



H-Environment

H-Environment Roundtable Reviews

Volume 4, No. 8 (2014)
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Publication date: October 15, 2014
Roundtable Review Editor:
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Christopher C. Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012). ISBN: 978-0-8078-3543-2

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Introduction by Jacob Darwin Hamblin, Oregon State University

Is it possible to be inspired by the suburbs? When teaching environmental history, suburbia is often relegated to discussions of sprawl, the ubiquity of cars, and the relentless expansion of human communities outside major cities.

Scholarship connecting the rise of environmental activism to suburbanization has emphasized how one was a reaction to the other.¹ The suburbs are treated as a part of the problem, with activists trying to mitigate the excesses of construction, rising populations, and the proliferation of lawns.

Christopher C. Sellers believes such narratives blind us to the ways that suburbanites of the 1950s and 1960s acted as grassroots activists in a nascent environmental movement. In his view, scholars and practitioners in a range of environmental fields are more likely to be embarrassed by the suburbs than inspired by them. And yet postwar suburbanites were the ones who turned to new ecological ways of thinking as they found their homes, communities, and bodies under threat.

In *Crabgrass Crucible*, Sellers makes a case for finding the roots of environmentalism in suburban nature. To him, such roots are often camouflaged by high-profile personalities and events, such as the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. They are also hidden by our common narratives of suburbanization as city-building and nature-erasing. In Sellers's view, suburban sprawl should be perceived as part of a quest for nature, not an erasure of it. Notably on the fringes of New York and Los Angeles, one can find a suburban quest linked to civic engagement on a range of issues, including building codes and zoning, municipal services, water and air pollution, and proximity to airports and factories. With Sellers, we have a book that connects places such as Levittown, New York, and Lakewood, California to notions of grassroots activism and environmental consciousness. Not only does Sellers seek to illuminate this as an origins story, he also wants to remind readers that we should pay close attention to the nature where most people live.

I asked **Andrew G. Kirk**, a Professor of History at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, to comment on *Crabgrass Crucible*. Kirk has written extensively about the environmental movement of the postwar era, and like Sellers, he finds environment-mindedness in unexpected places. In his book *Counterculture Green*, for example, he uses the publication of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, with its blend of gadgetry, survival gear, and dreams of space colonies, to reflect on a kind of pragmatic environmentalism that celebrated human ingenuity.²

¹ A leading example is Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

² Andrew G. Kirk, *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007). *Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

Our second commentator is **Kara Schlichting**, who earned her Ph.D. from Rutgers University in 2014 and currently teaches at Towson University. Schlichting's research focuses on metropolitan growth in the New York City area, and she uses reclamation and waste disposal issues as a way to highlight the role of city planners in imagining urban edges. Like Sellers, she explores the relationship between grassroots activists and civic planning.

Our final commentator is **Michael Rawson**, Associate Professor of History at Brooklyn College and faculty member at CUNY Graduate Center. Rawson's book, *Eden on the Charles*, provides an environmental perspective on the creation of Boston. He investigates the competing visions of suburban development in the nineteenth century, as residents struggled to ensure access to clean water and green spaces amidst industrial factories, growing populations, and landscape transformations.³

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 Michael J. Rawson,

Comments by Andrew G. Kirk, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

In his engaging and provocative new history of environmentalism, Christopher Sellers takes on long-standing assumptions about the historic arc of the environmental movement, forcing readers to think again about the origins and trajectories of modern environmental concern. In the process he points to several scholarly tendencies he believes have hampered our ability to fully understand some critical aspects of this story. Specifically, Sellers points to the “dichotomously” running habits of environmental historians and their inclination to view nature apart from places where people live and work. This mind-set, he argues, has particularly obscured the nature and ecology of the suburbs where most modern Americans live. In so doing, he believes scholars have missed or misunderstood a critical wellspring of environmental advocacy that originated in these dismissed or maligned places. In his new telling, suburbs emerge as demographically important and ecologically complicated places where millions came to know nature and were motivated to join a cause that became modern environmentalism. His goal in this deeply researched book is to “attend closely to suburban nature,” “flip long-standing generalizations” about the significance of suburbanization on its head, and show how “suburb dwellers deserve much of the credit for inventing modern environmentalism.” Sellers uses two detailed case studies, New York and L.A., to prove this case.

