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Introduction by Stephen Milder, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen

Elizabeth Grennan Browning's *Nature's Laboratory: Environmental Thought and Labor Radicalism in Chicago, 1886-1937* studies the "diverse modes of experimentation" deployed by how intellectuals, activists, and reformers in order "to counter the threat of labor radicalism and uncover the connection between the nonhuman natural world and human nature in the modern industrial city" (5). The book offers an impressive tour of Chicago's intellectual landscape, revealing the myriad ways in which the concept of nature was understood and utilized, from the fin-de-siècle to the New Deal era. The first of its three sections contrasts the views of anarchists and architects in late-nineteenth-century Chicago, offering insights into the ways that divergent understandings of the city's natural and built environments reflected conflicting understandings of the meaning of nature. The second section focuses on Chicago's famous social reformers at the beginning of the twentieth century, looking into how nature was deployed at John Dewey's Laboratory School and Jane Addams's Hull House, among others. The third section turns to metaphorical uses of nature in the 1920s and 1930s, showing how social scientists turned to ecology as a means of understanding urban life and worker motivation. The stories of labor and environmental thought and of the history of the city of Chicago that Browning interweaves so well in her book are also focal points of the lively conversation that follows throughout this roundtable.

The roundtable opens with a contribution from **Stefan Couperus**, who hones in on the relationship between environmental thought and the formation of Chicago's "social and spatial order." He praises Browning for showing how essential the idea of nature was for the "shifting imaginaries of labor-capital relations, gender and race, [and] spatial and social governmentalities" that shaped Chicago. Couperus wonders, however, what could be gained if Browning pushed beyond explaining *how* debates about urban life in Chicago were "embedded in contrasting imaginaries of 'nature'" and also asked "*why* certain changes occurred while others did not." He wants to know, in other words, why some ideas about nature proved more durable and more influential than others.

Drawing on deep insights from her own research as well as the tradition of historiography linking nature, capitalism, and Chicago, **Natalie Bump Vena** focuses particularly on the Chicago aspect of Browning's story. Vena discusses how Browning's book adds to our understanding of Chicago's rapid transformation at the turn of the twentieth century and helps us to think about its "status as a settler colonial city." She also links the Chicago of *Nature's Laboratory* with social justice in contemporary urban communities, discussing how "broken windows policing" draws on environmental thought.

Finally, **Janine Giordano Drake** focuses on the labor element of Browning's story. Her contribution emphasizes the extent to which Browning successfully teases out

how nature shaped discussions about capitalism and workers' rights in turn-of-the-century Chicago. She concludes by thinking about the importance of these links in the crisis-ridden present.

In an introspective response, Browning talks about how her work on *Nature's Laboratory* helped her to process the COVID-19 pandemic, and discusses the questions about the relationships between environmental, labor, and intellectual history that inspired her to write the book in the first place. She also offers thoughtful responses to the questions and points raised by the three reviewers. In responding to Couperus's *why* question, for example, she offers some thoughts on how *Nature's Laboratory* relates to the longstanding debate as to why socialism has never flourished in the United States. In addressing Vena's point about the links between the debates studied in her book and contemporary broken windows policing programs, Browning directs our attention to the broader links between the environment and "understandings of criminalization, incarceration, and so-called rehabilitative justice." In her response to Drake, Browning discusses the future of research that links labor and the environment, emphasizing the imperative to think more about the diversity of workers and its relationship to environmental discourse.

In sum, this roundtable draws on Browning's exciting book in order to open up a larger conversation about the ways in which ideas of nature have influenced labor history and urban history. The productive discussion offers new insights into *Nature's Laboratory* as well as some ideas about how historians might contribute to developing an environmental history that is more deeply enmeshed with neighboring fields.

Before turning to the first set of comments, 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.

