

The Problem with ‘Post-’

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What is the ‘new normal’? What does it mean to live in the world ‘post-Covid’? These are not new questions; they are questions that have been asked—sometimes hopefully, sometimes in mourning—since 11 March 2020 when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 to be a pandemic. In characterising Covid-19 as a global pandemic WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus made the following remarks: ‘Pandemic is not a word to use lightly or carelessly. It’s a word that, if misused, can cause unreasonable fear, or unjustifiable acceptance that the fight is over, leading to unnecessary suffering and death’.¹ Words, as Ghebreyesus’s statement signals, shape our orientation within the historical event. To use ‘pandemic’ (rather than, say, epidemic or public health emergency) instills particular moods, behaviours, and political, social and cultural responses. Over the past eight months, as this issue has come together, the language around Covid-19 has shifted. We are now ostensibly living in a ‘post-Covid’ world despite case numbers placing pressure on healthcare systems, numbers of fatalities continuing to climb, the emergence of new variants and the social, economic and political impacts of the pandemic being far from over. Compounding this sense of being ‘after’ Covid is the political rhetoric around the pandemic: Australia’s political leadership in 2022 has presented a narrative of Covid-19 that lives ‘in the past tense’.² In this context, we highlight Ghebreyesus’s words from what seems like a long time ago at the outset of this issue for several reasons. First, because the questions of living in a ‘post-Covid’ world are ongoing, and will continue for many years to come, and historians—particularly feminist historians—must address these questions. Secondly,

1 Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, ‘WHO Director-General’s opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19—11 March 2020’, *World Health Organization*, 11 March 2020, [who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020](https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020).

2 Michael Toole and Brendan Crabb, ‘Australia’s response to COVID in the first two years was one of the best in the world. Why do we rank so poorly now?’ *Conversation*, 28 July 2022, theconversation.com/australias-response-to-covid-in-the-first-2-years-was-one-of-the-best-in-the-world-why-do-we-rank-so-poorly-now-187606.

because the ubiquity of the conversation of what the 'post-Covid' world will look like evokes long discussions from scholars about the prefix 'post-' in political rhetoric.

To describe something as being 'post-' implies that 'we' (a pronoun that brings with it its own questions and uncertainties) have *moved past the originating events*. But, as has been evidenced over and over again, rarely is this the case. Much like Ghebreyesus's caution around the term 'pandemic', the prefix 'post-' is not to be used lightly or carelessly. Decolonial and anti-racist scholars have demonstrated that the application of 'post-' to 'colonialism' has the potential to offer the comfortable lie to the coloniser that colonialism is finished, a product of the past, something that has been moved beyond and nullified (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has even said in interviews, 'I find the word postcolonialism just totally bogus').³ This is particularly urgent for researchers in so-called Australia, where the academy and the university as institutions are built on unceded Aboriginal land; to claim to be 'post' colonisation implies that these structures of domination and power have ended when that is anything but the case. Feminist researchers in fact need to be more attentive to the 'colonial project of gender', to use Professor Sandy O'Sullivan's phrase, wherein binary gender norms are instituted as an ongoing feature of the colonial project.⁴ Postfeminist sensibilities offer a similar avenue through which (some) feminist ideas are imbricated into mainstream culture and simultaneously critiqued, rejected and/or commodified.⁵ What the 'post-' signifies is not, as sometimes seems more comfortable to the privileged and powerful, the quiet acceptance of living 'after the problem' but is, in fact, being *in* the problem itself. To live in the 'post-Covid' world is to live in the Covid world. This issue, despite the varied nature of the scholarship and reflections contained within, is a product of the Covid world.

3 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Robert Young, 'Neocolonialism and the secret agent of knowledge', *Oxford Literary Review* 13, no. 1/2 (1991): 224.

4 Sandy O'Sullivan, 'The colonial project of gender (and everything else)', *Genealogy* 5, no. 67 (2021): 1–9. Professor O'Sullivan also spoke on this in their keynote speech, 'No cession: Rendering the colonial project of gender' at the September 2021 *Lilith* symposium, *Gender in Catastrophic Times*.

5 Rosalind Gill, 'Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): 162–63. This understanding of postfeminism has also been nuanced and given regional, historical and cultural context in Margaret Henderson and Anthea Taylor's recent book *Postfeminism in Context: Women, Australian Popular Culture, and the Unsettling of Postfeminism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

The articles in this issue respond to the urgent nature of feminist research in the Covid world. Commonalities emerge across all of the articles in their shared emphasis on intersectional feminist historical research that breaks down assumptions about the universality of gendered experiences. The articles cover feminist vegetarian activism in Victorian England; the lives of Japanese businesswomen in northern Queensland before 1941; negotiations of gender among female combatants in Tigray, Ethiopia; and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on women. Taken together, these articles demonstrate the fallibility of the notion of history being a narrative of linear progress, and urge against political complacency; against, to return to Ghebreyesus's words, the 'unjustifiable acceptance that the fight is over'.⁶ Each of the four articles draws upon new sources and interpretations that shed light on the varied experiences of women within and beyond Australia, often challenging established norms or assumptions in the process.