This book will certainly stir some debate. Not everyone is going to agree that too little has been done to appreciate and study urban, suburban, fringe and other hybrid landscapes. Books like Char Miller’s, *Cities and Nature* or Lincoln Bramwell’s, *Wilderburbs*, along with new studies of Arthur Carhart and other early twentieth-century urban/suburban outdoor recreation planners have recast suburbs as places of natural value rather than wastelands of destruction and consumption. Not everyone will agree that too little has been done to move away from the great person school of environmental history that privileged those who spoke only for the pristine or damned and railed against cities and sprawl as evils. Not everyone will agree that New York and L.A. really work as national case studies. New York in particular, and the experience of the Manhattan migration to Long Island is quite unique. For those who grew up in this urban jungle the move to Long Island was certainly the revelation that Sellers describes so well. For those who grew up amid the more hybrid spaces of Denver or Kansas City, however, where the City Beautiful movement and other factors had long ago created a messy mix of made and born, the move to a suburb would be less transformative, the skunk less surprising, and the complexity less motivating of action in and of itself. Some may be surprised by Sellers’s contention that the environmental justice movement sprang first from the predominantly white and privileged suburbs before the urban blight and environmental inequality in industrial places sparked the disempowered to act. I think all readers of this book, however, will agree that Sellers has mustered some very impressive research and in presenting his case so strongly he forces us to think

hard, again, about the nature of the movement that is also a foundation of the field of environmental history. If the measure of a good book is that it sticks with you and makes you think about your fundamental assumptions, this is a very good book. It is a book, like Robert Gottlieb's, *Forcing the Spring*, that will stir debate and generate renewed interest in the history of environmentalism and that, I think, is a very good thing.

While New York and L.A., the two detailed case studies that comprise the bulk of the book, may not be perfect, in Sellers's carefully constructed narrative they reveal much about the ways that environmental thought and action was tied to titanic demographic changes in the post-war period. Likewise, by looking closely at the human and personal histories of suburban historical actors Sellers is able to tell a story of environmental awakening that is nuanced and richly detailed. One of the goals of this book is to show how suburbs were more than a phenomenon to be praised or damned. They were actual places and complicated ecosystems populated by real people. It is a simple point, but it needs the kind of careful reinforcement Sellers provides. It is in the more fully realized portrait of suburbs as meaningful places, and of suburbanites and their fledgling efforts to understand their nature, that this book makes its most important contributions and raises lots of important questions.

Chapters on missing and finding nature, growing concerns about pollution and water shine and bring to life the more familiar cold demographics of growth and sprawl. They also document with a high degree of precision how much nature remained in the suburbs to be discovered and worried about, and the mechanics of how nascent concerns moved toward grass-roots activism. Detailed excavations of the evolving aspects of suburban life including factors like fast food, Frisbee making and mowing, Sellers demonstrates, were meaningful motivators propelling a distinctly suburban environmental concern. More familiar issues like pollution take on new significance when seen from the vantage point of suburban locals. As intended, these nuanced studies of the grass-roots of suburban environmental thinking support Sellers's central argument that critical manifestations of modern environmentalism came from suburban encounters with a complicated nature and not simply from broader fears that suburban sprawl was destroying a more perfect nature. Particularly convincing is Sellers's contention that in the shift, on Long Island for example, from older agricultural uses of places to suburban residential ones enabled some hard-used places to recover, offering close-at-hand examples for new residents of the resilience of nature and the value of restoration. Thus, suburbanites were poised before the first Earth Day to champion a kind of pragmatic environmental preservation of wide appeal.

Environmentalism is a notoriously conflicted and multifaceted movement. Who gets to speak for nature always is open for debate. The purity of motive of those advocates who lean toward the pragmatic is easy to criticize. Community-based advocacy can look like self-interest and suburbanites are easy targets. All of this is

true, but *Crabgrass Crucible* challenges us to give agency to a wider group of historical actors, widen the palate of places that count as “natural,” and acknowledge the complexity of grass roots environmentalism. Sellers’s detailed portrait of suburban nature enriches our understanding of environmental politics and offers an excellent starting point for discussions about where environmentalism should go next on the front end of a new century that will be full of environmental challenges requiring all kinds of environment advocates.

