Transcript: History Now - More-Than-Human Histories
16 October 2024, Metcalfe Auditorium, State Library of New South Wales

Jesse Adams Stein: 0:16
Good afternoon everyone. Thank you for joining us and I'm glad that we all found the new venue in the Metcalfe. Welcome to this session of History Now 2024. My name is Jessie Adams Stein and I'm the programme director for History Now 2024 and I represent both the History Council of New South Wales and the Australian Centre for Public History at UTS. Today's topic is more than human histories and I am delighted that we are joined by Dr Emily Gorman and Taylor Coyne, and tonight's chair is Professor Warwick Anderson, who I will introduce shortly, and Warwick will introduce our speakers before that.
Jesse Adams Stein: 1:00
I'd like to start by acknowledging the country on which we are holding this event. We are on Gadigal country and standing here at the State Library of New South Wales, we are on the top of the hill close to Warrane (Sydney Cove) and (Wahganmuggalee) Farm Cove. I'd like to acknowledge that the Gadigal are the traditional custodians of this country and acknowledge that we are on stolen land. Before we dive into more than human, I would like to give you just a little bit of background about History Now as a series. It's a long-running public history talk series with the aim to bring excellent historical research into public discourse. We feature professional and academic historians as well as experts who use historical research into public discourse. We feature professional and academic historians as well as experts who use historical research in their practice.
Jesse Adams Stein: 1:51
History Now has had several iterations and organisers and homes over the years, and this year, in 2024, history Now is a collaboration between the History Council of New South Wales, the Australian Centre for Public History. It's a collaboration if it's the one person who's part of the two things and we also acknowledge we have venue support from the State Library of New South Wales and we thank them for the use of this space. We started this year in March and after this session we will have one more to go in November, so it's been running hot all year. Look at all those amazing speakers here and if you're listening to the recording later on, you can find a full event program through a quick search engine inquiry.
Jesse Adams Stein: 2:32
I'd like to introduce our chair for today's event, professor Warwick Anderson. He is the Janet Dora Hine Professor of Politics, Governance and Ethics in the Discipline of Health and leader of the Politics, Governance and Ethics theme within the Charles Perkins Centre at the University of Sydney. He also has an affiliation with history and philosophy

of science at Sydney University and is a professorial fellow of the School of Population and Global Health at the University of Melbourne. As an historian of science, medicine and public health, Anderson is especially interested in ideas about race, human difference and citizenship in the 19th and 20th centuries. In recent years, his research has focused on the conceptual development of disease, ecology and planetary health, for instance, the population health impacts of climate change. Please join me in welcoming Warwick.

Warwick Anderson: 3:32

Thank you, thanks very much. I was enjoying that. I thought it might go on for another five or ten minutes, thought you'd only just gotten started. That was a very impressive list of speakers up there, I should say. I once spoke at this forum many years ago over at UTS, and I think I drew all of four people in the audience. So the fact that this venue is almost full really attests to the appeal of both Emily and Taylor, of course.

Warwick Anderson: 4:09

So today we'll be hearing about more- than- human histories. In that title, the hyphen is doing a lot of work. So just this morning actually, I got an email from the Academy of Humanities, and they were asking Fellows of the Academy to explain perhaps why the humanities weren't seen as compelling as they should be. And I said to them well, you know, maybe we should be thinking more about climate histories, environmental histories, more than human histories, in fact, in an era of climate change and biodiversity loss and the destruction of the Earth's life support systems. So I think it's very timely that we learn more about these more-than-human histories. Some of you may know, though, that more-than-human histories aren't exactly new. I mean, I trained many years ago as a historian of medicine and biology and of course you have more-than- humans in those histories, even if they are mere microbes and it's usually just there as examples of pathology. But in more- than- human histories, as I understand it, I'll learn more now, the human is much more thoroughly de-centred in the historical narrative agencies distributed to non-human actors or figures, and perhaps one could almost call it an 'ecological' style of history. So think about this. As we hear some more. I do have a few issues. I wonder whether they'll be dispelled. One is the focus on charismatic vertebrates. I suspect Emily will be looking more at arthropods - maybe not - Certainly in her other work she has. But also I just wonder about the limits of how much one can ever truly de-centre the human. I mean, I think as humans we are sort of almost compelled to think about everything else in relation to ourselves. So I wonder but it is not non-human history, of course, it is more- than- human history. So anyhow, we'll find out more about that soon.