Comments by Stefan Couperus, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen

Elizabeth Grennan Browning has written an outstanding book. *Nature's Laboratory* is a prime example of how historiography can incorporate ecocritical readings into long-standing tropes in histories of modernity and power. The book shows how Chicago's social and spatial order, as it materialized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was informed by shifting imaginaries of labor-capital relations, gender and race, spatial and social governmentalities (i.e. ideas about social control), and predicaments of metropolitan life. All of these imaginaries and their proponents had one thing in common, Browning argues: they interpreted and envisioned the modern industrial city through a conception of "nature".

Browning indeed makes a compelling case for heuristically identifying the significance of "nature" in historical discourses and practices that have, hitherto, featured primarily in scholarship about the reifications of class, gender, and race in modernity – or, more specifically in Browning's case, the history of Chicago as metropolis-in-the-making. "Nature," as employed by Browning, offers new ontological prowess in understanding modernity and the social constructs underpinning it.

The book provides a deep historical contextualisation of how environmental and ecological considerations – or conceptions of nature as natural law, the material environment, and human behavior – feature in Chicago's succeeding, co-existing and overlapping imaginaries of social and natural order in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

A range of familiar and less familiar historical actors - anarchists, activists, urbanists, scientists, social workers, architects, lawyers, and (to a lesser degree) politicians - are presented as advocates of "nature", either in the guise of (public) health, the natural environment of the city and its outskirts, or in terms of social elevation and equality, or social Darwinist competition. In a series of more or less chronologically organized chapters that coincide with a thematic focus, Browning's analysis provides a fine-grained narrative of how to (re)consider Chicago both as "the natural environment of the free man" and as a "social laboratory" (153) to cite Robert Park's seemingly contradictory set of metaphors, while being critically attentive to ramifications of class, race, and gender throughout.

Again, the book's organization and layout are, overall, instrumental to the central and important argument it conveys. Yet, due to the empirical depth of each of the thematic chapters, it is sometimes hard to identify the consistent application of the intersectional lens Browning aspires to apply throughout her analysis. This is not a criticism in itself, but leads to a critique - or perhaps a set of follow-up questions - about what holds the historical analysis together beyond the diverse iterations of "nature."

Nature's Laboratory does an outstanding job unfolding *how* various social, racialized, gendered, and scientific dispositions of urban life materialized – and were acted out – in Chicago, and how they were embedded in contrasting imaginaries of “nature.” The question as to *why* these dispositions materialized – and were then negotiated, mediated, or rejected – is tackled less systematically. This is partly due to the absence of the thematization or conceptualization of political change in more “conventional” registers of institutional change. Obviously, this is not the study’s main intent. But I wonder whether a more articulate rendition of the shifting urban governance constellations and the hegemonic discursive constructs of “social control,” to cite a key term in Browning’s book, could have provided the backdrop for explaining *why* certain changes occurred while others did not. In other words: why and under what circumstances did certain renditions and iterations of “nature” permeate (or challenge) prevailing, hegemonic norms and practices (i.e. institutions) about social order and control?

The language of historical institutionalism might provide such an explanatory framework. The book highlights multiple (violent) “critical junctures” (though Browning does not use this term) that opened up or closed down politico-cultural opportunity structures for particular counter-hegemonic, conflated imaginaries of “nature” and social order. Most notably: the Great Chicago Fire (1871), which drastically altered the physical and social landscape of the city and prompted debates about labor rights, racial equality and the role of the state in mediating conflict; the Haymarket Affair (1886), as the summit of a counter-discourse to capitalism’s monopolization of material nature and natural law in industrial production; the Chicago Race Riot (1919), which catalyzed arguments about the “natural laws” governing race relations and Darwinian frames of competition; and, though mostly outside of the book’s temporal scope, the Memorial Day Massacre (1937), which reinvigorated public understandings of labor movements and their suppression within the framework of a broader narrative of class struggle and rights to nature and resources.

