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Follow the flows. A brief history of transnational urban environmental history

Responding to globalization and its discontents, urban history has taken a transnational turn. Over the past decade, the unprecedented scale of catastrophic damages resulting from climate change has also played a role in reorienting research agendas. Rather than compare the similarities and contrasts between cities in different countries, this approach follows the flow of people, information, and commodities among them. Transnational history investigates the ways in which these flows are received, modified, and reformed as they move full circle through the cultural and institutional prisms of nation, region, and locality, and back again into the global stream.¹ Consider the ways how the life and work of the Scottish regional ecologist, Patrick Geddes, personified the transnational. He was a globetrotter. He was constantly on the move, networking within a transatlantic community of urban reformers, who called themselves Progressives. Geddes lived for extended periods in India, Palestine, and France. His seminal ideas and town plans, moreover, were also travelling around the world.²

¹ For an introduction, cf. Nicolas Kenny/Rebecca Madgin (Eds.), *Cities Beyond Borders. Comparative and Transnational Approaches to Urban History*, Surrey/Burlington 2015; and A. K. Sandoval-Strausz/Nancy Kwak, *Making Cities Global. The Transnational Turn in Urban History*, Philadelphia 2018. Both provide far more depth of theoretical analysis and bibliographic references than can be provided here. For historiographic reviews of the pre-2000 period, cf. also Michael P. Smith, *Transnational Urbanism. Locating Globalization*, Malden 2001; J. Donald Hughes, *Global Dimensions of Environmental History*, in: *Pacific Historical Review* 70:1, 2001, p. 91-101; William Sites, *Global City, American City. Theories of Globalization and Approaches to Urban History*, in: *Journal of Urban History* 29:3, 2003, p. 333-346; and below, notes 5 and 6. The notes below on transnational approaches to urban environmental history have a heavy bias toward American and other English language sources.

² Cf. Helen Meller, Patrick Geddes. *Social Evolutionist and City Planner*, London/New York 1990; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings. Social Politics in the Progressive Age*, Cambridge 1998. Cf. also Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, London 1902; Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century*. Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, New York 1977; R. Beevers, *The Garden City Utopia. A Critical Biography of Ebenezer Howard*, London 1987; Michel Geertse, *The International Garden City Campaign. Transnational Negotiations on Town Planning Methods, 1913-1926*, in: *Journal of Urban History* 42:4, 2016, p. 733-752. In the case of the U.S., transnationalism has also

On the one hand, the study of world systems stretches back to the 1970s, when Immanuel Wallerstein began exploring agricultural commodity flows during the age of colonialism. His approach highlighted the key role played by port cities and the networks they formed. It also suggested that these flows extended beyond material goods to encompass a full spectrum of transnational exchanges.³ In addition, historians of urban planning have long followed leading figures like Geddes as their visions spread across the globe.⁴ On the other hand, a quarter century later urban historians began putting the socio-natural interactions of the built and natural environments in a local-global framework of analysis.⁵

Like the ever-expanding galaxy of subjects within the orbit of urban history, the city in global environmental context covers several overlapping clusters of scholarship. Here, only a few bright stars can be named in order to give an indication of this field of study's multi-dimensional range of research topics. One pole follows flows of popular culture such as *Rap Attack 2. African Rap to Global Hip-hop*. At the opposite pole of political economy are books like *Rethinking Environmental History. World-System History and Global Environmental Change*. In between are more fine-grained illustrations of social-nature interactions such as *Thick Space. Approaches to Metropolitanism*.⁶ In a separate sphere, moreover, are

long been a subject of inquiry in immigration history and ethnic studies.

³ Cf. Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, New York 1974; Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, New York 1974. See also Jane Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities*, New York 1969; William I. Robinson, *Globalization and the Sociology of Immanuel Wallerstein. A Critical Appraisal*, in: *International Sociology* 26:6, 2011, p. 723-745.

