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Sellers, Christoper C. *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012

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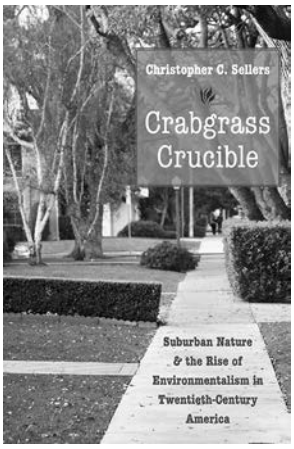

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* celebrated its 50th anniversary in June of 2012. The book aroused public awareness about pervasive, persistent chemical pollution and helped kickstart the North American environmental movement. As Carson showed, pesticides and other noxious industrial effluents did not just affect fields, forests, and waters—the wild nature that late-nineteenth-century conservationists valorized and sought to protect. Chemical compounds poisoned air and water closer to home and indiscriminately permeated bodies, human and non-human, irrespective of location.

This encounter, according to Christopher Seller's *Crabgrass Crucible*, was felt first and keenest in post-war suburbia. As Sellers points out, Carson's readers, including the scientists whose toxicology findings Carson popularized, were suburban-dwellers. Their experiences with local air and water pollution at the urban-edge—and their resistance to public health experts who downplayed associated health risks—galvanized environmental activism across class and racial boundaries before *Silent Spring*.

Taking groundwater contamination on Long Island and air pollution in Los Angeles as case studies, Sellers investigates suburban reactions to these environmental threats. Challenged on the "crucial terrain of the body," suburban residents, Seller argues, adopted an attitude that he calls "postsanitary naturalism," which associated the natural with health and the synthetic with harm. These attitudes reached their apogee in Earth Day in 1970—the critical mass of suburban environmentalism.

Crabgrass Crucible is organized into three parts: the first two deal with New York and Los Angeles as paradigmatic post-war sprawl. Each section provides a parallel chapter structure that traces the distinctive patterning of suburban nature and attitudes in each locale: how different suburban developments rearranged but did not erase nature, how residents experienced nature in their yards and homes, and how crises led to mobilization. The book's final section considers the failure of suburban environmentalism to confront issues of race and class that the environmental justice movement later took up.

At the heart of this book is an argument for "suburban nature." Sellers proposes that suburbs—even mass suburbs like Levittown—delivered what people historically sought in them: contact with nature. This was a nature, however, "at once built and biological," a fusion of local and exotic fauna and flora rearranged in, and against, the distinct climates and topographies of Long Island, New York, and Los Angeles.

Rejecting Adam Rome's view of suburbs as environmental disasters, Sellers proposes that we view suburbanization instead as "re-arranging" nature. This process is evident, for example, in the growing importance of horticulture as an agricultural activity in Los Angeles and Long Island; such businesses sustained suburbia's approximation to country living amidst farms and fulfilled homeowners' desire to naturalize suburban yards. Sellers also sees suburban nature appreciation in pet-keeping and children's play.

Sellers uses some innovative sources to build his account. He gets at attitudes to suburban nature through suburbanite oral histories, and assembles a picture of nature's waxing and waning in suburbia from GIS mapping, and the records of homekeepers' associations, humane societies, and wildlife refuges. *Crabgrass Crucible* is also attentive to the class and racial dimensions of American suburban experience that Andrew Weise's *Places of Their Own* (2004) earlier revealed. Sellers recognizes that suburbs were not just white enclaves. Dwellers in Latino barrios and African-American suburbs also desired space and open air, but were disproportionately exposed to hazards.

While Sellers' even-handed approach recognizes non-traditional nature appreciation within suburbia, the book is less convincing in connecting these attitudes and experiences to a broader environmental movement. On Long Island, Sellers shows how industrial production contaminated the groundwater commons from which both privileged and less-privileged residents drew their drinking water. They also shared skepticism about public-health officials who downplayed the bodily risks of contamination.

Yet Sellers focuses on how environmental activism emerged out of more affluent neighbourhoods under the leadership of prominent residents such as ornithologist Robert Cushman Murphy. Murphy led the legal challenge to DDT on Long Island that Carson profiled in *Silent Spring.* While his activism took on an issue that affected everyone, his connection to other communities does not appear to have been strong.

Similarly in Los Angeles Sellers argues that threats to "the aerial commons" also mobilized activism. There, smog threatened suburban residents across incomes and ethnicity. However, it was elite neighbourhoods such as Pasadena that challenged public-health officials who at first resisted calls for air quality standards. Moreover, it was an expert body, the Air Pollution Control District, which emerged to confront polluters including Detroit's automobile manufacturers. In this case Sellers validates Samuel Hay's argument in *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (1989) that experts forged environmentalism.

At the same time Sellers recognizes that suburban environmentalism failed to confront class and racial inequities. He

points to the overwhelming whiteness of the first Earth Day in 1970 as evidence of environmentalism's fractured appeal. Environmentalism, at best, only pointed toward the environmental justice movement, which tackled head-on issues of disproportionate exposure to toxic environments. This conclusion sits uneasily with his argument for an environmentalism that crossed class and racial lines.

Kenneth Jackson in *Crabgrass Frontier* called suburbanization the "the privatization of American life." Sellers makes a good case for seeing suburbs as communal spaces that drew people who sought and shared common experiences of nature—or at least a form of nature that they recognized and shaped themselves through landscaping and lawn care. *Crabgrass Crucible* is useful for opening up these questions of suburban nature. And while Sellers also shows that citizens challenged public health officials and thus mobilized environmentalism, there remains more work to show that the movement was more than a white middle-class one.

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