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Book Review of *Frontiers of femininity: a new historical geography of the nineteenth-century American West* by Karen M. Morin

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Book Review

Frontiers of femininity: a new historical geography of the nineteenth-century American West, Karen M. Morin, New York, Syracuse University Press, 2008, 278 pp., £24.95, \$29.95 (hardback), ISBN 0-8156-3167-7

Reviewed by Christina E. Dando

I found myself drawn again and again to the striking image on the cover of Karen M. Morin's *Frontiers of Femininity*, a mirror image created from two photographs, with one reversed. Left, we have a group on Overhanging Rock at Yosemite. Right, we have two women dancing on the Rock, silhouetted against the sky. The experience of being on the edge, of being the edge is central to Morin's collection of essays in *Frontiers of Femininity*. The complex frontier that Morin explores calls to mind not only Turner's frontier but Gloria Anzaldúa's 'borderlands':

the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy... Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien' element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being 'worked' on. (Anzaldúa's, 1999, p. 19)

Anzaldúa's personal and social re-discovery of frontier captures a place as well as a process – stimulating yet dangerous – not unlike the experiences Morin explores of women travelers on the frontier of the American West. Morin too is crossing into new territory.

Frontiers' essays, previously published in journals and books, each individual gems, are pulled together into a meaningful, comprehensive whole. This whole is an exploration of how women's gender identities were produced in-place in nineteenth-century North America. Drawing on books, newspaper and magazine accounts, and personal letters, Morin examines a complex set of frontiers – of feminism, of upper-class femininity, of colonialism/imperialism, of class, of race and nationality. Morin simultaneously seeks to advance the frontiers of American historical geography, slow to address gender and adopt clear theoretical commitments. Morin describes it as 'one of the last bastions of an empirical geography that was complicit with masculinist language and values' (p. 11). She highlights the direction in which she believes the field should be heading, particularly to 'incorporate feminist and gender theorizing and approaches' (p. 12). In Morin's work on gender and colonialism/imperialism, she is leading the way into a new frontier for historical geography.

Morin begins by sketching out her path – to understand the formation of women's 'self-identities ('subjectivities') in the nineteenth-century American West landscape through their writings' (p. 2). These identities shift with gender as well as with class, ethnicity, and race, and involve colonial and imperial relations. Their accounts are captivating windows to past times, places and peoples, but are also significant to understanding the geographical imaginations of the time.

The bulk of the volume (five chapters) addresses the accounts of British women travel writers (BWTW) in the American West, with each chapter addressing a different element. The first two chapters investigate BWTW writings on the Plains and Mountains where they were oscillating between feminine codes of behavior for proper upper-class British women and the new experiences these women were

having in this transition zone. Here the borders were (and are) more fluid and they could 'bend the rules' as they felt comfortable – mountain climbing, or not, some taking on domestic duties done at home by servants, some modifying their dress to allow more freedom of movement. Through their accounts, the women became the heroines of their own adventures, with each woman making her own way, as it were, to the 'peak'.

Morin then shifts to nature studies or what she terms 'near geographies', the writings and artwork of three British women who traveled to California. Through these 'nature studies', they contributed to the scientific understanding of the landscape while serving empire by encouraging immigration, investment, and commercial development (p. 107). These works, while couched in scientific terms, were not viewed as 'scientific' or part of the imperial exercise of geography. As a result, their contributions became 'erased knowledges' – information that undoubtedly was used and was influential, yet was not considered 'significant' because of their gender (and has largely been ignored since).

Race is central to chapters five, six, and seven, with travelers' accounts of Mexico and of Native Americans, and a woman's letters (Rosalie LaFlesche Farley) capturing the complex position of being between worlds. Empire is very much apparent, whether it is a matter of Britain's 'informal empire' (Mexico) or America's Western colonization, in both the treatment of the peoples and the resources (p. 116). I found particularly compelling Morin's reading between the lines, retrieving the resistance of Native peoples to the Imperial gaze. But what is truly being revealed is the travelers' own positions – ranging from sympathetic to intolerant – as 'discerning, civilized English ladies' (p. 166). Rosalie's letters are another perspective on Western transformation, countering the 'Great Man' tradition while pointing to America's internal colonization (p. 185). With postcolonial theory, Morin spotlights the complex intersection of gender, class, and ethnicity with discourses on American development and national building, all intertwined with the colonial processes taking place, in place, at this time.

