Between History and Cultural Representations. A Different Reading of American Environmental History

An interview with Christof Mauch by Alessandro Agosta

Proposing an original reading of the environmental transformations that have occurred throughout the history of the United States is undoubtedly a fascinating yet very tricky challenge. The first danger one encounters is the risk of reiterating analyses and interpretations already established and widely consolidated by a rich historiographical literature on the subject, given the well-known fact that environmental history in the United States established itself much earlier than in other continents. Therefore, it is legitimate to ask whether it is necessary to publish new syntheses that investigate the plurality of environmental contexts characterising a country as vast and internally diverse as the United States.

Christof Mauch, a deep connoisseur of American history and culture, has taken up this challenge by publishing *Paradise Blues. Travels Through American Environmental History*, first in German in 2022 and then in English in 2024. This volume, published in

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English by The White Horse Press, retraces the extraordinary environmental transformations that the territories of North America have experienced over the last centuries, in the form of a travel diary through the busy streets of some major cities as well as into the 'vast wilderness'.

In an international context now marked by global-scale environmental emergencies, Mauch believes we should consider the United States as the primary country to look to in order to deeply understand the effects of the Anthropocene, to study and analyse human intervention in planetary environments. The validity of the USA as a barometer of environmental transformations is dictated by the extreme contradictions through which Americans experience their relationship with natural resources, a complex system of relationships that finds comparable parallel 'in no other place in the world', due to the fact that 'conservation and destruction often lie side by side. In America, people love nature, sometimes to death'[1]. From this contradiction derives, according to Mauch, a 'paradise of unlimited possibilities on one hand and, on the other, the epitome of political megalomania' that, for these reasons, 'unearths grand hopes and bitter disappointments'.[2]

The main purpose of Mauch's volume is to reflect, from a historical perspective, and through the approach of the *environmental humanities*, on these profound contradictions deriving from the contact of American populations with natural resources. The environmental humanities perspective, now widely consolidated, especially concerning the specific case of the United States,[3] was the

[1] C. Mauch, *Paradise Blues: Travels Through American Environmental History* (Winwick: The White Horse Press, 2024), p. 245.

[2] Ibid., pp. 7–10.

[3] For example, Carolyn Merchant also argued the importance of considering the approach of the 'history of ideas about nature', encompassing the philosophical concept of wilderness, the scientific concept of ecology, and the aesthetic concept of 'natural beauty form'. Merchant highlighted how even the 'creative products of artists, nature writers, science writers, explorers and travelers ... help us to understand how changing ideas about nature and beauty can be influential in creating the environments we see around us today'. *American Environmental*

subject of discussion during a conference organised by the Bavarian American Academy and Rachel Carson Center in Munich in the summer of 2010 about environmental knowledge production in the United States, focusing on the impact of natural catastrophes and on public debate about climate change and environmental risk perception.

In the introduction to the volume of contributions presented during the conference, Mauch expressed his viewpoint on the importance of the humanities in enriching the interpretative nuances of environmental history in these terms:

> help us to understand the complex relationship between cultural values, individual experience, and human decision on the one side, and environmental change on the other. If you want to understand the complex relationship between nature and culture … it does not suffice to rely on scientific knowledge. Visions and emotions, for instance, but also historical narratives and fictional texts – the way we tell stories about nature – may be regarded as performing a specific role in the process of environmental knowledge production. 'Cultural spaces' in which environmentally relevant ideas, values, even whole epistemologies, are explored by connecting the personal with the large-scale perspective, by linking individual lives to global issues, and by combining intellectual, emotional, and sensual experiences … Environmental humanities reveal aspects about the environment that have been largely ignored by natural scientists.[4]

The 'cultural spaces' implied by the territorial case studies proposed by Mauch in *Paradise Blues* were directly investigated by the author, who, in the role of explorer, declares his cultural estrangement from the American context. Through a 'European perspective', the places visited during this journey are observed and investigated. So, what is the ultimate purpose of such work? Certainly not the production of a traditional history book, but rather the presentation to readers of a kind of diary, an 'unusual travel guide', as Mauch himself defines it, which can easily guide those interested in an informed visit, from a historical point of view, to some of the most symbolic

History: An Introduction (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. xviii.

