subject is ruled, not by inquisitiveness but by definitions of its boundaries, it is likely to face extinction. This way lies the death of learning.” See John Leighly, ed., *Land and Life: A Selection from the Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 355.

undeveloped and untrammelled wilderness landscapes.²¹ Throughout the book, in virtually every paragraph, I try to make the narrative as fresh and intriguing as possible, and I sincerely appreciate the readers who recognize my effort.

The blurring of boundaries between environmental history and other scholarship—perhaps I should say the convergence of environmental history and other scholarship—bears upon Sellers’s thoughtful questions about the moral purpose of *The Republic of Nature* and environmental history generally. I agree that my book departs from the field’s original attachment to a notion of nature (and especially a stable non-human nature) as a standard of value, and I suspect that for some historians, at least, environmental and otherwise, this might be the rub—this might be the standard that distinguishes environmental history from other fields. Yet I disagree that my approach is as stripped down as Sellers perhaps suggests, that my larger moral claim is simply that “nature matters,” and that this stance merely serves the instrumental function of expanding the power base of environmental historians at the expense of other fields.

Acknowledging that nature matters to history has powerful moral implications. For example, if any scholar cares about representative government and the struggles over justice that are functions of it, and if that scholar is concerned about the challenges if not threats posed by energy use and climate change to society (American or any other), then it might behoove her or him to probe the energetic and climatological bases of government throughout history. I can’t say that *The Republic of Nature* fully attempts much less accomplishes that task, but in several places throughout the book, I do pay close attention to government. Nature matters there and in other passages in morally engaged ways, and the book at least points in the right direction.

This is not the beginning and end of the moral purpose I had in mind when I wrote the book, either. Here is another side to it. I share with millions of people around the world a commitment to the struggle for human dignity, equality, and self-determination, and I believe that the best chance of realizing those ends requires democratic processes expressed through public deliberation and representative government. I believe that nature is intrinsic to this struggle, and that a broad range

²¹ Mark Harvey’s reflections on Howard Zahniser and the purpose of wilderness might be pertinent here: “He often stressed that wilderness was not merely a place to escape from the harried and confusing world outside, but more than that—a place from which to gain perspective on one’s own life and society. Immersion in wilderness strengthened humans for coping with their own dilemmas and concerns by freshening their perspective on themselves.” See Mark Harvey, *Wilderness Forever: Howard Zahniser and the Path to the Wilderness Act* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 251. Perhaps, however, the relevance of wilderness is overblown. See Mart Stewart, “If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian: American Environmental History West and South,” *Environment and History* 11 (May 2005): 139-162.

of material conditions—from climate and disease to many others—has affected its course. I might have made this point more explicit at the outset of the book (again, more on this below), but it is strongly implicit and is there for everyone to see, in every chapter and on virtually every page. Nature indeed matters, and not for its own (non-human) sake. This might complicate environmental history—diffuse it, perhaps—by departing from its original moral standard, but it also creates an opportunity for environmental historians to find common ground with other fields. Foner’s skepticism notwithstanding, it might be one means for historians of different sorts to extricate themselves from the “age of fracture,” as Daniel Rogers calls it, and recover a moral center that unites them in common effort.²²

At the risk of redundancy, let me offer an example, from African American history. (Or is it just American history?) While working on *The Republic of Nature*, I learned about James Weldon Johnson’s and J. Rosamond Johnson’s *Lift Every Voice and Sing* (1900), sometimes known as the Negro national anthem.²³ *Lift Every Voice* expresses an alternative providentialism, an alternative Manifest Destiny. It is not about war and conquest, not about surveying the American landscape from an omniscient, godly perch in majestic purple mountains, not about Pilgrim’s feet beating a thoroughfare of freedom across the wilderness and the bodies of American Indians. Rather, it is about a beleaguered people struggling to find refuge and redemption in spite of overwhelming adversity. I wonder if *Lift Every Voice* presents an opportunity to begin imagining an alternative American history that is not simply about the subjugation of people and land (so often related parts of the same project in the nation’s past), but about people working in nature to fulfill a much deeper, richer, more just purpose inherent in themselves and the world.²⁴ If ever there was a time when Americans could use such a story—if ever there was a time when they needed words such as *redemption* and *refuge* to help them imagine a road map to a better future—it is now. Perhaps the “nature matters” message at the heart of my book points to a moral engagement with the potential to bring people together rather than separate them.

