Placing Gender: Gender and Environmental History

This special volume, *Placing Gender*, is the product of discussions that took place at the *Placing Gender* workshop, which was held in Melbourne on Wurundjeri country, and in Bendigo on Dja Dja Wurrung country, in December 2018. Convened by Katie Holmes and Ruth Morgan, and supported by the Rachel Carson Center, the Australian Research Council, Monash University and La Trobe University, the workshop was a response to the relatively under-developed nature of gender analysis in environmental history and the lack of attention paid to this subject at major environmental history meetings in Europe and North America during 2017 and 2018. These concerns were raised on the White Horse Press blog in 2017, with posts from Verena Winiwarter and Ruth Morgan, and the workshop offered a means to revitalise this area of inquiry with contributions from Australasia, North America, the United Kingdom, India and China.

In our initial call for papers for the workshop, we noted: ‘Despite Carolyn Merchant’s provocative 1990 article on gender and environment in the *Journal of American History*, it remains an under-developed area of inquiry.’ Three decades ago, Merchant’s article had challenged environmental historians to consider gender and reproduction as key categories in the conceptual frameworks they bring to the field. Doing so would ‘offer a more balanced and complete picture of past human interactions with nature and [advance] its theoretical frameworks.’ But, as our call for papers noted, only a small number of historians had risen to Merchant’s challenge, most of them from North America – a fact that reflects the traditions of both feminist history and environmental history in the global north. Those who did respond echoed Merchant’s refrain about the absence of work in the field, and have demonstrated the truth of her words: that our view of the past is enriched when human-nature interactions are understood to be profoundly shaped by gender, just as they are by race and class and age. As Virginia Scharff observed in her important 2003 collection *Seeing Nature Through Gender*, gender is ‘stunningly historically powerful’. We need to ‘understand how gender situates humans in the world of fire, air, and water, and how that world can remake the gendered patterns we’ve engraved on ourselves and the planet’.

Much of the initial work that sought to integrate gender and environmental history took women as its focus. This is not surprising. The ontological association in Western thought and culture between women and nature, alongside

2. The differing geographical spread of work on gender and environmental history deserves more attention than this cursory comment but is outside the bounds of this brief introduction.
practices which have ensured and assumed an intimate connection, has led to work that grounds and interrogates the historical specificity of such ideas and the ways they have been enacted. Early feminist historians focused on recovering women from history and integrating them into the historical narrative before turning more focused attention to gender and the construction of femininity. Likewise the tasks of uncovering the forgotten environmental activism of women, or identifying the ways in which women helped make homes and shape new environments, have been crucial to understanding the multi-layered ways in which ideas about sexuality and gender were shaped by, and in turn shaped, the environments in which women lived, laboured, and fought to protect.

Analyses of the cultural and historical roots of the climate crisis are also revealing the ways that women too have geological agency. Contributions to the field of energy history, for example, reveal the ways a gendered analysis transforms what is invariably represented as a history of energy companies and fossil fuels, to one that highlights women’s roles as consumers of energy, professionals in the energy industry and active agents in shaping domestic technologies. Broadening the historical gaze from energy production and its environmental impacts, to its varied uses and users brings into focus a key site of energy consumption: the home. Ruth Sandwell, for instance, has shown how the domestic decision-making of Canadian women accounts for the ways in which urban and rural households shifted from an organic energy regime to the modern industrial energy regime based on fossil fuels.

Attention to the raced and classed nature of the human bodies that labour has also revealed the complex intersections that shape environmental interactions, and the ways in which these are played out in different historical and geographical contexts. The intersections are both material and discursive.

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Stefania Barca’s recent critique of the Anthropocene narrative illustrates the power of discourse to shape lives. She takes up Merchant’s early call to consider reproduction as a category of analysis and explores the ways in which the ‘master narrative’ of the Anthropocene fails to account for reproductive labour, ‘the work of sustaining life in its material and immaterial needs’. ‘By representing earth-system changes as the unintended consequences of Western civilisation’, she argues, the Anthropocene narrative fails to challenge the narrative of progress or the primacy of science and technology as the only tools for understanding and overcoming ecological crises. As she contends, ‘The system itself is not under question: its gender, class, spatial and racial inequalities are either invisible or irrelevant: no paradigm shift is necessary.’

Attention to masculinity has been even slower to emerge in the scholarship of gender and environmental history. Although many environmental histories have told men’s stories – the field of energy history being a good example – the gendered nature of those stories has not been foregrounded until relatively recently. Rural sociologists have drawn attention to the mutually constitutive relationship between rurality and masculinity, but without a historical perspective, they have not explored the ways in which such relationships have been formed and fostered. As with historical understandings of femininity, the process involves a combination of both action and discourse: real bodies working and interacting with, and being shaped by, non-human nature, and such engagements in turn being endowed with particular cultural meanings and significance.

