Commentary: Old and New

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COMMENTARY

Old and New

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As a historical geographer by training, I've long been interested in the messy and complicated ways that knowledge and narratives about the environment emerge at different times and in different places. It is fascinating to reconstruct physical-geographic knowledge from the past, illuminating how historical actors created knowledge claims, understood them, defended them, and saw them intersect with other domains like cartography, policy, and public opinion. So I was quite intrigued when cocommentator Rebecca Lave started organizing a group of scholars from across geography's subdisciplines (and from outside the discipline) to directly address questions about how we produce environmental knowledge in the present.[1] Lave and collaborators have worked ambitiously to show how physical geographers can engage with critiques of scientific objectivity, while also pushing critical human geographers to consider the value of producing science as part of their work. This concerted effort has made important headway in pushing back on the continued conceptualization of geography as a discipline divided.[2]

Even though proponents of critical physical geography (or CPG) have claimed to offer something new, it is an open secret that we've really only proposed that geographers follow through on something rather old: interdisciplinary and integrative thinking. These watchwords of "big-tent" geography have long received lip service but less often produced real action or change. CPG calls for a renewed commitment to multiple theories, methods, and perspectives, urging scholars to seek deeper and more meaningful insight into how we know the physical world, how we impact it through knowledge production, and how we hold ourselves accountable for these impacts. More radically, CPG urges us to think carefully about how we might build new communities of practice and

engagement, oriented toward fulfilling the "old" vision of geography as simultaneously descriptive, analytical, and transformative.[3]

In this special issue, we see evidence that historical geographers have taken these prompts seriously and are engaging CPG in a meaningful way. The history of our subdiscipline predicts success in this endeavor because (1) historical geography's origins as a subdiscipline rest fundamentally in exactly the kind of work CPG advocates—integrative study of the coproductive characteristics of landscapes and cultures;[4] (2) historical geography's critical turn focused attention productively toward the politics of knowledge, representation, and narrative;[5] and (3) contemporary historical geographers commonly engage in self-critique and typically display significant openness to working with scholars from other subfields and disciplines.[6]

Starting from this promising foundation, historical geographers stand to gain much from a full exploration of CPG and its tenets. This special issue contains only a subset of the papers originally presented at the 2017 AAG meeting, but it points toward several forward trajectories. After attending the conference sessions and reading the eventual papers they produced, I argue that historical geography should engage CPG in two main ways. First, historical geographers should critically study past episodes of physical geography knowledge production to understand the many contexts that produce impactful environmental claims. Second, historical geographers should engage with physical geographic methods and techniques to more critically understand past geographies across many domains.

In the first case, historical geographers must focus on the politics of past knowledge production, the origins and functions of knowledge claims, and the fundamental intertwining of human and environmental geographies at multiple scales. This requires interrogating how, why, and when certain claims about the environment became "true" in the past and excavating what purposes were served each time a truth was produced. Many of us in STS-inflected historical geography have been producing this kind of scholarship for some time, but the emerging CPG literature points to important places of intervention. First, our work on knowledge production cannot be limited to studying social networks or theoretical commitments; it must also include attention to physical geographies, since CPG demands an integrated and hybrid view of nature and society as mutually constituted. In addition, CPG requires that his-

torical work fully consider the impacts *in the present* of doing historical geography as scholarship, a point to which I return below.

The second recommendation then follows from the first, requiring interdisciplinary approaches to meaningfully understand past environments. This kind of research is far less common among historical geographers, who have in fact largely ceded the study of landscape and climate histories to environmental historians and paleoecologists. Environmental historians have now taken the lead on putting past environmental conditions into historical context, while paleoecologists have produced the most meaningful evidence of prehistoric landscape change and evolution. There is good work in both of these areas, but they sit at a great distance from one another across the worrisome divide that CPG endeavors to stitch.

