

Hiding in plain sight – environment in history

Posted on [August 18, 2022](#) by [whitehorsepress](#)

In today's blog, Atte Arffman introduces a new article in [Environment and History](#) (online first, August 2022), co-written by him and Antero Holmila, entitled ['Race, Environment, and Crisis: Hurricane Camille and the Politics of Southern Segregation'](#) and proffering an 'unusual angle' on hurricane studies. Atte realised today the coincidence that Camille made its landfall on this day, August 18th, 1969!

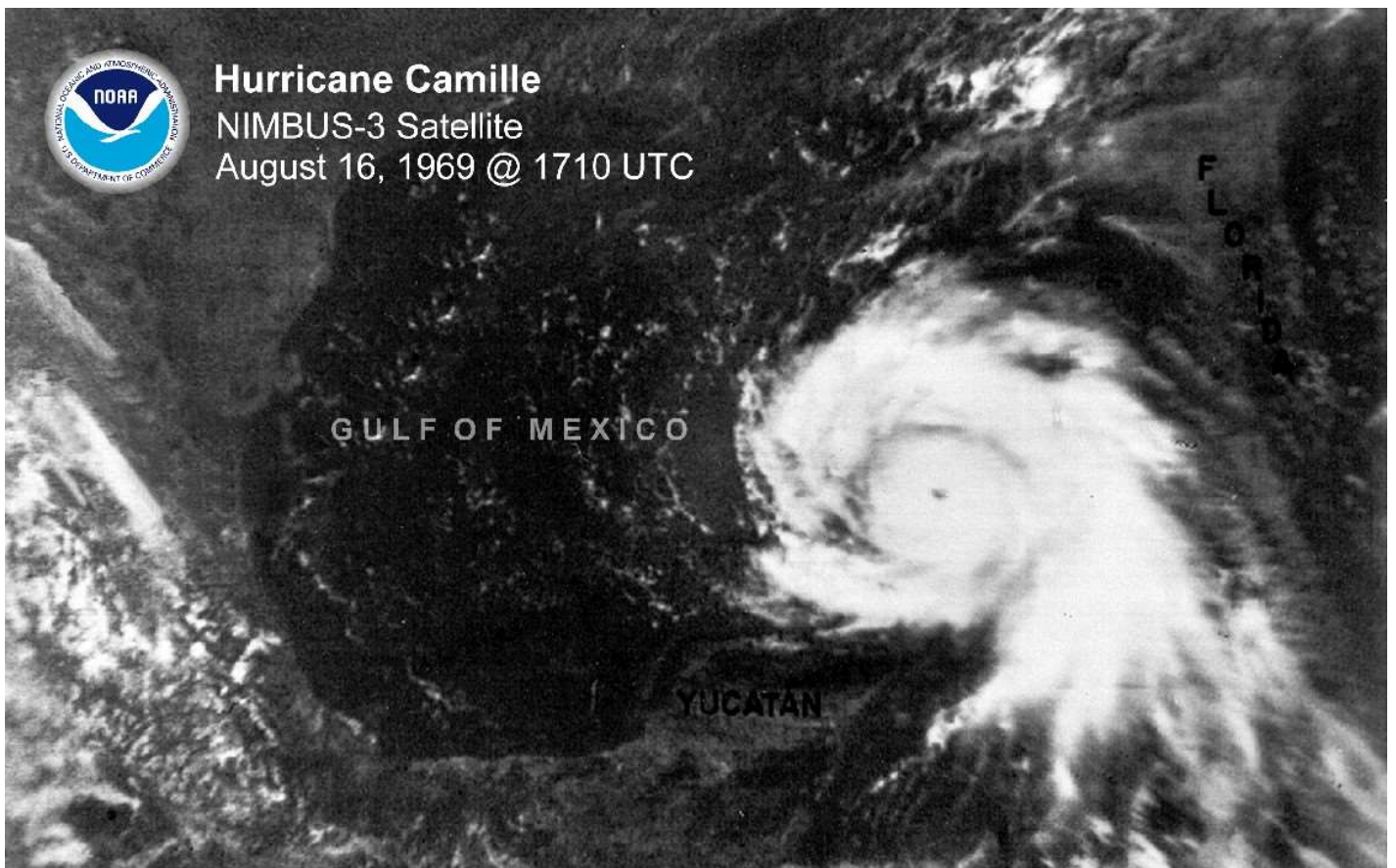


Bland Harvey House, Roseland. Photo from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/retroweb/43448890324/in/photostream/> (CC-BY 2.0)

