

Endangered, Extinct, Sublime
New World Colonialism and Climate Change

The current anthropogenic climate crisis has its roots in colonial expansion that fueled the Industrial Revolution of the decades surrounding the turn of the 19th century, but the link between colonialism and climate change can be traced centuries earlier. The genocidal depopulation of the Americas that raged in the 16th century resulted in a cooling of global temperatures, largely due to reforestation of formerly-cultivated agricultural land. The devastation of the “Great Dying” resulted in a landscape viewed by European settlers as simultaneously ruined and pregnant with possibility. American colonists looked back in time to the ruins of ancient civilizations, including those in the Americas, as a warning of the potential outcome of the project of Western expansion; they looked westward into the wilderness, to the devastated Americas in awe of the abundance of natural resources. Material on display examines the description and depiction of settler colonialism and its relationship to the climate through three tropes: the Endangered, the Extinct, and the Sublime.

Christopher Columbus (1451-1506)

De insulis nuper in Mari Indico repertis

Basel, 1494

Ascribed to Christopher Columbus himself, versions of this letter “Of Islands Recently Discovered in the Indian Ocean” were widely circulated after his first voyage. Describing his encounter with native Arawaks, the letter reads “I gave them many beautiful and pleasing things ... in order to win their affection, and that they might become Christians and inclined to love our King and Queen and Princes and all the people of Spain; and that they might be eager to search for and gather and give to us what they abound in and we greatly need.” Columbus’s account was instrumental in spreading his description of indigenous people as docile and without native government, therefore ready to receive Spanish rule; he also set the stage for the European view of the New World as abundant with resources greatly in need.

Chapin Library. Gift of Alfred Clark Chapin.

Amerigo Vespucci (1451-1512)

Mundus Novus

Augsburg, 1504.

This publication, which purports to be a translation of communications from Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci during his voyages across the Atlantic, was first printed in Paris in 1503. The letter describes the landmass later

known as *America* (after Vespucci) as larger than previously understood in Europe, and entirely distinct from Asia, hence a *Mundus Novus* (New World). The text reports “a continent more densely peopled and abounding in animals than our Europe or Asia or Africa, and, in addition, a climate milder and more delightful than in any other region known to us.” The dense population reported at the turn of the sixteenth century predates the Great Dying (and subsequent wilding of agricultural land) that would take place in the following century. Like the Columbus letter, the attribution of this text to Vespucci is speculative.

Chapin Library. Gift of Alfred Clark Chapin.

John Smith (1580-1631)

New Englands Trials

London, 1622 (first printed 1620)

William Wood (active 1629-1635)

New England’s Prospect

London, 1634

Through their writing for an English audience, colonists such as John Smith (who played a key role in the colonization of Virginia before mapping the region he called New England) and William Wood exhorted fellow countrymen to settle in the colonies. Smith’s encouragements emphasized the abundance of resources in America, where he wrote there were “few Salvages but an incredible

abundance of fish, fowle, wilde fruites, and good timber.” Smith reported the presence of “few” indigenous people two years after a devastating epidemic ravaged the Native population of Massachusetts Bay, leaving only a small fraction of the population surviving. As a result the English colonists saw large amounts of land and resources, formerly cultivated and managed by Native people, as open for their claim.

Chapin Library. Gift of Alfred Clark Chapin.

A report from the committee, appointed to consider how His Majesty's navy may be better supplied with timber

London, 1771

A dramatic increase in shipbuilding in eighteenth-century Britain led to a shortage of suitable native supply of timber such that at the time of printing “there is not a sufficient Quantity of Timber in England to be purchased at any Price.” This report outlines the increased demand for timber (due to greater numbers of ever larger ships) and solutions, including the introduction of American timber to the British market. The illustration on display depicts a massive 74-gun ship of war that required 1644 tons of timber to construct.

Chapin Library purchase, 1981.

Pehr Kalm (1716-1779)

Travels into North America

London, 1770 (*Gift of Alfred Clark Chapin*)

Barre, Massachusetts, 1972 (*Chapin Library, Graphic Arts Collection*)

Pehr Kalm, naturalist and student of Carl Linneaus, was commissioned by the Swedish government to assess the native grasses of North America in order to determine their suitability as fodder for livestock. Kalm’s aim was to improve agricultural practices in order to preserve and include soil fertility. He recognized that the quality of grass consumed by cows and sheep was a key component to maintaining agricultural productivity of grazed land, and brought samples of North American grasses and other native plants to Sweden. Kalm’s book was reprinted in 1972 for the Imprint Society, a publisher that reprinted works for the collector’s market.

Rebecca Goodale

Threatened and Endangered

Portland, Maine, 2001-2005

Book artist Rebecca Goodale creates works inspired by the 190 plants and 34 animals on Maine’s list of threatened and endangered species, including *Fifteen Maine grasses*, *Twenty Maine sedges*, and *Five Maine rushes*.

Chapin Library purchase.

John James Audubon (1785-1851)

Birds of America

New York, 1966

The landmark work by American naturalist John James Audubon, *Birds of America* in its iconic elephant folio size is on permanent display in the nearby Schow Gallery. This more accessible edition was distributed by Houghton Mifflin in 1966. Audubon's survey of American birds includes animals now extinct, such as the great auk. The illustrations and descriptions by nineteenth-century naturalists such as Audubon serve as an archive of extinction on the shelves of our rare book libraries.

