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## The Gender Trouble with Wilderness (Review of: Nature's Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism by Susan R. Schrepfer)

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## THE GENDER TROUBLE WITH WILDERNESS

Douglas Cazaux Sackman

**Susan R. Schrepfer.** *Nature's Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005. xii + 316 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, and index. \$35.00.

Having traveled over hill and dale, environmental historians have struck out into new territory: cityscapes and spatial segregation, the body, climate change, energy, consumption, genetically modified flora and fauna, the technological reinvention of nature itself.<sup>1</sup> They have also probed the cultural and political construction of the wilderness idea, laid bare its class, gender, and racial prejudices, and opened room for investigations of environmental justice in the past.<sup>2</sup> They have jettisoned the impulse to tell past environmental history as a dramatic conflict pitting "man" against "nature." Environmental historians now search for a more complicated narrative, one that probes the social and cultural differences in the category of "man" and shows how they matter if we are to truly understand the role and place of nature in North American history. Environmental historians are as likely to look at human health as they are to look at efforts to preserve bison, redwood trees, or wild rivers; they are as likely to trace the connections among cockroaches, asthma, and an "urban ecology of inequality" in Harlem as they are to trail a John Muir into the Sierra Nevadas.<sup>3</sup> An earlier generation of environmental historians often did just that, becoming camp followers of a sort hoping to inspire themselves and others with the great cause of environmentalism by sanctifying a heroic few who found a way to rise above the industrial din of their day.<sup>4</sup>

In our changed historiographic context, Susan Schrepfer's *Nature's Altars* may seem to be a throwback. She is concerned with those landscapes certain Americans designated as wilderness. The activities of the Sierra Club and other mountaineering groups are at the center of her narrative. John Muir and David Brower have a prominent role. The nature experience of America's elite are given a certain pride of place. Upon finding that gender is in the subtitle, we might believe that we will get another side of the tale, one that puts relatively unknown figures like Marion Randall Parsons (the first female member of the Sierra Club's board of directors) alongside the well-known male leaders. And we do. But the book is not a tired retracing of wilderness environmentalism,

with women simply added into the mix. Instead, *Nature's Altars* is a fresh and incisive book that may be the best monograph in U.S. environmental history yet to appear to use gender as its central category of analysis. Together with Virginia Scharff's edited collection *Seeing Nature through Gender*, Schrepfer's book will help propel a new wave of work integrating gender analysis with environmental history.<sup>5</sup>

"Protecting wilderness not only saves biological communities and evidence of earlier inhabitants," Schrepfer maintains, "but also preserves centuries of a multilayered, cultural history, of meanings imposed upon meanings, realities laid upon fantasies, and fantasies set against the force of very special places" (p. 8). In so saying, Schrepfer wedges her own work against William Cronon's substantial critique of American environmentalism, which he entitled "The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature."<sup>6</sup> Like a climber, she uses Cronon and other's criticisms of the wilderness idea to make her own way up the mountain. At the same time, however, she is pushing away from it. For Cronon, the trouble with wilderness had to do with the way that the idea, as a particular narrative told most consequentially by a groups of men claiming the American landscape for their own purposes, not least of which was as a space to prove the mettle of their manhood, narrowed the way that environmentalists and Americans at large have imagined themselves in relation to nature. In addition to effectively dispossessing Native Americans, the wilderness idea shut out other stories about how people may value the places around them, even if those places bear human fingerprints. Cronon conceded that Yellowstone or Yosemite may be special places, but pointed out that they are hardly untouched for they are landscapes forcefully shaped by competing individuals, cultures, and institutions. One thing the new approach has done is to put the state, as an agent that reinvented both nature and social relations with its efforts to manage the landscapes urban nature enthusiasts loved, back into the history of *national parks*.<sup>7</sup>

Schrepfer, informed by the new historiography, ventures back into this nationalized wilderness that was frequented by the Sierra Club and fellow travelers from the late nineteenth century until 1964 (when the Wilderness Act became law). Everywhere she goes, she spreads a kind of fine chalk, looking for the fingerprints individuals, cultures, and institutions have left in the mountains. Though it is not difficult to find them, the search is engaging and illuminating. She begins with a discussion of place-naming in the Sierras, and shows how a particular form of toponymy toppled Native American place names as the perspectives of male, EuroAmerican scientists and mountaineers gained ascendancy. Of 358 summits over 9,000 feet tall, 205 became affixed with the names of Euro-American scientists, climbers, officials, and artists. Schrepfer concludes that "[t]hese designations conveyed political and cultural authority, erased the history of the range itself, and decontextualized

its topography"—and all in a manner that "celebrated taking possession as a manly act" (p. 32). Though this critique is not new, the beginning of Schrepfer's analysis uses the historical evidence in a careful and persuasive way to show that the "power to narrate was the power to create identities" (p. 15). Schrepfer wants to understand how the culturally mediated encounters with wilderness reflected and shaped the identities of actual men and women.

