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Jennifer Mae Hamilton & Astrida Neimanis

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INTRODUCTION

Five Desires, Five Demands

Jennifer Mae Hamilton and Astrida Neimanis

School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, University of New England, Armidale, Australia; Department of Gender and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

We propose that feminist studies are particularly well-situated to analyse the paradox of what ‘we humans’ want as we gaze into the eyes of planetary catastrophe. The contributions in the special issue evoke tensions between a capitalist imperative to consume, activist calls for resistance, and queer feminist figurations of sex and longing. Asking in turn what we as editors want from the project of feminist environmental humanities, we respond: (1) we want to spark new relations between desire and demand from within environmental crisis; (2) we want a fulsomely feminist environmental humanities; (3) we want to inhabit the difficult and necessary articulation of ‘feminism’ and ‘environment’; (4) we want multiple, situated, perversely scaled and historically awkward genealogies for environmental humanities; and (5) we want ‘to take up the burden of remaking our world’. We contextualise these demands via a series of examples: the drought and bushfires currently gripping the places we are writing from; Betty Grumble’s performance LOVE AND ANGER; an origin story of feminist environmental humanities as told from our particular perspectives; and a 1943 short story, ‘Dry Spell’, by Australian writer Marjorie Barnard. We argue for the feminist potency of holding desire in tension with demand.

KEYWORDS

feminism; environmental humanities; desire; climate change; environment

We Want to Spark New Relations Between Desire and Demand from Within Environmental Crisis

As we sit down to write this editorial introduction, we notice bushfires raging across Australia and a staggeringly intense drought. Sydney, where Astrida is writing from, is blanketed in a smoky haze that cancels out the city’s characteristic sunny blue skies. And around Armidale, where Jennifer is writing from, lighting bolts from storms are setting the dry earth on fire. These spring blazes and the ongoing drought foreshadow what will likely be a challenging summer, to say the least. The spectacular urgency of drought and fire, and their entanglement with each other and exacerbation by climate change, mask slower violences of environmental crisis that are also ongoing: species extinction, land clearing, extraction, fish kills, water sell-offs and buy backs. What we hope this special issue of Australian Feminist Studies will make clear, though, is that these extreme events and questionable human practices are all environmentally legible
symptoms of bigger and deeper socio-political structures and ongoing processes: colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy amongst them. Putting out these fires and ending this drought requires much more than water. At the same time, if the world is both metaphorically and literally on fire, can we justify stopping to think about desire? Desire is a combustible feeling, often represented first as sparks, then as flames. Is it hazardous to stop and carefully consider what we want?

In the context of climate change, ‘want’ firstly invokes the vital yet underexamined question of material desire. Even as the fires rage, many of us still flick on the air conditioner, or hop into our cars, even though we know that these out of control blazes are directly linked to a heating planet. This is not to claim that climate change and associated problems should (or can) be solved via neoliberal pleas for individual behaviour change; it is simply to point out that, despite a growing recognition of the impact of human consumption on more-than-human worlds and growing indicators of disparity in terms of wealth and well-being, ‘we humans’ still love our creature comforts. As Kathryn Yusoff has observed, ‘one thing is clear, “we” can’t stop, “we” won’t stop, “we” love the Carboniferous fuel stock even as it sears the skies we live under’ (Yusoff 2015, 212). Want thus indexes both the longing that undermines one’s own ethics, as well as an acute inadequacy of the means for many to live well in the context of imperial structures of privatisation and capitalism.

But in this same context of a world on fire want also signals a resolute commitment to radical change. Want, like fire, is a potentially transformative force. Fire, to use Yusoff and Clarke’s term, ‘unravels’ (2018, 11). So, while ‘the urge to burn has often been accompanied by the regulation of other bodily desires’, they suggest that rather than putting fire out ‘fire itself … must be preserved, enhanced and multiplied’ (21). Temperance is not the answer; we need explosive new constellations of want.