If these – and other – critical junctures are read as instances of situated agency for the historical protagonists in the book (i.e. moments when their agency was both enabled and constrained by the institutions and power relations in the circumstances of a specific critical juncture), a more systematic explanatory narrative could be opened up. Such a narrative might provide an explanation as to why certain compounded imaginaries were ephemeral, whereas others became more robust - or maybe even amounted to a norm cascade ultimately leading to systemic change of norms and institutions.

In addition, I wonder whether such an approach might help justify why the intersectional prism through which (class-related, racialized, gendered, and scientific) discourses and social practices are looked at in conjunction with each other in the book, varies at times – or at least does not always yield symmetrical observations. This is not myopia on the author’s behalf. But it does raise the

question as to whether pointing to the specific situated agency of a protagonist at a given critical juncture at which power, nature and order were (re)negotiated in certain terms, could have helped explain why specific contractionary imaginaries of “nature” and social order (with varying emphases on class, race, gender, science) became tangible and viable while others did not.

Nature's Laboratory is an eye-opening book that shows how ecocriticism validates critical historical re-readings of modernity and power in the industrial city. Its historical-analytical depth, richness, and synthesis are admirable. In this contribution to the roundtable I have tried to open a discussion about how the book could also speak more explicitly to questions about institutional change and historical agency, and why, at certain instances and under specific historical conditions, “nature” ushered in new configurations of modernity and power in Chicago – and possibly beyond.

Comments by Natalie Bump Vena, Queens College-CUNY

In *Nature's Laboratory*, environmental thought often reads less like philosophy and more like a brawl. Elizabeth Grennan Browning presents intellectuals of all stripes using nature as the medium through which to analyze, to challenge, and to justify Chicago's frightening inequality, especially the cruelties of working-class life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

By yoking nature to capitalism in Chicago, she continues a grand tradition. In a nod to *Nature's Metropolis*, Browning starts her book by quoting a traveler's disgust with Chicago's "great stacks vomiting black smoke" that he could see "thirty miles out" (1). Likewise, the prologue to Williams Cronon's classic text features the recollections of disturbed visitors who first spotted the hazy city from railcars speeding through Indiana.¹ By all accounts, Chicago's unchecked industrialization and dizzying growth dismayed tourists, migrants, do-gooders, and even capitalists, many of whom moved to bucolic suburbs.

Seemingly obsessed with the landscape's rapid change (and the sudden loss of pastures, prairies, and woodlands), Chicagoans simply could not stop talking about nature at the turn of the twentieth century. Browning approaches this preoccupation as historically significant, and she details how intellectuals, including the urban elite, mobilized nature—in both material and discursive forms—during a period of profound labor unrest. Her analysis resonates with my research on the Cook County Forest Preserves, which Daniel Burnham and Edward H. Bennett called an "outer park system" in *The Plan of Chicago* (1909).² Dwight Perkins, an architect, and Jens Jensen, a landscape architect, fought to establish the forest preserves in the early twentieth century and cast them as a natural retreat accessible to the working-class, who did not have the money to travel farther afield.³ Browning analyzes *The Plan* as a set of projects intended to turn "the beautiful urban environs toward securing social order" (74), and has helped me better understand how the Cook County forest preserves initially functioned as "a bulwark against labor radicalism" (14). Perkins and Jensen were friends with Jane Addams,⁴ and like forest preserve boosters, Hull-House residents sought "to improve industrial workers' lives by bringing them closer to nature" (111).

Meanwhile, Chicago-based anarchists lacked faith in reforms that could only marginally improve working-class lives. I thank Browning for introducing me to Lucy Parsons, an anarchist and formerly enslaved person, who drew on

¹ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: Norton, 1991), 9.

² Carl Smith, *The Plan of Chicago: Daniel Burnham and the Remaking of the American City*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 87.

³ Natalie Bump Vena, "Work Relief Labor in the Cook County Forest Preserves, 1931-1942," In Kathleen A. Brosnan, Ann Durkin Keating, and Williams C. Barnett, eds., *City of Lake and Prairie: Chicago's Environmental History* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020: 150-164), 150.