I believe we historical geographers must act on this opportunity to develop a specificially *historical*-critical physical geography lens (H-CPG), not least because we are so well positioned to effectively bridge disciplinary divides, even those as vast as the humanities/sciences gulf. In the process, we can help bring a critical historicism and a reflexive consideration of the researcher's role to collaborators from physical geography. To meet this challenge, we will need to address pressing questions of both methodology and concept: how exactly do we bridge methodological divides in our pursuit of integrative scholarship, and how much interdisciplinarity is even required to carry out historical-critical physical geographies?

These questions are not yet answered; we will all need to struggle with them honestly. To provide an example from my own ongoing research into water management histories in New Mexico: a historical CPG approach does not find it sufficient to simply illuminate the production of water management science that underpins today's water policies, statutes, and conflicts in New Mexico (which was the original idea for my current book project). A deeper CPG engagement requires that this historical investigation additionally include attention to the microgeographies of sites where hydrological science was produced at different times in New Mexico's history, reflecting on the hybridities that permeate site geographies, environmental conditions, and knowledge claims. Once foregrounded, these relations reveal the necessity of analyzing knowledge production within settler-colonial structures, which have long defined New Mexico's political, social, and economic geogra-

phies. Following from this, it becomes clear that the researcher must reflect on and account for the ways that this historical work—illuminating settlement imperatives at the century-old core of hydrologic science in New Mexico—accrues impacts in the present day. This is a much different and more honest way to generate historical understanding of environmental knowledge production in this particular place and time.

The papers highlighted in this special issue (and others presented at the 2017 AAG), offer additional windows and insights into how we might undertake the propositions of H-CPG. My limited summaries should encourage readers to take time to read each nuanced and reflexive piece fully. I close with a brief conclusion advocating for continued attention to the role and impact of our historical geographies in the present, along with other lessons learned from CPG.

Kicking off the special issue, Greer et al.'s paper fits directly within the first engagement vein I posited above: critical analysis of how physical geographic knowledge was produced in the past. The paper undertakes an institutional history of McGill University's environmental research program, with a focus on the Caribbean Project conducted from its Bellairs field research station in Barbados in the mid-twentieth century. In this paper, we learn about the personalities, classes, projects, and field trips that defined McGill's Barbados-based research program, and we are also reminded that neither interdisciplinarity nor its inherent challenges are new. In excavating these stories, Greer provides an important historical view of early CPG-like scholarship. In fact, by focusing on fieldwork outside the more formal setting of the university, Greer shows that many scholars were directly focused on the concerns of today's recent CPG publications: integrating environmental histories with social and political relations. She also captures some of the dynamic ethical challenges that emerged from this interdisciplinary work at Bellairs, particularly in terms of the racial and gender inequalities that were exploited within research teams, possibly *because* research was undertaken in a field setting far removed from the formal and institutional confines of the university.

This paper should give hope to those who wish to leverage the insights of critical physical geography for historical work. First, it shows simply that this broader project—to critically integrate historical and physical geography—has been ongoing for decades now, through many iterations, incarnations, and yes, failures. Second, this particular institu-

tional history gives us a lens that refracts the political and unequal relations that define any kind of scholarly undertaking but have tarnished fieldwork. This helpfully points to the need for today's interdisciplinary research teams to view fellow scholars as embodied individuals with complicated identities and positionalities. Creating just research can start at the level of the research team and the project organization, which is particularly important with teams that span a range of nationalities.