Warwick Anderson: 6:53

I'll just introduce fairly briefly the two speakers and we'll first hear from Associate Professor Emily O'Gorman. She's an ARC Future Fellow based at the Department of

History and Archaeology at Macquarie University. Her research is situated within environmental history and the interdisciplinary environmental humanities, and it's primarily concerned with contested knowledges within broader cultural framings of authority, expertise and landscapes. Her focus, as many of you will know, is on rivers and wetlands. She's the author of Flood Country an environmental history of the Murray-Darling Basin 2012, and Wetlands in a Dry Land More than Human Histories, there you go. More Than Human Histories of Australia's Murray Darling Basin in 2021. And, I think, reprinted in 2024.
Warwick Anderson: 7:54
Taylor Coyne we'll hear from after Emily. Taylor Coyne's a PhD candidate in Urban and Historical Geography at UNSW here in Sydney. He's also a project officer in the Connection with Country Design team at the Sydney-based practice, Yerrabingin. I'd like to hear more about that at some point. Taylor's research focus is on the history, politics and design of eastern Sydney's urban stormwater infrastructure. In particular, he asks how and why Sydney's waterscapes came to be the way they are today and whose knowledges and experiences have been included or excluded in the way these spaces have been designed, planned, managed and governed. Taylor is working toward addressing how landscape architecture and environmental history might come together to incorporate Sydney's swampy, more-than-human histories.
Emily O'Gorman: 9:03
Hi everyone and thanks so much for the introduction, Warwick. I really appreciate it. Before I go further, I'd just like to acknowledge that we're meeting on the country of Gadigal people and I pay my respects to elders past and present. Thank you all so much for being here tonight and a huge thank you to the organisers, especially Jesse. I really appreciate all the work you've done, not just organising this particular forum but organising this series. And also a big thank you to the History Council of New South Wales and UTS, as well as State Library of New South Wales Library of New South Wales. So I will start by giving a brief overview of the emergence of more- than- human histories as an approach and as a set of ideas as I understand it. So this is my perspective on how it's emerged and the approaches within it, and then I'll give a brief example of how I've used this in my own work examining histories of wetlands in the Murray-Darling Basin.
Emily O'Gorman: 10:03
So this is from my most recent book that Warwick mentioned, which is on sale at the bookshop just outside, very pleased to see that there. So, more- than- human histories in general terms bring approaches in multi-species studies and more- than- human scholarship into a transformative dialogue with environmental history. So it's trying to bring together different groups of scholarship. Environmental history emerged in the 1970s within the discipline of history as a radical new mode of inquiry that aimed to

examine the interaction of people and environments, to reveal new historical narratives in which nature was an active agent. Multispecies studies and more-than- human scholarship are interdisciplinary modes of inquiry that have been consolidating cognate scholarship, emerging from many disciplines over the last decade and a half. I'll spend a bit of time focusing on the latter, newer fields of inquiry rather than environmental history per se.

Emily O'Gorman: 11:09

In broad terms, multi-species and more-than-human scholarship has argued against human exceptionalism and instead aimed to re-situate humans within multiple dynamic relationships, only some of which are human, including with plants, animals, fungi and elements and forces like water, wind and fire. It has developed in opposition to notions that there are fixed and impartial ways of knowing, particularly in the sciences, through the purity of categories like nature within Western traditions. Instead, it has sought to situate particular ontologies within shifting sets of relationships between humans and non-humans, in which power is uneven and agency is manifold. Importantly, these approaches include an attentiveness to multiple human as well as non-human voices and agencies, and examination of racial ideologies, class and gender are central. Indeed, an explicit goal of multispecies studies is drawing attention to heterogeneity in more-than-human worlds. It is about paying attention to differences and the specificity of lived natural cultural entanglements. These approaches are based on notions of co-constitution of humans and non-humans and seek to enact a situated ethics and politics.

Emily O'Gorman: 12:28

Multispecies studies, and more- than- human scholarship, have come to sit within the field of environmental humanities, so there's a bit of nesting happening here. This field has emerged and rapidly grown internationally over the last two decades in response to contemporary ecological challenges such as the climate emergency and mass species extinction. Scholars have argued against the definition of these issues as purely environmental, rather aiming to provide nuanced understandings of significant problems that are inescapably both social and environmental. Environmental humanities has come to be used as a term for grouping together environmental sub-disciplines such as environmental philosophy, environmental anthropology and environmental history, amongst others, and increasingly to describe an interdisciplinary field with its own concepts, shared concepts, concerns and approaches. In the latter sense, the environmental humanities has consolidated emerging interdisciplinary work in many places, including that of the Ecological Humanities Group in Australia, which has some longer roots and a particular history that I won't go into right now.

