

Foreign Bodies, Intimate Ecologies: Transformations in Environmental History Symposium

Rachel
Carson
Center

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Sponsors: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, LMU, Munich, Germany; Sydney Environment Institute, University of Sydney, Australia; Centre for Environmental History, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia; Department of Geography and Planning, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia; Faculty of Arts, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Conveners: Emily O’Gorman (Macquarie University), Ruth Morgan (Monash University), Christof Mauch (Rachel Carson Center, LMU Munich), Cameron Muir (Australian National University), Alessandro Antonello (University of Oregon)

Over thirty historians, from Australia and internationally, gathered in Sydney in mid-February for the symposium ‘Foreign Bodies, Intimate Ecologies: Transformations in Environmental History’. The local convenor, **EMILY O’GORMAN** (Macquarie University), opened the proceedings on the evening of 10 February at History House in Sydney, the home of the Royal Australian Historical Society. In her opening remarks, she noted that this symposium was a chance to showcase new research emerging from historians in the exciting and ever-growing field of environmental history. She reflected that we were all “driven by a new sense of urgency created by contemporary environmental crises,” and that many of us were increasingly reaching across disciplines to frame and shape our work. O’Gorman teased out and explored some of the meanings of our symposium title: “foreign bodies” highlighted “the fluid, but ecologically and politically potent, nature of categories that aim to establish boundaries”; “intimate ecologies” highlighted “the particular and what it means to live closely with, and be constituted by other organisms, minerals, elements.” Over the three days following, bodies and intimacies would recur throughout the papers, suggesting the power but also allusiveness of these words and their complex meanings.

TOM GRIFFITHS (Australian National University) delivered the opening keynote, titled “The Transformative Craft of Environmental History.” Griffiths provided a sure and generous guide to several generations of historians and their oeuvres in investigating the relationship people and

environments. Griffiths reminded us all that historians are not stuck in “the thin ephemeral deductive moment of now,” but rather dig deeply into the past and embrace both the past’s familiarity and its strangeness.

The first panel “Ought-Ecology and the Aesthetics of Conservation” considered diverse approaches to conservation in different places. **LIBBY ROBIN** (Australian National University) opened by considering the question of what “ought” to be done on issues of conservation in Australia. Looking at what is seen as native, natural, economic and invasive vegetation, Robin considered whether the fear of invasive species and environmental degradation is really a fear of ourselves. Biologist **LESLEY HUGHES** (Macquarie University) followed with an up-to-date account of climate change science and data, discussing potential impacts upon Australian ecosystems and species, with some reflections on the recent Paris agreement. **DOLLY JØRGENSEN** (Luleå University of Technology) discussed the various strands of thinking about “rewilding” in Europe, categorizing the use of the term and elucidating the complex claims of that body of thought. **LILLIAN PEARCE** (Australian National University) described the attempts at restoring a sense of place in Bermagui, on the south coast of New South Wales, especially as an attempt by local peoples to achieve “a little bit of healing,” both for themselves and their disturbed local environment. **CHRISTOF MAUCH** (Rachel Carson Center) rounded out the session by offering a deep view of the history of Portland, Oregon, as “the greenest city,” and the lessons that it might offer other cities in their environmental and social choices, including the promise that it is the stories people tell of themselves and the creation of traditions that might be important.

The session, “Resourceful Bodies,” explored a range of issues surrounding scale, mobility and the resources of the land. **JAMES BEATTIE** (University of Waikato) presented an environmental history of the “Cantonese Pacific” in which the migration of Chinese throughout the Pacific world because of their resource demands transformed Pacific natures. These Chinese migrants, both sojourners and settlers, affected the landscapes they settled in or passed through in various ways, both good and bad. Beattie’s paper was not simply about the environmental changes brought by Chinese migrants, but an opportunity to ask who was responsible for bringing New Zealand into modernity and the limits and unevenness of British imperialism. **ELIZABETH DOWNES** (La Trobe University) told a rollicking tale of duck hunting and its complex politics in late nineteenth century Victoria—the ways in which ducks were actually shot for a substantial market rather than simply as game hunting or local subsistence, the politics of sport hunting against market shooting, and the shifts of landscapes from working to recreational. **REBECCA JONES** (Australian National University), drawing on her work on drought in southeastern Australia from the late nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries, reflected on issues of scale, questioning the limits of globalizing

historical narratives. Using diary records, Jones's work demonstrated the sensitivity and knowledge farmers had of their localities.

The session "Recording Bodies, Bodies of Records" saw two papers on individual artists and particular Australian landscapes. **JARROD HORE** (Macquarie University) explored the "intimate ethics" of the Tasmanian government photographer James Watt Beattie during the decades at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Hore explained the many registers of Beattie's photographs, which covered wild, working, sublime and cultivated landscapes. **JAYNE REGAN** (Australian National University) explored the work of South Australian poet and teacher Flexmore Hudson, his "world-mindedness," emphasis on the Australian continent and environment, and the place of specific localities in his poetry and teaching.