Comments by Kara Schlichting, Towson University

Christopher C. Sellers has written an important book reinterpreting the role of suburbanites in producing the 20th century environmental movement. *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America* is convincing in its argument that environmentalism sprouted in the suburbs adjacent to the nation's most populous cities during the mid-20th century. This award-winning book, the 2013 recipient of the American Public Works Association's Abel Wolman Award for the best book in public works history, accomplishes a great deal. Sellers makes three important changes to the definition of environmentalism. First, he reframes the environmental movement from the bottom up, stressing participatory democracy rather than control by government officials or an expert or enlightened few. Second, he argues that modern environmentalism was distinct from earlier nature-defense movements in its joining of concerns about the preservation of natural lands and pollution. Suburb-dweller activism fostered what Sellers terms a "new post-sanitary naturalism" (7). Supporters of this ideology valued the natural and organic and treated synthetic, artificial chemicals, notably DDT, as inherently dangerous. Third, Sellers claims that it was because of environmentalism's suburban, populist roots that millions mobilized on Earth Day 1970. These interventions to the traditional origins story of environmentalism propel Sellers's argument.

Crabgrass Crucible opens with an impressive overview of late-19th and early 20th-century affections for country life and scholarship pertaining to it. Sellers situates the popularization of the countryside for healthful residence and recreation in the legacies of health and medical thought, a perspective he argues has been overlooked in environmentalism scholarship. In doing so, he sets an analytical framework around lay conceptions of environmental and bodily health that shape case studies of Los Angeles and Long Island suburbanization. Sellers contends that the spreading edges of New York and Los Angeles through the mid-20th century are representative of suburb-building. In parallel chapters, Sellers highlights the ecological melting pot of suburbia's flora and fauna. Differences in topography, climate, and flora of each case study resulted in different types of suburban development that rearranged nature. Mid-century critics and historians who took up their ideas of suburbanizing as "city building" and/or "nature erasing," (41) Sellers says, miss the hybrid nature of suburbs as well as environmentalism's roots in experiences in such nature. Sellers investigates the ways in which upper, middle, and working-class suburbanites experienced nearby nature, valued it, and worried about it. Each case study charts how pollution of shared urban-edge environments galvanized activism across boundaries of class, race, and geography on behalf of environmental health. The final chapter on 1960s environmental activism and Earth Day makes a claim for environmentalism as a grassroots suburban movement wrought from such interactions with suburban nature.

According to Sellers, environmental activism first coalesced around the least built corners of the region, among owners of the most spacious properties. Elite conservation groups overlooked the nature of suburbs or farms in favor of spaces where human work was least visible. Sellers identifies this perspective in the fight against road-building on Long Island's Fire Island and its subsequent 1964 designation as a national seashore. Until well-to-do suburban conservation groups broadened their standards for preservation, the possibility of a popular environmental movement remained unfulfilled. In Los Angeles's barrio, for example, Sellers makes visible the multiplying legal restrictions on yard use, such as public health restrictions on barnyard animals, which made residents such as the Alva family feel ethnically as well as ecologically marginalized from environmental campaigns. The mobility of pollutants to circulate through air and water, however, catalyzed cross-class coalition-building to defend nearby nature. For example, Sellers argues the public health concerns of the 1957 and 1967 DDT trials on Long Island "sliced like a knife through the conceit" that nature lay somehow apart from suburbia's built spaces and humanity (103). Such realizations motivated a diverse group of suburbanites to work together to preserve suburban nature. Sellers's case for a new cross-cultural grassroots suburban movement emerges explicitly in the section on activism in the canyons of Beverly Glen outside Los Angeles, which he presents as a galvanizing experience for locals who articulated a new understanding of community through shared environment. This disaster, part natural and part manmade, inspired one resident to become aware of the link, in his own words, "of home place to canyon, of self to society" (194).

