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## Bloom, Lisa E., (2022) **Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics: Artists Reimagine the Arctic and Antarctic.** Duke University Press.

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In his 2016 novel about climate change in the poles, Ilija Trojanow attempts to map what Glenn Albrecht (2007) calls “solastalgia.” The glaciologist, Zeno Hintermeier’s growing ennui at the loss of an Antarctic glacier serves as a poignant demonstration of Albrecht’s neologism where a sense of displacement and psychic perturbation accompanying the destruction of habitats— specifically ecological connections that structure an individual’s or community’s conception of identity as a place-based formation— is also applicable to a generalised affective condition that accrues out of inhabiting the Anthropocene’s depleted planetary commons. A possible way out of the impasse of incomprehensibility when confronted with the gargantuan scale of climate catastrophe, Trojanow’s book seems to suggest, is to radicalise the very limits of perception. At once geographically, meteorologically, and culturally singular, and nodally “intertwined with global networks of ideas, practices, objects, and technologies” (Roberts et al., 2016, p. vi) the poles are a conceptually rich domain for articulating a deep history of anthropogenic relationship with the planet. In her new work, *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics* (2022) Lisa E. Bloom draws our attention to this capacity of contemporary visual art on polar regions to resignify polar topographies and critically comment on the role of representation in structuring global conceptions of the poles.

### Ice Humanities and the new polar aesthetics

Bloom’s work is part of an emerging field of scholarship in the last two decades that rearticulate the poles as an archivally dense and imaginatively loaded site. These studies testify to how polar geographies are incompletely mapped and yet overdetermined through representational mediation— a paradox explained by Stenberg et al. in their book *Contesting the Arctic* (2015) as follows: “The partial state of surveys and maps reminds us, every time a ship goes aground in the Baffin Strait, that the Arctic is still an area of white spaces on maps – of incomplete images, of both known and unknown unknowns. To fill in these white spaces, outsiders and Arctic residents alike rely on what the authors of this book term ‘imaginaries.’” (p. 8) Such contradiction is also at the heart of what Hansson and Ryall encapsulate as Arctic modernities: a contemporary anthropogenically altered configuration of the Arctic as simultaneously geographical region and discursive formation. Other studies trace these discursive configurations of the northern periphery as exotic locale, threatened environment, and mundane place of everyday activity, and where older rhetorics of conquest and heroism

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have made a resurgence in novel forms of tourism, industry, technology, militarization, and science (Bloom, 1993; Spufford, 1996; Ryall, Schimanski, and Wærp, 2010; Hansson and Ryall, 2017; Thisted, 2013; Dodds and Nuttall, 2015; Jørgensen and Sverker, 2014). This critical foray into the histories, sociopolitical and material underpinnings, and ecological implications of polar imaginaries includes, among other works, Bloom's (1993) own groundbreaking research on the construction of gender in narratives of polar travel and conquest; Hester Blum's (2019) survey of a prolific domain of 19th and early 20th century polar print culture comprising local presses and illustrated periodicals that circulated the Arctic and Antarctic as image and text while consolidating a parallel discursive domain corresponding to scientific and nationalist knowledge production; Finis Dunaway's (2021) monograph on the photographer and grassroots activist Lenny Kohm's traveling slideshow *The Last Picture Wilderness* and the work of a collaborative conservationist indigenous community led movement from below involving members of the Gwich'in community for the preservation of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; Leane and McGee's edited collection *Anthropocene Antarctica* (2019) that seeks to relocate the continent in relation to contemporary questions of global warming and tourism; and Roberts, van der Watt, and Adrian Howkins's *Antarctica and the Humanities* (2016), a comprehensive interdisciplinary collection that challenges the dominance of the sciences in studies of Antarctica and places it within larger global histories of circulation and exchange. *Climate Change and The New Polar Aesthetics* is also a valuable addition to a larger field of Ice Humanities that includes interdisciplinary scholarship on ice that have argued for the deeply politicized, historically mediated status of ice (Dodds and Sorlin, 2022) and its capacity to tie "people and climate together closely, in some ways synchronizing them." (Antonello and Carey, 2017, p. 194).

The emergence of the Arctic and Antarctic as sites of resource extraction, and the rapid deterioration of their ecologies through pollution, permafrost melt, habitat loss and species extinction— are deeply implicated in the ways in which the poles have been configured in representational practices. Bloom's analysis traces a visual genealogy of this relationship demonstrating how the systemic environmental destruction of polar regions is rooted in an imaginary that has historically constructed these terrains through an imperial masculinist and anthropocentric rhetoric of human conquest of and mastery over a wild, dangerous, yet passive nature, what Andrew Stuhl (2016) calls the "the pursuit of knowledge converging with colonial ambition in the Arctic." (p. 4) This representational history includes 18th and 19th century heroic tales of polar expeditions; early 20th century competitive expeditions paradigmatically by Scott, Peary, Amundsen; and the rediscovery of the poles in the post-war era as scientifically mappable and technologically expropriable zones where global geopolitical tensions could be played out as resource wars and technoscientific machinations, including nuclear and surveillance technologies. Bloom's detailed delineation of this historical ground not only creates a context for the environmental interventions of the art that she engages with; it also highlights the enmeshment of aesthetics, especially in the poles, with science and technology.

