



Climate Theories in Early American Literature

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Environmental humanists routinely take their departure from the romantic ecology of the mid-nineteenth century, dismissing earlier climate theories as racist, unscientific, or overly impressionistic. Drawing on a number of salient examples, this lecture revalues the pre-1850 period as one of intense climatic sensibility in American literary culture. It argues that early climate theories fused science and sentiment, culture and climate in ways that citizen science, public health, epigenetics, and new materialist philosophy are aspiring to do at the present juncture. Moreover, unlike modern climate science, with its reliance on statistics, remote sensing, and performance indexes, these climate theories – often anachronistically understood as environmental determinism – eschewed philosophical speculation and prioritized experiential, sensory knowledge as a crucial interface between the emotions, thought, and the natural world. The oft-lamented dualism of Western philosophy, which has been taken as the root of our troubled relation to the environment, was less pronounced in the climatic doctrines that we tend to consign to a naïve, predisciplinary phase in the history of climate awareness than in current debates on global warming. The lecture thus offers a plea for more historical awareness in the climate debate and warns against overly monolithic narratives of ecological modernization.

Michael Boyden is Associate Professor of American Literature at Uppsala University, Sweden. He is the author of *Predicting the Past: The Paradoxes of American Literary History* (Leuven UP, 2009). He has a new book project underway entitled *Climate and Sensibility in American Literature, 1780-1850*.