[4] C. Mauch and S. Mayer (eds), *American Environments: Climate, Cultures, Catastrophe* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag WINTER, 2012), pp. 1–2.

places in the United States. It is clear, then, that the ultimate recipients of this work are not just professionals, but a much wider audience, reachable through a popular style devoid of excessive technicalities and specialisms. Mauch has made the choice to promote a fluent reading, with an 'accessible style', which allows a broadening of the audience of readers interested in the historical evolutions of the archipelago of environments that make up the USA, implicitly supporting the historians who 'have complained in recent times that history books sound increasingly sterile and passionless'.[5]

Offering readers a more exciting communication of historical processes is a complex operation that cannot be supported by a change of narrative register alone, but which takes the form of a change of historiographical perspective, for which *environmental humanities* embody the best means. In fact, in Mauch's volume the strictly historical reconstructions relating to the ecological evolution of the places visited are intertwined, without any forcing, with the most relevant and well-known cultural representations that those same places have historically transmitted and, in many cases, still transmit today in the collective imagination. By identifying some of the most iconic locations in the United States or, rather, the image of the USA that has developed around them, a dialectic is engaged between representation and reality, a dualism that constantly pervades the narrative.

Since the post-war period, in fact, a heritage 'with which we are familiar from the media' has transmitted the image of a 'American way of life', which suggests the idea 'that a national uniformity exists: but, in terms of the country's physical geography, this is an illusion'. In reading the volume one has an immediate perception of the need to deconstruct the stereotypes circulating around symbolic locations in the USA, or, at least, to delve deeper into their history to prevent simplifying images from continuing to be transmitted, in order to discover 'a country beyond the common cliches and well-know dichotomies'.[6]

[5] Mauch, *Paradise Blues*, p. 237.
[6] Ibid., p. 8.

Among the most discussed images, one has become the fundamental category for understanding the evolution of US environmental history, the *wilderness*, which according to Mauch represents a concept that 'has played a central role'. In previous works, the author highlighted how the attractiveness of 'North America for millions of emigrants European colonists' was conditioned by the perception of an 'empty' territory and therefore 'a land of limitless possibilities, not least because of its abundant natural resources'.[7] This perspective, which implied unlimited exploitation of resources, was reflected in the 'biblical' speech made in Washington by President John Quincy Adams in 1846, referring to the redefinitions of the natural environment underway in Oregon: 'We claim that country to make the wilderness bloom as the rose, to establish laws, to increase, multiply, and subdue the earth, which we are commanded to do by the first behest of God Almighty.'[8]

On the contrary, at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the American conservation and preservation movements declined wilderness in a different way, highlighting the extreme 'fragility of specific landscapes and ecosystems' and leading to the creation of the first national parks in the world.[9] This process impressed a different awareness of the peculiarity of natural environments in America, often characterised by extreme situations in which humans had to adapt to precarious conditions of life compared to the risks posed, for example, by tornadoes or the aridity of desert areas. However, throughout the history of the twentieth century, especially with the '*great acceleration*' of the post-war period, this awareness did not resolve the fundamental contradictions that still characterise the system of relations between humans and nature in the United States today: from the discovery of oil and 'craving for gold' in Alaska to the warm beaches of Malibu in California; from the cotton fields,

[7] C. Mauch and K.K. Patel (eds), *Environment: Conservation versus Exploitation, in The United States and Germany during the Twentieth Century: Competition and Convergence* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 180–93, at pp. 180–83.

[8] Mauch, *Paradise Blues*, p. 91.

[9] Mauch and Mayer, *American Environments*, p. 2.

the 'white gold' in Mississippi to the ghost town of St Thomas in the arid plains of Nevada, where Las Vegas, defined as 'a crazy place', endures under difficult environmental conditions; from the Kansas Dust Bowl to the model green city of Portland – the United States is a mosaic of situations often antithetical to each other and not easily comprehensible.