Gift of Lois K. Levy from the books of her father Donald S. Klopfer (Williams 1922).

Carleton Watkins (1829-1916)

Carleton Watkins: The Art of Perception

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1999

Gift of Wyatt Kahn.

Yosemite Falls, 2630 feet

Watkins' Pacific Coast, undated print (photograph 1861)

Carleton Watkins, nineteenth-century American landscape photographer, photographed Yosemite Valley in 1861, using mammoth glass plates that captured the immensity of the views. His photographs were widely circulated and his admirers included

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Oliver Wendell Holmes. These splendid images (shown here reprinted in a 1999 photobook) played a role in inspiring the establishment of Yosemite as a National Park. Watkins also took smaller-scale images in stereo, printed on cards that could be viewed with stereoscopes. Here, the stereograph shows a slightly different view of Yosemite Falls from the larger plate photograph. Stereograph cards were widely accessible in the late nineteenth century, and fueled the American imagination of the West as a sublime landscape.

George Catlin (1796-1872)

Catlin's North American Indian portfolio

London, 1844

At the tail end of the 18th century, when George Catlin was Born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, his birthplace would have been considered the western Frontier of a new nation. Catlin brought his perspective of a white American colonist in the borderlands to a lifelong fascination with depiction of the Native peoples of the Plains region. His paintings became iconic, popularizing the notion of American Indians as rooted in the natural world (and in opposition to the modern civilizing technological progress of the colonized Americas). This image of a buffalo was painted before the population was decimated as part of a campaign to claim the West for railroads and disrupt native lifeways,

rapidly altering the vast intermontane ecosystem.

Chapin Library

Aron of Kangeq (ill., 1822-1869)
Hinrich Johannes Rink (pub., 1819-1893)
Kaladlit okalluktualliait / Grönlandske folkesagn
Nuuk (Godthåb), Greenland, 1859-1860

Aron of Kangeq was a nineteenth-century Greenlandic Inuit illustrator who was instrumental in recording indigenous historical narratives in a visual medium. Four volumes of narratives collected in the 1850s were published by Hinrich Johannes Rink, Danish colonial Governor of the Southern District of Greenland. The volumes contain woodcut images by Aron of Kangeq as well as historical narratives in Kalaallisut (West Greenlandic) and Danish translations. These volumes were collected by members of the 1860 Williams College expedition to Greenland.

College Archives. Captain Charles E. Ranlett's copy (left). Chapin Library. Professor Paul A. Chadbourne's copy (right).

Logbook of the Schooner Nautilus
Charles Everett Ranlett papers
E.P. Hopkins journal, 1860

The Lyceum of Natural History at Williams College sent an expedition of students and faculty, co-sponsored with Bowdoin College, to Labrador and Greenland in 1860. Among the records from this voyage in the Archives are letters to captain Charles Everett Ranlett, whose vessel the Nautilus transported the group. Records of nineteenth-century Arctic expeditions document environmental conditions in some of the ecosystems most vulnerable to climate change today.

Williams College Archives

Samuel E. Elmore and Henry C. Allen
journal, 1857
Student journals, 1986

Williams was exceptional in its emphasis on taking students to the field to study natural history in the nineteenth century. In 1986 Professor Henry Art led a group of students to retrace the path of an 1857 expedition to Florida. Both expeditions are represented in the Archives by photographs, reports, and student journals. Given the rapidity of current environmental change, the time lapse between these two exhibitions compels us to ask, what will this landscape be in 2115?

Williams College Archives

We are the Storm: Climate Portfolio

Oakland, California JustSeeds Artists' Cooperative, 2016

Climate change continues to have a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable communities around the globe, including migrants and communities of color - people who are typically marginalized in our society. Justseeds, in collaboration with CultureStrike, has forged partnerships between artists and frontline environmental justice organizations to create this provocative, limited-edition art print portfolio called *We Are the Storm*, which highlights the effects of climate change on these communities. (Bookseller's description).

Purchased from Booklyn on the W.E. Archer Fund, 2018.

Joel Sternfeld (1944-)

Oxbow Archive
Göttingen, 2008

Thomas Cole, English-American landscape painter and conservationist, is regarded as the founder of the Hudson River School of painting, which portrayed American landscapes as romantic and sublime. Two centuries after Cole painted one of his most well-known works, "View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm (The Oxbow)," photographer Joel Stern undertook a project to document

the landscape depicted in Cole's iconic painting. By 2006, the Oxbow had been affected by industrialization and transportation infrastructure development, and the global impact of climate change was apparent.

Gift of Wyatt Kahn, 2017.

James Walsh (1961-)

The Arctic Plants of New York City
New York, 2015

Graphic artist James Walsh created this survey by referencing Nicholas Polunin's *Circumpolar Arctic flora* (1959), and noting all the species listed that are also found in New York City. The spreads include mounted botanical specimens and text drawn from earlier works of botany, highlighting the continuity between New York and the Arctic as well as the fragility of the floral landscape.

Purchased from Granary Books on the W. E. Archer Fund, 2017.