Emily O'Gorman: 13:40

The relational approaches of multispecies studies and more-than-human scholarship have diverse roots. In general terms, these consolidate work that began to emerge in multiple disciplines from the turn of the 21st century, which gave rise to new sub-disciplines. This included the scholarship of cultural geographers such as Sarah Whatmore and Jamie Lorimer, that helped to form the field of more-than-human geographies. And that of anthropologists like Heather Paxson, Anna Tsing, Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, that laid the foundations for multi-species ethnography. The work of these scholars was already interdisciplinary and built upon the arguments of feminist science and technology studies. Scholars such as Donna Haraway, who advocated for a radical decentering of the human, for the importance of recognizing human co-becoming with many other organisms and forces, and for the need to rethink the relationship between science and society, including situating these and other knowledges. They also engaged with the arguments of science and technology studies scholars such as Bruno Latour, who proposed actor-network theory as a way of examining multiple relationalities. Environmental philosopher Val Plumwood's critiques of dualisms, such as nature and culture, and her repositioning of humans within ecological terms and non-humans within ethical terms have also been taken up within more recent scholarship.

Emily O'Gorman: 15:07

In many ways, all of this work turned anew towards materiality, with growing scholarly attention evident from the early 2000s. In so doing, it turned away from traditional social constructivism as it had emerged, while still recognizing the importance of situating knowledges. Indeed, far from being narrowly focused on materiality, multi-species studies and more-than-human scholarship emphasise the need to consider more-than-human worlds as full of meaning as well as matter, as inescapably cultural and material. It is vital to examine shifting and diverse ways of knowing, including our own as researchers and readers, as these guide actions and, in so doing, help to shape worlds in relation with a wide array of non-humans. An emphasis on co-constitution has meant that some of these scholars have started to rethink histories in more- than-human terms, people outside the discipline of history. This shift included Tsing's examination of the way humans and fungi have shaped each other's histories, including through their entanglement in agriculture, and anthropologist Tess Lea's engagement with mosquitoes as co-authors of the City of Darwin.

Emily O'Gorman: 16:18

Indeed historians have also sought to show the dynamic roles of other organisms, from Alfred Crosby's Ecological Imperialism to Harriet Ritvo's work on animals in Victorian England and the contributors to a more recent collection titled the Historical Animal, who argue for the importance of taking animal perspectives seriously and behaviours seriously, including in the making of films, as not only subjects but co-creators of films.

These works have often sought to examine historical encounters between humans and animals, and this is a point Warwick raised about an emphasis on vertebrates. As such they have not always explicitly aimed to contribute to multi-species and more-than-human scholarship, which has a slightly different emphasis, and this emphasis is on diverse relationships, not just with animals, extending to plants, non-human forces like volcanoes and so on. While more-than-human and multi-species scholars and environmental historians have been slowly edging towards each other, a sustained and transformative dialogue has been somewhat slow to emerge. Some, like environmental historian Greg Mittman, have argued that those in his field have been resistant to embracing relational and diverse ontologies, which is a key aspect of more-than-human approaches. Perhaps this has been a stumbling block. However, there is now a growing body of historical scholarship that is explicitly engaging with the fuller suite of multispecies and more-than-human approaches and environmental history, trying to bring these approaches together to explore the agency of other biota in shaping "human in brackets histories, while also being attentive to shifting and diverse ways of knowing human and beyond.

Emily O'Gorman: 18:15

So I am an environmental historian as well as engaging with the environmental humanities, as Warwick has mentioned in the introduction, and I've used more- than-human approaches in researching and writing a recent book on the history of wetlands in the Murray-Darling Basin, and here's a map of the Murray-Darling Basin. It is, very briefly, a large river system that covers 1, 7th of Australia and my interest in wetlands sort of stem from the fact that wetlands in the region have declined significantly across the 20th century due to diversions for irrigation and drainage for agriculture in this particular region. And that's the Macquarie Marshes, which is the area I'm going to focus on very shortly. And this is another map of the basin which I think is important to show. So you can see here different Aboriginal groups within the basin and just outside it as well. So the short example that I would like to give is from a chapter that centres on Wailwind, aboriginal women's weaving practices and the Macquarie Marshes. Macquarie Marshes is a Ramsar listed wetland of international importance in north central New South Wales, australia where that red dot was. So here, an engagement with contemporary Wayilwin women's practices draws us into a more- than- human history that is often entirely absent from documentary archives formed within British colonial power structures. This chapter developed its analysis from my discussions with Wayilwin woman Danielle Carney-Flakelar pictured here with the yellow backpack with whom I've subsequently collaborated on other projects. So we're sort of in an ongoing conversation that has developed into a collaboration.