⁴ Natalie Bump Vena, "The Nature of Bureaucracy in the Cook County Forest Preserves" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2016), 62.

environmental thought to argue for the abolition of political and economic systems that erected “barriers between the human being and natural development” (48). Parsons theorized that the equal distribution of natural resources would produce a fundamentally benevolent society (48), and her vision resonates with that of Geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore, a prison abolitionist, who argues, “Where life is precious, life *is* precious.”⁵ In other words, Gilmore contends that when societies end incarceration and shift spending priorities to care for individuals, their members are likelier to care for one another and to avoid violence. Lucy Parsons was married to Albert Parsons, a typesetter turned anarchist leader, who was one of five men sentenced to death for the Haymarket bombing in 1887 (31, 45). Although Browning calls the Haymarket trial “one of the most severe miscarriages of justice in US history” (43), she powerfully illustrates how radical working-class leaders embraced their own materials (namely dynamite) to overthrow capitalism and the prevailing social order (40).

In addition to establishing Chicago as “nature’s laboratory” *nonpareil*, Browning’s book underscores Chicago’s status as a settler colonial city. At the turn of the twentieth century, capitalists, social reformers, and ecologists trafficked in racist tropes in their urban experiments, and laid claim to Potawatomi land.⁶ Browning describes real estate investors in the late nineteenth century using indigenous words to name Chicago’s early skyscrapers, in order to cast the otherwise startling structures as “organic features in the cityscape” (68). In their projects and campaigns, Chicago’s urban elite also adhered to one of settler colonialism’s principal ideologies: Fredrick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, first presented in Chicago in 1893. Browning observes that Addams “subscribed” to the thesis and designed hands-on exhibits at the Hull-House Labor Museum for factory workers to reconnect with natural materials and nature itself (125, 121). In accordance with Turner’s theory, Addams and her associates intended for the exhibits to instill in working-class immigrants a hardy independence that was vital to American democracy and originally forged on the frontier. Browning describes the co-production of nature and racism in these exhibits, noting “an implicit prejudicial message undergirded many” (122). The Labor Museum presented Navajo weaving and other indigenous arts and crafts as primitive, revealing Hull-House “residents’ nostalgic association of Native peoples with the ‘strenuous life’ of the frontier and an idealization of wilderness” (123). Browning also confronts how settler colonialism structured the Prairie Club’s “Historical Pageant of the Dunes” (1917) designed, in part, to advance their campaign of saving Indiana’s sand dune ecosystem. The “epic production feature[ed] nearly one thousand actors portraying Indians, European explorers, fur traders, soldiers, and city planners” (145). *Nature’s Laboratory*

⁵ Rachel Kushner, “Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Might Change Your Mind,” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 17, 2019.

⁶ See: John N. Low, *Imprints: The Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians and the City of Chicago* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2016), and Vena, “The Nature of Bureaucracy in the Cook County Forest Preserves.”

demonstrates that settler colonialism shaped much environmental thought in Chicago at the turn of the twentieth century.

Browning has also heightened my sensitivity to contemporary uses of environmental thought to exercise control over urban communities. For instance, broken windows policing still contributes to disproportionate rates of Black incarceration. In this style of law enforcement, police officers arrest people for low-level crimes (like vandalism) under the assumption that environmental disorder creates fertile ground for more serious offenses. *Nature's Laboratory* has helped me see the throughline between broken windows theory and Chicago School research that “naturalized segregation” (139)—and I would add policing—as early sociologists applied Cowles and Frederic Clements’ theory of ecological succession to urban life (146). Browning points out that in *The Negro in Chicago* (1922), Sociologist Charles S. Johnson “emphasized that the Black Belt’s physical and social environments were conducive to crime and delinquency” (152). In *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas* (1942), Sociologists Clifford R. Shaw and Henry D. McKay attributed misconduct to social environments, and not “permanent characteristics of any ethnic or racial group” (177). Importantly, Johnson, Shaw and McKay challenged stereotypes about Black people’s inherent deviance. However, assertions like theirs effectively criminalize entire Black communities, inviting over-policing in racially segregated neighborhoods.