### **Slow violence and aesthetic intervention**

The work of aesthetic intervention is not just to generate modes of attunement to the scalar magnitude of what Elizabeth Kolbert (2014) has called the sixth mass extinction. It is also to bring to our attention, the intimate and molecular dimensions of our existence as situated beings in webs of multispecies interdependencies. Rob Nixon (2011) in his work on the alternative



iterations of violence beyond the statistically and representationally spectacular, demonstrates how a crucial register of violence is the invisibilization of certain kinds of accretional, temporally distended violence where assault and trauma are not experienced as instantaneous but instead play out over extended time periods as incremental losses. The sticky phenomenologies of such violence register less as direct impact, and activate what Stewart (2011) and Ngai (2005) have described as ordinary affects. These low frequency toxic “durabilities” (Stoler, 2016) escape standard liberal-humanist and rights-based discursive frameworks of normative justice and critical inquiry. When it comes to the enduring effects of colonial capitalist violence this imaginative or representational lacuna precludes dominant Western models of environmental justice and activism from fully acknowledging how what is seen as a universal form of environmental degradation (for which the geological stratigraphic marker of the Anthropocene has become an unexamined shorthand) is in fact differentially distributed along racial, territorial, and class divisions, a distribution that Laura Odgen calls “a vernacular of loss” (2021, p. 7). A decolonial environmentalism exposes the links between certain kinds of ecological violence and the regimes of visibility and tangibility through which the earth is mediated.

The art covered in Bloom’s book, particularly in its antiestablishment and activist orientations, is critical of the role played by hegemonic forms of cultural production in consolidating media ecologies that foreground the Arctic and Antarctic territories’ status as resource frontiers for settler colonial and capitalist extraction. Museums and art establishments collude in extractivist processes, both through their links with corporate funding, and by supplying media infrastructures conducive to the manipulation of resources in and around the poles. As Rafico Ruiz (2021) argues, resource frontiers occasion particular strategies, material environments, and politics of mediation that facilitate the transformation of land and labour into sites of ceaseless metabolisation and consumption. In order to adequately dissect the media ontologies of these extraction zones, it is necessary to rethink the process of mediated knowledge in these sites as an infrastructural rather than solely representational or communicational project. The issue of the infrastructural reorganization of Antarctica as a continent for peace and science is taken up by two of the artists Bloom studies. Anne Noble and Connie Samaras’s photography depict these infrastructural arrangements in Antarctica—the naming of transit vehicles after absent women: a gesture in which anthropomorphisation of machinery serves as mode of projecting and perpetuating misogynist biases by an all-male community; and the architectural dynamics of scientific research in the region, which, despite claims to objectivity, are part of institutional apparatuses of knowledge and power. Samaras’s digitally modified photos of speculative future scenarios like the Buckminster Fuller dome sinking underwater or the sleeping quarters of a camp made to resemble a meat packing centre—use technologies of defamiliarization: harsh lighting, stark contrasts, skewed camera angles, to bring out the risks and violences underlying seemingly sanitised and progressive spaces. Bloom uses an intersectional environmentalist art critical approach to debunk the myth of the poles as isolated and remote. Situating her work in an existing field of critical environmental scholarship that includes Jason Moore and Donna Haraway’s Marxist rearticulation of the Anthropocene as a predominantly capitalist and colonial-extractivist formation; Macarena Gómez-Barris, T.J. Demos, Imre Szeman and Stephanie LeMenager’s explorations of changing multispecies relationships in the context of the Capitalocene’s fossil fuel dependent regime and its implications for artistic practice; and Klaus Dodds, Mark Nuttal, Scott Mackenzie, and Anna Westerstahl’s studies of the cryosphere, particularly in the poles,

as a historically saturated site constituted by complex negotiations between modern neoliberal interests and indigenous ecological arrangements—Bloom explores representational idioms of proximity that bring the Arctic and Antarctic close to our everyday realities.

