

“Between God and Darwin: Early Modern Transitions in the Understanding of Climate ”

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My book project examines how eighteenth-century European explanations of climatic difference created imperial anxieties and shaped the trajectory of empire in the world – in the Caribbean, in West Africa, and in the British Maritimes. In an age in which the body as much as the mind were considered porous, “leaky” to outside influence or contamination – the era between unquestioning faith in God and the scientific certainties of Darwin – imperialists and their agents worried that the seepage of alien environments would result in degeneration. Their bodies, intelligence, sexuality, and morality appeared all at risk. Unwilling to abandon the colonial project, British governors, physicians, missionaries, and soldiers found surprising ways to quiet their paranoia as they ruled, healed, converted, and defended British rule in alien climates. Their assumptions about the effects of these environments shaped where they settled, who they recruited into the military, how they organized their missionary enterprise, and where they considered retiring. This is the subject of *Between God and Darwin*.

High white fatalities in tropical settlements, especially in West Africa, led to paranoia about the weakness of European bodies outside their native regions. Insufficient medical knowledge led colonizers to correlate climate with diseases, and imagine the tropics as regions of sickness. But extreme temperatures, unrelated to fatalities, also created uncertainties. The frigid winters in eastern Canada appeared to atrophy the spirit, drop fertility rates, and seemed to have the potential to end all human life. Any extremes of weather, many believed, produced ‘the lesser sort,’ those with reduced capacity to reason and to innovate.

Enlightenment understandings of the environment were far more capacious than our own. They encompassed topography and temperature, as well as the customs of a people, physical hygiene and appearance, as much as sexual, leisure, and work habits. Environment was described in terms that suggested active agency: it was powerful and present and had a developmental role in the formation of bodies, minds, and morals. On the positive side, it could promote

industriousness and virtue; but on the other, it could encourage idleness and immoral conduct, and transform colonizers into someone unrecognizable, into something that could not be re-integrated into British society. Climate, hence, became a convenient shorthand to structure difference between the colonizer and the colonized, a means of boundary-making crucial to the success of the imperial project.

Anthropologists have long recognized the effects of climate on how human societies organized themselves and made sense of their place in the world. Over the past few decades, historians have joined evolutionary biologists in exploring how physical surroundings shaped people's everyday lives. As scientists study the rewiring of the human brain in response to environmental stimuli, historians explore botanical gardens, hill stations, and landscape paintings in light of pre-Darwinian ideas about the effects of environment on human character. My work, interdisciplinary and global, contributes to this exciting scholarship, one which is concerned finally about the nature of being "human" in an age of expansion and indeterminate knowledge.