In another example of environmental thought’s ongoing salience to urban governance, technocrats in New York City, where I now live and work, use the language of “resilience” and “sustainability” to legitimate urban planning initiatives, such as re-zonings, that result in gentrification.⁷ In the labor context, this same language justifies corporate restructuring that leads to layoffs. As in nature-based arguments at the turn of the twentieth century, these terms also have the potential for radical meaning. Grassroots activists use “resilience” and “sustainability” to protect their communities from unmanageable flooding, concentrated pollution, rising rents, and stagnating wages. Although familiar, environmental language remains contested. As Browning’s indispensable book reminds us, we must stay vigilant against discourse that renders inequality natural.

⁷ Melissa Checker, *The Sustainability Myth: Environmental Gentrification and the Politics of Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

Comments by Janine Giordano Drake, Indiana University

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, everyone from radical workers to authoritarian managers argued that the reforms they advocated were consonant with restoring a *natural order* to Chicago. Labor radicals used “nature” to refer to the homeostasis of ecosystems and the rights and privileges of all creatures to enjoyment and full participation therein. When they sought to dynamite buildings, to withhold their labor, or to demand the value of their artisanal craftsmanship, organized workers proposed reforms that would take direction from nature in restoring social peace to a chaotic and rapacious urban world. Other reformers of the period understood nature as the condition of untamed wilderness, the opposite of the social and scientific *progress* of “civil society” typified by the modern city. New research in ecology similarly inspired the work of educators, social workers, scientists, and architects who sought to temper those base tendencies of nature through a carefully engineered social, political, and physical environment.

In *Nature's Laboratory*, Elizabeth Grennan Browning shows us that “nature” was a major site of social and political contest in the late nineteenth century, and in no place was it more of a contest than in Chicago, the heavily polluted city which stood at the beating heart of the American labor movement. Browning's book leads readers on a journey through Chicago's major urban crises from the Haymarket Affair of 1886 to the Little Steel Strike of 1937, illustrating an ongoing conversation among radical workers, reformers, and scientists as each deployed arguments drawn from new “research on nature” in defense of their claims about the proper direction of social, industrial and architectural reform. Browning reminds scholars, and particularly scholars of environmental science, that the line between the “built environment” and “nature” is a social construction, and that this line has been contested for as long as the history of cities themselves. Research on “nature” or “the environment” has never been politically neutral or independent from social and political implications.

The book proceeds both thematically and chronologically, and is divided into three parts, each of which comprises two chapters. Part I, “Nature's Laboratory of Anarchism and Capitalism,” illustrates the contrast between anarchists and capitalists in their understanding of “human nature.” Anarchists, Browning illustrates, believed in “human nature's perfectibility” through their relationship to their surrounding environment (39). They believed that once the people owned the means of production, they would be able to thrive. In contrast, Chicago architects of the late nineteenth century “condemned organized labor as a deviation from the natural order” (71). They sought to build skyscrapers which brought in natural light and organized space effectively in order to accentuate the best elements of human nature, especially “civic pride, dignity and social harmony” (76).

Part II, “Nature’s Laboratory of Pragmatism and Progressivism,” illustrates how educators like John Dewey at the University of Chicago used ecological research to argue that the social environment which formed young people made a profound difference in who they became. Dewey’s Lab School, Browning argues, “interwove pragmatism and environmental aesthetics to establish a new approach to pedagogy and remind children of their constant immersion in the natural world” (101). Hull House settlement house reformers Ellen Gates Starr and Jane Addams, too, understood the degree to which immigrant and ethnic peoples developed a relationship to craftsmanship and art as they came of age, and that these relationships were part and parcel of their understanding of themselves in relationship to civic society. Meanwhile, Alice Hamilton and Florence Kelly, Chicago occupational health reformers, built upon scientific and social scientific research on the importance of social and environmental factors in human formation as they demanded reforms to working conditions in mines and factories, especially for women and children.