Emily O'Gorman: 20:06

Danielle told me that weaving with semi-aquatic reeds and sedges from the marshes is one way that Wayilwin Women continue to connect with country and with multiple generations. Wayilwin Women have used these plants to weave baskets, mats and other items for many generations. Weaving, in Danielle's view, is co-becoming. These connections are shaped by the plants themselves which flourish within particular country. Danielle explained that in the Macquarie marshes there are particular properties of weaving with the sedge from the marsh because you harvest it right, it's right out of the ground, it's green, you weave it and then it dries as it becomes tight on itself and it has its own personality, I suppose. "You know you've got this item here, and its green and lovely, and it becomes." That's a quote from Danielle. The weaver and the plant have determined the new form together, but with a range of other influences, human and non-human, that have shaped the plant and the person.
Emily O'Gorman: 21:11
The importance of the properties of particular plants in shaping woven items have meant that in many places Australian Aboriginal people have encouraged plants to grow in particular ways through burning, which shapes the characteristics of the plant. Cool fires can encourage stronger fibres, which create a different, stronger weave to that of fibres from plants that have not been burnt in this way. Danielle emphasised that for Wayilwin people, weaving cannot be separated out from other aspects of caring for country and there are other knowledges and practices that must be nurtured alongside weaving, like burning, language and medicine. Knowledge exchange within and between different Australian Aboriginal cultures is an important part of fulfilling responsibility in tending country. Sharing knowledge between women, including through and about weaving practices, is particularly important, Danielle noted, because of the cultural knowledge that is specific to women. It also helps to build leadership confidence amongst women.
Emily O'Gorman: 22:12
Accessing parts of the Macquarie Marshes can be difficult, with some parts encompassed within grazing properties and other parts under New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service state government management. In recent years, weaving as a cultural practice has become a way to gain access to wetlands like the Macquarie Marshes, which have been managed as protected conservation areas. Danielle explained that "weaving is a way we open the door to country, to say that we, as Aboriginal people want access for cultural practice. Issues around access to the marshes have been ongoing since British colonisation in the region, spearheaded by pastoralists in the 1830s. By the 1880s the marshes were hemmed by pastoral properties and in 1900, parts of the marshes, totalling 40,000 acres, were declared a game reserve by the New South Wales State Government. Some pastoralists were granted occupier's licence for these marsh blocks, which became concentrated into the

hands of a few people. These gave them government authorization to graze their stock there, predominantly cattle, before the introduction of sheep in 1927. By then, grazing cattle in the wetlands was acknowledged by many to be damaging the vegetation. Large sections of the marshes became fauna reserve in 1955, with many of the birds listed as protected under state acts. Parts of the marshes were listed in the Ramsar Convention in 1986, with the areas extended in 2000 and 2012.

Emily O'Gorman: 23:45

Throughout this period, Wayilwin people's access to and use of the marshes was limited in various ways, compounded by government policies of surveillance and forced removal, a practice that extended from the colonial era well into the 20th century and arguably to today. However, Wayilwin people used a variety of strategies to maintain connections to country, including working on pastoral stations. We might consider contemporary disputes about the management of wetlands as natural cultural places as a continuation of disputes about Aboriginal peoples' legal rights to country. Danielle emphasised that, despite government policies supporting Aboriginal people's access to and use of areas under national parks and wildlife jurisdiction, in her experience access has not always been easy. In her words, in the past it depended on the manager at the park at the time and their attitude as to whether you get access to sedge and other plants out there as well. Her experiences point to ongoing effects of fortress conservation approaches within government agencies rooted in both ideas of wilderness and a range of colonial era legacies that clearly still need to be challenged.

Emily O'Gorman: 25:07

Relationships with landholders, especially graziers whose properties border the marshes, have become important in accessing particular areas, including for ceremonies. She said "we're right in the heart of the marsh, still getting access through just a handshake agreement, and the landholder there who we've had a good long relationship with ensuring that the next generation is connected with responsibility to maintain our connections to country." Well, when many Aboriginal people throughout the Basin continue to exercise their responsibilities to country. Wayilwin and many Aboriginal people throughout the basin continue to exercise their responsibilities to care for country even when access is difficult or near impossible. Country, like weaving, is woven into the world in multiple ways. Danielle explained that "Aboriginal women are still very connected to our roles and responsibilities. This is her words from traditional law and we have to adapt in the role because we can't get on Country. Our purpose is to nurture Country, people and culture."

Emily O'Gorman: 26:02

Being in discussion with Danielle, going to the Macquarie Marshes and researching the history of this wetland draws us into a consideration of the more- than- human histories and futures, not only of wetlands, but also the more- than- human histories of British

