



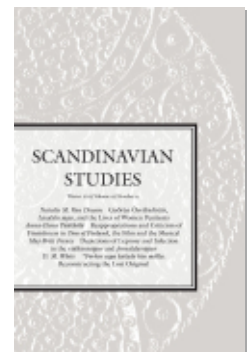
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*Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics: Artists
Reimagine the Arctic and Antarctic* by Lisa E. Bloom (review)

Jenna M. Coughlin

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Reviews

■ Lisa E. Bloom. *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics: Artists Reimagine the Arctic and Antarctic*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022. Pp. xx + 265.

Lisa Bloom has been a major contributor to Arctic Studies since the publication of *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), a postcolonial, feminist examination of the discursive strategies by which white, Western, male possession of the Arctic was legitimized in popular media. Although Bloom has since turned to other subjects, she has continued to publish on the topic of polar discourse. In the intervening years, the contemporary relevance of polar studies has only grown, as human activity in these regions has increased, and the rapidly warming poles have broad environmental and geopolitical implications.

As memorable titles go, it is difficult to surpass *Gender on Ice*; nevertheless, one might wish *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics* had a more striking title, especially since “new” is a less significant characteristic of the aesthetics Bloom describes than “critical.” Rather than critiquing colonial discourse herself, Bloom turns her attention to representations of the Arctic today from “feminist, Black, Indigenous, and non-Western perspectives” (p. 2), demonstrating how these works critique and challenge outmoded and harmful understandings of the polar regions. Unlike the old sublime aesthetic, this “new polar aesthetics” insists on the intimacy and singularity of the polar regions, especially for the Indigenous inhabitants of the Arctic for whom environment and culture are fully

enmeshed, while also insisting that these regions are unexceptional—just as vulnerable to human misuse and subject to change as any other environment. Although Bloom introduces us to a wide range of works from installations to documentary films to protest art, the works convincingly cohere as examples of visual media that challenge the old, yet resilient colonial aesthetic of the sublime and conquerable poles. The analyses are accompanied by many high-quality images: Every treatment of an artist includes at least one black-and-white illustration, and there are thirty-one color plates. These usually allow the reader to follow Bloom's analyses, as well as form their own impressions.

Bloom includes several works by artists and filmmakers of Scandinavian origin, as well as works inspired by or situated in the Scandinavian Arctic, which I highlight below. (As a Scandinavianist, the fact that examples from the Arctic significantly outnumber those from the Antarctic did not particularly bother me, although some readers may feel misled.) The book comprises three parts: Part I, "Disappearing Landscapes: Feminist, Inuit, and Black Viewpoints," is the longest section. These chapters feature artists who most directly challenge the aesthetics of polar exploration and research, and include some artists who have been directly inspired by Bloom's scholarship. In chapter 1, artist Judit Hersko is among the women recipients of an artists' grant to Antarctica who are featured. Hersko re-imagines polar exploration narratives by inventing a fictitious Jewish female explorer whom she includes in a photograph of Robert Falcon Scott next to Roald Amundsen's tent, highlighting the absence of women in polar discourse (p. 38). In chapter 2, Swedish artist Katja Aglert's work *Winter Event—Antifreeze* (2014) is the subject of a lengthy analysis (pp. 56–69). Bloom argues that Aglert depicts "short-lived and abandoned" infrastructure on Svalbard as more recent examples of Arctic "failure" (p. 58), not unlike the heroicized failures of the Heroic Age of Polar Exploration. In one work, Aglert incorporates images of the gravestone of Roald Amundsen and Salomon August Andrée's balloon, thereby "creating new memories" of the Arctic to counter distorted ones (p. 68). Chapter 3 focuses on the problem of ethically bearing witness to the impact of climate change without "sentimentalizing or spectacularizing suffering" (p. 84). Bloom highlights women and Indigenous filmmakers who employ decolonizing filmmaking practices, focusing on the lived experiences and knowledge of Inuit subjects to create "an alternative visual archive and cinematic language" that bear witness to the cultural disruption that Inuit communities are facing (p. 100). Bloom's observations here may be of interest to scholars working on climate change from Indigenous perspectives in the context of Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) or Sápmi.

