

Book reviews

through which ideas of ‘nature’ and ‘wilderness’ are constructed and reinforced through banal national images.

Each of the central chapters of the book trace the specific and unique history of the four symbolic representations. At the same time, clear themes emerge in the meta-narrative surrounding the origin and evolution of the nation. Canada is portrayed as a wild and open landscape, a space for certain bodies to pursue dreams of material well-being. Categories of the colonized and colonizer are secured and reinforced in many ways. Male territorial mastery is also a common thread. As an example, the Canadian Pacific Railway can be considered as an emblem of masculinity’s domination over nature. This characterization was simultaneously denied to racialized bodies, whereby boundaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’ were construed through various means, such as homophobic sexual paranoia about men from ‘the Far East.’ Central to the evolution of each of these symbols is the parasitic Canadian relationship with Indigenous peoples—the simultaneous historic erasure as well as a spectacularization or fetishization of the ‘Indian,’ which is wrapped up in the narratives surrounding these banal national symbols as well as Canadian identity in itself.

The second portion of each chapter is dedicated to presenting the work of contemporary artists who challenge the dominant cultural myths associated with these banal national symbols. The creative interventions are diverse both in medium and intention—ranging from satirical sculptures that play with behavioural codes of female sexuality (e.g., *The Spirit of Canada Eating Beaver* by Wendy Coburn), to Richard Fung’s video *Dirty Laundry*, which challenges prevailing historical memory surrounding the Canada Pacific Railway both in form and in content. The images and narrative of the video serve to problematize misconceptions regarding the Chinese workers who built the railroad, as well as the considerable absence of their memory altogether. At the same time, through the style of the film, which presents multiple and conflicting narratives, the very notion of historical

truth is destabilized.

As mentioned, a common thread within the book is the (mis)representation of Indigenous peoples, which, through both systemic erasure as well as strategic appropriation of ‘the Indian’ caricature, is a key component of the Canadian origin myth as represented within the national symbols described. While many of the artistic works that play with/against the first three symbols address the racialized discourse of “white national belonging,” the fourth chapter looks specifically at how Indigenous artists have responded to ‘Indianness,’ which arguably continues to haunt Canadian national memory. The works described engage in “tactics of appropriation” whereby the artists present a form of mimicry that strategically intensifies certain aspects of misrepresentation, and also refute other characterizations to be substituted with their own self-image.

Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination

By Nicole Seymour, Illinois UP, 2013 \$25.00

REVIEWED BY CAMERON BUTLER

Nicole Seymour’s *Strange Natures* makes a strong case for the need to cultivate a queer ecological empathy that celebrates the strange and ugly, promotes difference, and rejects constructions that oppress and divide, be it for bodies or landscapes. Her work is one in the growing field of queer ecology, seeking to destabilize our understanding of ‘the natural’ and reconfigure our relationship with/in nature. Seymour’s archive is comprised predominately of American films and novels, from 1987 to 2006. The book contains a thorough introduction and four chapters of critical readings of her archive, as well as a short conclusion. Throughout the book, she engages with major queer theorists, such as Lee Edelman, Judith Butler, and José Muñoz, and builds on the works of queer ecological writers, including Catriona Sandilands, Greta Gaard, Noël Sturgeon, and Gordon Brent Ingram.

The introduction traces the histor-

The content and format of *Creative Subversions* are both clear and insightful, and the writing is complemented by the many images that supplement the analysis. The theoretical concepts of banal nationalism and haunting are effectively woven through the text, although I would have been interested to hear more about how the artistic works included (and subsequently what has been excluded from this volume) move beyond simply exposing a public secret to achieve a “transgressive uncovering” (as framed by the writings of Derrida and Benjamin). Overall, however, *Creative Subversions* provokes the reader to critically reflect on taken-for-granted emblems of ‘Canadianness,’ and the broader historical narrative therein.

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ical divide between queer theory and ecocriticism. Seymour does not seek to define queer ecology as a field, but rather to explain why collaboration has taken so long to occur. Naturalization of heteronormativity and the labeling of queers as being “against nature” have stalled queer theorists from positive engagements with “the natural” that is so often used to justify their oppression. Conversely, ecocriticism has often lacked poststructuralist positions, opting instead for an essentialized nature, while environmentalism frequently builds its ethics out of concern over “white, heterosexual, familial reproductivity.” Following this quick history lesson, Seymour describes her archive and their places within her project to outline “concrete, sincere environmental politics even while remaining, to varying degrees, skeptical, ironic, and self-reflexive.”