colonisation, protected area management and women's past and ongoing connections to Country.
Emily O'Gorman: 26:28
In researching this book about wetlands in the Murray-Darling Basin, I found myself turning towards more- than- human approaches for interdisciplinary methods, including interviews and oral histories, listening to multiple voices, and for examining multiple agencies and understanding and accounting for the diverse ontologies and non-human worlds I was encountering, and also for addressing questions of justice and asymmetrical power relations. I needed more- than- human histories to bring together approaches in environmental history, which is still incredibly valuable, and more- than- human scholarship, which are also incredibly valuable. I'm currently building on this work to develop a more- than- human history of international wetlands conservation post 1945, to examine why wetlands became a focus of international conservation efforts and what some of the consequences have been. But more on that will have to wait for another time. So I'll wrap up there, thank you.
Emily O'Gorman: 27:30
And that's the cover of my book in case you'd like to read it.
Warwick Anderson: 27:35
Thanks very much, Emily. You've more than kept the time. You've come in early, so that's great, Thanks. A lot More time for discussion then. No arthropods in the short version of the talk, but there's plenty of mosquito agency in the book, which I recommend highly. And now we hear from Taylor
Taylor Coyne: 28:04
Thanks, Warwick.
Taylor Coyne: 28:04
Thanks, Emily, that was great. This is what I'm going to be presenting on tonight, but before I begin I'd like to acknowledge country, acknowledge country and the custodians of country here we meet tonight on the unceded lands and waters of the Gadigal people. Respect to elders, past and present, and to any First Nations people here tonight. I honor your connections to your lands and waters. The struggle for Indigenous justice endures here in Sydney and for Indigenous peoples across the seas who all share in the collective fight against the enduring and current impacts of colonisation.
Taylor Coyne: 28:42
My name is Taylor Coyne. I'm an environmental historian, slash historical geographer and critical design theorist - Modes of thinking which thread together geography, history and design, and which ask broadly how have different people in different places shaped and been shaped by different environments at different times? The overarching theme to all of my work is water, in particular, how stormwater infrastructures has emerged in settler colonial cities like Sydney, what political and economic systems were driving this

emergence, which individuals were entangled in these processes and, importantly, how are these infrastructures and these complex socio-ecological spaces being reconceived of today? A large feature of my work is to consider stormwater infrastructures not as politically neutral artefacts but as complex socio-ecological systems situated within messy governance and management structures with contentious design paradigms, shaping their futures. Stormwater infrastructures - Drains, for all intents and purposes - are part of the hydrosocial cycle. These are systems of water which move not simply as aqueous H2O, but water systems which also reflect the relationship between humans and the more- than- human world, a relationship that varies greatly depending on cultural, political and economic context. This interplay of nature, infrastructure and human agency is starkly illustrated in colonial encounters, where different worldviews on the environment were highlighted as novel.

Taylor Coyne: 30:14

To help guide us through how to make sense of these novelties tonight, I'll be sharing this paper in two parts. Part one speaks to the way Sydney's more-than-human environments have been documented by colonial figures. The eel becomes a mascot for this colonial fascination with an apparently bizarre Antipodean nature. Part two then progresses to unpack the broader colonial rationale for why these spaces and these more-than-human inhabitants were treated with such contempt and disgust. What was underpinning the logic for the channelisation of creeks and the draining of swamps? This is concluded by a reflection on what all this might mean for how Sydney's environmental histories and environmental politics can benefit not only from considering but amplifying and celebrating the web of more-than-human life that this city's infrastructures now nurture. Part one: the more-than-human histories of Sydney's silent swampscapes.

Taylor Coyne: 31:06

One of the earliest one of the colony's earliest documentations of more-than-human life was captured by George B Worgen in his 1788 account of early colonial Sydney. Here the lived experiences with a diverse, more-than-human world, as seen through Worgen's interaction with Gadigal people and Gadigal animals, becomes a prominent feature. Worgen recalled his time in Sydney in a journal of a First Fleet surgeon. In his recollection he provides a detailed description of the search for food in the emerging colony. In doing so he provides a rich overview of the more- than- human inhabitants who were present at that time. He writes "I was one day on a shooting excursion and fell in with a tribe of the natives. While I was with them, a crow settled in a tree that was within shot. On leveling my gun at it, one of the natives ran up to me in a hurry, clapped his hand over the muzzle of the piece and cried out several times bow, bow, bow, bow, meaning, as I conjunctured that I was not to kill it, for they had seen the effects of the