Perhaps the most original of all, Part III, “Nature’s Laboratory of Technocratic Social Control,” brings the first two parts together and offers an explanation for how Progressives reimagined the place of “nature” in Chicago in the first third of the twentieth century. These two chapters illustrate how sociologists and human relations specialists of the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s built upon the social scientific research of their day when they offered plans to redesign the urban landscape in order to tame the parts of nature that needed to be tamed, but also make room for natural tendencies among humans that could not be controlled. This was not just a matter of playgrounds, parks, nature study and student-centered-learning. Technocratic leaders, Browning shows, wanted to establish a “socioeconomic equilibrium in the American capitalist system, where economic growth remained undisturbed by labor unrest” (147). Browning shows how the plans for “urban renewal” that were crafted in response to the 1919 race massacres in Chicago were intended to provide poor people, and particularly people of color, more opportunities to be immersed in inspirational opportunities for social mobility. Similarly, Western Electric’s experiments in welfare capitalism were another attempt at designing the workplace to make workers compliant, content, and hardworking.

The book concludes with a thoughtful reflection about what we’re talking about when we talk about nature. “Nature persists as a malleable and slippery concept that is universally available to all who might need help explaining complicated ideas or bolstering contested political platforms,” Browning writes (221). In a moment when environmental risk—due to pollution, disaster capitalism, and climate change—falls disproportionately on the poor, Browning reminds us that this truth is even more important to remember. Instead of relying so heavily on scientists and social scientists to “tame” and “control” the rebellions of poor and oppressed peoples, Browning argues that it is worth “decentering and democratizing the important role of expertise” (222). In other words, if it was organized workers that inspired the many “Progressive” scientific, architectural and cultural institutions of

Chicago, then those organized workers are probably worth listening to as we now prepare for environmental change. The book will be a welcome addition to scholarly conversations in environmental science, urban history, and labor history.

Response by Elizabeth Grennan Browning, University of Oklahoma

As I was revising *Nature's Laboratory* for publication, I could not help but see an uncomfortable alignment between my research focus and how I came to process the overwhelming public crisis of the day—the global COVID-19 pandemic. As I worked through the early twentieth-century environmental rhetoric deployed by a wide array of historical actors to address the period's major social upheavals around urbanization, industrialization, and labor relations, I also puzzled over how discourse about nature filtered into ubiquitous contemporary discussions about risk and uncertainty surrounding COVID-19, and the pandemic's etiology and psychology—from how the virus was transmitted to how humans decided whether or not to wear a mask or follow official quarantine guidance. That the decision not to wear a mask could be an expression of freedom to some and selfishness to others made for contentious deliberations over normative uses of the idea of "human nature." As scientists, sociologists, and social commentators speculated on how the public response to the pandemic might affect public opinion and action around climate change, I continued to piece together the enduring ways that narratives about humans' relationship with the environment could be deployed to cope with and mitigate the most pressing social disasters.⁸

While this pandemic context helps illustrate my state of mind at the eleventh hour of this project, a historiographical conundrum was the driving force behind the book's origins many years prior. In various ways, *Nature's Laboratory* emerged from my reflection on two historical subfields that I believed recent environmental histories needed more engagement with: intellectual history and labor history. I agreed with Paul Sutter's directive in 2021 that "it's time to restore the fragmented habitats that have isolated" the subdisciplines of environmental history and intellectual history.⁹ I was also compelled by Gunter Peck's call in 2006 to "delineat[e] an analytical common ground between studies of nature and labor."¹⁰ These remain important subfields for environmental historians' methodological investigation, and my hope is that *Nature's Laboratory* will continue to galvanize historiographical conversations along these lines.

