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Review of Shared Spaces and Divided Places: Material Dimensions of Gender Relations and the American Historical Landscape.

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Deborah L. Rotman and Ellen-Rose Savulis have an impressive collection of essays that explore the “materiality and spatiality of gender relations” (p. 1). This collection began as a conference workshop and is targeted primarily to scholars in archaeology—which, according to the editors, is a discipline that lags behind others in incorporating feminist scholarship. They argue convincingly that landscape can and should be understood broadly. Most critically, the collection demonstrates the degree to which gender is a critical factor in structuring material landscapes and the built environment. Although this central point may not strike American historians as especially novel, there is nonetheless much of value in this collection for historians—especially in the best of the essays, such as those documenting how gender mattered in structuring slave plantations, religious communities, and the conservation projects of the New Deal.

Indeed, it is precisely when the essayists interrogate specific landscapes that they offer much to nuance current scholarly debate and also encourage historians to dig (literally) into the landscape in the course of their own research. For example, Amy Young, in “Gender and Landscape: A View from the Plantation Slave Community,” demonstrates how male and female slaves constructed the material world of the plantation in accordance with their gender identities and in a manner that allowed them to have some amount of control over their everyday lives. Her well-drawn argument not only deepens our understanding of the slave experience but also underscores the importance of thinking about the spatial as well as the social, economic, and political contexts of slavery.

In Kenneth Lewis’s study of a tinworker’s shop, we get an even sharper portrait of the benefits of studying the landscape closely. In his work with the Camden Historic Commission, Lewis encountered such a remarkably complete archaeological deposit of an eighteenth-century tinworker that he wondered how and why the site remained arrayed much as it had been originally for nearly two hundred years. In his search for the answer, Lewis discovered the degree to which gender ideology mattered. It turns out that, when the tinworker’s widow remarried, South Carolina law stipulated that the shop was her property and thus outside the second husband’s control. Thus, Lewis suggests that the particular patterns of gender ideology that had been codified into South Carolina law, as well as benign neglect, contributed to the shop being intact after so many years. Once again, gender mattered in giving structure to the landscape.

The collection’s contributions are compromised only by a presentational style that is sometimes too sterile and scientific and by a tendency for individual essayists to overreach in making their arguments. Because it was prepared for an audience of archaeologists, the format of the essays is scientific and can be somewhat jarring (to the historian accustomed to narrative), which interrupts other-
wise well-written arguments. Also, a few of the essays seem so focused on arguing that gender matters that their arguments appear to be based more in cultural theory than in the evidentiary and/or material record. Neither of these criticisms, however, detracts much from the effectiveness of the collection, which hammers home the degree to which gender has shaped the physical landscape.

*Shared Spaces and Divided Places* has much to recommend it, especially for public historians who ply their craft in the context of rich material landscapes. At the same time, this collection reminds American historians just how well the physical landscape lends itself to serious scholarly interrogation. Not only can we recover lost worlds, but also in uncovering layers of historical experience we find a rich source of evidence that enriches our interpretive efforts.

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