gun, I complied with his request and laughed off the offence I had seemingly given, at which he laughed likewise and seemed mightily pleased.
Taylor Coyne: 32:13
Worgan continues, "of reptiles here are snakes, scorpions, centipedes, lizards and goannas. The insects which prove troublesome are mosquitoes, sandflies and red and black ants. Here are spiders of various kinds, butterflies and several sorts of beetles, and some few bees have been seen. He then turns his gaze underwater. The harbours of this coast are well stocked with a variety of fish, and we have never sat down to dinner without a dish of one kind upon the other Upon the table since our arrival here. Very often the boat is so successful as to catch enough for the whole ship's crew, and two or three times we have been able to supply the officer's table on shore.
Taylor Coyne: 32:51
But since the approach of the winter the fish have become scarce. Perhaps they go northward as the cool weather comes on and return to the southward with the summer. Oysters, cockles and mussels are to be got here for little trouble, and one very small lobster has been caught and wonderful to tell it was red. Enormously large sharks are very numerous in the harbours and very destructive to other fish as well as to our lines and hooks." Wogan's reflections of the abundant more-than-human life in Sydney illuminate a fascination with their abundance and apparent peculiarity, where references to animals that make sense as being from home sharks and lobsters, ants and butterflies allude to an attempt to provide a rational reference for how to comprehend this environment. The story of the Crow highlights that there is a misunderstanding of the kinds of relationality which Gadigal people had with their more-than-human kin. Wogan's description of Gadigal animals is, all things considered, quite substantial, but it is clearly not exhaustive and doesn't come close to acknowledging the true diversity, abundance and wonder of the animals here.
Taylor Coyne: 33:56
While the fish get a pronounced description in Wogan's writing, even these aren't encompassing, and there is one particular fish species that is pressingly absent from his list: the eel. The eel is also absent from countless other records of Gadigal animals by colonial explorers and people here. What contentious, extensive description of New South Wales fauna. For example, in his December 1790 entry from A Complete Account of the Settlement of Port Jackson, goes into extraordinary detail on the region's more-than- human beings. Indeed, he writes four immense paragraphs on the kangaroo, one entire paragraph dedicated to methods for killing them. There simply isn't enough time to read this account in full, but from this specific recollection I've highlighted here it speaks to the very real value attributed to these beings food. For me, though, it is the animals not mentioned in these writings which speak volumes. As someone quite infatuated with the eel, its absence in these early accounts is pressing. Even Governor

Arthur Phillip recalls some animals in his writings, but these focus mostly on birds, and where fish are mentioned, the sharks take precedent and there is no mention of the eel. But where all these figures mentioned so far almost seemingly purposefully, omit the eel.

Taylor Coyne: 35:18

Other writers in Sydney's early colonial environments do mention them, if only briefly. In Appendix 4, mode of Living, from David Collins, an account of the early colony of New South Wales, volume 1, published in 1798, there is one mention of the eels, this time in the context of Indigenous people living near the Darabin-Hawkesbury River. "They Aboriginal people, collins writes resort at a certain time of the year, the month of April, to the lagoons where they subsist on eels which they procure by laying hollow pieces of timber in the water into which the eels creep and are easily taken. A short and to the point recollection how eels are being woven into Indigenous food cultures.

Taylor Coyne: 35:49

Beyond writing, there are two major illustrations of Sydney's eels which I've been able to locate in the archives this painting by Joseph Lycett showing Aboriginal men spearing an eel on the shores of the Daraboon, and this illustration from seaman and artist George Rapier in the late 18th century, showing what I will call an attempt to illustrate the eel. But both Collins' account and Rapier's illustration lack nuance and there is a lack of ecological situatedness and sociocultural context, something that has been substantially addressed in the work of a writer who came much later, Obed West. In the interest of time and overwhelm. I won't read this aloud either, but there are key phrases from West's text which are relevant. Importantly, there is a firm acknowledgement of a specific locale in his writing. This is Boxley's Lagoon, a place which has largely been silenced from Sydney's contemporary urban geography, but a place that has much to offer to those attuned to environmental transformations and those concerned with interpreting and representing the transformations of these places to the public.

Taylor Coyne: 36:53

In 1883, Obed West penned this article in the Sydney Morning Herald, recollecting on his youth in Sydney. In this particular piece, he recalls the environments across Redfern and Surrey Hills and the large swamp which was known as Boxley's Lagoon, the location of which has been articulated from West's recount by a horse race as being near Mount Carmel and between Redfern Street and George and Pitt Streets. As a historical geographer, my obsession with maps is extreme. This map from between 1820 and 1840 shows the northern section of a series of swampscapes. By working with West's article as a reference point, these environments begin to make sense to us. Many of the dry areas to the south were set aside for settlers, their names stamped onto parcels of land shown here. Others, like Sydney Common, were set aside for public use. We now know Sydney Common by an entirely different name. Centennial Park. West of Sydney

Common and north of Mount Lachlan is an unnamed semi-aqueous waterscape. Using West's street name cross references, we can articulate Boxley's Lagoon as being here - what is now Redfern Oval and Redfern PCYC. The historical swamp that West was noting was an incredibly rich, ecologically rich swamp. Birds of all kinds as well as small mammals and a variety of plants, including a mammoth nine foot diameter black butt tree. This was a verdant and abundant environment full of all kinds of more- than-human life, and in addition there was, of course, the eels.