The second contribution, by Maddison-MacFayden and Csank, similarly illustrates the great promise of H-CPG, while also highlighting its inherent difficulties. This project fits within the second engagement area I posited at the outset: it uses physical geography methods critically in the present to better understand complex geographies of the past. The paper focuses on reconstructing the historical site and material culture of a Bermudan estate, Cavendish Hall, as a way of giving voice to those who were enslaved there. At this site, two different forms of wealth were accumulated: enslaved humans and exploited timber. The authors use dendrochronology to recover both slave and timber histories in the Atlantic world, bringing physical geography into a central role in the historical process. The documentary history of enslavement at Cavendish Hall is fairly rich with stories, names, and financial figures, making it possible for the research team to estimate the daily impacts of enslavement on the people confined at Cavendish Hall and also to "read" the buildings both as tools of enslavement and as evidence of the flow of wealth. The role of timber and timber wealth is somewhat less straightforward, however, and the authors again effectively use the estate's buildings themselves to understand this part of the story. Dendrochronological analysis of historic timbers confirms that some wooden beams arrived from Georgia, revealing that Bermuda had turned to North American coastal forests after local cedar was exhausted. This provocative exercise rounds out the material context of enslavement at Cavendish Hall, and also offers an opportunity to explore the environmental geographies of timber exhaustion and of timber flows between colonial realms. Although the authors characterize this analysis as speculative and difficult, it makes an important step. If dendrochronology can be integrated alongside documentary analysis, it points in this case toward the tantalizing prospect of diving more deeply into related and complex questions about how timber flows around the Atlantic influenced Emancipation (and vice versa).

In the third paper, by Schoolman et al., a case study on Italian landscape change in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, Schoolman et al. used an integrative approach that required complex cross-referencing of historical documents and fossil pollen sediments. This compelling analysis contributed insights about the medieval interactions between changing climates, landscapes, economies, and political systems in Italy's Rieti basin. Whereas previous scholarship has attributed most social and political change in Italy during this period to the effects of the plague, paleoecological data adds an important new dimension, pointing toward a likelihood that both humans and landscapes responded to demographic decline and also to a cooler and wetter climate associated with the Little Ice Age. Where pollen records indicated possible water management efforts related to basin-wide flooding and to the expansion of grain cultivation, historical records confirmed engineering efforts in river drainage as well as associated changes in political control.

In presenting these rich findings, the study authors acknowledge they faced significant challenges in undertaking a deeply interdisciplinary approach. First, data: historians and paleogeographers use different types of source data, interpret it differently, and present it differently to their scholarly peers. The project team made strategic decisions about how to communicate findings, from removing narrative from publications intended for STEM audiences to simplifying graphics intended for humanities publications. The second problem: chronology. The project team found it difficult to synchronize the chronological scales of resolution. Documentary evidence from church archives or legal records typically comes with an exact date, while pollen data is attributable to a date range. How can and should documents be cross-referenced with environmental data? And which time periods should be targeted for study? This project team suggests letting historians determine which documents are available, then choosing pollen sites to match the documents. And finally: scale. Pollen-based analysis is typically used at regional or global scales to identify trends in landscape change, despite the difficulty of causally linking such change to coincident events. A documentary focus on single cities or small regions, however, cannot offer any compellingly generalizable finding. The case study itself offers a potential solution: if more local-scale analyses like this one could be built up over time, they could be effectively stitched together with a goal of identifying regional or even global patterns.

Bampton et al. offer a similar case study, endeavoring to find historical links between environmental change and community resilience in the Shetland Islands community of Broo. During the Little Ice Age, a cooler climate produced frequent storms across the study area, leading to a wide variety of hyperlocal impacts that the research team attempted to reconstruct through a critical physical geography lens. Noting that historical climate reconstructions are typically carried out at the global or regional scales, Bampton et al. used a mix of soil data, archaeological evidence, and cartographic documents to examine climate impacts more critically within a local context. Although they found archaeological evidence that storm-driven sand deposits caused abandonment of a community center in the late 1700s, the research team noted that soil records actually revealed a centuries-long record of intermittent sand deposits interspersed with clear signs of cultivation. The fact that Broo had therefore apparently persisted through earlier episodes of overwhelming sand deposition raised the question of why the 1680–1720 inundation proved catastrophic.