Sellers roots the suburban and populist origins of environmentalism in groundwater pollution crusades concerning Long Island's "aquatic commons" and counterpoint anti-smog battles of the Los Angeles Basin's "aerial commons." Such framing underscores Sellers's argument that modern environmentalism emerged when suburbanites realized, through everyday experiences, the ubiquity of pollutants in the suburban commons he defined in Chapter 1. Pollutants ignored municipal, class, and racial boundaries of suburbia and revealed the physical, bodily similarities of all suburbanites. Mobile and persistent toxins made the healthfulness of suburban environments a shared problem in communities as different as the dense, ethnic working-class barrio of San Gabriel and exclusive Bel Air outside Los Angeles. The grassroots fight against groundwater pollution on Long Island and smog in Los Angeles reflected a broadening constituency. Pollution-centered nature activism overcame the class and racial fragmentation that defined suburban landscapes and came to include spaces that looked far less natural, green, or suburban.

Crabgrass Crucible is a challenge to the traditional postwar disregard, both popular and scholarly, for suburban nature. Sellers seeks "to flip long-standing generalizations about 'suburbia' on their heads" (5) by offering "a broader, more ecological framing" of the suburban quest for nature (42). Eschewing stereotypes of suburbia, he defines the suburbs as a continuum of places, from densely-built tract homes to estates nestled among farms and forest. Such city-country hybrids are furthermore diversified by regional contrasts of geography, flora, fauna, and climate.

In this work Sellers explicitly challenges suburban histories such as Adam Rome's *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (2001) for ruling out the possibility of nature in postwar suburbs. Such a narrative repeats the assumptions of suburbia's mid-century critics, which Sellers says has been echoed by regional and city planners, and modern environmentalists, that suburbs were the antithesis of nature. Ecological awareness was assumed to have originated elsewhere, among professional ecologists, federal officials, and public leaders.

Sellers argues that the top-down origins story of environmentalism focused on government programs, professional scientists, and singular activists like Rachel Carson obscures the important localized environmental activism of suburbanites on the urban edge. As a suburban social movement, environmentalism grew from suburb-dwellers' everyday experiences with nearby nature, well before Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and the first Earth Day (1970). Postwar issues motivated local environmental political action by uniting individuals who saw worrisome evidence of new industrial wastes and synthetic chemicals in their backyards, children, and pets. This environmentalism was about "citizen story-telling." Rather than using planner's definitions of an urban periphery, or journalists' and social scientists' definitions of suburbia, Sellers searches for, and finds, the ways in which residents imagined the space on an intimate, human scale. Nearly eighty oral interviews form the basis of Sellers's analysis. First-person narratives create an intimate composite portrait of how suburban residents came to see the vulnerability of both their bodies and environments.

An impressive range of evidence is compellingly shared visually, such as the charts tracing the usage of the terms conservation, environmentalism, suburbia, and the rise of the subject of pollution in national newspapers. The charts and maps of *Crabgrass Crucible* underscore the reshuffling of the vocabulary by which Americans talked about suburbs that took place in the rise of modern environmentalism. As the culmination of this cultural-linguistic turn and coalition building, in the 1960s the "environment" emerged as an object deserving of protection and local-level activism came to be called an "environmental" movement.

The 1960s, according to Sellers, marks a moment of public mobilization of environmental defense that has never been matched. Yet Sellers concludes his history with an overview of the missed opportunity of "environmental altruism" of this activism. He argues that environmental altruism defined pollution as a ubiquitous threat and expanded the definition of nature to include more urban and industrial spaces. Sellers says scholars have missed just "how much suburban environmentalism, as it broke out of the conservationism mold of the 1950s, had looked like the movement that environmental justice historians described" (291). He concludes that this impulse failed to sustain an attack on the issues of race and class inequity in pollution that environmental justice later took up. The problem, which he acknowledges but leaves largely unexplored, is that the power of environmental altruism waxes and wanes. Such a lament does not seem a fitting

conclusion to the remarkable case Sellers makes for the powerful new way of thinking of “post-sanitary naturalism” to bridge the worlds of public health and conservation.