In doing so, Schrepfer does not create cardboard cutouts of men bent on conquest and women finding their feminine essences in the fields of alpine flowers. Instead, Schrepfer's book documents a range of creative activity and actions in the mountains to reveal how men and women "enjoyed the mountains, and as they did so, constructed their own sense of self" (p. 234). Men and women are depicted as full-bodied human beings performing identities in relation to culturally prescribed norms. Therein lies the gender trouble with wilderness. As the feminist theorist Judith Butler argued in her influential book *Gender Trouble* (1990), there is nothing natural about sex, about "men" or "women" as such. Instead, women are subjects created through discourses produced in particular historical circumstances. For Butler, gender cannot be separated from the "political and cultural intersections in which it is produced and maintained."<sup>8</sup> Yet, feminism, Butler pointed out, had naturalized women, claiming that they shared an essential body that must be protected from the damaging impact of patriarchy, and ultimately liberated from it. In "The Trouble with Wilderness," Cronon did essentially the same thing for environmental historians, showing how wilderness discourse created the object it claimed to simply represent. "Wilderness," he argued, "hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural."<sup>9</sup> As Butler did with the "women," Cronon wrote a genealogy of wilderness that revealed that this cultural construction had been naturalized. Not all feminists and scholars involved in gender studies were wild about Butler's social constructivism, but it certainly spread. Not all environmentalists and scholars involved in environmental studies were wild about Cronon's intervention (indeed, it generated forceful blowback), but it has certainly spread as well.

This is not the place to rehearse the battles over the postmodern turn in environmental history. And readers should not get the impression that *Nature's Altars* is an abstract theoretical reflection on identity and constructivism. However sophisticated the underlying arguments are, the book is a grounded, lively, and embodied narrative. It recounts lived experiences, often harrowing and dramatic, of men and women in the mountains. It is an engaging read, and one that would make a superb introduction to undergraduates of environmental history, the importance of the wilderness idea, and the significance of gender as a social reality and a way to investigate the past.

Out of her narrative, though, comes a full and persuasive account of just how both gender and nature have been constructed. Moreover, Schrepfer traces the

ways the two phenomena have been entangled in generative ways—women and men formed and reformed their identities on the basis of the way they formed and reformed their relationship with nature. She shows how women and men performed gender in the mountains in relation to scripts Schrepfer usefully labels the masculine and feminine sublime. American men such as William O. Douglas, Clarence King, and David Brower “climbed and hiked and wrote of their adventures as ways to simultaneously fulfill and contest complex and contentious ideas of what it meant to be a man. What they sought—variously, the cultivation, the sublimation, the escape from, or the release of, strong emotions—sprang from society’s expectations that they struggle with each other and with the natural world.” While men sought granite, women such as Alice Eastwood or Mary Austin tended to look at the life of the mountains, enacting a “feminine sublime [that] coalesced in moments of almost overpowering intimacy with place, moments of keen awareness of the life forces that flowed through the physical world and themselves, verifying the values of nurturance and reproduction that society expected of women” (p. 233). But women also used the mountains to enact dramas asserting their equality with men. Miriam O’Brien, for example, became an accomplished mountain climber. Finding that if any men accompanied her on her ascents primary credit would go to the man, O’Brien helped pioneer manless climbing (p. 118). O’Brien and other women bagged summits not so much to conquer nature as to transcend society’s containment of female power. As Schrepfer concludes, “feminine narratives [of ascents] . . . emphasized the sensuality of nature, the pleasures of equity, and the desire to escape social strictures” (p. 121).

*Nature’s Altars* goes on to trace how all-female climbing declined in the 1930s and how women lost power within the Sierra Club and other organizations. A fascinating chapter shows how gendered expectations about wilderness were inculcated through the Boy Scouts and Camp Fire Girls, whose organizers, Schrepfer incisively notes, “believed that gender was biologically determined, but their rhetoric betrayed the fear that gender might be socially constructed.” Acting on this fear, the Camp Fire Girls made sure “girls learned domestic skills in the wild” (p. 157). After World War II, Schrepfer argues in a subsequent chapter, American wilderness was re-constructed as an essential component of family life and a key to national identity. On family camping trips, fathers, mothers and female and male children would learn their proper roles. Although Schrepfer notes that “philanthropist and eugenicist” Charles Goethe believed that “reenacting the frontier bolstered the family” and sponsored a Sierra Club essay contest to promote this idea, she does not delve into the racist agenda of Goethe and some of the other eugenicists who were influential promoters of a white-washed wilderness (p. 189).<sup>10</sup> Still, Schrepfer does much to put on the table the ways class, racial and gendered identities shaped experiences of and perspectives on wilderness in the twentieth century.

