



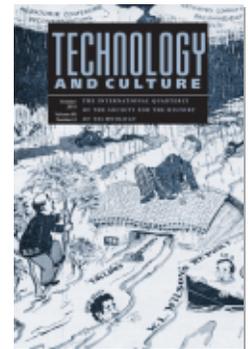
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*Back on Track: American Railroad Accidents and Safety,
1965–2015* by Mark Aldrich (review)

Amy Gangloff

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outside of the Bad River Reservation in Wisconsin, and the ways in which the mine threatened traditional Anishinaabe hunting, fishing, and gathering. One of Langston's central points is that pollution impacts that industrial interests saw as distant, and thus acceptable, were profoundly local and often dire for native peoples.

Over the last half-century, as a result of modern regimes of environmental regulation and U.S.-Canadian cooperation, Lake Superior experienced a recovery, and yet the lake has also faced more global challenges. In the 1990s, scientists noticed that the levels of toxaphene, a powerful pesticide used in cotton and soybean farming in the South, were rising in Lake Superior. This was strange, because the chemical had not been used in or near the lake for a long time. Eventually scientists figured out that legacy chemicals continued to be volatilized from southern landscapes and carried atmospherically to the north (they also arrived from China, Russia, and parts of Africa, where the chemical is still in use). Because Lake Superior is so cold, it became a sink for these and other mobile chemicals, which have biomagnified in fish as well as other birds and mammals. Langston shows that these global dynamics are making even remote boreal regions toxic in ways that are difficult to regulate. *Sustaining Lake Superior* ends with a meditation on how global warming will continue to transform the lake and the health of those who rely upon it.

Sustaining Lake Superior is animated by Rachel Carson's fundamental insight that our bodies exist in dynamic relation to our environments. Langston charts those relations over a century, providing a history both of the evolving threats to environmental and public health in the region and of the changing human understandings of those threats. In many ways the lake is a conservation success story, but it is also a bellwether environment in a world with persistent and mobile toxic legacies, a warming climate, and continuing patterns of environmental injustice.

PAUL S. SUTTER

Paul S. Sutter is a professor of history at the University of Colorado–Boulder and the author, most recently, of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies: Providence Canyon and the Soils of the South*.

Back on Track: American Railroad Accidents and Safety, 1965–2015.

By Mark Aldrich. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. Pp. 304.
Hardcover \$59.95.

In *Back on Track: American Railroad Accidents and Safety, 1965–2015*, Mark Aldrich extends his previous analysis of railroad accidents and injuries into the present. The period explored encompasses a complicated and quickly shifting safety terrain shaped by technological advancements,

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interference from federal regulators, and a society that no longer had faith in corporations. During this period, the railroad industry made advances in carriage design, automation, protection of passengers, and elimination of accidents at stations and crossings, among other areas. Throughout the period examined, accidents of various types sometimes increased, belying any easy narrative of success and progress. As Aldrich argues, safety is a contingent space shaped by an industry's changing financial fortunes, what he sees as sometimes misguided regulations, and societal expectations.

Considering the array of factors contributing to the safety of any technology, historians have approached the subject from a variety of perspectives. Aldrich places one of the most significant actors in any safety equation at the center of his narrative—the industry. His safety story is broken into three periods. From the nineteenth century until the 1920s, railroads dominated travel and largely remained unregulated. Starting in the 1920s, the railroads faced ever-growing competition from cars, trucks, and airplanes while economic regulations at every level of government hampered the industry's profitability and ability to adapt, leading to an increase in accidents by the 1950s. Economic deregulation, increasing federal support, and the goal of developing high-speed rail travel helped to improve railroad safety both on the cars, in the stations, and at crossings starting in the 1980s.

While acknowledging the importance of federal regulations in some cases, such as applying pressure to design and build passenger cars to prevent injury, Aldrich argues that railroad safety increased when the industry remained free from interference. According to Aldrich, the companies recognized that safety was good for business, but they also understood that increased profits allowed for research into more effective safety measures. With lawsuits, property damage, and destruction of equipment all hurting the bottom line, railroad companies had what Aldrich considers powerful incentives to improve safety.

Aldrich tackles this complicated subject thematically. The first chapter offers an overview of much of the material covered in his previous work, *Death Rides the Rails*, setting the stage for subsequent chapters. The second chapter explores the rise in railroad derailments and hazmat accidents from 1955 to 1978. The horror of these accidents brought public scrutiny to an industry increasingly financially unable to respond. Chapter three explores the impact of economic deregulation in the 1970s and 1980s on declining accidents from 1965 to 2015. Aldrich concludes that "private-sector capitalism was the dominant source promoting the decline in train accidents after 1978" (p. 73). With the decline of accidents on the rails, the industry shifted to worker safety (chapter four), passenger safety (chapter five), and automobile crossings and pedestrians (chapter six).

Back on Track is vast in scope, surveying almost every imaginable risk to railroad travel in the second half of the twentieth century and into the

twenty-first. Aldrich emphasizes the industry narrative and utilizes a quantitative approach to his analysis. He offers an important perspective that seeks to complicate the easy narrative of corporations as villains. While a strong addition to the historiography of risk and safety, its emphasis on the industry could be balanced with more examination of the railroad's critics and the impact of wider cultural trends on the safety discussions surrounding the railroads. High-profile congressional hearings introduced ideas of crashworthiness and environmental safety to the nation along with Ralph Nader and Rachel Carson in the 1960s. Were railroads a part of these larger debates? Who were the critics calling for more regulation of the railroads? Aldrich introduces us to some of them, but a stronger sense of the dialogue between the critics, the government, and the industry could strengthen Aldrich's argument.

Back on Track: American Railroad Accidents and Safety, 1965–2015 is a detailed, expansive examination of a complicated period during which Americans shifted their ideas on risk, corporations, safety, and responsibility. Aldrich focuses on the economics of safety and the importance of industrial expertise and finances to constructing an effective safety regime. His work is an important contribution to the historical narratives of risk and safety.

AMY GANGLOFF

Amy Gangloff is professor of history at Lindenwood University.

The Lives of Guns.

Edited by Jonathan Obert, Andrew Poe, and Austin Sarat. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 232. Hardcover \$34.95.

Today, the subject of firearms is highly controversial, permeating conversations of culture, society, law, violence, and politics. In their collection of essays representing an array of beliefs and opinions on *The Lives of Guns*, Jonathan Obert, Andrew Poe, and Austin Sarat attempt to highlight the complicated nature of firearms use and ownership in the United States from an interdisciplinary standpoint. Through an academic exercise, the essayists animate the inanimate, examining the material culture of guns as moral agents rather than objects with no power or influence over human factors.

Such a task is no easy feat, as the number of directions one can go is nearly limitless and scholarship on the materiality of firearms in the field is lacking. Obert, Poe, and Sarat focus these essays on potentially violent affiliations with firearms and divide the conversation into three sections, or "lives," of the gun: the political, social, and private. In the "political," scholars discuss politically relevant topics and their opinions on such, including ideas about gun ownership and the desire for individual sover-