In 'Vegetarians, vivisection and violationism', Ruby Ekkel explores the centrality of vegetarianism to noted Victorian activist Anna Kingsford's activities and lived experience. In this article, Ekkel argues that while Kingsford's vegetarianism has often been dismissed as trivial or 'kooky', Kingsford's vegetarian beliefs were foundational to her ideas about animal protection, to her relationship with the antivivisectionist movement and to her commitment to women's emancipation. Shifting from Victorian England to interwar northern Queensland, Tianna Killoran's article 'Sex, soap and silk' draws on newly accessible sources to move beyond traditional narratives that characterise Japanese women in this region as impoverished sex workers. She instead considers their entrepreneurial activities both within and outside the sex industry, revealing a dynamic landscape of business activity among this community. Both Ekkel and Killoran offer new perspectives on these women, challenging the gendered stereotypes that have pervaded much of the historiography on their lives and work.

The final two articles in this issue are drawn from papers presented at the 2021 *Lilith* Symposium. Organised around the theme 'gender in catastrophic times', the symposium asked speakers to consider the ways gender has historically been (and continues to be) mediated *through* and *by* catastrophe. Participants were encouraged to interpret the theme of

6 Ghebreyesus, 'WHO Director-General's opening remarks'.

catastrophe broadly; papers covered topics from warfare to the climate crisis, from nuclear testing to economic recession, from pandemics to political and social activism. The diverse ways in which speakers responded to the symposium theme are demonstrated in the two articles. In ‘A soldier and a woman’, Francesca Baldwin examines how female combatants in Tigray, Ethiopia, negotiated the connections and collisions between soldiering and womanhood during and after the 1974–91 civil war. Baldwin argues that women carefully negotiated their gender performances during the conflict and recognises the long-term impact of participation in the war on combatant women’s lives and life trajectories. The article also reflects on the experience of undertaking oral histories during dual crises: the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing conflict in Tigray. Finally, Petra Brown and Tamara Kayali Browne’s article explores how the individualistic/atomistic model of autonomy in responses to Covid-19 disproportionately disadvantages women. Comparing the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic to historical pandemics, they argue that the concept of individualistic autonomy corresponds to an outdated and patriarchal mode of the social contract that emerged in the seventeenth century, and propose an alternative model of ‘relational autonomy’ for the ‘post-Covid’ world.

Like many other scholarly journals—particularly those that focus on feminist research and history, publish work primarily from women, transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming scholars, and promote voices from early career researchers and postgraduate candidates—*Lilith* saw a reduction in submissions over 2021–22.⁷ As with every other aspect of the pandemic, the effects of Covid-19 have been felt more by already marginalised people and communities.⁸ Living in the Covid world has led the Editorial Collective to find new ways to build feminist research communities and to reflect on feminist praxis in catastrophic times. In this issue, consequently, we reached out to feminist researchers across Australia to invite reflective essays on the question ‘what does it mean to do feminism in 2022?’ The variety of responses speaks to the vibrant feminist research fields across Australia.

7 Flaminio Squazzoni et al., ‘Gender gap in journal submissions and peer review during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. A study on 2329 Elsevier journals’, *PLOS ONE* 16, no. 10 (2021): 1–2.

8 Neeta Kantamneni, ‘The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on marginalized populations in the United States: A research agenda’, *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 119 (2020), doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2020.103439.

These essays reveal the political power of feminist historymaking. Indeed, as Ann Curthoys argues in her essay, feminist history is itself a form of activism. Curthoys points to the disturbing similarities between our past and present, as she, Catherine Kevin and Zora Simic research the history of domestic violence in Australia, finding echoes of our current concerns nearly 200 years ago. Ann McGrath also reflects on the project of feminist history, imploring feminist historians to support and sustain one another and to prioritise First Nations women's knowledge, concerns and understandings of deep time. McGrath describes her feminist heroines—some mythological, some current or past colleagues, all inspirational—and ends with a call to consider hope as the driver of feminist history. Both Curthoys and McGrath focus on how we can ensure our work as feminist historians is both insightful and impactful in the present.

Other essayists examine how our documentation of, and interactions with, feminist history can influence current pushes for change. Janet Ramsay (writing on behalf of the Jessie Street National Women's Library) emphasises the integral role of memory to the feminist project, especially when feminism itself is constantly in flux. Noting both recent achievements and setbacks, Ramsay urges us to remember our feminist past, lest we 'go on reinventing wheels or lose it all'.⁹ Similarly, Sharon Crozier-De Rosa discusses the challenge of building on earlier feminist activism, especially when historical research into feminism remains underfunded. Crozier-De Rosa encourages readers to take inspiration from the past, yet to do so without sanitising it; in other words, to view the past as—much like the present day—a complicated terrain characterised by both conflict and unity. These authors argue that we can and should preserve feminist history without treating it as a story of linear progress, particularly when the project of feminist activism is so far from over.