Alongside the lure of the fossil-fuelled life and the transformative potential of desire itself, want thus precipitates activist claims for an alternative polis. ‘What do we want?’ is the catch cry of the protester. Even as the fossil fuel economy has created and sated desires previously unimaginable (some wonderful, some tedious: to fly, to live longer, to video conference, to work in an office), there is at the same time a building resistance to this mode of being.

In this special issue, we propose that feminist studies are particularly well-situated to analyse this paradox of what ‘we humans’ want as we gaze into the eyes of planetary catastrophe. Desire, pleasure, and subjectivity, on the one hand, and resistance to and refusal of political norms and certain modes of subjection, on the other, are cornerstones of feminist scholarship. And, perhaps even more centrally, the impossible necessity of articulating some kind of ‘we’ – where hopes for solidarity chafe against the violence of a Western liberal universal subject – has long been a feminist quarry. As such, the essays in this special issue explicitly draw on decades of feminist thinking to ask: How can ‘creature comforts’ be imagined otherwise through intersectional feminist lenses of erotics, care, justice and responsibility? And what does it mean to say that ‘we are all in this together’ when we are clearly in this in all kinds of very different ways? (Braidotti 2019; Neimanis 2017). That is: what we also want is for the question of want in the context of planetary environmental crisis both to benefit from the insights of intersectional feminist scholarship and to give back to those long-standing struggles for justice. Here ‘what do we want?’ is answered by a call for things to be radically otherwise. But how?
We Want a Fulsomely Feminist Environmental Humanities

Environmental humanities – which has been consolidating as a named field of scholarly inquiry over a decade – brings ‘qualitative analysis’ to ecological issues and ‘engages with fundamental questions of meaning, value, responsibility and purpose in a time of rapid, and escalating, change’ (Rose et al. 2012, 1). In other words, it is the interdisciplinary study of the vexed and vexing ways in which culture is always co-imbricated with nature. In this sense, environmental humanities is well suited to examining the kinds of challenges with which we open this introduction. However, what we definitely don’t want, is to posit ‘a feminist approach’ to environmental humanities as an add-on to the central business of this field. So, if we nuance the question to be about the specific project of this special issue – namely, what do we want from feminist environmental humanities? – then our answer might assert: we want research that begins with the inextricability of these propositions, both nature and culture and feminism and environmental humanities. We want to insist that environmental humanities, if it is to produce the world-changing, activist-oriented, and paradigm-shifting kind of work that is in various ways posited as the field’s ambit (see Rose et al. 2012; Nye et al. 2013; Neimanis, Åsberg, and Hedrén 2015; Heise 2017), must also be feminist: that is, attentive to the ways in which feminisms’ commitments to analysing intersectional materialisations of power and privilege related to gender, race, class and other embodied markers are not an optional extra, but central to understanding current species privilege and environmental exploitation.

We also want to insist that feminist studies, if they are to be deeply intersectional, must attend to human domination, speciesism, and the ways in which social power and privilege manifest through and as human relations to more-than-human beings and worlds. Various lineages of feminist scholarship take up these challenges. Ecofeminisms found in the works of Mies and Shiva (2014), for example, and their inheritors, remain necessary and relevant today in the critique of uneven and racialised economic development as deeply connected to oppression of both women and the natural world. Other ecofeminisms stemming from thinkers such as Adams and Gruen (2014) provide tools that are equally necessary for continuing to probe the question of human domination over other animals. More recently, the rich and particular history of ecofeminism in Australia, traversing relations with land rights, philosophy and deep ecology, has been reprised and updated in urgent response to the present moment (Stevens, Tait, and Varney 2017). But the value of feminisms for thinking with and through environmental crisis is more capacious still, in ways that emerge slightly athwart a straight gender-environment (or human-animal) nexus. This connects to a long history of feminisms that, on one hand, have directly critiqued normative figurations of gender and sexuality, and on the other, have wrestled with women’s historically difficult relationship with nature. These scholarly and activist literatures have thus taken up environmental questions from different angles, sometimes alongside or in response to ecofeminist conversations: Afrofuturist and Indigenous futurist work has long shown up the ways in which race, colonialism, and gender are at the heart of human stewardship of planetary futures (see Butler 1996; Schalk 2018; Okorafor 2015; Wright 2013; Erdrich 2017). Questions of technological entanglements have emerged differently in feminist science and technology studies (Haraway 1988), and in its specifically queer and decolonial uptakes (see Cipolla et al. 2017; TallBear
The related field of feminist materialisms (see Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Asberg and Braidotti 2018) has one eye trained on STS, another on ecofeminism, and a third on ‘the ontological turn’ of the early twenty-first century, further parsed the relationship between gender and nature as necessarily connected to metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical contours of Western cosmology – positions which have long been underscored in critical race and Indigenous ontological scholarship (see, for example, Wynter in McKitrick 2015; Jackson 2015; Simpson 2017; Povinelli 2016). And in the fields of queer (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010; Seymour 2013) and crip (Jaquette Ray and Sibara 2017; Hamraie 2017; Kafer 2013) ecologies, and ecosexuality studies (Stephens and Sprinkle 2014), gender nestles among other questions of bodies, pathologies, ‘naturalness’, strange kinships, and care as gendered labour.

