

## Grossman, Sara, *Immeasurable weather: Meteorological data and settler colonialism from 1820 to Hurricane Sandy*

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## Book Reviews

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Sara Grossman's latest book examines the history of the production of knowledge about weather in the United States. The author critically assesses data gathering and quantification practices and places them within a larger project of settler colonialism – 'In quantifying the weather, settler science measured its way out of reciprocal relation' (p. 165). Grossman steers the reader through two mesmerising yet destructive centuries of 'settler world-building' (p. 3) that have fundamentally changed how people approach and relate to nature. Grossman makes a convincing case for understanding weather scientism as a manifestation of settler logics and, specifically, of categorical white male dominance, of male policing and male networks. In uncovering these histories, Grossman seeks to encourage a different way of imagining the nonhuman world and to seriously account for indigenous participation and knowledge production.

Grossman's book – presented as a 'sociocultural history of environmental data' (p.12) – fits very well in the sub-disciplines of the history of science and international political sociology. The writing is clear, dynamic, poetic and personal. If settlers in times past created data archives to glorify a nation, the author of *Immeasurable weather* revisits these same archives judiciously in order to problematise the scale of the technological conquest and to unpack the mechanisms and rationales propelling the exploitative knowledge of the biosphere. Grossman fills her writing with real people. She takes great care to present them – their names, their professional activities, the correspondence they exchanged with institutions, their trials and errors and personal aspirations. Many of the participating settlers were genuinely devoted to everyday science.


Professors S. Phinney and X. Haywood befriend the reader in chapter one, where they are introduced to early nineteenth century US weather science culture based on numericity, data visualisation, systemic observations and generalisable rules. Anna Bowen – a female member of the Smithsonian Meteorological Project – gives an auspicious start to chapter two. The female observer's participation in the mid-nineteenth century professionalising scientific community was not deemed as dependable, received much less support and often did not get credit at all. Grossman argues, meteorological data is 'a deeply sensorial, body-anchored process' (p.60), but 'a reliable account would be precisely an account felt and understood by the white male body' (p.67). Grossman concedes that there was some swing in the institutional preference for quantifiable weather information, but the male body was the idealised meteorological instrument and the arbiter of scientific data.

Chapter three investigates kite-flying, 'an emerging technology and a boy's toy' (p.88) of the late nineteenth century, explaining the story of the quantification

of the air and illustrating the problematic aspects of a feverish data-centric culture that strove to know the sky and claim control over it. Towards chapter four, the author probes early twentieth-century crises to make a compelling case for why instrumentalisation and excessive preoccupation with precision was doomed. The Dust Bowl caused havoc. Dust was everywhere, but 'dust was categorically messy' (p.129). It was then that the scientists realised the futility of separating quantitative data from qualitative descriptions, for the weather mixed everything up and obliged people to think relationally.

In the fifth chapter, *Immeasurable Weather* examines late twentieth-century mass media weather data visualisations. This part is crucial to Grossman's critique of the data objectivity frenzy that gave rise to 'useless data' or 'bad data' or 'data on the edge' (p.132). The reductionist approach to dealing with unclassifiable information quickly spread from texts to visuals. Grossman raises important questions about visual weather knowledge. She aptly uses Hurricane Sandy to study the power of visual narration. She unapologetically asserts that people consume visuals and become submerged by them. The book makes the critical point that the habitual seeing of superimposed visuals obscures the historical fact of settler colonialism and perpetuates human distancing from the environment and denial of responsibility towards the other-than-human world. It is clear from reading the book that the affective dis/connections in environmental imaging and imagining have been neglected. Advanced scanning technologies produce weather data visualisations so sterile and perfect that they became dangerously confusing, creating false impressions of a tamed environment, or in the author's words, 'a crisis of the settler environmental imagination' (p.164).

In *Immeasurable Weather* Grossman presents a substantive analysis of the history of American weather science that crosses national borders and engages discerningly with the existing international literature (p.27). She proposes a rethinking of settler logics and a reassessment of science's trust in numerical truths. The book is successful in questioning 'bounded, object-oriented' science (p.132). In it, Grossman advocates for settler responsibility and restorative and transformative justice. Even if she does not expand on how this might materialise, Grossman's book has paved the way for future scholarly research into these issues.

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