⁴ Cf. Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, New York 1938; Lewis Mumford, *The City in History. Its Origins, Its Development, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*, New York 1961; Peter Hall, *Cities in Civilization*, New York 1988; Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow. An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century* (Updated ed.), Cambridge 1996; Erik Swyngedouw, *Neither Global nor Local. "Glocalization" and Politics of Scale*, in: Kevin R. Cox (Eds.), *Spaces of Globalization. Reasserting the Power of the Local*, New York 1997, p. 137-166; Peter Clark, *The Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History*, Oxford 2013; and above, note 1.

⁵ Cf. Thomas J. Sugrue, *Forward*, in: A. K. Sandoval-Strausz/Nancy Kwak (Eds.), *Making Cities Global*, p. vi-ix; Roger Burbach/Orlando Núñez Soto/Boris Kagarlitsky, *Globalization and Its Discontents. The Rise of Postmodern Socialisms*, London/Chicago 1997; Peter Marcuse/Ronald van Kempen (Eds.), *Globalizing Cities. A New Spatial Order?*, Oxford/Malden 2000; Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents Revisited. Anti-Globalization in the Era of Trump*, New York 2018.

⁶ David Toop, *Rap Attack 2. African Rap to Global Hip-Hop*, London/New York 1994; Alf Hornborg/John Robert McNeill/Juan Martínez Alier (Eds.), *Rethinking Environmental History. World-System History and Global Environmental Change*, Lanham 2007; Dorothee Brantz/Sasha Disko/Georg Wagner-Kyora (Eds.), *Thick Space. Approaches to Metro-*

outspoken critics of globalization, including Mike Davis, the author of *Planet of Slums*, and *Evil Paradises. Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism*.⁷

I call the year 2000 the “big bang” because three events set off an explosion, the “transnational turn of urban history”.⁸ The first landmark of that year was the International Roundtable on Urban Environmental History in Clermont-Ferrand, France. The second was the extended session on cities in states of emergency from natural disasters at the Berlin meeting of the European Association of Urban History (EAUH). The third big, anticipated event was the inaugural meeting of the European Society for Environmental History in the following year. Significantly, all of these meetings of historians were themselves fully transnational in terms of their participants, interchanges of ideas, and commodity flows of books and articles published in their aftermaths. In quick order, each event produced a seminal book: *The Modern Demon*, *Cities and Catastrophes*, and *Rivers in History*, respectively. Together, they also fueled support for additional international exchanges and sparked the creation of specialized institutions such as the Rachel Carson Center in Munich, Germany.⁹

This international burst of creativity engendered a new universe of original theory and practice on urban environmental history that continues to expand. Almost two decades after this big bang, a book published in 2019, *Urbanizing Nature. Actors and Agency (Dis)Connecting Cities and Nature since 1500*, can serve as a stepping stone towards laying out an agenda of future research.¹⁰ Its four editors, Tim Soens, Dieter Schott, Michael Toyka-Seid, and Bert De Munck, discuss the state of the art of urban environmental history in an introductory essay. To illuminate this process of city building and its interplay with cultural imaginations of urban nature, according to them, requires case studies and comparative

politanism, Bielefeld 2012.

⁷ Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, New York 2006; Mike Davis/Daniel Bertrand Monk (Eds.), *Evil Paradises. Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism*, New York 2007. Cf. also Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear. Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*, New York 1998.

⁸ Sandoval-Strausz/Kwak, *Making Cities Global*.

⁹ Cf. Christoph Bernhardt/Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud (Eds.), *The Modern Demon. Pollution in Urban and Industrial European Societies*, Clermont-Ferrand 2002; Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud/Harold L. Platt/Dieter Schott (Eds.), *Cities and Catastrophes. Coping with Emergency in European History = Villes Et Catastrophes. Réactions Face à L'urgence Dans L'histoire Européenne*, Frankfurt am Main/New York 2002; Christof Mauch/Thomas Zeller (Eds.), *Rivers in History. Perspectives on Waterways in Europe and North America*, Pittsburgh 2008. Cf. also Dieter Schott/Bill Luckin/Genevieve Massard-Guilbaud (Eds.), *Resources of the City. Contributions to an Environmental History of Modern Europe*, Aldershot 2005; Martin Knoll/Uwe Lübken/Dieter Schott (Eds.), *Rivers Lost, Rivers Regained. Rethinking City-River Relations*, Pittsburgh 2017.