This iteration of closeness and permeability is dramatised early in the book by an imaginative superimposition of orange skies caused by California wildfires, and iconic images of melting glaciers and rising sea levels in the Arctic. While one is evocative of science fictional scenarios, the other has passed into collective consciousness as a paradigmatic sign of climate collapse. The kitschy repertoire of starving polar bears or diminishing icebergs has not only been commercialised and heavily politicised to serve particular ideological and market agendas without any real amelioration for the actual sites of endangerment; these have also perpetuated habits of apathy by flattening the complex dynamics of environmental damage in the poles to a static image. Such commercial aesthetics, while offering an easily accessible simulation of the poles to an audience of theme park and museum goers, “does not alert them to the immediacy of climate change or the radical difference in the weather now compared to that of the earlier epoch.” (Bloom, p. 31) Far from equipping citizens, scientists, environmentalists, and policymakers with an adequate vocabulary with which to approach ecological crisis, these popular visual appropriations of the Arctic and Antarctic institute a smokescreen preventing critique and accountability.

The “justice-attentive aesthetic research practices” (p. 5) in Bloom’s book (chapters 4 and 5 co-written with Elena Glasberg) respond to the violence of visual foreclosure by foregrounding new ways of imagining contested spaces, highlighting industrial capitalist deployments of polar topographies that remain absent from representational parlance, and creating unconventional juxtapositions, continuities, and collaborations. These artists spanning a range of locations, aesthetic styles, and mediums, from photography and photomontage (Connie Samaras, Subhankar Banerjee, Judit Hersko, Joyce Campbell) film and video (Ursula Bieman, Issac Julien, Katja Aglert) painting and etching (Annie Pootogook) to performance art and site-specific installation (Roni Horn, Amy Balkin) defamiliarise the poles as they exist in institutional and popular discourses, while providing us with an archaeology in Michel Foucault’s sense, of the normative constructions of gender, race, sexuality, and class that inform and constrain the semantics of such discourses. The artists under consideration examine the effects of anthropogenic climate change in both particular polar geographies as well as other vulnerable sites like global warming-affected coastal territories in the tropics, to indicate how environmental losses in the cryosphere have a wider reach, involving other planetary commons and their cultures—hydroecologies and migratory paths— and produce a relational map of human and nonhuman displacement and suffering. Taken collectively these works posit new optics, conceptual frameworks, and analytical rubrics within which to situate these “anthropogenic landscapes” (Bloom, p. 178). They enable alternative ways of experiencing and counterhegemonic modes of perception, and provoke us to rethink notions of form, aesthetic value, artistic autonomy and creative authority, scientific data and the (precarious) stability of facts. Many of these contemporary works interrogate the role of activism vis-a-vis art—and thus the very parameters that define art—to institute new possibilities for exhibiting, display and viewership beyond the constraints of institutional and commercial spaces and norms. Several of the artists studied by Bloom experiment with dynamic configurations of the archive as a collaboratively constituted, contingent and fragile formation, itself enmeshed in ecological damage. The work of envisioning climate change in the poles, the eponymous new polar aesthetics, leads to multiple innovative historiographies



that unearth silenced voices and incorporate into mainstream narratives, speculative and marginalized ones.

### **Reconfiguring polar archives**

In the work of Judit Hersko, Annie Pootoogook, and Issac Julien, photography, painting, and video reimagine counter-histories of the poles. Hersko's insertion of a fictional female marine biologist called Anna Schwartz into iconic images of heroic expeditions, draws on the failed expedition trope and turns it into a site for thinking about other iterations of failure and negation, including the forced exclusion of women from the Antarctic. Schwartz/Hersko redocuments the Antarctic through a focus on its microscopic lifeforms, leading to a descaling and feminization of science and the exploration genre. An attention to marine microplankton reconceptualizes the so-called hostile and desolate polar space as a lively, relational, and multispecies ecosystem, in which the human scientist's role is not one of detached observation but intimate enmeshment and participation. Likewise, in Annie Pootoogook's paintings of everyday objects and domestic scenarios, questions of absence and erasure: what is unsaid and remains beyond the purview of representational capture, inform and structure the objects on display— a pair of folded spectacles refracting surrounding negative space, a suspended red bra, a scene of a traditional Inuit family meal. Decontextualized, unmoored from identifying cues, these singular objects metonymise historical processes of displacement and deracination faced by indigenous communities. The hauntological presence of suppressed contexts and spectral subtexts in the blank spaces or out of place surroundings framing a seemingly stable subject, demonstrate the critical value and political import of invisibility and unknowability as modes of interrogating histories of violence and loss, both ecological and sociocultural (Pootoogook's attempt to visualise the invisible is also a provocative allusion to the history of missing indigenous women and becomes part of a larger feminist commentary on racially informed atrocities against women). This project of rethinking visual archives to excavate silenced ancestry is continued in Issac Julien's immersive high definition videography, *True North* (2004-08) in which a black female actress, Vanessa Myrie, plays Matthew Henson, the only black member of Peary's Arctic exploration group. Eschewing realist conventions, Julien's placing of a fashionably dressed black woman against panoramic icy backdrops once again addresses the question of intersectionality and community. Myrie's presence highlights the overlapping histories of racial and gendered oppression.