At bottom, a good deal of environmental history’s moral purpose—and that of my book—still turns on the question of whether people are inside or outside of nature. That question was at the heart of the famous 1990 round table that did so much to define the field. I think it deserves attention here, and I think it also reflects on the newness of *The Republic of Nature* and of environmental history. One of the great achievements of Sellers, Valencius, Linda Nash, Nancy Langston, and like-minded

²² Daniel T. Rogers, *The Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

²³ I discuss and quote the song on pp. 331-332 of my book.

²⁴ Some African American historians believe that this is not an alternative history, but *the* core of the American experience, and they are patiently waiting for everyone else to figure this out. See, for example, Vincent Harding’s suggestively titled *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

historians after the 1990 round table was to demonstrate the materiality of human bodies and the fruitlessness of trying to understand them apart from the environments in which they flourish, sicken, and die.²⁵ That insight impressed me, and I thank Sellers and Valencius for recognizing my effort to elaborate it in every chapter of my book. The trend has continued, and now other scholars are going even deeper to suggest that human evolution has been an important element in history.²⁶ These insights, it seems to me, at the very least make it more difficult to argue for a moral standard that positions people outside of nature. I suggest that *The Republic of Nature* be read as part of an effort to create an environmental history that arises from a moral ground on which people are in and of nature, not apart from it.

I might have made this and other points more strongly had I taken a different approach to writing the book. My desire to write history that was more narrative than analytical, more “show me” than “tell me,” perhaps prevented me from addressing certain issues more explicitly. I’m not entirely convinced, as Sellers suggests, that *The Republic of Nature* is the place to air environmental historians’ disagreements over the definition of nature, but be that as it may, perhaps I should have made the effort, just as I might have addressed scholarly disputes over the causes of witchcraft, as Valencius wishes. Rather than thinking of those issues as obstacles that might disrupt the flow of the book and put off readers, I might have imagined them as eddies in which the story could circle before slipping back into the main current.

If I could rewrite the book, I would do more to reveal my commitments in the debates that have enlivened environmental history, explain more forcefully and at length what is new in my approach, especially in relationship to previous work, and point out some of the book’s subtleties. I might devote a good portion of the conclusion to a summary of major themes developed in the chapters.²⁷ I certainly

²⁵ Christopher Sellers, “Thoreau’s Body: Towards an Embodied Environmental History,” *Environmental History* 4 (October 1999): 486-514; Conevery Bolton Valencius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Linda Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Nancy Langston, *Toxic Bodies: Hormone Disruptors and the Legacy of DES* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

²⁶ See, for example, Andrew Shryock and Daniel Lord Smail, eds., *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Here it might be worthwhile to recall Donald Worster’s appeal to “the unconscious, unplanned, unsuperintended wisdom of evolution” as an independent, objective, coherent standard that can help rescue people from illusions characteristic of the modern era. The statement appeared in his memorable rejoinder in the round table debate, “Seeing beyond Culture,” *Journal of American History* 76 (March 1990): 1142-1147 (quotation 1146).

²⁷ See the thoughtful critiques by William Wyckoff in the *AAG Review of Books* 1(1) (Spring 2013): 16-18, doi:10.1080/2325548X.2013.785765; and by Steven Danver,

would remove the material on ergot and witchcraft from the endnote and put it in the text, and do the same for the material on environmental disturbance and witchcraft crises in Europe.²⁸ And I would add a few words on causation and how it is a problem for all historians, not just those telling the story of nature and the supernatural in colonial New England. But no matter what I would do differently, I'm still pleased with what I've done, and I thank Foner, Nash, Sellers, and Valencius for appreciating the quality of my prose.