Crabgrass Crucible is a striking model of the rich opportunities of scholarship uniting the history of science and public health and environmental history. Sellers contributes to the history of science and medicine by making visible the challenges leveled by citizens against scientists regarding environmental exposures. As one of Sellers’s Long Islanders who connected bodily health with environmental health said, “conservation is purely and simply hygiene” (131). Sellers’s interest in public health and disease provides the sources for his most thought-provoking assessments of how suburbanites overcame the historic divide between the environmental concerns of public health and conservation through a unique synthesis of popular ecology and popular epidemiology. Sellers convincingly argues that in building and living in suburbs, suburbanites became alert to the longer and wider impacts of modern artificial contaminants. Suburbanites first articulated the threats of new toxins to human bodies and nonhuman nature alike. Going “against grain of reigning expertise and officialdom,” activists came to see threats to human bodies and the environment as interwoven (7). Among those exposed to pollutants, confidence in experts waned. So did suburbanites’ faith in boundaries formerly considered secure and protective,” of the natural and the synthetic, city and country, and most fundamentally, of the human body (9). Sellers brings to light the hubris of public health experts and government leaders who declared that all environments could be rendered disease-neutral through modern sanitation and monitoring. Empowered by the new sanitary naturalism at suburban environmentalism’s ideological core, ordinary suburban-dwellers mobilized and demanded new ways of scientific thinking about ecology and environmental health.

Comments by Michael Rawson, Brooklyn College and Graduate Center of the City University of New York

Christopher Sellers's *Crabgrass Crucible* adds considerably to our understanding of postwar suburbanization and its impact on environmental thought. I am already using it in my classrooms. It is important to realize, however, that Sellers covers only a small part of the larger environmental history of suburbanization, a process that first emerged in the nineteenth century rather than the twentieth. I am not suggesting that Sellers should have devoted more of his book to the nineteenth century than he did: the book's central argument is, after all, about the postwar period. But I want to use this space to draw attention to the need for more work on the environmental implications of nineteenth-century suburbanization and the roots it laid for the kinds of twentieth-century environmentalist thought discussed by Sellers.

There is currently a strong preference among urban and environmental historians to study twentieth-century suburbs, especially postwar ones. This is even true of the "New Suburban History," which aims to reframe our understanding of suburban development as a whole. But without more work in earlier periods, historians of the urban environment risk developing a skewed view of the topic that underestimates the importance of suburbanization's formative years. A closer look at nineteenth-century suburbs reveals that they did far more than serve as the distant seeds of postwar sprawl. Rather, they provided the roots, trunk, and young branches of the suburban world we inhabit today and, perhaps, some of the early sources of environmentalism as well.

Many of the processes and environmental attitudes that Sellers discusses in the context of postwar suburbs had their genesis in the nineteenth-century. The tendency to associate "rural" landscapes with houses set in pastoral settings rather than working farmland developed in the first decades of the 1800s. Residents of the urban fringe began using municipal incorporation to keep out urban services that might threaten their rustic settings as early as the 1840s. The large-scale migration of the working and lower-middle classes to denser suburbs in search of "nature" and the "country" dates to the 1870s and the advent of inexpensive streetcars. Nuisance suits over industrial pollution on the urban fringe and concerns that different racial and ethnic groups might bring the "wrong" kinds of nature to the suburbs were evident long before the turn of the twentieth century.

Especially interesting in light of Sellers's argument about the postwar suburban roots of environmentalism is the fact that Americans were already expressing concern about the environmental cost of suburbanization in the nineteenth century. In fact, the first "outer park system," Boston's ring of state-owned suburban parks built in the 1890s and conceived decades earlier, was largely a reaction to what we would today term suburban sprawl. Sylvester Baxter, one of the fathers of the

system, advocated its construction in advance of further suburban development. He lamented the environmental damage already done around Boston, the “acres and acres of streets and houses where a few years ago were only pastures and woodland,” and feared that continued suburbanization would produce “a vast desert of houses, factories and stores, spreading over and overwhelming the natural features of the landscape.” Recent work also suggests that, by the end of the nineteenth century, a new, more metropolitan environmental vision was developing in response to some of the same concerns evident in the later postwar period. While it is true that no environmental movement on the scale described by Sellers emerged in response to nineteenth-century suburbs, that century did witness the first anxieties about the environmental cost of suburbanization and the first reactions to it.⁴

So this brief response to *Crabgrass Crucible* is simultaneously a celebration of its accomplishments and a call for further studies that will dig even deeper into the past. There remains a lot of work to be done on the environmental history of suburbanization, work that can shed further light on the deep environmental roots of a way of thinking and living that heavily influences most of our lives today.