Combining these field methods with documentary research, Bampton et al. determined that Broo's abandonment is a more complicated story than it may appear. Rather than serving as a textbook case of climate change–induced community collapse, this study of Broo leads to two illustrative points: first, human activity likely undermined soil quality before the sand deposits began—whether the mechanism was overgrazing or an inability to fight back invasive species—and therefore rendered the late-C17 inundations more of a socionatural disaster than a simple climate-driven problem. Second, abandonment of Broo was not necessarily a sign of community collapse. By reconstructing the hyperlocal conditions of storm-driven aeolian deposition, the research team showed that areas very nearby Broo were not similarly inundated with sand, making them logical places for relocation of Broo's residents. The historical record confirms that the movement of people away from Broo was more simply a climate adaptation than an abandonment. By relocating nearby, the community actually demonstrated a certain resilience in the face of climate impacts. This study raises similar challenges to those identified by Schoolman et al., yet its strength lies in attention to hyperlocal conditions, where historical records can be used to understand decisions at the scale of lived experience. This critical take on historical physical geography allows for a much more nuanced

explanation of how human change and environmental change are intertwined, rather than seeing one or the other as a fundamental driver.

These four papers give an admittedly limited view of the vast potential for further engagement with H-CPG, yet they helpfully outline a series of approaches and demonstrate value in the undertaking. Many thanks are due to Kirsten Greer for organizing this joint rumination, and kudos go likewise to all of the research teams for undertaking these compelling projects with dedication and humility. I hope that the readers of *Historical Geography* will be both encouraged and motivated by these examples of sustained cross-disciplinary engagement.

I also encourage readers to consider that our next (and potentially most difficult) step as historical geographers is to ground our scholarship in the present.[7] CPG's practitioners have shown that scholarship always relates in some way to modern social and political concerns and relationships. However much we historical geographers may "have our heads in the past," our research results can have significant impacts on communities and environments in the present. To embrace H-CPG, we must view our methodological and topical choices as carrying always the weight of political relevance. Accordingly, we should reflect on and document our role as historical knowledge producers *while we are producing it*. By more explicitly accounting for the modern significance of our scholarship at the points of project design and team formation, we may find new paths to solve some of the thorny problems raised in these thoughtful papers. And if we take up this worthy challenge, historical geography will indeed have something "new" to offer.

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NOTES

1. Rebecca Lave, Matthew W. Wilson, Elizabeth S. Barron, Christine Biermann, Mark A. Carey, Chris S. Duvall, Leigh Johnson et al., "Intervention: Critical Physical Geography," *Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe canadien* 58, no. 1 (2014): 1–10.

2. Rebecca Lave, Christine Biermann, and Stuart N. Lane, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Physical Geography* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

3. E.g., Nicole Gillett, Eve Vogel, Noah Slovin, and Christine E. Hatch, "Proliferating a New Generation of Critical Physical Geographers: Graduate Education in UMass's RiverSmart Communities Project," in Lave et al., *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Physical Geography*, 515–36.

4. This can be found in early influential works like H. C. Darby, "On the Relations of Geography and History," *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers* 19 (1953): 1–11, and Andrew H. Clark, "Historical Geography," in *American Geography: Inventory and Prospect*, ed. Preston E. James and C. F. Jones (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1954), 71–105.

5. For a general sense of the critical turn's unfolding, see Cole Harris, "Power, Modernity, and Historical Geography," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 81, no. 4 (1991): 671–83; Chris Philo, "History, Geography, and the 'Still Greater Mystery' of Historical Geography," in *Human Geography: Society, Space and Social Science*, ed. Derek Gregory, Ron Martin, and Graham Smith (London: Macmillan, 1994), 252–82.

6. Any recent HG-themed review article in *Progress in Human Geography* reveals these dimensions, e.g., Cheryl McGeachan, "Historical Geography I: What Remains?" *Progress in Human Geography* 38, no. 6 (2014): 824–37; Cheryl McGeachan, "Historical Geography II: Traces Remain," *Progress in Human Geography* 42, no. 1 (2016): 1–14.

7. Levi Van Sant, Elizabeth Hennessy, and Mona Domosh, "Historical Geographies of, and for, the Present," *Progress in Human Geography* (October 3, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132518799595.