¹⁰ Tim Soens et.al. (Eds.), *Urbanizing Nature. Actors and Agency (Dis)Connecting Cities and Nature since 1500*, New York/London 2019.

methods. They map out a longitudinal timeline stretching back centuries prior to the fossil-fuel era of the industrial revolution. The value they give to long-term perspectives suggests that an examination of the effects of climate change on the city will yield important results.

At the same time, they describe a horizontal plane in spatial terms of the city's hinterland. This geographic concept is especially useful because it includes both the import of essential natural resources such as fuel, food, and water, on the one side, and the export of waste materials, including sewage, garbage, and air pollution, on the other side. In some cases, urban hinterlands were confined to small fringe areas and, in others, expanded to global scale. Finally, they outline a "manifesto", or roadmap of the path forward in gaining a better understanding of the relationship between the built and the natural environments.¹¹

Adding transnational flows through the city will open yet more new vistas on the past. These perspectives can make a difference. They are already influencing environmental activists, policymakers, and planners alike in places suffering unprecedented natural disasters. The outpouring of case studies on urban catastrophes after 2000, for instance, helped inform public policy debates following the hurricane that struck New Orleans five years later. In the case of Katrina, historians of the urban environment helped hold accountable those responsible for the failure of the levees and pumps to forestall the sinking of the city's poorest neighborhoods.¹²

These insights on environmental risk and adaptation need to be followed-up by research on long-term climate change. The potential for radical reinterpretations of the agency of nature in human history is shown in Ronnie Ellenblum's *The Collapse of the Eastern Mediterranean. Climate Change and the Decline of the East, 950-1072*. He highlights the effects of a two-hundred-year period of warm weather that stretched from Western Europe to India. Rather than a disconnected series of local experiences, the resulting drought crossed national borders and caused related, albeit widely spread out conditions of famine, mass migration, and population decline in cities from Constantinople to Cairo and Baghdad.¹³

¹¹ Cf. *Ibid.* Cf. also Peter Clark/Bernard Lepetit, *Capital Cities and Their Hinterlands in Early Modern Europe*, Aldershot/Brookfield 1996.

¹² Cf. William R. Freudenburg et. al., *Catastrophe in the Making. The Engineering of Katrina and the Disasters of Tomorrow*, Washington 2009. Cf. also Craig E. Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis. Wrestling New Orleans from Nature*, Baton Rouge 2006; Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge. Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, New York 2006; Joe W. Trotter/Johanna Fernandez, *Hurricane Katrina. Urban History from the Eye of the Storm*, in: *Journal of Urban History* 35:5, 2009, p. 607-613; Gary Rivlin, *Katrina. After the Flood*, New York 2015.

What will investigations of opposing, cool periods of weather, as well as wet and dry ones, reveal about the ways that cities adapted to environmental change? Given the relatively large geographic footprint of climate change, this transnational research agenda of following the flows will fit comfortably within a methodological framework of case studies and comparisons. This approach will shed light on contrasts in national, regional, and local responses to changing patterns of the daily weather and extreme events such as damaging floods and heat waves.

My latest book, *Sinking Chicago. Climate Change and the Remaking of a Flood-Prone Environment*, is the first study of the long-term effects of changing weather patterns on an American city.¹⁴ It can serve as a model because it is based on a database of standardized statistics that covers 150 years. In the 1870s, international telegraph networks and scientific communities combined to promote the creation of national weather bureaus in Europe and the United States. In the case of Chicago, the rainfall data shows a dry period of below average precipitation from the 1900s to 1945, followed by a still ongoing wet period, marked by more frequent and extreme, record-breaking downpours. Tracing how policy-makers, politicians, and the grass-roots responded to damaging floods and contaminated drinking supplies revealed society's interactions with its environment. Over time, this process caused more deep-rooted transformations in Chicagoans' cultural imagery of urban, and suburban nature.