⁴ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *Report of the Metropolitan Park Commissioners, January 1893* (House Document No. 150), 9 and 2-3; Shen Hou, *The City Natural: Garden and Forest Magazine and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013).

Response by Christopher C. Sellers, Stony Brook University

Let me begin by expressing my appreciation to Jake Hamblin, not just for his interest in my book but for this H-Environment roundtable forum which he's done so much to develop. Thanks too, to my reviewers, for taking the time to read the book and write about it. Much of what I have to say seeks not so much to debate their thoughtful observations as clarify what I was intending to accomplish.

I hatched this project in the late 1990s out of the conviction that pre-eminent syntheses of post-WWII American history (e.g., James Patterson's *Grand Expectations*) had given the environmental movement short-shrift. The problem, as I saw it, lay less with the synthesizers themselves than with how, unlike with campaigns, say, for civil or women's rights, we really knew little about this movement's ties to any large-scale social change. Environmental historians from Sam Hays to William Cronon had alluded to a link between environmentalism and the rise of a suburban middle class. But in the 1990s, these invocations came with a hint of embarrassment, and a reluctance to inquire more deeply. We'd been dissuaded, in part, by the environmental justice critique of "mainstream environmentalism," but I now believe our hesitancy owed as much to a half-century of place-stereotyping of "suburbia," bearing whiffs of a class prejudice all its own. Though social historians of suburbs had commenced to crack this stereotype apart, environmental historians--almost as much as many environmental activists--tended to accept it without question.

No doubt blithe dismissals both of environmentalism and of suburbs will endure across the broad field of American history; but I do hope that *Crabgrass Crucible* will make them more infrequent, or at least less blithe. If I had my way, the next generation of textbooks would talk about post-WWII environmentalism in America this way. It did not just hinge on Rachel Carson's heroics, nor on the spread of ideas from the "science of ecology," nor on a youthful counterculture. Instead, we need to understand it as rooted in the striking rise in homeownership around the edges of the nation's largest and wealthiest of cities, and the contradictions—material, cultural and political—ushered in by "mass" suburban living.

If that's what I'd like to see non-environmental historians take away from this book, let me say more about its messages for environmental historians. Those few titles mentioned by Kirk as well as my own book hardly exhaust all that can be gleaned from looking at urban, fringe or suburban landscapes in more ecologically even-handed fashion, as "hybrid." A mere glance at how environmentalism as well as suburbs continue to be written about in the mass media suggests how much work is yet to be done: this revisionism has as yet made little dent in the larger culture. Where I see a more productive debate emerging is over Kirk's question about how representative (or as he puts it, "perfect") my New York and Los Angeles case studies are. I actually agree with him that in many ways, suburban experiences

there did not mirror those in other parts of the nation or world. Precisely the timing, extent and character of suburbanizing around the largest and wealthiest of America's cities made them, more so than smaller counterparts, the earliest birthplaces for this new movement. By contrast, suburbanizing in what began as my third case study, Atlanta, differed in degree, kind, and period, in types of pollution and environmentalism, and more. So on this front, stay tuned: this contrasting story has now morphed into its own separate book—and my next!

Our field may be still less prepared for just how far I seek to bring us out of “the great person school of the history of environmentalism”: through a more rigorously social scientific unpacking of this movement's popular, grass-like roots. For instance, both Kirk and Michael Rawson make reference to the great urban and recreation planners of the Progressive Era. Long the heroes of a durable mode of historical writing about city and regional planning, their habitual elevation seems to me rather too innocent of the insights of social history. While my book does gesture to that tradition, ultimately, in the course of researching it, I found the historical agency of elites with big ideas (e.g., Ezra Howard and his “garden city” notion) to offer an ever less convincing account of what American cities' suburbs actually became—much less what people living in these places experienced of nature. I applaud Rawson's call to look further backward, for the environmental discontents and struggles that may have driven and shaped 19th-century versions of suburbanizing. Such a project will become ever more interesting and realistic, I believe, as it takes into account influences emanating not just from the top down but from the bottom up, as it turns ever more precise and historically specific about those on-the-ground communities, concerns, and contests that defined the dynamism of these landscapes.