Paradise Blues is a valuable volume precisely because it manages to guide us through this complicated mosaic, showing us the uniqueness of each piece through the best and most profound means of understanding: history.

Alessandro Agosta (AA): *Before you published* Paradise Blues *you had already authored or edited many books about the USA – monographs, collections, dictionaries. Your book* Geschichte der USA *is a standard text in German, and it is chronologically organised. Likewise, the vast majority of environmental histories of the USA are chronologically structured. They all look at the US as a whole and over time. This is not the case with* Paradise Blues. *Why not?*

Christof Mauch (CM): I don't believe it is important to focus on the evolution of a nation as a whole unless you are writing a political history. *Paradise Blues* is subtly political but political developments – lawmaking, diplomacy etc. – are not foregrounded in the book. The political shines through in each chapter but it is not central. A chronological, nation-focused organisation forces us to generalise, to essentialise where in reality diversity – physical, topographical and cultural diversity – are prominent features that matter more than we typically acknowledge. I don't believe that grand triumphalist narratives like the US as 'natures nation' or declensionist narratives that focus on environmental destruction can capture the diversity of what is going on. 'America's nature' does not exist as such. You have aridity and humidity, arctic and tropical climates, heavily industrialised and sparsely populated regions. The fascination with diversity is reflected in the fact that each chapter focuses on a very unique region. There is of course, some chronology in

these individual chapters. But the main organisational idea of the book is not chronological. Instead, I am zooming in and out into diverse and unique places.

AA: *The USA was founded in 1776. But you are going further back in history and taking into account some of the encounters and relationships between the Indigenous populations and the European colonisers.*

CM: Yes. That is true. I am going further back in time – in fact way beyond encounters between indigenous populations and colonisers. The goal was to integrate prehistoric developments on the basis of archaeology and geology into the narratives. We cannot understand the fascination with Niagara Falls and its 'machine power' or the siting of Memphis on top of the Mississippi bluffs or the environmental story of the Everglades without a deeper understanding of geology. In most chapters I am also trying to integrate indigenous populations, sometimes through interviews, like in the case of Malibu, but mostly on the basis of archaeological research and evidence.

AA: *Would you say you are employing a special methodology? In the book you say you are reading documents of culture as well as documents of nature, i.e. written texts, artefacts, statistics on the one hand, but also landscapes, flora, fauna. When you travel in the field are you more of a historian or an anthropologist?*

CM: Anthropologists tend to spend much more time in the places they study than historians. I cannot claim that I am a participatory observer, not least because my interest is more in ecological developments and human-nature relationships than in relations among people. I am bringing a camera and a tape-recorder along on my travels in order to document and, if you will, magnify or enhance my observations. Over time I have trained myself to see the past in the present. Why did Floridians start to grow oranges or sugar cane? Why are there South African trees in California? Why was the town of St Thomas submerged and why are its ruins becoming visible again? Reading landscapes is very much like detective work. It starts with observations. It starts with finding things strange and

curious; and it continues with gathering information, questioning and investigating with different means and methodologies. In the end, hopefully something new is being revealed.

AA: *Would you say that this is what makes your book unique? There are so many books on the market about American environmental history. Can I ask why you dared to write a new one?*

CM: This book was written for a German audience. Originally it was supposed to highlight the differences between Europe and America, policy differences and differences in cultural perception.

AA: *Yes. I remember in your publications, you have repeatedly called for a transatlantic, comparative, 'Tocquevillean' perspective.*[10]

CM: I ended up rejecting the Tocquevillean idea. Indirectly the book takes a transatlantic perspective, of course, but not openly so. I did not choose the most popular European tourist destinations in the USA when I selected sites for the individual chapters. I am not writing about Yellowstone or Miami Beach. Wiseman has thirteen inhabitants, St Thomas none, Portland with about a million inhabitants is the most populous place in the book and hardly a prime tourist destination. But I decided to integrate a lot of references to cultural icons and places that non-American audiences will immediately recognise and be familiar with: the Cowboy town of Dodge City, Disney World, Hollywood, Memphis Blues etc. What is unique is that I dared to write in a first-person style, that I dared to leave out facts that some readers might hope to find in an environmental history, like: what did lawmakers say about this or that? What is unique is that I am cautiously suggesting that a focus on just eight locations can be representative for a whole nation. What is also unique, I think, is the combination of travel reporting, nature writing and an Anthropocene-type, *longue durée* way of history writing.