Finally, Schrepfer suggests that both masculine ways of regarding wilderness as a pristine and extreme landscape and feminine ways of seeing it in domestic terms as a garden or home coalesced to generate support for the Wilderness Act of 1964. While the Act portrayed wilderness as uninhabited by people, "the act also gave voice to the feminine and domestic sublimines by calling such places communities of life" (p. 236). This point is crucial to Schrepfer's overall argument. Implicitly, she is arguing that Cronon's critique of wilderness is incomplete, or even off base, because it targets only the masculine version of wilderness. Women had created an alternative view of wilderness that accepted and respected the human history of these places, valued them for their biological as well as aesthetic qualities, and—refusing to draw a line between the human and the natural—saw them as a home. Schrepfer reconfigures Muir as a wilderness enthusiast who combined in his person and ideas the masculine and feminine and forged a "domestic vision of the sublime" (p. 235). Muir had insisted that "going to the mountains is going home."<sup>11</sup>

The fundamental purpose of "The Trouble with Wilderness" was not to create a full history of the wilderness idea, nor was it to diminish the efforts to preserve parts of nature in the name of wilderness. Rather, it was to liberate American environmentalism from the constraining, and problematic, implications of what we may now, thanks to *Nature's Altars*, identify as the masculine myth of wilderness. That view "emphasized the emptiness of wilderness places," holding that the nature that has been uncontaminated by humans is most valuable; by implication, the nature around us is degraded and unworthy of our care and concern (p. 235). Cronon historicized and thereby demythologized wilderness as a way of making room for a new story of positive human relationships to nature. The trouble with wilderness was not that it was a construction of nature, but the particular form that structure had taken. Cronon wanted environmentalists to see the commonplace nature around them as a home, and the wilderness idea seemed to stand in the way of such a view.

From the vantage point that Schrepfer's eye-opening narrative affords, we might just as well start viewing the wilderness as women had always done. If we did that, there would be no need to reject wilderness, but instead we might use it as a model for our relationships to the lowland environs that more obviously bear the marks of modern industrial and consumer society. The whole planet would be our home. Of course, Native Americans such as the Blackfeet, Havasupai, Yakama or Nisqually also held a similar view of the nature of their world as a home, but that did not prevent them from being removed from their homelands to make room for national parks. Schrepfer's nuanced and critical appreciation of white American men, women and children playing in the mountains—often "playing Indian"<sup>12</sup> in the mountains—cannot

undo the work the wilderness idea has done as a home-wrecker. There yet remains an imperial trouble with wilderness.

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1. For a set of twenty-nine short essays charting possible future directions of the field, see Adam Rome, ed., "Anniversary Forum: What's Next For Environmental History?" *Environmental History* (January 2005).

2. See especially Mark Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (1999); and Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (2003).

3. An exciting new direction in the field examines the connection between health and landscape. See Gregg Mitman, Michelle Murphy, and Christopher Sellers, eds., *Landscapes of Exposure: Knowledge and Illness in Modern Environments* (2004); Linda Nash, "Finishing Nature: Harmonizing Bodies and Environments in Late-Nineteenth Century California," *Environmental History* (January 2003): 25–52; and Conevery Bolton Valençius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (2002). The phrase "urban ecology of inequality" is from Gregg Mitman, "Cockroaches, Housing & Race: A History of Asthma and Urban Ecology in America," paper presented at the University of Washington, March 3, 2006.

4. Now in its fourth edition, the classic work in this vein is Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (2001).

5. Virginia Scharff, ed., *Seeing Nature through Gender* (2003).

6. William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (1995).

7. See Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature*.

8. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; rev. ed., 1999), 7.

9. Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 69.

10. For a revealing account of the intersection of eugenics and conservation, see Alexandra Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (2005).

11. John Muir, "Wild Parks and Forest Reservations of the West" (1898) in *John Muir: Nature Writings*, ed. William Cronon (1997), 721.

12. See Philip Deloria's brilliant cultural history of this phenomenon: *Playing Indian* (1998).