I believe Morin makes a compelling argument for the ways in which identities are produced in place. In the American West, gendered identities were (are) fluid, even in the Victorian age. The first half of the chapters I find narratively compelling, pulling me into the stories of the BWTW and the ways in which their place experiences were mediated by the ways in which they encountered the places and how they each produced their own identities as they moved through the region. The second half of the chapters I found theoretically compelling and stronger, as she considers the colonial presence and internal colonization of the American West. I admire Morin's sources and the clear efforts to ground and contextualize these essays in both time and place. But I think that if the reception of the writings and the relationship between the images and the texts had been more extensively addressed, this would have strengthened Morin's arguments on the geographical contributions of these extraordinary women.

I would like to know more about how these writings were distributed and received. I assume the BWTW were writing primarily for a British audience – how many books were published? What is the estimated number of newspaper/magazine subscribers and/or readers? How were they received in the United States? This information would expand our understanding of the power of these women's writings and their contributions to geographical knowledge. Near the end of the book, we are given a taste of the reception of these travel accounts (pp. 213–14, 216–17). I found this fascinating and really would like to know more. Were all the responses positive? Or did reception depend on location – was it as 'placed' as the identities? The 'reach' of these women, that is the number that potentially read their writings, would enhance Morin's argument that they contributed to the geographic knowledge of the time. This is

tricky ground, for academic geography has an uneasy relationship with popular geography. But as Morin works to recover what has been termed 'not-geography' or 'erased' geography (p. 113), their reach is of utmost importance. Scholars are now paying more attention to popular geographies and their impacts, as with Susan Schulten's (2001) *The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880-1950*. Morin's work contributes to this growing body of work on popular geography.

Second, some of the women were artists and illustrated their own works. Constance Gordon Cummings self-illustrated her books (p. 87), as did Lady Theodora Guest (p. 90). And what of the other books: did they have illustrations? The combination of text and image needs to be addressed, particularly when a writer provides both, and they need to be considered as a whole, for together they comprise a complete message. Between text and image there is an interplay, a reinforcing and resonance. Illustrations are significant for this period, providing visual proof for viewers. Geography as a discipline is tied to both words *and* image, privileging maps, photographs, and computer displays. These BWTW were not only marshalling narratorial authority in their writing, but they were also employing the tools of the geographers of the age – illustrations - to further support their claims. Morin does an excellent job on rhetorical analysis, analyzing the arguments and positions presented in these writings, but she has neglected the visual rhetoric, that is the persuasive or argumentative nature of the visual (see Hill and Helmers 2004). It is ironic that in a context where gaze is so significant – gaze at landscape, gaze at peoples, to be the object of the gaze – what the women provided for their audiences to gaze upon is given short shrift.

In 2006, historian Elizabeth Jameson (2006) called for more explorations of 'borderlands' in 'Dancing on the Rim, Tiptoeing through Minefields: Challenges and Promises of Borderlands'. Jameson (2006, 20) writes of how she has been inspired by the work of scholars who 'opened the human meanings of these borderlands for me: the relationships that reveal human agency and its limits, the private arenas where cultures are transformed, the intimate borderlands where new people were born who embodied difference in new ways'. She calls on scholars to 'dance on these rims' (Jameson 2006, 22). Morin is already 'dancing' as Jameson suggests, working to advance historical geography while she finds her own way through the wilderness of geography. *Frontiers of Femininity* is an outstanding contribution to historical geography, to histories of geography, to popular geography and to work on geography and gender. I look forward to see where she takes us dancing next!