Nonetheless, transnational flows of people and information played an important role in making decisions on the best ways to cope with living on a prairie wetland. In the 1930s, for instance, the utilitarian conservationism of the New Deal prevailed, while the ecological movement enlightened by Rachel Carson in the 1960s shifted the public sphere towards nature preservation.¹⁵ Like the accumulative value of case studies of cities and natural catastrophes, long-

¹³ Roni Ellenblum, *The Collapse of the Eastern Mediterranean. Climate Change and the Decline of the East, 950-1072*, Cambridge 2012. For a contrasting look at a "Little Ice Age", five hundred years later that had similar repercussions of famines, mass migrations, and violent uprisings, cf. Sam White, *The Climate of Rebellion in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, New York 2011. Cf. also Wolfgang Behringer, *A Cultural History of Climate*, Cambridge 2010.

¹⁴ Harold L. Platt, *Sinking Chicago. Climate Change and the Remaking of a Flood-Prone Environment*, Philadelphia 2018.

¹⁵ Cf. Platt, *Sinking Chicago*. Cf. also Dan Egan, *The Death and Life of the Great Lakes*, New York 2017; Benjamin Heber Johnson, *Escaping the Dark, Gray City. Fear and Hope in Progressive-Era Conservation*, New Haven 2017; Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside. Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism*, New York 2001; Christopher C. Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible. Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America*, Chapel Hill 2012.

term research on climate change covering different ages from ancient times to the present, and different regional zones of nations across the globe should produce similar, rewarding results.

Furthermore, this agenda of research should include a range of specialized lenses that cover the field of urban environmental history. New levels of disaster, in some respects, have refocused the attention of scholars on some of the same, old problems faced by Wallerstein's traders during the colonial period.¹⁶ Unprecedented challenges for public health, water management, and the transmission of epidemics have resulted from the global movement of people on the run from climate change. Measuring the successes and failures of science and technology as a fix for urban heat sinks, air pollution, rising sea levels, and so on would benefit as well from a transnational point of view. Shedding light on the role of gender in both the construction of real cities and nature imaginaries is another area that needs additional illumination.¹⁷

The transnational perspective on history will also help find solutions of urban design and planning for the universal problem of sprawl. Cities are growing out, not up, for the most part. The consequent costs in terms of energy consumption, environmental degradation, and human health, in addition to the emotional stress suffered from unendurable commute times, cannot be calculated. In order to achieve any kind of success in reaching current planning goals of "sustainability" and "resilience," cities will have to be redesigned, compacting housing districts at the core and reopening green spaces at the periphery. Like the transnational biography of Geddes, following the course of more

¹⁶ Cf., in particular, the seminal works of John R. McNeill, including John Robert McNeill, *Atlantic Empires of France and Spain. Louisbourg and Havana, 1700-1763*, Chapel Hill 1985; Alan L. Karras/John Robert McNeill, *Atlantic American Societies. From Columbus through Abolition, 1492-1888*, London/New York 1992; John Robert McNeill, *Mosquito Empire. Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914*, New York 2010; William Hardy McNeill/John Robert McNeill, *The Global Condition. Conquerors, Catastrophes, and Community*, Princeton 2017. Cf. also J. H. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead. The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793*, Philadelphia 1949; L. G. Stevenson, *Putting Disease on the Map. The Early Use of Spot Maps in Yellow Fever*, in: *Journal of the History of Medicine* 20:3, 1965, p. 226-261; and G. Melville Klinor, *Plague of Sheep. Environmental Consequences of the Conquest of Mexico*, Cambridge/New York 1994.

¹⁷ On science, medicine, and technology, cf. for example, Igor Vojnovic et. al., *Handbook of Global Urban Health*, New York 2019; and Francesco Musco, *Counteracting Urban Heat Island Effects in a Global Climate Change Scenario*, New York/Berlin/Heidelberg 2016. On gender, cf. Maureen A. Flanagan, *Constructing the Patriarchal City. Gender and the Built Environments of London, Dublin, Toronto, and Chicago, 1870s into the 1940s*, Philadelphia 2018; Ellen Shoshkes, Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, *A Transnational Life in Urban Planning and Design*, Farnham 2013.

contemporary planners and their projects will contribute to addressing the dual problem of urban sprawl and global warming.¹⁸