Part II, “Archives of Knowledge and Loss,” is co-authored with Elena Glasberg, a partnership that seems to have been particularly productive, as I found this to be the most engaging section of the book. Both chapters focus on the concept of “documenting” cultural and environmental change in the polar regions. The artists featured gather data—often data that has been excluded from scientific research—and present it using artistic methods. Artist Lillian Ball’s *66 Degrees, 32 North, 50 Years* (2007), featured in chapter 4, was produced in Jukkasjärvi, Sweden, and draws on Indigenous Sámi knowledge, particularly as a witness to climate change and its impacts on reindeer herding. The treatment of Ball’s work is relatively brief and lacks concrete detail, leaving me curious to know more about how Ball’s work “intervenes” in official climate change narratives and imagery (p. 106). Chapter 5 focuses on an archive by Amy Balkin, which includes objects submitted by people in places threatened with disappearance. (The website that houses images of the items features entries from Greenland and Iceland.) Bloom and Glasberg view this as a catalogue of “climate-related losses” that reveals the different degrees of exposure different communities are subject to, as well as differences in what they will lose (pp. 133–4). More relevant to the Scandinavian context is Roni Horn’s installation *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* (2007–) in Stykkishólmur, Iceland. Horn has collected glacier water from around Iceland and stored it in glass columns inside a decommissioned library. According to the authors, this project takes inspiration from the Icelandic citizen scientific practice of glacier keeping, dating back to the 1930s, and thus highlights the importance of citizen science in creating and maintaining human relationships to landscapes (p. 143). They argue that Horn’s presentation of the Arctic counters the late capitalist desire to make the region useful, instead highlighting a “polar aesthetics of mystery and finitude, the unseen, the deliberately reserved or unused landscapes left purposefully fallow and uninstrumentalized, reserved for sensation or for dreaming” (p. 145).

Part III, “Climate Art and the Future of Art and Dissent,” focuses on art and film with a more overtly activist agenda. Chapter 6 presents filmmakers “reinventing documentary practices” in order to respond to the aesthetic challenges posed by the scale, temporalities, and interconnections of the Anthropocene (p. 153). Most relevant to Scandinavia is Ursula Biemann’s film *Subatlantic* (2015), which seeks to represent gradual climatic changes occurring from the beginning of the Subatlantic, our current climatic age, into an imagined future. Disco Bay in Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) is one fieldwork location for a fictional female scientist who travels through time to document climatic changes over several thousand years. In addition to conveying “the eerie temporality of climate change,”

Bloom notes how Biemann “elucidates a three-way link” between ocean currents, Arctic melting, and the emersion and submersion of landforms (p. 164). In chapter 7, Bloom examines photography, film, and activism that represent “the violence of extraction” in response to “extreme industrial extractive practices” now conducted in the Arctic region (p. 176). Most of the examples Bloom mentions are protests against oil companies and the media practices they use to conceal the damage they inflict on the Arctic, often by referencing sublime polar aesthetics. This section focuses on “extraction” as the culprit in Arctic destruction, and appropriately so, as the extraction and subsequent burning of fossil fuels is the main driver of anthropogenic climate change; however, processes of slow and concealed violence are also occurring in conjunction with the transition to renewable energy. In February 2023, Sámi activists and their supporters blocked the entryways to several government offices in Norway to protest the Fosen wind park, which the Norwegian Supreme Court has ruled to be in violation of the human rights of Sámi reindeer herders. Although Fosen is below the Arctic Circle, many of Norway’s wind parks are located within it. A future critical polar aesthetics will have to take into account that technology meant to mitigate climate change can also have deleterious effects on environments and cultures. This is implied early in Bloom’s book when she cautions that “the heroic ethos has returned with a vengeance to overcome planetary catastrophe” (p. 5). Future studies could employ Bloom’s critical framework to understand how renewable energy projects are represented in order to justify or challenge their presence in the Arctic.

Jenna M. Coughlin
St. Olaf College

■ Skinner, Ryan Thomas. *Afro-Sweden: Becoming Black in a Color-Blind Country*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022. Pp. 291.

Sweden, like the rest of the Nordic region, is in the international imaginary often cast as a bastion of socially progressive policy and egalitarianism. Sweden is also widely imagined as color-blind, anti-racist, and homogeneously white. Yet even prior to the recent political gains of the Sweden Democrats, scholars, activists, and cultural producers have long worked to dismantle the “myth of Nordic exceptionalism” and to expose the “white normativity” that underlies hegemonic notions of Swedishness.¹

1. See, for example, Lena Sawyer and Ylva Habel, “Refracting African and Black Diaspora through the Nordic Region,” *African and Black Diaspora* 7:1–6, 2014); Michael McEachrane, ed., *Afro-Nordic Landscapes: Equality and Race in Northern Europe*, Routledge, 2014.