This is all perhaps to say: despite the fraught relation between feminism and nature, we can neither solve nor easily disavow this difficulty; we must move towards it. At the same time, while intersectionality has been nothing short of a revolutionary concept in the field of feminist studies and beyond, we recognise that the concept’s logic is not always fit-for-purpose when dealing with more-than-human worlds, and all the ways in which humans are of them and in them – and seemingly sometimes against them. In other words, environmental crisis is not only about adding another oppression (i.e. of non-human natures) to the intersection; addressing environmental crisis is also about unpicking and rethreading the connections of something like climate change to humanist values and planetary histories, which are inextricable from the weave of many dominant modern imaginaries. Just as feminism does not necessarily take ‘women’ as its explicit object of concern, nor can ‘feminism and environment’ be primarily about a bilateral relation.

Claiming what feminist environmental humanities wants is thus necessarily difficult. We might want it to challenge our orthodoxies or invite revisions to key assumptions, but we do not want it to become a new paradigm. In this special issue, we approach these difficulties in various ways. Multispecies worlds, place, migration, human death, water, race, motherhood, domesticity, embodiment, food, Indigenous-Settler relations, decolonisation, art, survivance, transnationalism, weather, undersea pollution, breathing, housework, kin, babies, property, erotics are some of the regions traversed. In this collection, such questions are taken up by scholars each in turn with different (inter)disciplinary training and methods. Neither the list of themes nor the assortment of methods is comprehensive; instead we hope they suggest a centrifugal force, moving outwards into a space of expanding possibility.

Holding these articles together, though, is a clarity afforded by the articulation of what it is that each scholar wants (and therefore does not yet have), and how the iterative potential of the question itself can continue to trouble relations between gender or feminism and environment. New convergences emerge here, with implications for both feminisms and environmental humanities, together and apart. Stacy Alaimo’s work is foundational for the field as a whole and her article in this issue identifies a tension in this same project: how to navigate the God Trick involved in the desire for ‘all species to be’ as part of a planetary ecology, while also remaining attentive to difference, location and a troubled idea of ‘we’. The article is an experiment in moving toward that difficulty. In Mythily Meher’s article, the rise of strongly place-based scholarship in environmental humanities is set in uneasy relation with patterns of human migration and settlement: how does the literal grounding of certain scholarship for ecological reasons intersect
with race and migration, across generations and troubled by complexities of gender, race and class? At the same time, though, neither coordinate is privileged over the other – place-based scholarship and migration are held together. Jennifer Biddle’s want is for a research article where the settler scholar working in an Aboriginal community does ‘not speak louder than what the works and the women present themselves [do]’. This article re-engages the long-standing challenge for anthropologists of how to work with Indigenous knowledges as settler researchers, but reconsidered in the context of a feminist environmental humanities.