The larger problem to which *The Republic of Nature* and this discussion points is the tendency of too many historians to downplay if not dismiss the material context of human life on Earth. The Australian ethicist Clive Hamilton explains that this is a fallacy rooted in the experience of modernity. Science and the specializations characteristic of modern universities separated human history from natural history and established a history discipline whose practitioners by-and-large assumed a "human exceptionalism" in which people heroically rose above the material forces that governed the rest of the planet. This "bifurcation," Hamilton writes, "was an essential moment in the evolution of the modern subject, the autonomous agent acting on the external world. The autonomous subject, taken collectively, must have an autonomous history."²⁹

The consequences of this crucially important turn have been profound. Well-off history professors, enjoying abundant electricity, food, clothing, office space, paper

"Making Environmental History into *Environmental History* in Mark Fiege's *The Republic of Nature*," *Journal of the West* 51 (Winter 2012): 84-85. I thank Jared Farmer, as well, for his critical comments on these matters.

²⁸ Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 9-10, 220, 379, 512, 662, is a more recent work that connects witchcraft accusations and other forms of instability in Europe and North America to environmental disturbance during the Little Ice Age.

²⁹ Clive Hamilton, *Earthmasters: The Dawn of the Age of Climate Engineering* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 193-199 (quotations 195, 197). The implications of this insight are immense and potentially explosive, especially as concerns questions of human nature and its influence on human behavior. Azar Gat, *Nations: The Long History and Deep Roots of Political Ethnicity and Nationalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 28, argues that historians and other scholars, in their reaction against social Darwinism and fascism, have gone too far in the opposite direction and are now unprepared to address substantive questions about human nature and behavior and the reciprocal interplay of nature and nurture. For a work of history that takes human evolution seriously, see Shryock and Smail, eds., *Deep History*. In *The Republic of Nature*, 506n32, I wonder if the modern "episteme of separation," as the historian Charles Maier calls it, segregated nature from history much as other forms of separation and segregation spread through American society at large. I thank Jared Orsi and Janet Ore for our many conversations on these and other matters at issue in this exchange.

and books, library and archival resources, and warm interior spaces—all made possible by the exploitation of coal and oil—began to tell the story of the great struggle for freedom as if that struggle bore little or no relationship to energetic or biological (or, as Downs explains, epidemiological) conditions. In their commitment to agency and culture, a commitment that borders on obsession, in their assumption of human exceptionalism, historians on the ideological left have shared—and still share—much in common with their conservative, neo-Platonist, libertarian, and neo-liberal political opponents.³⁰

Human exceptionalism retains much of its enduring appeal, and even now, substantial numbers of historians remain unquestioningly devoted to it. In a forum on “Historiographic ‘Turns’ in Critical Perspective,” which appeared in the *American Historical Review* in 2012, Julia Adeney Thomas—an intellectual historian steeped in critical theory and cultural analysis—points out that none of the contributors addresses the most important turn of all. Her essay, “Not Yet Far Enough” (here recall Foner’s criticism that *The Republic of Nature* doesn’t go far enough) praises the authors for their intellectual vigor, but also states that historians “still understand only dimly the forces reshaping our field and our world over the past few decades, and these essays, broad and bracing though they are, are not broad and bracing enough.” The “environment has gotten short shrift from most of us” in the history profession, she concludes, and “this forum accurately represents our discipline’s still-halting engagement with the monstrously difficult problem of how to execute an environmental turn.” The question remains, in her estimation, of whether or not historians even have the conceptual tools and vocabulary necessary to the task.³¹

I believe that historians do, in fact, have the necessary means, as demonstrated by Thomas herself, by my book, by the powerful and growing current of environmental history scholarship in general, and by the work of the new scholars on the scene of the sort that I have discussed here, notably Jim Downs. To these can be added evidence of an increasing openness among non-environmental historians to engage in material approaches to the past. Ann Little, for example, a specialist in the history of women, gender, and sexuality in early America, has drawn attention to a potential “collaboration between environmental history and cultural histories of the social

³⁰ For a model history that unites social and environmental history, see Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America’s Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008). Perhaps also relevant here is Adam Rome, “What Really Matters in History: Environmental Perspectives on Modern America,” *Environmental History* 7 (April 2002): 303-318, which criticizes the discipline for ignoring obvious opportunities to incorporate environmental history perspectives.