[10] C. Mauch, 'Which world is with us? A Tocquevillian view on American environmental history', *Journal of American History* **100** (2013): 124–27; C. Mauch and K. Patel, 'Environment: Conservation versus exploitation', in Mauch and Patel (eds), *The United States and Germany During the Twentieth Century*, pp.180–93.

AA: *Talking about aspects that might be missing. You also leave out climate, don't you? I strongly agree with this passage: 'Besides global warming, which lethally intensifies many existing problems, there are countless other ecological challenges, often in our immediate vicinity' (*Paradise Blues*, p. 246). So did you leave out climate change deliberately?*

CM: Climate change is not immediately tangible, not immediately visible. But it plays out indirectly in many of the chapters. You are right. *Paradise Blues* is not a climate history.

AA: *I am still wondering why you chose the sites of the book. What were your selection criteria?*

CM: I chose places from very different regions. The Northeast (Niagara), the Northwest (Portland), The Southwest (St Thomas), the Atlantic and Pacific coasts (Florida, Malibu), Alaska (Wiseman) and a place on America's largest river, the Mississippi (Memphis). I also chose places that I had already visited. I was living in the US for fourteen years as a professor and a director of a research institute. Whenever I travelled to conferences I would try to explore the area around the conference city. In putting together *Paradise Blues* I realised I could not write about places that I don't know, that I had not visited. Generally I tried not to fly to places just for the sake of writing a chapter. I also did not want to unnecessarily blow out CO_2. So there is some randomness, if you will. But altogether, I think, I covered the continental US quite well. I would have loved to write about Puerto Rico or about Hawai'I, where I have never been, but I decided to focus on the continent and not on islands in the Pacific or the Atlantic.

AA: *Paradise Blues starts in Alaska and ends in Oregon. The Portland chapter was designed to end the book on a hopeful note. 'Hope' is a category that you have focused on in other environmental humanities publications. Your concept of 'Slow Hope' tries to set a positive tone in an age of global vulnerability and ecological crises.*[11] *Can a narrative about*

[11] C. Mauch, *Slow Hope: Rethinking Ecologies of Crisis and Fear* (München: Rachel Carson Center, 2019).

Portland help us out of these crises? Can America be a model? Isn't the excessive form of US consumerism and the 'American way of life' per se deeply destructive? Can Portland be seen as a model city, a city of hope?

CM: Your point is well taken and your question is important. Today I am not sure whether I would end the book with Portland, for more than one reason. All the places I visited have changed over time but in the case of Portland the change has been drastic. I noticed this just before the English edition came out and I put it into a footnote. After fifteen straight years of growth, the population has begun declining in recent years. *Forbes Magazine* talked about 'the death' of Portland. Homelessness has increased exponentially since 2015. Today, I am told, the city radiates despair in some of the districts that I describe. Having said that, I find it amazing and inspiring to see how one of the most polluted cities on the planet has cleaned up its rivers; has created a pedestrian-friendly (or should I say jogger-friendly) infrastructure; how it fought urban sprawl; how it involved citizens in grassroots activities; and how its administration values sustainability. We often point out, quite rightly, that American culture promotes an unsustainable way of living and that the US is a major climate offender. Why don't we acknowledge other tendencies as well? One can be a harsh critic of US wastefulness, of climate change denial, of America's newfound love of fracking, and of Silicon valley's neoliberal techno-creed, but it is important to see that Americans have also developed unique forms of environmentalism. Portland was the first city in the USA to demolish its city highway, it is still America's bicycle capital, Portlanders understand the value of biodiversity. They have learned to value alternative forms of transportation; they have given priority to urban parks; and their involvement has inspired people in other parts of the country as well. All this remains true despite the city's economic downturn over the last few years.