With the session "Bodies of Knowledge," the symposium took a turn into the borderlands between environmental history and the history of science. **CHRIS O'BRIEN** (Charles Darwin University) teased out the seemingly dry and inarticulate tables of records kept by Dutch colonial meteorologists in the Dutch East Indies to tell a "microhistory of the cloud burst," a weather phenomenon that occurred regularly in the archipelago, knowledge of which was aided by the particular style of Dutch meteorology and record keeping. O'Brien concluded by wondering how small our histories might go, to the gust of wind or the raindrop? **RUEL PAGUNSAN** (National University of Singapore) detailed the history of ornithology in the Philippines, especially under US colonial rule between the 1880s and 1930s. His paper explored the importance of ornithology to the US imperial project in the Philippines, taking in the concept of "economic ornithology" as well as the relative place of birds and ornithology among other natural history and biological concerns. **ERIKA JONES** (University College London) followed a mollusc specimen from collection in the Kerguelen Islands to storage in the Natural History Museum in London and then to the pages of the scientific reports of the *HMS Challenger* expedition. By recognizing the mobility of scientific bodies, Jones illuminated how our histories can artificially divide the ship and the shore, and how we might pursue more environmental histories of exploration.

The second keynote was presented by **DOLLY JØRGENSEN** on the history of narratives of extinction of the passenger pigeon. Jørgensen posed the question of how we think about species when they're gone. For the passenger pigeon, she suggested six narratives of extinction: abundance, denial, anger, sorrow, acceptance, and bargaining. Across these narratives she traced the fate not only of the passenger pigeon, but of ideas of extinction, abundance, vitality, and resurrection across more than a century. Jørgensen closed her lecture by noting that these narratives mapped onto what are popularly known as the stages of grief.

The second day of the conference opened with an eclectic range of bodies of, and connected to, water in “Encountering Water.” **ALESSANDRO ANTONELLO** (University of Oregon) detailed the many bodies and various intimacies of the Antarctic ice sheet, arguing that the ice sheet has been variously imagined, incorporated and engaged with in the history of exploration and scientific research. **RUTH MORGAN** (Monash University) explored two moments in the history of southwest Western Australia, a region currently experience significant transformations under climate change. She detailed two stories of exploration and encounter, first with the geographer Griffith Taylor and geologist J. W. Gregory and the promise of “Westralia Felix” as a region to settle, and the second with the idea of the late 1960s and 1970s of watering the region with icebergs towed from Antarctica. Morgan wondered about the place of environmental determinism and possibilism in this region where increasing thirst seems to be the new norm. **CAMERON MUIR** (National Museum of Australia) told a grim tale of the toxic waters produced by mining, exploring current coal-seam gas conflicts in New South Wales, fights over water quality, and the stark “rainbow of toxicity” that emerges from the different poisons in waste water. **HEATHER GOODALL** (University of Technology, Sydney) explored “working water” in the Upper Darling River in northwestern New South Wales, seeing the registers and forms of pump water, fertile water, fish water, livelihood water, and water creating stories in this complex riverscape.

Water remained the focus during the next session, “Intimate Aquatic Ecologies of Queensland.” **JODI FRAWLEY** (Queensland University of Technology) explored the marine environmental history of Queensland from the perspective of Wilhelmina Rawson’s plate and cookbook of the late nineteenth century. Frawley demonstrated how Rawson and other’s lives existed not just on land, but in the rivers and intertidal zones, and how these marine environments were part of the structure of the domestic sphere and leisure time. **MARGARET COOK** (University of Queensland) questioned whether the common view that engineers are environmental vandals is true, looking at the story of hydraulic engineer John Baillie Henderson in Queensland. How well did engineers “know” the environment? Cook suggested that Henderson knew a good deal about the Queensland hydraulic environment, given the bureaucratic and governmental constraints that allowed him only a few instruments across a sizeable colony, and which kept him in his a great deal.

The next session, “Sensing Oceanic Bodies,” saw yet more salt water. **NANCY CUSHING** (Newcastle University) delighted the attendees with a skillful and illuminating re-reading of the records of the First Fleet—the fleet of eleven ships that founded the colony of New South Wales in 1788—and the ways the animals on board were priceless “live lumber,” public and private property needed to establish the new penal colony and treated better than the convicts on board. **ROHAN**

LLOYD (James Cook University) detailed how the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Queensland has a long history of competing uses and visions, especially between exploitation and preservation, and the ways in which governments and the public have attempted to reconcile these competing demands on the Reef. **JOY MCCANN** (Australian National University) explored a moment in Australia's "oceanic consciousness" in the 1950s, when the newspapers were filled with talk of deep-sea monsters at the edge of exploration, other media including Jacques Cousteau's *The Silent World* and Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us*, and the general promise of the oceans as undiscovered and unexplored volumes.