Knowing no political boundaries, climate change is playing a part in this historic process of global urbanization by causing a migration that has recently tipped the scales from a rural to an urban majority. In the case of Latin America, an ongoing hot spell has not only withered farm crops like coffee and corn, but also facilitated the spread of insects and micro-organisms that devour whatever is left in the fields. Given the choice of starving or moving, Guatemalan refugees in the tens of thousands have been streaming from the countryside towards Mexico and the United States. At the same time, hotter weather near the equator has warmed the oceans to a point where the water no longer holds enough oxygen for the fish to breathe. They too have been moving from the South to the North, leaving coastal settlements dependent on harvesting the sea without enough food to eat, let alone to sell in the marketplace. Creating urban crises across borderlines, this migration is exacerbating long-standing problems of mass homelessness and unemployment, public health and sanitation, and social welfare and crime.¹⁹ Like the movement of people around

¹⁸ Cf. the pioneering work, Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Granite Garden. Urban Nature and Human Design*, New York 1984, which sorts out the successes from the failures of landscape design in American cities. Cf. also Richard Register, *Ecocities. Building Cities in Balance with Nature*, Berkeley 2002. For an example of the flow of technology, cf. Jessica B. Teissh, *Engineering Nature. Water, Development, and the Global Spread of American Environmental Expertise*, Chapel Hill 2011.

¹⁹ On sprawl, cf. Lawrence A. Herzog, *Global Suburbs. Urban Sprawl from the Rio Grande to Rio De Janeiro*, New York 2014; Howard Frumkin/Lawrence D. Frank/Richard Jackson, *Urban Sprawl and Public Health. Designing, Planning, and Building for Healthy Communities*, Washington 2004; Reid H. Ewing, *Growing Cooler. Evidence on Urban Development and Climate Change*, Washington 2008. On urban planning, cf. Eric Paul Mumford, *Designing the Modern City. Urbanism since 1850*, New Haven/London 2018; Alisdair McGregor/Cole Roberts/Fiona Cousins, *Two Degrees. The Built Environment and Our Changing Climate*, Abingdon/Oxon/New York 2013. On Latin America, migration, and climate change, cf. Clinton L. Beckford/Kevon Rhiney, *Globalization, Agriculture and Food in the Caribbean. Climate Change, Gender and Geography*, London 2016; Russell Duncan/Clara Juncker, *Transnational America. Contours of Modern US Culture*, Copenhagen 2004; Justin A. Read, *Obverse Colonization. Sao Paulo, Global Urbanization and the Poetics of the Latin American City*, in: *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 15:3, 2006, p. 281-300; Elana Zilberg, *Space of Detention. The Making of a Transnational Gang Crisis between Los Angeles and San Salvador*, Durham/London 2011; A. K. Sandoval-Strauss, *Latino Landscapes. Postwar Cities and the Transnational Origins of a New Urban America*, in: *American Historical Review* 101:3, 2014, p. 804-831. On migration, cf. also Kim Marie Korinek/Thomas N. Maloney, *Migration in the 21st Century. Rights, Outcomes, and Policy*, London/New York 2011; Bayindir Goularas Gökçe/İşil Zeynep Turkan-İpek, *International Migration in the 21st Century. Problems and Solutions*, Newcastle upon Tyne 2018. On

the world, the role of the hinterlands of cities in the globalization of commodity flows of natural resources, popular culture, and capital represent other rich areas of future research.

If there has been a transnational turn in urban environmental studies, scholarship only began illuminating this landscape of history twenty years ago. Building on the academic foundations of world systems and urban planning, historians have been advancing this field of knowledge along several paths of research. While learning more about the effects of climate change on the environment will offer contributions of immediate interest, many other dimensions of urban nature that involve the flow of people, information, and goods across national boundaries deserve equal consideration.

housing and homelessness, cf. Edward Murphy/Najib B. Hourani (Eds.), *The Housing Question. Tensions, Continuities, and Contingencies in the Modern City*, Farnham/Burlington 2013; Emilio de Antunano, *Mexico City as an Urban Laboratory*. Oscar Lewis, the “Culture of Poverty” and the Transnational History of the Slum, in: *Journal of Urban History* 45:4, 2019, p. 813-830.