Chapter 2, “Post-Transsexual Pas-

toral: Environmental Ethics in the Contemporary Transgender Novel,” is focused on developing Seymour’s idea of “organic transgenderism,” as well as queer ethics of care, through readings of American Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* (1992), Jamaican-American Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), and Trinidadian Canadian Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1998). Organic transgenderism situates gender transitioning as a phenomenon that is not primarily constructed, but rather partly natural in a way that parallels puberty; it is a rejection of medical commodification to regain self-possession. Self-possession is central to Seymour’s redefining of “the natural,” with bodies made bioregions such that bodies and landscapes are all shown to deserve care. A brief history of transgender activism is given in regards to the development and promotion of the term “transgender” over “transsexual.” However, outside of this section, the lived experiences and oppression of trans people are absent from the chapter, which leads to the chapter at times feeling too theoretical and utopian to be applicable to actual activism.

Chapter 3, “It’s Just Not Turning Up’: AIDS, Cinematic Vision, and Environmental Justice in Todd Haynes’ *Safe*,” is a fascinating and compelling analysis of Todd Haynes’s film *Safe* (1995), which follows the deteriorating health of a suburban housewife supposedly suffering from chemical hypersensitivity. Seymour suggests that the decidedly queer film techniques and narrative style highlight the processes that render marginalized bodies, and their suffering, invisible. She goes beyond previous analyses of the film and argues that *Safe* negotiates and deeply complicates environmental injustice by showing how public and private spheres overlap in incredibly intimate ways, and are simultaneously gendered, raced, and classed. Most importantly, how, and which, bodies and spaces are deemed ‘safe’ or ‘unsafe’ is deconstructed, making a convincing case for how her queer ecological empathy, based on patience, attentiveness, and appreciation of the unfamiliar or different, can expand understandings of structural violence as

demonstrated through environmental racism, classism, and sexism.

Chapter 4, “‘Ranch Stiffs’ and ‘Beach Cowboys’ in the Shrinking Public Sphere: Sexual Domestication in *Brokeback Mountain* and *Surf Party*,” is the longest, and arguably strongest, chapter of the book. Seymour is able to bring a unique perspective from the numerous existing critiques of Ang Lee’s film *Brokeback Mountain* (2002), framed as a queer rewriting of Maury Dexter’s film *Surf Party* (1964), rejecting the surveillance, cleansing, and privatization of nature and queerness that *Surf Party* promotes. In *Brokeback Mountain*, Jack and Ennis’ lower-class status are shown to be critically important for “it is not just their biological and social non-reproductivity, but their economic non-reproductivity that renders them abject.” Queer theorist Lisa Duggan’s concept of homonormativity is deployed to underscore the tension between public and private spaces, as Seymour links queer and environmentalist struggles through their rejection of domestication and pushes them towards a rejection of capitalism’s heteronormative (re)productivity.

The final chapter, “Attack of the Queer Atomic Mutants: The Ironic Environmentalism of Shelley Jackson’s *Half Life*,” revolves around queer irony, ethics of care, and the politics of ugly. Seymour uses Shelley Jackson’s *Half Life* (2006) as an example of a queer irony that is compassionate and ethically driven, while maintaining a strong skepticism. She employs a queer erotic to guide potential reconfiguring of relationships between humans and the nonhuman. One of her best points in the book is her development of an empathetic anti-identitarianist ethics of care. In rejecting an essentialized nature, it allows one to “both love an adulterated landscape and criticize its adulteration,” creating a space for discourses that can challenge violence and pollution, without contributing to the further marginalization of landscapes or bodies through oppressive rhetoric.

While a strong work overall, *Strange Natures* does face two issues in particular. First, Seymour outright dismisses anti-futurity, a queer theory

position that critiques all future-based motivation for action as being inherently heteronormative, in favour of demonstrating the possibility of a non-heteronormative futurity. In not questioning the centrality of futurity to environmentalism, she misses an opportunity to explore a queer ecological imagination drawn from anti-futurity. Additionally, the book’s organization around the archive requires the reader to work much harder to bring together the elements of her environmental politics. It is clear that this is, first and foremost, a work of literary analysis, and her insightful political implications are secondary. However, these details are small and the book brings a unique perspective to its treatment of its archive. It presents a powerful foundation that will likely be built upon by academics and activists to continue this project of developing an even broader queer ecological imagination.

CAMERON BUTLER is a final year undergraduate student at McGill University, majoring in Bioresource Engineering and minoring in Environmental Studies. His work within engineering has focused on deconstructing the politics of engineering and engaging with social justice and queer ecology in hopes of reconceptualizing the field as one that seeks to dismantle systems of oppression, rather than support and maintain them. In both his coursework and activism, he explores the contributions queer theory can offer in imagining a critical sustainability that rejects the assimilationism that leaves oppressive constructions and systems unchallenged.