With the session "Connecting Pacific Environmental Histories," the symposium focused on the great Pacific Ocean. **RYAN TUCKER JONES** (Auckland University) told a compelling story of international conflict between Australia, New Zealand, and the Soviet Union over whale stocks—Australia and New Zealand wanted to maintain shore-based whaling in their territories while restricting Soviet pelagic whaling in the Antarctic and nearer their shores. **JULIA MILLER** (Macquarie University) explored the overlap of the discovery of the El Niño-Southern Oscillation in the 1960s along with a time of drought in Australia, and the tensions of folk knowledge of weather with scientific knowledge and discovery. **KYLE HARVEY** (Macquarie University) looked at the anti-nuclear protest movement in Australia in the early 1960s, especially the environmental elements of its rhetoric. This movement protested French nuclear testing in the Pacific Ocean, calling to keep Australia's beaches, oceans and milk clean and pure.

The final day of the symposium opened with papers focused on the Mallee lands of southern Australian. **ANDREW GAYNOR** and **YVES TOUSSAINT** (University of Western Australia), **KATIE HOLMES** and **RUTH FORD** (La Trobe University) each presented parts of a large Australian Research Council funded project on the Mallee Lands. Gaynor and Toussaint explored the history of eucalyptus oil production from mallee trees in both Victoria and southwest Western Australia from the nineteenth century into the present, and the fortunes of the tree and local environments under various demands of settlement, industry and commerce. Holmes analyzed the masculinist discourse and rhetoric associated with the "Mallee-made man" in the early twentieth century, detailing how clearing the land, battling roots, harvesting wheat and dealing with droughts constituted this identity along with an individualist focus on success and failure. And Ford drew on a photo album of two brothers who were soldier settlers in the Mallee from the late 1920s to illuminate the relationships of the men and the land.

The panel "Transforming Landscapes" looked at three landscapes of different scales and make-up. **DAVID HARRIS** (La Trobe University) focused on the entrance to the Gippsland Lakes in

Victoria, and the tensions of the “natural” and the “engineered” marine and shore landscape. Historian **JAN OOSTHOEK** (independent scholar) and ecologist **JEAN-BAPTISTE PICHANCOURT** (CSIRO) were a model of interdisciplinary work, exploring the city of Brisbane as a bio-cultural system and the history of the transformation of bushland to suburb, demonstrating the pathways of movement and development laid down across the decades. In a paper co-authored with Peter Davies, archaeologist **SUSAN LAWRENCE** (La Trobe University) revealed how the natural and agricultural landscapes of Victoria have, in fact, been profoundly shaped by mining since the mid-nineteenth century. Lawrence’s work reads landscapes, especially waterways, to see how water has been redirected, thus revealing significant transformation of the landscape by historic mining practices. She noted how the mining sludge that flowed down those redirected waterways created “an immense human artefact that has been completely naturalized.”

The final session, “Human Body, Animal Body,” brought chimpanzees and ants into the conversation. **PAUL MUNRO** (University of New South Wales) captivated the symposium with a history of “Hollywood” chimpanzees, historicizing chimpanzee anxieties in Sierra Leone, and in the process detailing how Sierra Leone was also the site from which a great proportion of chimpanzees for medical testing were exported in the 1970s—the many ways we “consume” chimpanzees, whether visually or through medical testing. **ADAM GALL** (independent scholar) explored the place of Argentine ants in early and mid-twentieth century. He elucidated the ways the ants were “anticipated” in the Australian press, the ways concerns of ant invasion intertwined with geopolitical and racial concerns, and subsequently, following the ants arrival in Australia, how the suburbs of Sydney became battle grounds of a “war.”

The program closed with a keynote by **VINITA DAMODARAN** (Sussex University) that explored the ways in which the Anthropocene manifests and is experienced in specific localities. Drawing on the activities and strategies of resistance of people in Jharkand and Noamundi in Eastern India to protect and defend their forests against the activities of the giant Tata Company, Damodaran especially emphasized the tight links of resistance and resilience. She specifically argued that by analyzing resistance, we might, as historians, be able to bring politics back into the idea of the Anthropocene. Furthermore, given the link of resistance and resilience, Damodaran suggested that there might, in fact, be good and bad resilience, and that we might pursue a more politicized view of the concept.

Symposium conveners **CHRISTOF MAUCH** and **RUTH MORGAN** gave closing comments, highlighting that there are several planned publications from the symposium.

After the close of formal proceedings, conference participants were invited to a film screening of *Night Parrot Stories* by the Australian filmmaker Robert Nugent—a treat, as the film had not yet received its official premiere. Nugent’s film is a story of a search for a rare, downright mysterious, bird of the Australian outback, the night parrot, seen by only a few people with a small handful of specimens in collections around the world. Intense, artful, searching, beguiling, and haunting, Nugent’s searching film was a rewarding end to a rewarding symposium.

Through its diverse range of topics and approaches, “Foreign Bodies, Intimate Ecologies” demonstrates that environmental history in Australia and internationally is in excellent health. Engaged with questions of deep importance to the environment today—resilience, conservation, protection, changing climates, sustainable communities and resource systems, justice, among many others—each of the papers engaged with the conference themes in deep and meaningful ways, and it was especially noteworthy that each paper found the language and concepts of “body” and “intimacy” generative and productive to work with.

-- Alessandro Antonello