It is entirely conceivable that the body of literature examining Rachel Carson’s life, work, and legacy could come to rival the scholarly industry built up around Charles Darwin and his times. As we enter the Anthropocene – a new epoch marked by indelible human transgressions into the geological strata – our historical interest in the social, economic, industrial, and environmental processes that got us here warrant further and ongoing investigation. Carson’s instant environmental classic, “Silent Spring”, highlighted the human and environmental hazards posed by a series of persistent and poorly understood chemicals that proliferated throughout post-World War II landscapes. It was – remains? – the most poignant and persuasive counterbalance against the unmitigated rise of the petrochemical industry that so typifies the second Industrial Revolution.

“Silent Spring” is now more than fifty years old. Carson died of cancer in 1964. In the origin myth of modern environmental consciousness, the book’s publication in 1962 constitutes a critical turning point. And we have already witnessed a few historiographic moments that have lightly shaped the manner in which historians engage with the work and its impact. Ten to twenty years ago, a series of anti-environmental challenges in the media from the Right posited that “Silent Spring’s” influence, which pushed for stiffer controls over the use of pesticides, invigorated the spread of malaria in many parts of the developing world. This critique contends that bans on DDT and other synthetic pesticides – tools well equipped to kill vectors of insect-borne diseases – were responsible for millions of deaths, particularly in Africa. In this vein, Carson was castigated for imbuing in world culture a prejudice against DDT, which came at the expense of human lives. The criticisms are widespread, but they typically fail to acknowledge the policies in place, the diminishing effectiveness of pesticides as insects develop further resistance to specific poisons, or Carson’s own assertions that she was advocating responsible chemical use and treating the physical environment with care rather than pushing a militantly anti-pesticide agenda. In sum, challenges to Carson’s life, work, and legacy rested on a set of binaries that neither reflected her position, nor the realities of the social and environmental consequences of our complicated relationship with human-made chemical pesticides.

Michelle Mart’s „Pesticides, A Love Story“ constitutes part of a new project to revisit and revision the recent environmental past and reflect on its toxic legacies as part of a narrative much more central to the human condition. This new literature seeks to further complicate the false binaries surrounding interpretations of health, safety, poison, and pollution by establishing a more spectral understanding of chemicals and their social risks. Pesticides are all different, and the risks they pose vary on all manner of conditions. The dose makes the poison; the context frames the history. Mart is effective in translating much of the technical information around the pesticides she writes about for a lay audience. This is no mean task, but it provides a valuable service in situating pesticides and their contexts more squarely within contemporary discourse. While much of the early work on synthetic pesticides and herbicides – Rachel Carson preferred to be more direct: she called them biocides – came from environmental history, more and more of the new work is unapologetic in merging environmental, social, and cultural narratives. For Mart, the love story in her title is an investigation of the cultural discourse around pesticides in the wake of „Silent Spring“.

After World War II, pesticides offered Americans the opportunity to remake landscapes, free from the annoyance of undesirable insects. Fertilizers and herbicides produced greener lawns. That was at home. On the farm, copious amounts of chemicals were adopted to realize higher crop yields and less waste. Verily: synthetic chemicals promised better living through ever-greater consumption of these new products. And it

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1 Rachel Carson, Silent Spring, Boston 1962.
is important to stress that the various pesticides brought to market were effective in killing ants, termites, aphids, mosquitoes, and other insect irritants. Unfortunately, they also posed risks to other organic forms of life, humans included. These consequences and the decline in bird populations are what inspired Carson’s title: a spring without birdsong. Where Rachel Carson is credited for having awakened an American environmental consciousness in 1962, Mart points out that pesticide use actually “increased” tenfold in the decade after “Silent Spring” was published. In most of the work that treats the rise of American environmentalism during the 1960s – the Age of Ecology, ushered in by Carson’s work – this continuing proliferation is somehow overlooked and underreported. But it urges us to reconsider the relationship between chemical use and the emerging environmental consciousness. Mart is not undermining Carson’s cultural significance, but rather asking the critical question: what happened? Where simplicity, convenience, and ideas about health and cleanliness clearly dictated the mainstream adoption of pesticides, growing concerns about their safety did not seem to shift cultural attitudes nearly as vociferously as environmental interpretations have long thought. Even in the face of increasing criticism, pesticides represented a modern future, even as claims about increased crop yields never really bore fruit. This is the primary focus of the book, which collects and organizes the stories Americans told each other about the costs and benefits of pesticide use. Mart outlines a tale of entrenched, unquestioning faith in technology, which is universally familiar as a characteristic of the twentieth-century world, but also quintessentially American. Ever confident that a technical solution to the environmental crisis was not only possible but also inevitable, American problem-solving – a patchwork of pragmatism, industrial ingenuity, and marketing panache – raced to put band-aids on a gaping and festering wound. Persistent, but less acutely toxic, organochlorines were replaced with less persistent, but more acutely toxic, organophosphates. And the belief that these new chemicals were more benign encouraged more spraying on fields, on forests, in parks, in gardens, and in houses. Pesticides deemed to be less toxic enjoyed greater proliferation.

In keeping with her book’s title, Mart embarks on a compelling account of the relationship between pesticides and American society. Each chapter title plays on the love story theme: „Falling in Love,” „Breakup?” „Foreign Affairs,” and „Recommitment,” for example. Collectively, they tell the story of a pretty dysfunctional relationship. Where pesticides offered a variety of short-term benefits, their long-term costs were invariably overlooked. Green gardens belied the health hazards to humans and wildlife and the environmental damage caused by large-scale, mono-crop agriculture. This tension constitutes „Pesticides, a Love Story”. Mart analyzes the evolving responses to pesticides through industry marketing, mainstream media, environmental protection, and government regulation. In the backdrop is a tendency to favour industrial solutions. Mart is not alone in this analysis, but she seizes upon the opportunity to discuss the American allergy to the precautionary principle, a predilection toward erring on the side of caution, common in Europe. If a considerable portion of environmental history’s corpus treats the history of unanticipated consequences, then reaching some semblance of an understanding of how and why American society has not learned from its lessons of chemical catastrophe remains an especially vexing question for historians and contemporary policymakers. The answers, of course, are vague and likely point toward the ingrained nature of economic and technological systems that drive American industry more than they suggest some kind of cultural anomie. They also likely indicate inconsistent treatments of slow and fast disasters – the former frequently lacking a flashpoint but possessing a latent quality that makes them hard to track and understand and fear. These latter questions deserve more historical attention. Mart contributes to that conversation and invites further dialogue in this impressive book.