The brilliant group of scholars featured in this roundtable, Stefan Couperus, Janine Giordano Drake, and Natalie Bump Vena have my sincere gratitude for offering skillful overviews of the book, trenchant insights, and important lines of further inquiry. Each review has opened new avenues of exploration for me around the book's core question of how environmental thought shaped public debates about labor radicalism and the market economy during the rise of modern American industrial capitalism. I also thank Stephen Milder for all his work organizing the

⁸ Alice C. Hill, *The Fight for Climate after COVID-19* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁹ Paul S. Sutter, "Putting the Intellectual Back in Environmental History," *Modern Intellectual History* 18, no. 2 (2021): 596–605.

¹⁰ Gunter Peck, "The Nature of Labor: Fault Lines and Common Ground in Environmental and Labor History," *Environmental History* 11, no. 2 (2006): 212–38.

roundtable and introducing the discussion. Together, the reviewers recognize my argument that the invocation of nature in social argumentation has never been isolated from calculated political maneuvering in US history. The environment has served as a political tool for a wide spectrum of interlocutors, from radical to conservative. Charting the shifting meanings of nature across political discourse can help us discern how Americans have wrangled over the problem of widening social inequality in the past.

I appreciate Couperus's close attention to the varied ontological meanings of "nature" in historical discourse—from the material environment to human nature, and finally, natural law. Indeed, these were key threads that could not be condensed into one single essence of nature, but rather operated in tandem, weaving together human society and the natural world. As "nature's laboratory" at the turn of the century, Chicago was a hybrid construct of both natural and social elements. Couperus's prompting to draw out *why* particular understandings of nature prevailed over others within hegemonic norms and institutional practices is a helpful directive. From my archival research of myriad historical actors concerned about the state of labor relations, I realized that "nature" was a slippery heuristic device—and often a straightforward starting point—for conflicting perspectives on the ideal social order. For example, Lucy Parsons's anarchistic manifestos and John Wellborn Root's architectural monuments to industrial capitalism both equally employed metaphors of nature, and both figures directed their audiences to consider the inner workings of nature in order to assist the uninitiated in grasping their distinctive arguments and to persuade them to adopt such philosophical outlooks. Ultimately, given the political and economic context of the Progressive Era and the interwar years, measuring the power of nature's different registers of meaning reveals that those who were most successful in dictating the socioeconomic order (such as Elton Mayo and Robert Park) directed nature toward justifying capitalism and explaining the workings of the marketplace. But even those who were arguably less successful (such as Lucy Parsons and her husband Albert Parsons) in effecting their social visions did in fact advance public deliberation over alternative approaches toward structuring the socioeconomic order. In ways that I hadn't considered before Couperus's remarks, I see that *Nature's Laboratory* engages with the long-studied historiographical question of why socialism did not take firm root in American politics—and of whether America was exceptional in this regard.¹¹ This all gives credence to Couperus's nudge to more fully consider political development and institutional change in Chicago. Admittedly, the book's focus on Progressive reform drew me to tangential political arenas such as the settlement house, the sociology classroom, and the factory line more so than City Hall. However, the political implications of this shifting rhetoric do surface in the book, and, I hope, make clear how this discourse motivated the state's actions: from the city's investigation of public and occupational health concerns in the tenement

¹¹ For a discussion of the historiography of arguments regarding socialism's failure in America, see "The Debate Table: Eric Rauchway and Ian Tyrrell Discuss American Exceptionalism," *Modern American History* 1, no. 2 (2018): 247–56.

sweatshop industries to public officials' response (or lack thereof) to the racial violence of Chicago's Red Summer of 1919. Additional study of politicians' reliance on the concept of nature to advance capitalist and democratic order would provide an important contribution and would help respond to environmental historians' appeal "to bring the state back in" to U.S. environmental history.¹²