Contributions in this volume traverse this array of concerns with articles that focus on the latest environmental history research on gender in relation to agrarianism and imperialism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Together they reveal the different ways that imperialists constructed gender, race, labour and class in relation to particular colonial environments in the British Empire and the inland empire of the American West. They reveal the gendered nature of colonial capitalism and the tensions that arose between the rhetoric and reality of domesticity, improvement, and rural life. Each article also draws on its own field of historical research and thus reveals the ways in

12. See, for example, the special issue on ‘rural masculinities’ in *Rural Sociology*: Hugh Campbell and Michael Mayerfield Bell, ‘The question of rural masculinities’, *Rural Sociology* 65 (4) (2000): 532–46.
which such areas address gender, including agricultural history, the history of medicine, climate and colonialism.

The special issue opens with a study of the gendered, classed and racialised nature of the production of climate knowledge in early colonial Tasmania. In this fine-grained study, Harriet Mercer examines the hierarchies of environmental expertise on the frontier, where understanding local meteorological conditions was vital for imperial science as well as for sealing and whaling. Broadening the study of colonial climates beyond the observatory to include the knowledge of Indigenous women allows Mercer to contrast their confident understandings of local conditions with the faltering and tentative attempts of Anglo-European men of science to ascertain meteorological measurements. In doing so, Mercer recasts the roles of meteorological authority in colonial contexts and underscores the importance of shifting the historian’s focus from the history of science to the history of knowledge. She also reflects on the limits of the colonial archive: what it can and cannot reveal about Indigenous meteorological knowledge and methodologies to deal with such issues.

The following article turns to colonial Assam, where Namrata Borkotoky examines the oppressive labour conditions facing women working in tea plantations during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The economy of the plantations depended on the cheap labour of these women workers, whose very bodies were deemed both ideal for the nature of the work, and for ‘settling’ the male labour force and facilitating its reproduction. Yet the exploitative labour conditions undermined these ambitions. As Borkotoky shows, the strenuous work, poor wages and lack of nutrition combined to exact a heavy toll on their bodies, which curtailed the health and reproductive capacities of women labourers.

Reproduction, or claims about it, is also a focus for Ruth Morgan’s article on discourses about race, climate and demography in the settler and Indigenous populations of Western Australia. The colony’s proponents promoted its climes as ideal for the recuperation of the ‘diseased men’ serving the Raj in India. Morgan takes up Merchant’s call to examine gender and reproduction as key categories in environmental history and exposes the ways ‘reproduction and dispossession, displacement and replacement, were mutually constituting concerns of empire’.

Remaining in Australia, the articles by Katie Holmes and Karen Twigg each turn to the distinctive ecoregion of Mallee lands in the continent’s southeast. In the Mallee, they both interrogate the ways in which masculinity and femininity were shaped by particular environmental conditions. Holmes traces the emergence of a modern masculinity in the Mallee and the costs of the masculine ideal on the men who failed to meet the standards. Twigg’s attention, meanwhile, is on the influence of abundant rain in shaping ideas about

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rural femininity and women’s emotional, social and sensory responses to the possibilities facilitated by plentiful water in an area more commonly known for prolonged drought. Both authors also consider the ways in which different kinds of historical sources and methodologies allow for different kinds of histories. Twigg’s use of oral history and personal papers, for instance, offers rich insights into women’s lived experience, which contrasts with Holmes’ reliance on a state archive, where men’s voices appear refracted through a bureaucratic process that positioned them as supplicants calling on the state for support.

The final essay in this special issue considers the life and writings of Ralph and Myrtle Borsodi, an American couple who were part of the back-to-the-land movement of the 1930s. Analysing their papers, Valerie Padilla Carroll considers the gendered nature of this rural ideal of agrarian smallholder self-sufficiency. In the context of the Great Depression, Ralph conceived of the smallholding as a space for rebuilding the masculine self that unemployment and urban living had damaged. For Myrtle, meanwhile, the smallholding was a space to empower women through self-sufficiency and home-making. Despite the gender empowerment to which the Borsodis aspired, Padilla Carroll illuminates the conservative nature of their plans that upheld not only traditional gender roles, but also racial and sexual hierarchies.

Taken together, these articles contribute to the unfinished business of untangling the historical relationships between gender, race and environment in the colonial lands of the British Empire and United States. Particular colonial configurations of peoples and places produced dramatic and lasting environmental and physiological impacts; shaped and informed the formation and practice of colonial environmental knowledge; and prompted sustained, if not successful, efforts to realise settler rural ideals. Placing gender in these diverse ways finds that environmental histories are as much historical narratives of the relations between people and places, as they are about the relationships between people and power.

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Exploring Russia’s Environmental History
This book offers new perspectives on the environmental history of lands that have come under Russian and Soviet rule by paying attention to ‘place’ and ‘nature’ in the intersection between humans and the environments that surround them. Through case studies of specific places in northwestern Russia, for example the Solovetskie Islands, the Urals, Siberia, in particular Lake Baikal, and the Russian Far East, the book highlights the importance of local environments and the specificities of individual places and spaces in understanding the human-nature nexus. This focus is accentuated by the fact that the authors have considerable, first-hand experience of the places they write about that complements and supplements their research in textual sources.

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