### **Trauma, contingency, and multispecies witnessing**

This exposition of the traumas produced by capitalist extractivism in the Arctic and Antarctic is continued in indigenous documentary films highlighting the labour of bearing witness to and continuing to exist in resourceful, dissensual, agential ways in devastated ancestral lands. Bloom analyzes three such documentaries charting the psychological effects of habitat destruction on local indigenous communities in the Arctic. Kunuk and Mauro's film *Qapirangajuk: Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change* (2010) uses the documentary format to amplify the otherwise unheard voices of indigenous elders in their native Inuktitut, while also recording everyday life and activities among the Inuits of Nunangat in Arctic Canada. *Attutauniujuk Nanami/Lament for the Land* (2014) juxtaposes panoramic landscapes with individual testimonies of how native communities are carrying on with their daily lives in the face of ongoing threats to lands and livelihoods. For Bloom, Gerald Vizenor's concept of "survivance" offers a useful analytical rubric to describe forms of caregiving, mutual aid and

cooperative practices including the establishment of mental health clinics by indigenous practitioners, as what enables these communities to not merely subsist in precarious conditions but actively safeguard their traditions and cultural practices and assert a collective desire for healing and justice. The human cost of ecocide in the poles is given a transnational framing by Ursula Biemann whose documentaries have a twofold purpose, of highlighting specific regional dimensions of climate change, as well as creating a narrative map of connections and commonalities that chart the links between various local contexts of precarity and destruction. Tracing the trajectory of interconnections on this map offers, as Bloom's analysis suggests, a more nuanced and accurate picture of the Anthropocene's planetary scope, where planetarity is not an abstract geological concept but this very contingency of connectedness and finitude. Here instead of focusing solely on polar topographies, films like *Deep Weather* (2013) explore coastal erosion in Bangladesh that is caused by rising sea levels. Bloom's inclusion of these documentaries as evincing a critical polar aesthetics expands the climatic boundaries of the poles to incorporate vulnerable areas in the Global South, moving beyond an exclusively cartographic understanding of place to reframe the poles through a transnational lens of interconnected histories as well as shared futures in the Anthropocene. The documentaries' emphasis on indigenous resilience, be it through modes of survivance and community response to ongoing environmental and medical crises or the efforts of local residents to create disaster management infrastructures in coastal Bangladesh, provide vernacular alternatives to the western imperialist and masculinist myth of heroic struggle against and conquest of a hostile polar wilderness. These local responses to environmental degradation in the poles, in which the visual narratives too participate as community owned and collaboratively produced projects, are based on relationships of care, stewardship and mutual coexistence with land, ecology and nonhuman species. Ice is not something to be subjugated, inscribed with cultural symbolisms and subjected to forms of commodification and extraction. Rather ice and other elemental planetary commons enable new modes of attunement, cohabitation, activism and knowledge production that are non-hubristic and non anthropocentric, premised on a recognition of the human subject's porosity and vulnerability which it shares with the ecosystem itself.

### **Concluding remarks: towards impure methodologies**

What aesthetic forms might these situated and precarious knowledge building practices adopt? This question is explored in another set of artworks using site-specific installations, protest and performance art to create alternative sources of archival and scientific information. Roni Horn's *Vatnasafn* (2007) uses water from melting glaciers to fill 10-foot tall columns built inside a former library in Iceland, turning planetary matter itself into its own transcriber. Like in Biemann's positing of a transnational and traveling polar imaginary, the phenomenon of melting glaciers is transposed to a different environment, where immersive installations that produce variable sensations of temperature and tactility, alert the audience to the closeness of polar climate change. Amy Balkin uses art to challenge the scientific definition of data, expose the complicity of scientific methods in environmental damage, and offer alternative conceptions of data that are crowdsourced, collaborative, and dynamic. Balkin's curatorial project *A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting* (2012- ongoing) deploys standard institutional archival protocols for rare collections to create an elaborate system of indexing and circulation through which these subaltern collections are made accessible to audiences. For Bloom these



installations privilege the figure of the citizen scientist as an equal stakeholder and participant in environmental knowledge production.

Bloom's choice of art is informed by an attempt to demonstrate how knowledge shapes material realities including topographical and climatic realities. Thus a crucial component of these contemporary artistic approaches to the poles is a constant dismantling of boundaries between genres and styles, art and activism, representation and intervention. The performance-based spatial interventions of anti-oil activist guerilla art projects, Liberate Tate, the Platform London, and Not an Alternative underscore the complicity of modern cultural institutions like museums in abetting extractivism in and commercialization of the poles. A focus on their politics allows Bloom (and her readers) to perceive the issue of ecological devastation both in the poles and as a planetary concern as demanding a “long environmentalism” (p. 19), one that resists containment within discrete disciplinary and creative modalities, and articulates itself by ambiguating epistemic boundaries and generating hybrid, multi-sited, multiply authored impure methodologies.

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