

CHRISTOF MAUCH and SYLVIA MAYER, eds., *American Environments: Climate—Cultures—Catastrophes* (Heidelberg: Winter 2012), 195 pp.

This collection of essays, based on a 2010 conference at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich, displays some of the most recent approaches in environmental humanities by addressing “the connection between cultural values, individual experience, and human decision on the one hand, and environmental change on the other” (1). Its focus on American environments and public debates on issues of climate change, environmental politics and perception as well as its emphasis on risk and disaster are supposed to reflect two things, namely the great frequency and destructiveness of ‘natural’ disasters on the North American continent as well as the omnipresence of representations of such catastrophes in the popular imagination. The contributions cover the disciplinary range from political science, (environmental) history, and cultural geography to media and cultural studies.

The short introduction sketches out the United State’s relationship with the environment in the past and present. Mauch and Mayer argue that natural disasters as well as the representation of such real or imagined catastrophes in the popular imagination “play a powerful role in the general perception of the natural environment and in the production of knowledge” (2). While this certainly makes for an intriguing point of departure, the editors unfortunately miss the opportunity to further elaborate on both the interrelation of the volume’s key concepts—climate, cultures, and catastrophes—and the three sections into which the essays are divided. This is, perhaps, the only drawback in the volume’s otherwise rich ointment: a slightly more substantial and conceptually comprehensive introduction would have easily turned this collection of high-quality essays into a coherent volume.

The two essays in the first section, entitled “Climate in America—Past and Current Perspectives,” examine the historical and social dimensions of contemporary environmental politics. Taking his departure from the current debate surrounding the question of whether or not human actions have an impact on climate change, Lawrence Culver’s compelling essay outlines the history of man-made environmental change in the United States. Culver

defines the encounter of the European settlers with the arid climate and barren landscape of the Great Plains as a turning point in American environmental history and shows how the westward expansion and the ideology of the Manifest Destiny marks the beginning of a profound anthropogenic interference that has led to an ecological catastrophe or ‘manifest disaster.’ In an essay that ties in with Culver’s historical perspective in a quasi-complementary way, Andreas Falke explains why, even under the supposedly ‘green’ Obama administration, U.S. environmental politics lag behind in an international comparison. Analyzing how public opinion, the political system, the influence of the economy as well as the disaffection with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change all impede a more resolved environmentalist agenda, Falke concludes that a significant shift, at least at the federal level, is probably not in sight.

Section two, “Cultures of Ecology—Cultures of Risk,” contains three essays, which shed light on rather diverse aspects of ecological practice and risk management in the United States. Heike Egner deals with risk research and management and particularly with the role of spatialization in the construction of risk. Drawing on observation theory (von Foerster, Luhmann et al.), she discusses two case studies. The first case study argues that the spatial indexing of risk in the beach community of Camp Ellis, Maine, in fact increased rather than minimized natural hazard-induced risk. The second example, somewhat out of sync with the rest of the essay, is concerned with the role of narration in constructing the nowadays dominant climate-change metaphor, i. e., the ‘greenhouse effect.’ Andrew C. Isenberg’s shrewd essay addresses the issue of environmental restoration by historicizing the so-called Buffalo Commons, i. e., the proposal to reintroduce bison to the Great Plains area and thus reconstruct its original ecosystem. Analyzing how this idea, famously launched by geographers Frank and Deborah Popper in 1987, is built on frontier rhetoric and nostalgic notions about untamed nature, Isenberg traces a history of bison in North America that reveals how much such a grand-scale restoration project implicates problematic notions about, for example, the ‘ecological Indian,’ eco-tourism, or American masculinity. His conclusion is that we cannot simply “order *à la carte* historical environments” (90; emphasis in orig.) and that a sus-

tainable culture must instead “continually adjust to social and ecological change” (86). In her discussion of Roland Emmerich’s blockbuster *The Day After Tomorrow*, Alexa Weik von Mossner draws on research in the areas of risk perception and affect studies to describe the film’s environmental significance. She not only argues that imaginary narratives, particularly in popular film, are “much better at engaging emotions” (97) than science when it comes to communicating environmental crises to the public but also that affect is “central to both the perception of risk and to decision making in the face of such an enormous risk as climate change” (99).

The final and largest section contains four papers and shifts the focus towards “Catastrophe—Natural Disasters and the Media.” Sherry Johnson applies critical juncture theory to her analysis of the Cuban earthquake of 1880 and argues that this example from the past can also “offer warnings for the present” (118). While this theoretical framework can explain why the event was soon largely forgotten in Cuba, Johnson claims that it is the task of historians to “tell these stories” (127) to learn their lessons for future calamities. While the Cuban perspective of Johnson’s contribution broadens the volume’s geographic scope, it also inadvertently exposes its otherwise rather narrow, national perspective on the United States. Another welcome exception to this is Gordon Winder’s essay on (pre-Fukushima) Japanese earthquakes and their coverage in the *Los Angeles Times*, in which he examines the continuities and changes in U.S. and, more specifically, Californian reactions to these catastrophes. Identifying a major shift between the 1923 earthquake in Kanto and the 1927 disaster in Tango, he concludes that the

newspaper mainly “built its coverage around the issue of whether Japan was worthy of US aid” (155). Craig E. Colten, then, sees a connection between social memory and resilience in his discussion of the long-term effects of hurricane Katrina in 2005 for the community of New Orleans. Asking why Katrina caused much more damage and casualties than the significantly stronger hurricane Betsy in 1965, Colten demonstrates how the city leaders’ fatal decisions in terms of land use, structural protection (e.g., levees), residential architecture (slab-on-grade instead of raised houses), and evacuation strategies were all the result of a “degree of amnesia” (172) in the community’s social memory and thus reduced resilience. Starting with a critique of the discourse of ‘cleaning up’ the oil spill of the Deepwater Horizon in 2010, Stacy Alaimo, finally, deploys a neo-materialist framework to contest the dominant cultural imagination of the ocean as an alien and immaterial space immune to human influence. Her essay is a very fine example of how research in the environmental humanities is not at all self-contained but can make an important contribution to our societies’ understanding of “the substantial interchanges, interconnections, and flows between industrial practices, scientific knowledge, and cultural fabrications, as well as their effects on [...] environments” (187-88). As such, Alaimo’s essay proves to be the perfect conclusion to a rich and thought-provoking volume that attempts to bridge the gap between the natural sciences on the one hand and the socio-cultural and historical dimensions of our notions of nature, natural disasters, and environmental change on the other.

Gießen

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