AA: *This sounds like if you had a chance to rewrite* Paradise Blues *you would revise it, at least the last chapter? Anything else you would do differently today?*

CM: I would (or will) neither revise *Paradise Blues* nor rewrite it. I have already spent too much time on this book project. Visiting the different regions was time-consuming. It took me years to explore the country and read up on different regions. During these years I have actually overtaken myself. I still believe in the project and its organisation. But recent, more scientific, understandings of the world around us have fascinated me. Bringing them on board would probably cause me to write a totally different book if I started over. It may well be that the history would be more transnational. More importantly, however, I would try to shed more light on what is going on in the more-than-human world. I would bring the materiality of natural resources into the narrative as well as hardly visible actors such as insects or microbes. I believe we, that is we environmental humanities scholars, should try to learn more from natural science while making sure we do not lose our ability to tell stories in an appealing and understandable way. And at the latter we are better than our science colleagues! I could imagine writing an environmental history from the perspective of artefacts, that is from transformed or engineered nature, or from the perspective of the ecology of individual animals or species. Human agency and interference would of course also come into these stories but human intentions, agendas, ideas would not be dominant.

AA: *This sounds radical.*

CM: Yes. It is perhaps a bit provocative too.

AA: *I realise that your suggested approach corresponds with your recent article about history writing in the age of the Anthropocene.*[12] *But let me turn back to* Paradise Blues *and to its title. The main title of the book is the same in English and in German and apparently in an upcoming Chinese edition as well. What is the Blues for you? Where does it come in?*

[12] C. Mauch, 'More-than-human histories. Herausforderungen für die Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeitalter des Anthropozän' *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 73 (2023): 330–43.

CM: Well, the actual Blues, blues music, makes an appearance in the Memphis chapter. This gloomy music has its origins in the Mississippi valley, on cotton plantations, farms and timberyards. The plantations were central to the environmental history of the American South, a history of slavery, racism, discrimination and violence that is lingering on. In a more figurative sense, there is a lot of blues in my own relationship with America, and in the relationship between Americans and their, sometimes truly paradisical, nature. Americans fail, more often than not, to appreciate their environmental treasures. There is suffering and longing in *Paradise Blues*, bitter disappointment and hope.

AA: *The German edition of* Paradise Blues *appeared with dtv publishers, one of the largest independent trade publishers in the German-speaking world. Many of your essay collections in environmental history have been published with American university presses.* Paradise Blues *came out with The White Horse Press, a small English publisher. Why?*

CM: I really like the dedication of Sarah Johnson and her family team at White Horse. In fact, Sarah took care herself of the final editing of *Paradise Blues*. A close reading of manuscripts by publishers is anything but common these days. There is, to my knowledge, no other publishing house in the English-speaking world that is more committed to environmental history than White Horse. Also the book is available free of charge in an Open Access electronic version. I really like that.

AA: *With books that are translated into different languages one always wonders whether they will reach readers in new cultural contexts. Does* Paradise Blues *work beyond the audience that it was written for.*

CM: I cannot really answer this as an author. You as a native of Italian might be a better judge. [Smiles]

AA: *Totally. So let me phrase the question differently. You wrote a book about America. What do you hope readers in other countries, let's*

say in China, will get out of reading this book? And could one write the same type of book about other countries?

CM: To answer the last question first. Absolutely, I think a place-based history of a nation would work for any country. Now, in the broadest sense, my hope is that readers of *Paradise Blues* will recognise that history matters; that nature has agency (which is often overlooked); and that people also have power. We have shaped the world around us and the world around us has shaped us. I hope readers will see that our world is co-created by the objects we produce, the vehicles we use, the mountains we climb, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the decisions we make. And I hope that they will discover and appreciate that there is beauty and paradise wherever we visit and wherever we live. These are lessons that readers in any part of the world can get out of *Paradise Blues*.

AA: *Thank you very much for taking the time for this interview.*

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