Taylor Coyne: 38:32

Sydney's eels move through much of the waterscapes across what we now call Sydney and West's. Clear articulation of their presence here at Boxleys Lagoon is quite expected from those of us who know and have situated the lagoon amongst other swampscapes of Sydney's. Boxleys Lagoon is part of the wider network of swamps, marshes, lagoons, creeks, rivers and streams which stretch out from the ridgelines around Surrey Hills, paddington, waverley and Randwick down to Botany Bay. At this point I acknowledge that my work on these swampscapes would not be made possible without the work of former State Library of New South Wales research fellow, Rebecca Hamilton. For Boxley's Lagoon, it now no longer sings with frogs and water birds, save the ibis, apart from when heavy Sydney rains in undate the sports fields. The waters here have been silenced, but, like all historical waterscapes that no longer speak, if you go there and listen deeply, listen, water life and the eels can be heard. Today, Sydney's eels move mostly under our feet, in drains and pipes across the city. So it makes sense then, that they remain as a somewhat separate part of our daily life.

Taylor Coyne: 39:36

But the eel story is one which is increasingly becoming more and more sought out and more and more well known. Sydney's native eels, the short and long fin eel, are cataridormous, meaning they spend most of their lives in fresh water but migrate to the ocean to spawn. Their life cycle is extraordinary. After spending up to 30 years in fresh, sweet and bitter brackish waters of swamps, creeks and rivers, they embark on their journey into saltwater over 2,000 kilometres north to the Coral Sea, where they reproduce and die. The larvae, carried by ocean currents, eventually return to the same waterscapes as their parents to begin the cycle anew.

Taylor Coyne: 40:18

The journey of the eels is indeed captivating. It marvels and astounds to consider that these slippery little fish are able to travel such immense distances. But this astonishment at the eels isn't a new phenomenon. Countless records from newspapers across the 19th and 20th century profess wonder at the eel. The history of eel astonishment is actually something which dates back millennia. Early Greek philosophers pondered not only of the journey of the eel to their breeding spot, but also of their breeding functions more broadly. The attempt to articulate this breeding

behavior, along with many other eel oddities, is part of the work being done by Alexis Farr at University of Wollongong. Her work unravels what has turned into a quite violent scientific obsession with the eel dissecting, injecting, isolating, tormenting and, for all intents and purposes, torturing the eel, all in the name of scientific inquiry. So, while the eel represents tenacity and adaptation, it has become a body to be viewed as objective and measurable.

Taylor Coyne: 41:16

The eel is emblematic of the colonial desire to locate and control In a lingering legacy of colonization. The early accounts of attempting to make sense and locate the animals here have continued to be manifest in contemporary science's tenacious resolve to make sense and locate the eel. This remarkable migratory journey of the eel speaks not only to the resilience of the eel but to the interconnectedness of land and sea, of river systems and oceanic currents, a connectivity that the colonial project sought, often violently, to sever. And so, paradoxically, by draining wetlands, redirecting watercourses and introducing pollutants into the river systems, colonial authorities disrupted these intricate socio-ecological relationships, rendering waterscapes almost uninhabitable and driving many species, including the eel, into being even more elusive. Part 2. Miasma Mania.

Taylor Coyne: 42:10

In Sydney's swampy environments, the eel has become entangled with the broader structures of control and manipulation that waters also have been. Whether dammed for the creation of milling industries, diverted for flood protection or drained for sanitisation ambitions. Swamp waters have been the source of disdain and malice since the very beginning of the colony. In a dispatch sent to the Lord Sydney dated May 15th 1788, governor Arthur Philip recalls the situation which led him to relocate the fleet from Botany Bay to Sydney Cove, a story which I'm sure many of you are familiar with. He writes when I considered Botany Bay being so very open and the probability of the swamps rendering the most illegible situation unhealthy, I judged it advisable to examine Port Jackson. When Philip did eventually come to Port Jackson, he noted, quote nothing can more fully point out the great improvement which may be made by the industry of a civilized people in this country than the circumstances of the small streams which descend into Port Jackson. They all proceed from swamps produced by the stagnation of water after rising from the springs. When the obstacles which impede their course can be removed and free channels opened through which they may flow, the adjacent ground will gradually be drained and the streams themselves will become more useful. At the same time, habitable and salubrious situations will be gained in places where at present perpetual damp prevails and the air itself appears to stagnate.

Taylor Coyne: 43:36

But what was it exactly that repulsed Philip so much? The conceptualisation of dirty swamps has become a hallmark of colonial ventures across the British Empire, from the backwaters of Mumbai, the bogs of Ireland, the southern jungles of Malaysia through to the dank forests of Canada. These hybrid, semi-aqueous, semi-terrestrial environments have been embroiled in vitriol and contempt for centuries. And where might much of this disdain have come from? Well, like most things imperial, it is the Romans, first century AD.