While remaining steadfast that feminism and environment as concepts are far from content-less (they come with histories and are populated by material bodies who bear physical traces of both violences and care), we want a feminist environmental humanities that holds both of these terms open, and is willing to grapple with the way each term reframes the questions, changes the scope, and challenges the orthodoxies of the other. So again: we want neither of these fields – neither feminist studies, nor environmental humanities – to be an add-on or afterthought to the other, but we also recognise that their articulation together is not straightforward. We want them both and we want them together.

We Want to Inhabit the Difficult and Necessary Articulation of ‘Feminism’ and ‘Environment’

... if Iggy Pop and Patti Smith had a love child, and Annie Sprinkle and David Bowie had a love child, and then those two love children made love to each other on a bed of roses, high on acid, rage and love, they would give birth to Emma Maye Gibson’s drag alter ego Betty Grumble. That’s about the closest I can come to trying to describe the glorious, unreal and completely authentically beautiful mess that is the protagonist of LOVE AND ANGER (or Sex Clown Saves The World AGAIN!). (Royalle 2018)

This is how Candy Royalle describes Betty Grumble: an ecosensual creature, a living, breathing, mammalian force, swept up in the beauty and violence of our worldly condition as humans. On the one hand, Betty Grumble can be simply used as an ‘example’ of the coming together of feminism, sex, and nature – she is a queer femme performance artist, and her performances are sometimes ‘about’ things such as climate change and extraction. But on the other hand, this description alone would do a major disservice to her art: Betty Grumble brings feminism and environment together to illustrate just how magnificently messy and thoroughly imbricated the projects are today. When Betty performed at Hacking the Anthropocene III: (what do we) WANT? at the Women’s College at the University of Sydney (a setting steeped in histories that further complicate the question of any feminist ‘we’), not only did she participate in the event that gave rise to this special issue; she also materialised the beautiful chaotic necessity of the kinds of questions that we hope this collection of papers raises, worries, and reworks.

In the middle of that day and in the middle of the program, Betty Grumble offered us a condensed version of LOVE AND ANGER. The show is a series of images and sketches (dance, performance poetry, reading, audience participation, physical theatre, strip tease and karaoke) that explore the body as desiring and desired, as beautiful and traumatised, all in the pursuit of earthy justice. It comes together in a spectacular denouement when Betty transitions her vagina into vase for flowers (see Figure 1). The vagina-vase could
also operate as a visual epigraph for this special issue. If so, though, what set of scholarly issues does this image foreshadow?

At the moment Grumble becomes vase, she is naked, standing on her head with legs in splits; an audience member is invited to fill the vase with water and arrange the flowers. She turns herself from sex clown into a vessel – container, cup, receptacle, carrier bag (Haraway 2013) – for growing things. More than symbol, the vagina-vase image is thoroughly physical both in terms of being a vase and also in terms of adopting a particular posture. Prior to signifying as this material-semiotic vessel, Grumble’s pussy had functioned as a printing press known as the ‘Unshaming Machine’ where she loaded her printer/labia with red ink, then stamped out simulacra of herself and distributed these reproductions to the audience. Prior to becoming printing machine, her labial lips serenaded the audience with a song. In the performance, Betty’s genitals are always more than the sum of their parts. Each part can do multiple things and also signify in multiple ways at once. The vagina-vase is completely overdetermined.

Betty Grumble is obviously not the first feminist performance artist to proffer the female body as a vessel capable of nurturing life, nor to understand the multitudinous signifying capacity of genitals. But hers is a rare instance where the body is presented at exactly the same time as a desiring subject and object of desire; even more rarely is this linked well, in its full complexity, with the unfolding environmental catastrophe. And almost never are we invited to experience the physical and emotional stakes of this complexity – body as mother as printer as lover as spectacle as subject as object as garden as sex clown – but Betty offers it as a place for the audience to inhabit. She opens the space – both between her legs and between everyone in the room – to try to think these things together.