I am indebted to Natalie Bump Vena for helping me develop a deeper understanding of the Cook County Forest Preserves from her important scholarship on the preserves and environmentalism in Chicago. Vena's comments attend to the political dimensions of Chicago's forestland and the need for environmental historians to engage with environmental justice scholarship and carceral studies to better understand how the environment has figured within histories of racial oppression and social inequality. Vena's discussion of contemporary New York City public officials' and grassroots activists' dual usage of environmental rhetoric such as "resilience" and "sustainability" reminds us that that strategic references to "nature" can indeed cut across varied agendas. As Vena emphasizes, environmental history's intersections with the history of criminality, incarceration, and policing in America demand further attention. My continued reflections on the Chicago school of sociology's criminology research—particularly the work of Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay—have drawn me to my next planned monograph which will examine how criminologists, prison reformers, and administrators at the U.S. Bureau of Prisons prioritized engagement with the natural environment in their rehabilitative labor programs. As "nature's laboratory," Chicago figured prominently as a test case in broader, national understandings of criminalization, incarceration, and so-called rehabilitative justice measures in America.

Vena also connects *Nature's Laboratory* to settler colonialism in generative ways that I had not previously considered. In the book I refer to the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 as a key moment that cleared the urban palimpsest, making the land a seemingly blank slate—a testing ground for industry and labor. However, Vena steers us toward considering Chicagoland's previous decades of settlers' violent dispossession of the ancestral homelands of several tribal nations, including the Neshnabék: the Potawatomi, Odawa, and Ojibwe Nations; the Illinois Confederation: the Peoria and Kaskaskia Nations; and the Myaamia, Wea, Ho-Chunk, Sauk, and Meskwaki Nations.¹³ Exploring Chicago as "nature's laboratory" through a settler colonial lens would also invite important research on the continued presence of Native Americans in the city and their complex relationships with industries and labor organizations in the region.

Janine Giordano Drake aptly centers the perspective of the laborer in her review. This tact reminds me of a core challenge throughout my research. I often

¹² Paul Sutter, "What Can U.S. Environmental Historians Learn from Non-U.S. Environmental Historiography?," *Environmental History* 8, no. 1 (2003): 109–29.

¹³ The Newberry Library, "Land Acknowledgment," <https://www.newberry.org/land-acknowledgment>.

strategically “read between the lines” of prominent intellectuals’ archival papers to get at the voices of Chicago’s workers. Above all I was eager to understand how environmental rhetoric in Chicago’s battles over labor relations shaped the most influential voices in the political sphere and their respective fields of reform and scholarship. However, further research within the archives of key Chicago labor organizations, such as the Chicago Federation of Labor and the Industrial Workers of the World, would reveal additional dimensions of the varied meanings of nature in Chicago’s labor arena. As my chapters on the Hull-House Labor Museum and the Western Electric Hawthorne Works especially showed, the diversity of Chicago’s laborers presented significant challenges for labor organizers who had to traverse divisions of language and culture to effectively mobilize workers.¹⁴ Especially important for further research is scrutinizing to what extent union leaders appealed to the environment to either discriminate against women and minority workers, or to integrate and desegregate their organizations’ ranks.

Environmental historians would do well to continue to engage with labor history and intellectual history, as these subfields can enhance our understanding of diversity along the lines of race and ethnicity, gender, and class. By examining histories of racism and settler colonialism, environmental historians are increasingly focusing on the ways in which the environment has played a part in mediating political power among different social groups across time, but this work has only just begun.¹⁵ Offering a window onto the kaleidoscopic meanings of nature in the rapidly industrializing modern American city, *Nature’s Laboratory* contributes to this ongoing conversation by reminding us that humans’ fixation on nature has often served as a mirror reflecting diverse groups’ most urgent concerns regarding political power and social order.

¹⁴ Lizabeth Cohen most eloquently made this argument in *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁵ Mary E. Mendoza and Traci Brynne Voyles, eds., *Not Just Green, Not Just White: Race, Justice, and Environmental History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2025).

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