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Lisa E. Bloom

### *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics: Artists Reimagine the Arctic and Antarctic*

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022. 288 pp.; 32 color  
ills. \$27.95 (9781478023241)

Robert Bailey and Pete Froslic

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Lisa E. Bloom's *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics: Artists Reimagine the Arctic and Antarctic* is a sequel. In 1993, Bloom published *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions*, which examined the construction of heroic male subjectivity vis-à-vis people seeking to reach the North and South Poles during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A prescient work, *Gender on Ice*, located thematic overlaps involving gender, race, empire, nation, science, and environment that remain current topics in the academy three decades later, so why is there a need for the sequel?

There are two ways to answer that question, one political, the other artistic. Politically, the answer is climate change. The poles are melting. They were in 1993, too, but anthropogenic climate change was neither the mainstream political issue nor the scholarly concern it has become. The artistic answer involves a shift in language between the two books' titles: the words "aesthetics" and "reimagine" here replace the word "ideologies." Most of Bloom's subject matter in *Gender on Ice* was not art but visual and literary culture that participated in constructing an ideological image of the heroic male polar explorer. By contrast, *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics* is very much a book about art, specifically art concerned with the poles made since *Gender on Ice* appeared (and sometimes directly inspired by it), and it offers an aesthetic antidote to the older ideology's persistence by imagining the poles otherwise.

The artistic answer, then, is also a political answer because Bloom's chosen artists are not largely white, European men but women and people of color (including Indigenous artists from the Arctic), whose presence in, thoughts about, and images of the poles are marginalized by the persistent figure of the heroic male explorer. To perceive the Arctic and Antarctic as these artists do (or to analyze their work as Bloom does) is to do a kind of political work that transforms perception of the poles such that their ecologically fraught and fragile status has priority over sublime images of them as harsh and inaccessible terrain to conquer. In other words, just as the artistic answer is political, the political answer requires art. Bloom suggests that there will be no ethical relation to the poles without confronting and comprehending the aesthetics offered in the work of contemporary artists who provide alternatives to masculinities bound up with ecological harm to permafrost and icebergs as the planet warms.

To articulate her case, Bloom divides the book into three parts, each consisting of two or three chapters. Each chapter contains an introduction and a conclusion between which Bloom discusses artists and their work in tidy units. While this pattern of one capsule description after another sometimes becomes repetitive, it provides a clear sense of order to Bloom's approach to her topics and makes navigating the book straightforward. Indeed, clarity of argument is one of the book's virtues.

In the first part, "Disappearing Landscapes: Feminist, Inuit, and Black Viewpoints," Bloom introduces the aesthetic category with which *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics* is most intensely engaged: the sublime. She is uneasy about this category's widespread mobilization, favoring the work of artists who "want to transform our affective and aesthetic responses to [ . . . ] challenge the dominant and narrow mainstream media approach that equates climate change with apocalyptic spectacles of melting ice and masculinist imagery of sublime wilderness and imperial heroics" (29). Against such imagery, Bloom mobilizes her analyses of mostly research-driven, project-based contemporary art, largely in lens-based media and often making use of installation, to foreground historically informed and politically thoughtful points of view from feminist, Black, and Indigenous artists such as Anne Noble, Isaac Julien, and Zacharias Kunuk (Inuk). These works tend to blend poetics and documentary in imaginative and rooted ways to contest historical male heroics and continuing projections of emptiness onto the polar landscape. Through this work and Bloom's

accounts of it, sublime vastness encounters sufficient qualification, historicization, and population to demonstrate that the poles are real places inhabited by real people, not fantastical projections, and this construction of relatability is key to the new polar aesthetic she champions.

The book's second part, written in collaboration with Elena Glasberg, focuses especially on projects that engage with Indigenous perspectives. Titled "Archives of Knowledge and Loss," this part foregrounds artists whose "work points to unprecedented material-environmental conditions not picked up by official state or scientific discourse" (106). Artists like Subhankar Banerjee, Lilian Ball, Andrea Bowers, and Annie Pootoogook (Inuk) collaborate with Indigenous communities (or, in the case of Pootoogook, are Indigenous) to confront how governments and science treat data to produce knowledge about the poles. Against the rigid informatics of the state and technocratic knowledge, Bloom and Glasberg suggest that artists use data in other ways or generate other kinds of data that result in representations of the polar regions incompatible with the interests of power and its monetary support for research. Here, the new polar aesthetic functions as an alternative not to other aesthetics but to scientific ways of knowing that, through government funding and administrative management, research is turned into policy that is then brought to bear on the poles.

"Climate Art and the Future of Art and Dissent," the book's third and final part, combines one chapter on new approaches to documentary cinema with another chapter on activists whose work engages with art or visual culture. While these might seem to be separate concerns, each traffics in the movement of Bloom's new polar aesthetics out of the art world (and academia, where many of the artists she discusses work) into wider circulation. In a brief conclusion, Bloom asserts that these filmmakers and activists, like the artists she also discusses in the book, urge people to rethink time, "shifting the temporalities of planning and action to the here and now rather than to the statistical calculation of futurity of market-based neoliberal governments" (196). This is good advice that is assuredly being ignored right now by market-based neoliberal governments the world over.

Since its publication, *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics* has been widely reviewed in art history, environmental studies, Scandinavian studies, postcolonial studies, and more general humanities and social sciences publications. That is a testament to its broad relevance and the widespread enthusiasm for work on its topic. There are a few fields in which the book has not, to our knowledge, been reviewed yet: Indigenous studies, Russian or Slavic studies, and aesthetics. Why? Though many of the artists Bloom discusses collaborate with Indigenous communities, she speaks about few Indigenous artists, which is odd as Indigenous art is, more or less by definition, concerned with land, the word "Indigenous" having roots that mean "from the land." As such Indigenous artists from the Arctic would seemingly have much to say about the land and water (and ice) in the far north. Kunuk and Pootoogook are both worthy of the attention Bloom pays them. Still, a look into any issue of *Inuit Art Quarterly* will turn up many more makers of art and film deserving such recognition. Likewise, Sámi artists, absent from the book, have been discussed well, especially in relationship to environmental concerns, in recent publications by the Office of Contemporary Art Norway. Russian artists, Indigenous or otherwise, and Russia's Arctic and Antarctic enterprises receive sparse mention despite Russia's longstanding and intense involvement in polar regions.

Finally, concerning the new polar aesthetics around which the book is based: If aesthetic philosophers have not found value in *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics*, then aesthetics have less primacy here than subject matter. If so, then Bloom's book takes its place within an emerging discourse about art related to the polar regions, from books like Christopher P. Heuer's *Into the White: The Renaissance Arctic and the End of the Image* to recent exhibitions like *INUA*, the inaugural presentation at Qaumajuq, a new museum in Winnipeg dedicated to Inuit art. Within that discourse, *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics* figures as the most comprehensive accounting yet of contemporary polar art and the point of departure for any further thinking on the subject. It is the most thorough attempt to think through aesthetic questions to which the poles and art about them give rise. Calibrating aesthetics that can convince or compel the heroic white male captains of industry and heads of state to stop extracting and vacate power remains an outstanding challenge, but *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics: Artists Reimagine the Arctic and Antarctic* will be helpful to those who feel up to it.

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