Figure 1. From the LOVE & ANGER season in January 2019 at Griffin Theatre, Sydney. Credit: Dean Tirkot.
In terms of the feminism’s fraught histories on the question of nature, Betty spectacularly embodies how both the sexed and gendered body is essentially of the earth and how seeking justice and love within this material reality is (essentially) an anti-essentialist ambit. In other words, we fundamentally cannot escape the brute impurity and mess of our divine material and affective situation. Like the project of feminist environmental humanities that we are introducing with this special issue, Betty finds fearless ways into this difficult question.

So what does Betty Grumble want? Best to ask her, but our experience of participating in her show suggests that Betty wants us to feel love and anger at the same time. Certainly, the performance itself stirs such affective ambivalence in an audience (pleasure/discomfort, titillation/disturbance, laughter/tears, excitement/shame, love/anger). In other words, the performance shows us we are capable of inhabiting and, indeed, often do inhabit two (or more) contradictory states at one and the same time. For the duration of this performance, we are given licence to dwell in that ecotone.

The special issue creates such zones of contact between unlikely or opposing ideas too. Laura McLauchlan’s article brings together Audre Lorde’s notion of the erotic with hedgehogs, for example. ‘Hedgehog champions’ are people who create pathways (holes) for these animals in private fences. McLauchlan engages Lorde’s work on erotics to theorise the mode of embodied subjectivity required for the project of multispecies community making. Jennifer Hamilton’s article paradoxically plays with the drudgery of housework to examine a structuring irony in Donna Haraway’s proposition to ‘make kin not babies’. She proposes that the labour of making kin is actually quite like making babies. In so doing, Hamilton examines what a feminist retreat from the ambition to be either liberated from or paid for housework might look like, while theorising new figurations of housework as unlikely forms of resistance. Susanne Pratt considers the human body as food, but does so by working through the self as toxic. Rather than detoxing to live your best life, Pratt seeks ways of preparing the body for another after death. Following her own diagnosis with mercury poisoning, she combines autoethnography and Plumwood’s idea of ‘being prey’ with a look at various contemporary artworks, to examine what it means to be good food for others. This article also inhabits the tension inherent in working with concepts generated by settler scholars on unceded Country. Pratt’s article moves towards deconstructing the settler views of the body that are urgent in these times, but it also chafes against other understandings of Plumwood and her work. We say more about this below. And finally, Astrida Neimanis’s article pursues an anti-racist feminist line of inquiry as a deep dive to the bottom of the sea. The critical move here reveals the challenge and possibilities of feminist environmental humanities in radically non-human places. In dialogue with the work of Christina Sharpe, Adrienne Rich and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Neimanis asks how the breathless sea invites reckoning with feminism’s own disavowals. In the undersea, dissolution can be both loss and another kind of relation.

**We Want Multiple, Situated, Perversely Scaled, and Historically Awkward Genealogies for Environmental Humanities**

Genealogies are funny things. As scholars, we all tell them and fall back on them; they provide quick ways of explaining how something – ideas, disciplines, or fields of research – grow up, or get from one place to another. Indeed, above we reach for some kind of
origin story for the emergence of feminist environmental humanities through different kinds of feminisms, even as we simultaneously resist a clear trajectory. We know that telling a story can sometimes be misunderstood as a claim for the story. So in spite of (and because of) the stories we might sketch out for this field, in finalising this introduction, we discovered that our story had to be quite specific.

We – Astrida and Jennifer – met in 2015 on a beach on the South Coast of New South Wales, in Australia, at an environmental humanities retreat. Astrida had just arrived in Australia to take up a continuing position at the University of Sydney in the Gender and Cultural Studies Department; Jennifer had recently had a baby. Neither of us can remember if we explicitly talked about feminism that time. What we do remember is walking along a treacherously large-bouldered beach, Jennifer with her 6-month old baby strapped to her torso, as we attempted to find a different way to get around the headland. We wanted to take an alternate route. It was an adventure: a bit risky, kind of fun, with a brewing sense of being in something together.