What could be more interesting than conducting research in the nexus of the environment and politics? Well, probably many things, but it is rather hard to think of other activities that invite questioning certain assumptions of our historical imagination. Making sense of the complex

relationship of the environment and societies requires: ‘...reconsidering and deconstructing the intricate historical relationships between the political and the environment...’, as Stefan Couperus and Liesbeth van de Grift have succinctly put it.^[1] Usually this means questioning the long-lasting practice of understanding the environment as a passive and silent background context. In many cases it takes an extreme phenomenon for the environment to break those chains. In 1969 it was the devastating Hurricane Camille that broke these chains and penetrated the stages of civil rights politics in the late 60s United States.

In our article ‘Race, Environment, and Crisis: Hurricane Camille and the Politics of Southern Segregation’, we pursued to show how Camille was an active agent in the political crisis caused after the landfall of the hurricane. Camille highlighted how inadequate the implementation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act had been in the Southern States and how segregated the practices of giving, for instance disaster relief, were. To keep Camille in sight and to prevent it from falling into the background context, we implemented a moderately extended conception of historical agency and, instead of focusing on what kind of decisions and political manoeuvres human agents enacted in the aftermath of the hurricane, paid attention to how Camille changed the circumstances in which all those decisions were taken.



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hurricane_camille.jpg

This kind of methodological and theoretical choice to acknowledge non-human agency is not as radical as it may at first sound. Actually, we have a tendency to see non-human entities as active; for instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic many news items described how it was the

coronavirus that shut down restaurants and forced governments across the world to restrict travelling and movement of people. This kind of thing happened also in 1969 when local Mississippi press as well as big national newspapers such as the New York Times and the Washington Post declared how Camille had destroyed the lives and hopes of the hurricane victims or how the hurricane erased the colour line in the state of Mississippi. A closer analysis also revealed that Camille profoundly affected human agents' motivations in politics: the decision of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) to deny relief to Mississippi schools that still upheld segregation of white and black students had much more weight after Camille created a desperate need for the funds. Camille created new ways for Civil Rights advocates to push civil rights in the Southern states that were recalcitrant towards the Civil Rights Act and the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision from 1954, and made this decision very enticing for HEW.

An environmentally conscious analysis where non-human agency was acknowledged did not require moving human agents aside. It did not need us to replace humans with non-humans. It did not even need new kinds of source materials (we used local, national and partisan American newspapers). The only thing it took was courage to peek out of the box and to see that a relatively minor shift from the more traditional political history enabled the writing of a much more comprehensive history of Hurricane Camille. It helped us to better understand how and why different human actors made the decisions they made and revealed how seemingly purely social structures, such as segregation in Southern US, were very much connected to the physical world and its phenomena.

Non-human agency of course is a much debated theme in historical studies, especially in environmental history. However, challenging many long-standing assumptions regarding human and non-human agency felt rewarding. The idea was not to prove previous studies wrong or obsolete, but instead to try to understand the events of the past in a new way. Even though we are not the only ones to have explored the non-humans in history, writing the article was some sort of an expedition into the unknown. Still, the results were good: it revealed that noticing, seeing and finding the somehow hidden non-humans in the source material is about asking the right questions. Instead of trying to decide or define beforehand who or what can be an agent, we asked empirically open questions: what and who was active in a given situation. With this short text we would like to encourage historians and other scholars to explore and make expeditions: after all, that is what scientific research is all about! Our article is a good starting point and from there, the road is open for a departure from the familiar path.

[1] Stefan Couperus and Liesbeth van de Grift, 'Environment and Democracy: An Introduction', *Journal of Modern European History*, fast track online <https://doi.org/10.1177/16118944221113271>. (Accessed 15 Aug. 2022).