Let me take this opportunity to note a couple more contributions of the book, as I see it, that go unnoted in these reviews. Despite the upsurge of interest in urban environmental history over the past decade, environmental history still has not found its way very deeply into the material ecology of suburbs. To carve a way in, I draw on notions like the “urban-rural gradient” which themselves have gained traction among ecologists only over the last couple of decades. Another innovation of the book, I believe, is to open up the historical import of differences between middle and upper-middle—or just upper—classes of suburbs. That's a distinction of increasing importance in our own time, as America's upper economic echelons have been pulling away from more middling counterparts; it was also formative, I've tried to show, in the post-WWII emergence of environmentalism. Kirk caricatures my argument here a bit; some white home-owning communities were certainly far more privileged than others. The making of modern environmentalism constituted a movement *toward* environmental justice, first of all, by how its agenda mobilized those not just in elite communities but in more middle or even working-class suburbs, like Levittown. And secondly, that most important issue for transforming post-WWII environmentalism into a genuinely mass movement—pollution—bore a striking similarity to those concerns about hazardous waste that later energized that movement identifying itself as for “environmental justice.” Thanks to Kara

Schlichting for picking up on my argument about just how this passage across suburban classes worked: as “nature” advocacy swelled not just to encompass, but to center around, threats to the human body, an agenda of public health. Readers of some of my earlier work may appreciate the chord I strike here: threats to the human body lay at the core of environmentalism’s making, even if this centrality subsequently became harder to remember.

Schlichting’s careful reading has picked up on another coinage almost no other reviewer here or elsewhere has noted, what I call “environmental altruism.” Let me be the first to admit the oddness of the meaning I attach to the phrase. Unlike what you might expect, I don’t refer to care for a non-human nature—the badge of “ecocentricism”—but instead, care for other *human* environments, those manifestly separate from, and unlike, one’s own. The concept coalesced out of my effort to distinguish between a suburban environmentalism that was mostly just about suburban problems, and another that more or less explicitly embraced urban and industrial places, where the environmental dangers were often most dire. Upon hearing that this environmental altruism proliferated especially over the later sixties, Schlichting poses a very good question: what happened to it? I suggest, without much explanation, that it then began to vanish, only to then be rediscovered by advocates for “environmental justice.” So: why? The easiest answer is that in a book that ends with the first Earth Day, I didn’t have room to explain. But more honestly, I’m not entirely sure about the “why”—also about how completely it vanished. I’ve been thinking about this question more in writing my Atlanta book, which treads into the 1970’s and beyond. Perhaps I will have a better answer once that’s finished, but I’d happily invite answers anyone else may have or happen upon....

Thanks again to my reviewers, for their public ponderings of what *Crabgrass Crucible* has to offer. Here’s hoping that it can remind readers of one final point. Environmentalism was not just about building new kinds of knowledge and awareness, nor about regulating corporate polluters, nor about creating environmentally minded consumers; it was also a push for a more participatory democracy. That’s an insight that anyone concerned about today’s most pressing environmental problems cannot afford to forget.

About the Contributors

Jacob Darwin Hamblin is Associate Professor of History at Oregon State University. His books include *Arming Mother Nature: The Birth of Catastrophic Environmentalism* (Oxford, 2013); *Poison in the Well: Radioactive Waste in the Oceans at the Dawn of the Nuclear Age* (Rutgers, 2008); and *Oceanographers and the Cold War* (Washington, 2005).

Andrew G. Kirk is Professor of History at University of Nevada, Las Vegas. His books include *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism* (Kansas, 2007), *Collecting Nature: The American Environmental Movement and the Conservation Library* (Kansas, 2001), and *American Horizons: The United States in Global Perspective*, with Michael Schaller et al. (Oxford, 2013).

Michael Rawson is Associate Professor of History at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He is the author of *Eden on the Charles: The Making of Boston* (Harvard, 2010).

Kara Schlichting is a lecturer at Towson University. Her 2014 Ph.D. dissertation at Rutgers examined metropolitan growth around New York City, and the collaboration between grassroots activists and professional planners.

Christopher C. Sellers is Professor of History at Stony Brook University. In addition to *Crabgrass Crucible*, he is the author of *Hazards of the Job: From Industrial Disease to Environmental Health Science* (UNC Press, 1997).

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