At the time, Jennifer was living in a share house called Earlwood Farm on unofficial maternity leave from precarious work. Her training was in critical literary studies, strongly inflected with feminisms of her undergraduate teachers Elizabeth McMahon, Brigitta Olubas, Kate Livett and Elizabeth Wilson. By the end of her PhD she was blasted by multiple deaths and a relationship change and, ultimately, more interested in the calming and comforting everyday activities of gardening and cooking with her partner and friends, and informally blogging about it, than strategically planning an academic research career. But by virtue of her location, thematic preoccupations, and the openness of the newly appointed Environmental Humanities staff at UNSW, she found herself teaching casually into that program and benefiting from the exciting scholarly community that emerged in that now-dispersed (geographically and cosmologically) research cluster. Meanwhile, Astrida was seven years on from completing her PhD in Social and Political Thought in Canada, under the (very feminist) supervision of Barbara Godard and Catriona Sandilands. Upon arrival here, she brought her own connections to conversations in North America and Europe that were travelling under the monikers of feminist new materialisms, feminist science and technology studies, and critical posthumanities. Astrida had been a frequent guest at the Posthumanities Hub in Sweden, directed by Cecilia Åsberg, who in turn mentored by Rosi Braidotti (a student of Deleuze) and Nina Lykke – all pioneering feminist thinkers in different ways. Although Astrida was outside of the field’s development in Australia, her story nonetheless reveals queer connections to an Australian environmental humanities: Rosi grew up in Australia; Donna Haraway who was a major influence for the posthumanities in Europe was also the teacher of many of Australia’s leading environmental humanities scholars; Vicki Kirby who was a frequent visitor to Europe for these events lives and works in Sydney, at UNSW. We could keep listing things that led us to this collaboration and this particular constellation of ideas – the very different times we have breakfast each day and how we both like cold water swimming – but the point we make with this story is that this emergence of feminist environmental humanities is as particular and situated as it is a part of a bigger and more generalisable scholarly field.

Our bodies serve as the media for these connections to converge in new configurations. Six months after our beach walk, we hosted the inaugural meeting of the Composting Feminisms and Environmental Humanities reading group, and the following year, when Jennifer
took up a position as a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Sydney (as part of The Seedbox – an international consortium of an environmental humanities supported by Swedish funders Mistra and FORMAS) we launched the first iteration of Feminist, Queer, and Anticolonial Propositions for Hacking the Anthropocene – the third of which in 2018 led us directly to propose this special issue. In the intervening time, we spent many hours discussing, researching, writing about, and convening numerous events on ‘feminist environmental humanities’. We tracked its development worldwide; we investigated where it had come from, and we paid keen attention to where it was going. We noticed where it was silenced, and what and whom it silenced in turn. (Such co-labouring was helped by working in neighbouring offices and living in adjacent suburbs – these things always matter in any kind of academic field-building.) We became curious about many things – such as, despite the feminism of key Australian environmental thinkers such as Val Plumwood and Ariel Salleh, despite major feminist and queer thinkers in or from Australian (Rosi Braidotti, Claire Colebrook, Elizabeth Grosz, Elspeth Probyn) moving towards environmentally inflected research, a distinctive Australian feminist environmental humanities felt latent. What we wanted was to make and hold space for these strange overlaps to be interrogated, and to grow.

The very specificity of our story should make it clear that other genealogies do exist. The Ecofeminist Fridays collective in Melbourne will have their own narrative, as will scholars from The Seedbox and the editors of the explicitly feminist ‘Toxic Embodiment’ special issue of Environmental Humanities. Some people might refer to the project that we call feminist environmental humanities in different ways, signalling subtle and important critical and methodological distinctions: Feminist Science and Technology studies, Feminist Geography, the Feminist Posthumanities, New Materialism and Discard Studies so on. So, in telling this story, we tacitly argue that all origin stories are situated. Intellectual trajectories are material entities in the world; they are activated, carried, and sometimes thwarted by material bodies, circumstance, geography, and timing. Moreover, choosing to narrate these things in one way, and not another, allows us to see certain things, and not others. This partiality does not make them less real. As with all situated knowledges, by rejecting a God’s Eye View in favour of claiming a partial view from somewhere, we can make ourselves accountable to the story we tell (Haraway 1988). In presenting this special issue, then, we are not arguing for a definition of feminist environmental humanities as a specific field of thought or sub-discipline with particular characteristics (or, god forbid, ‘membership rules’). We are rather telling you: this is one way it can happen. The omissions, the filiations, and the tensions in this volume all belie the pleasures and difficulties of building scholarly communities in the real world.