³¹ Julia Adeney Thomas, “Not Yet Far Enough,” *American Historical Review* 117 (June 2012): 794-803 (quotations 801, 802). I thank Julia Adeney Thomas for additional dialogue concerning the issues in this and the preceding paragraph, and I thank Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, Adrian Howkins, and Jeremy Vetter for their thoughts as well.

construction of identity.”³² The intellectual historian James Kloppenberg has called for a more deeply contextualized approach to the history of ideas. “American intellectual history in the future will be embodied, embedded, and extended,” he writes, and if his methodology isn’t explicitly environmental, then he is at least pointing in that direction.³³ Lawrence Glickman, in a book edited by Foner and the political historian Lisa McGirr, outlines “cultural history’s new materiality—highlighted by a focus on structures, places, movements, and the senses,” and identifies a parallel trend among historians in other fields, including environmental history, to adapt cultural studies to their purposes.³⁴

I hope that more scholars of American history and all other fields will join us in completing the environmental turn. A world rife with staggering environmental problems—energy, food, epidemics, fresh water, floods and hurricanes and other disasters, species extinctions, climate change, and more—behooves historians to revisit the past in ways that assist humanity in negotiating its perilous present and future. I hope that my friends and colleagues in environmental history will not see the opening of our field as a diffusion or loss of our message or an abandonment of moral commitments. We have too much to offer the world to worry overly much about our purity or our boundaries or our internal disagreements, and I hope we can embrace new ideas and perspectives coming from scholars outside our self-selected ranks. Despite the disagreements among us, I believe we share a commitment to a common methodology that has no equal in the history discipline in its comprehensive effort to trace the connections among all elements of the human experience—mind and matter, nature and nurture, ecology and economy and cognition and all of the rest. If that way does not lead to the best of all possible futures, it at least can carry us to a future that is better than many of its alternatives. That is the future to which I try to point in *The Republic of Nature*. I thank the participants in this forum—as I thank all of my thoughtful, careful critics—for their efforts to read my book closely, see it clearly, represent it fairly,

³² Ann M. Little, “Bodies, Geographies, and the Environment,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 68 (October 2011): 679-685 (quotation 683). I thank Ann Little and Ruth Alexander for their reflections on the unrecognized connections and unrealized affinities between women’s history and environmental history.

³³ James T. Kloppenberg, “Thinking Historically: A Manifesto of Pragmatic Hermeneutics,” *Modern Intellectual History* 9(1) (2012): 201-216 (quotation 201). Kloppenberg comes tantalizingly close to environmental history at several points in his essay, for example 214n23, where he cites Donald Worster, *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir* (New York: Oxford, 2008). In this context, see, for example, Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, *Enlightenment’s Frontier: The Scottish Highlands and the Origins of Environmentalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

³⁴ Lawrence B. Glickman, “The ‘Cultural Turn,’” in *American History Now*, ed. Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 221-241 (quotation 222).

and address its implications.³⁵ Most of all, I thank them for their willingness to acknowledge the spirit in which I present it, as an invitation and an experiment, as an opening to a larger and more generous sensibility that will enable us to disagree while working together to rethink and reimagine the past.

³⁵ Among other examples of well informed, temperate, and useful reviews, see those by Matthew Dennis in *Environmental History* 18 (January 2013): 201-203; Mark Barrow in the *Journal of Southern History* 79 (August 2013): 681-682; and Linda Nash in *Isis* 104 (September 2013): 596-597.

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