Yet the feminist historian's role in this activism is less than straightforward, as essays by Catherine Kevin, Madeleine Seys and Zora Simic suggest. Kevin documents the hard-won gains of the South Australian Abortion Action Coalition during the Covid-19 pandemic. Like Ramsay, she reminds us to not take abortion policy reform for granted, especially in light of the recent overruling of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States. Seys explores the subversive power of needlework and handmaking, activities traditionally associated with women and therefore dismissed as ephemeral

9 Janet Ramsay, 'The power of memory for feminism', *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*, no. 28 (2022).

and unable to comment on the human condition. Seys calls our attention to the hidden histories of storytelling and activism associated with these practices. She highlights how she and others have turned to needle and thread to create community, live sustainably and enact the feminist project, especially during the pandemic. Zora Simic complicates our understandings of the public duties of feminist historians, recounting her conflicted feelings as the *Depp v. Heard* trial took the media by storm. Her reflections on how future feminists may analyse this trial and its consequences for victims of domestic violence recall Crozier-De Rosa's call to eschew narratives of progress when analysing the past.

Finally, Jordana Silverstein and Yves Rees push the boundaries of what 'doing feminism' entails in 2022. Silverstein considers whether the feminist movement should remain at the centre of our social justice work, especially when it continues to prioritise white subjects to the detriment of First Nations women. Instead, Silverstein encourages us to decolonise our practices. As part of her own anti-colonial thinking, she aims 'to enact a form of Jewishness ... that is beautiful and imaginative'.¹⁰ Rees argues that recent debates about the place of trans women in the feminist project are a 'red herring' and that trans inclusion in the movement is both logical and long existent. They redirect our attention to the productive challenge posed by transness to feminism, as it encourages us to dismantle the gender binary. Doing so can weaken patriarchal notions of masculine superiority, aid in decolonial thinking and lead to liberation from restrictive gender roles. Silverstein's and Rees's essays remind feminist historians to look not just to the past but to the future of our movement, and to think about whether and how it can best serve all marginalised peoples.

The vibrancy and urgency of contemporary feminist historical research is also demonstrated in this issue through the range of conference, monograph and book reviews, covering the Australian Historical Association's (AHA) 2022 conference, radio broadcasting, anti-war and anti-nuclear activism and the lasting physical and psychological impacts of sexual assault and bodily trauma. *Lilith* Editorial Collective member Bridget Andresen's review of the AHA's 2022 conference invites consideration of the urgency of feminist historical research in the 'post-Covid' world. Reflecting on the theme of the conference, 'Urgent Histories', Andresen examines the ways that feminist research presented at the conference has clear

10 Jordana Silverstein, 'Solidarity and justice: What does it mean to do feminism in the year 2022?' *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*, no. 28 (2022).

resonance with contemporary catastrophes, with bodily autonomy and consent at the forefront of everyone's minds in the wake of the repeal of *Roe v. Wade* days beforehand. The social media conversations during and after the conference as more and more people tested positive for Covid-19 reinforced the nature of the 'post-' prefix actually indicating being *in* the problem.

The book reviews in this issue continue the consideration of the contemporary feminist history landscape. Nicola Ritchie reviews Carole Woods's *Vera Deakin and the Red Cross*, shining light on Vera Deakin's life and the issues that come with writing about a female public figure. Belinda Eslick's review of Catherine Fisher's *Sound Citizens* explores how Fisher defends the place of women's voices on Australian radio, examining how female broadcasters used their position to challenge gender norms and agitate for social change. Emma Carson's review of Carolyn Collins's *Save Our Sons* shows how Collins highlights the heterogeneity of the activist groups under the Save Our Sons banner nationally, and sheds light on the often overlooked anti-war activism of Australian mothers throughout the Vietnam War. Jessica Urwin reviews Ray Acheson's *Banning the Bomb, Smashing the Patriarchy*, which examines the role of feminist activism in the international campaign to abolish nuclear weapons. Finally, Zoe Smith's review of Lucia Osborne-Crowley's *My Body Keeps Your Secrets* discusses the impact of oppressive, patriarchal society on female and non-binary bodies, and the ways persistent trauma can manifest as both psychological and physical scars. Each of the books reviewed demonstrate once again the fallibility of linear narratives of progress, and unpack the often unrecognised and gendered work that goes into enacting and maintaining change.

In a recent piece for the *Conversation*, historian Frank Bongiorno asked 'Do we care enough about COVID?'¹¹ That is another of the urgent questions that historians will be asking for many years. What this issue of *Lilith* demonstrates is that feminist researchers, scholars, historians and activists *do* care and will continue to care about what it means to live through and after catastrophe. To return one final time to Ghebreyesus's words, 'There's been so much attention on one word [pandemic]. Let me give you some other words that matter much more, and that are much more actionable. Prevention. Preparedness. Public health. Political leadership.

11 Frank Bongiorno, 'Do we care enough about COVID?', *Conversation*, 26 July 2022, theconversation.com/do-we-care-enough-about-covid-187356.

And most of all, people. We're in this together, to do the right things with calm and protect the citizens of the world. It's doable'.¹² There has been so much attention on one prefix, 'post-'. Rather than an insistence on living in a post-Covid world, what this issue offers instead are considerations of living *through* the Covid world, and the ways that attentive feminist historians are reacting in the increasingly urgent present.

12 Ghebreyesus, 'WHO Director-General's opening remarks'.

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