Some of these filiations are obvious – the authors of the following articles have all participated in growing this particular community, initially based in Sydney, in one way or another. This connection enriches many of the discussions gathered here, as they have been interrogated and developed across many forms of conversation. But, like Betty Grumble’s vagina-vase as a vessel for growing things, this collection is also circumscribed and contained. Not everyone who we think with has been a direct part of these conversations. For example, no Indigenous scholars are included here as authors. This is in part circumstantial (related to competing commitments), but we cannot shy away from a tension that we have grappled with everywhere during this multiyear project: environmental
humanities as a field remains predominantly white. This is unsettling, but we also need to stay with this discomfort. For example, during the editorial phase of this special issue, we came into direct contact with critiques of Plumwood’s work coming from Aboriginal scholars and specifically regarding her work on ‘Being Prey’, a work which is taken up in Pratt’s article in these pages. The notion of being prey is so generative for deconstructing Western subjecthood and fantasies of human exceptionalism and immortality, and yet in this formulation, the concept erases other stories too. Changing how settlers create and apply theory on stolen land is slow, careful work. Mythily Meher’s article offers one way. By engaging Plumwood, but via her concept of ‘shadow places’, Meher notices and marks Plumwood’s white settlerhood, and incorporates Plumwood’s own working with complicity. Thus she begins repositioning Plumwood’s place in our field. Both concepts – being prey and shadow places – are hugely influential and can remain so, but these critiques also change how we can and will engage with Plumwood’s work in the future. Although publication adds an air of finality to arguments, scholarly work is always in progress, always changing.

This connects to another reason for telling this specific story: we hope it underscores how for us, feminist environmental humanities is most importantly a place where things can happen. Like the COMPOSTING reading group that was the first output of our collaboration, and whose primary purpose is to provide a forum for fomenting provocative ideas at the intersection between feminisms and environment, our hope is for this special issue to materialise further possibilities, and find connections between other stories, sparked elsewhere. We want something like ‘feminist environmental humanities’ to continue to grow from many possible (and sometimes surprising) places without needing to feel like we are all sheltering under the same umbrella; we want it to grow in directions that might also be as of yet unthought, not creating a single new paradigm, a counter-hegemony, but something more grounded, more evenly distributed: many different umbrellas and raincoats, with some even out in the rain. By offering a deliberately non-authoritative but real account of feminist environmental humanities’ origins, we want to remind our readers of the importance of scrambling genealogies and fucking with the main story. This is how new possibilities can be tended.

We Want to ‘Take Up the Burden of Remaking the World’

We know there are many more stories that gather up ‘feminism’ and ‘environment’ in other ways still – stories to come, and also extant ones we are still learning about. Marjorie Barnard’s ‘Dry Spell’ is an example. Published in 1943 in the collection The Persimmon Tree, it is a short story representing drought and fire addled future-Sydney and its internally displaced inhabitants. It is cli-fi avant la lettre. The story shows the city with a changed environment:

The country with its endless, aching death pressed in on the city, the drought and heat pressed on both. In the city and its environs its stamp was no less clear ... In the wealthy suburbs of the North Shore and Vaucluse a change had taken place too. It was as if the earth had been squeezed so that all the fine houses that had nestled so comfortably in the contours and in the greenery, were forced up into the light. They bulged out, exposed and the sun tore at them. (Barnard 1943, 153–154)
To say that reading this story in 2019 is uncanny is an understatement. We read the story knowing it was written in the 1940s about a distant future, but feeling it as a description of today. We read it alongside organising our thoughts for this Introduction – passing notes between a city cloaked in smoke and a regional town surrounded by fire. We write this Introduction breathing in smoke and dust, with Sydney’s water restrictions about to be raised to the next level and Armidale on Level 5: ‘emergency’. The purported distinction and distance between the city and country, then and now, contract. As we revise and edit, an op-ed in *The Guardian* reflects sentiments eerily similar to Barnard’s tale and our own experience: ‘It is, as ever, rural and regional Australia that has borne the heaviest costs of this crisis – in lives, homes and the gruelling labour.’ But maybe, the op-ed’s author Josephine Tovey continues, this is a ‘turning point’ for city dwellers – those ‘who often only watch these crises from a sympathetic distance’. Like Barnard writing decades earlier, Tovey knows that the ‘[c]ity limits won’t hold out the reality of the natural world and its changing climate’ (2019). The interleaving of Barnard’s, Tovey’s and our stories captures our current predicament well: time and space have collapsed, old temporal delineations of past, present and future shift, and geographical distinctions between the city and the country are remade in the shared experience of planetary change. Although everything seems the same, we are always grappling with the differences. We are all in this together, but we are all in this in situated, specific ways.

The characters in Barnard’s story seem familiar today too. The inhabitants of her addled city are adrift, not knowing what to do or how to think. They ‘walk because there was no reason for stopping’. The ‘Captain-General’ of the colonial town holds a fancy title, but has no sway over these ecological circumstances. Everyone seems to be walking, zombie-like, towards the water, or each other, or aimlessly. While all the characters are on the move, they do not have anything to move towards. They do not know what they want. They eventually gather in Macquarie Square around an anchor-made-monument, a remnant part of the First Fleet, and a reminder that the colonial apocalypse has long been going on. As the story concludes, it starts raining. What kind of ending is this? The rain signifies salvation, but the rain of this story does not deliver on its promise. The ineffective rain of this story is a reminder that putting out our fires and ending our drought requires much more than water. ‘Nothing would come of it now’, the narrator concludes: ‘we must take up the burden of remaking the world’ (1943, 160).

We too must take up the burden of remaking the world. The environmental crisis is totalising and certain distinctions and historical markers of difference are shifting, but new particularities and convergences emerge too. Thus, there is no single solution or essential escape route from this problem, only temporally weird, spatially diverse and site-specific responses. So although we do not posit a clear or precise vision for what we are walking towards in our story, this special issue models different possibilities to walk toward nonetheless – these possibilities are grounded in the world, but also wanting it to change. Feminist environmental humanities offers neither a technocratic ‘solution’, nor a finalised sense of precisely what the act of remaking will ultimately remake. We nonetheless insist that by holding onto these queries and challenges, committed to a thoroughly earthy justice, we – a collective subject position always under constant renegotiation – can move us towards an otherwise, and slowly remake the world.
Notes

1. At the time of publication, the Runway Journal archives were not available on the website, so the only version of this review was available via the Wayback Machine, which is what we have referenced here. We hope that in time these archives will become available and searchable again at http://runway.org.au/archive/.

2. For more information about this event and for links to other Hacking conferences, see https://hackingtheanthropocene3.wordpress.com/.

3. For a scholarly review of these investigations, see Hamilton and Neimanis (2018).

4. Thanks to Jennifer Biddle for alerting us to this story.

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Notes on Contributors

Jennifer Hamilton is a lecturer in Literary Studies at the University of New England, on unceded Anaiwan Country. Her first book is This Contentious Storm: An Ecocritical and Performance History of King Lear (2017). Her current research examines the relationship between weather and housework. With Astrida Neimanis, she is co-founder of COMPOSTING Feminisms and Environmental Humanities.

Astrida Neimanis is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies and a Key Researcher with the Sydney Environment Institute at the University of Sydney on Gadigal land. Her books include Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology (2017) and the co-edited collection Thinking with Water (2013). With Jennifer Mae Hamilton, she is co-convenor of the reading and research group COMPOSTING Feminisms and the Environmental Humanities.

ORCID

Jennifer Mae Hamilton https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6380-9067
Astrida Neimanis https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7666-8507

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