Taylor Coyne: 44:08

Vitruvius, the Roman architect and engineer, wrote for when the morning breezes blow toward the town at sunrise, if they bring with them mist from marshes and, mingled with the mist, the poisonous breath of creatures of the marshes to be wafted into the bodies of the inhabitants, they will make the site unhealthy. Miasma Vitruvius is referring to miasma. An unpleasant or unhealthy smell or vapour was considered the cause of diseases like malaria, typhoid and diphtheria. The word malaria, for example, is a composite word which comes from the medieval Italian for bad mal and air area, which is an acknowledgement of the kind of swampy settings around the Italian peninsula which experienced early cases of the disease. And while the British preoccupation with miasmic environments came from the Romans, the Romans were also drawing on the ancient Greeks, like Hippocrates, who described diseases like marsh fever, the imperial legacy of swampy environments as dangerous, unproductive and for lack of a better word disgusting has been entangled in these historical webs. As such, the removal of swamps and marshes was seen as crucial to ensuring the health of settlements across a whole range of empires, including the British Empire.

Taylor Coyne: 45:16

Here in Australia, Emily O'Gorman notes that in other settlements, like in Toowoomba, Queensland quote "people's views of swamps as miasmic wastelands seems to have meant that they were inclined to use them to dispose of unwanted matters which exacerbated their miasmic qualities. End quote Sydney's lagoons and swamps like Boxley's Lagoon in Redfern, were perceived of as miasmic, and so people treated them as waste disposal sites, in a positive feedback cycle of sorts, because these swamps were conceived of as dirty. When the swamps showed signs of degradation, they became treated as places of refuse, often for waste like animal carcasses and discarded industrial material, which was most likely the actual cause of the diseases. Because of this conflation, the more than human beings which inhabited these spaces became relegated to equally contemptuous status. Eels and mosquitoes, yes, but also bats, lizards, frogs, spiders and many others. The environments of these critters became utterly transformed the creeks into drains and swamps, and the swamps most often into sports fields and parks. This was the emergence of the sanitary city in every way, for at the same time as there was this environmental cleansing taking place,

societal shifts were pushing towards even greater conservatism and a want by many officials to rid the city of all manner of untoward characters In challenging colonial contempt for swamp creatures.

Taylor Coyne: 46:42

In Sydney, we are not merely revisiting the past. We are dismantling a destructive legacy that saw nature as something to be tamed, controlled and exploited. These critiques force us to confront how colonial ideologies degraded environments, silenced indigenous knowledges and dismissed the value of creatures vital to the web of life. Today, as we face a world in ecological crisis, this reflection compels us to reimagine our relationship with the natural world, not as conquerors but as custodians. By reclaiming the significance of these so-called undesirable spaces and undesirable species, we open ourselves to new possibilities for ecological restoration, environmental justice and a future where human and non-human life thrives in harmony.

Taylor Coyne: 47:25

While there are efforts to naturalise urban stormwater infrastructures across cities around the world, we most likely cannot reproduce historical environments that once existed in Sydney prior to invasion in full. The systems of climate, ecology, geomorphology and hydrology have changed so much that attempting to insert singular species back into this setting or reorienting waterscapes back to their historical flows would most probably result in failure. Now don't get me wrong. Work like what's being done here in Brisbane or Sydney's Johnson's Creek are magnificent steps in the right direction. But with the ability to craft a built environment that draws on historically contextual reference points from culture and not just ecology, we can create more meaningful, ecologically and socially regenerative systems.

Taylor Coyne: 48:10

Design, especially designing with country, has the power to shape how stories are told, whose stories and with what narratives. Considering more than human histories can be a generative step in reconceptualizing the relationship between designers and historians, and how these stories are told can be remarkably innovative and profoundly powerful. These stories are told can be remarkably innovative and profoundly powerful. Whatever work happens, it should be guided by confronting and actively dismantling the damaging colonial stories that have been causing so much hurt to so many lives, human and more than human and, in their place, tell stories which highlight tenacity and celebrate the splendour of our life, which flourishes here in Sydney, this swampy city. Thank you.

Jesse Adams Stein: 49:01

I'll just close off tonight's event with a few of the acknowledgements and thank yous in relation to History Now, as well as thanking our speakers and chair. First of all, thank you to the History Council team, none of whom are here right now, but they've all helped

tremendously previously Catherine Shirley, Amanda Wells and Lauren Chater, as well as to the History Council's executive committee. Thank you also to the State Library of New South Wales, in particular the events team, Callum MacLean and Lydia Tasker, and the Australian Centre for Public History at UTS History Council. As always, we want to acknowledge our cultural partners, which you can see listed here, including our major funder, new South Wales Government, via Create New South Wales.

Jesse Adams Stein: 49:43

And finally, I just wanted to preview the next history now, the final one for the year, which is next month, the 6th of November, wednesday 5pm in this space the Ethics of Crime Histories with Meg Foster, Rachel Franks and chaired by Nerida Campbell. Again, it's free and you can register for it on the State Library's What's On page. Thank you all for being such a wonderful, attentive audience. Really enjoyed it, and thank you once again to our speakers. Thank you.