

## Book reviews

tween space and race, and how portions of society have been claimed, cordoned off, excluded or defended for these purposes. Here, the ecology of landscapes meets ideas of sexual orientation and societal feelings of safety. Lesbian community structures in the USA (Unger) and ghetto environments (Ingram) are identified as locations of strife, both ecologically and socially. In great detail—from a nuanced understanding of “appropriately” queer living quarters, to physical barriers and spatial matrices—the queering of space that occurs in this second section freely admits that “place matters” (Unger) in political cultural organization.

The final section in this examination of queerness and environmentalism, “Desiring Nature? Queer Attachments,” looks at desire, with rich discussions of love, sex acts, need, and understanding. The conversation is heavy with a fierce mixture of frustration and freedom. Questions of what is “natural” are connected to ideas of passion, longing, and belonging. For example, Rachel Stein reviews how feminist, lesbian poets Minnie Bruce Pratt and Adrienne Rich expose homophobia as a “crime-against-nature” ideology.” Stein also brilliantly summarizes the core aim of *Queer Ecologies*, recognizing:

the power of queering nature, making obvious the potency of our ideas about nature and our use of naturalization, for ill or for good, and the very real effects of such discourses on our social/sexual identities and relationships with natural environments.

Moreover, the contribution by Castriona Mortimer-Sandilands, “Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies,” works with what is most troubling within the crossing of environmental and queer epistemologies: sadness. Grief lies in the myth that only human societies are violent and unaccepting, and that all others—meant generally (the environment) or specifically (other species)—are peaceful and forgiving; angst is centered in the absence of a safe resting spot. Environmental destruction

parallels societal oppression, and then twirls and combines in a multitude of complex cultural constraints. Mortimer-Sandilands points to mourning, fear, and pain as universalities. Ecological sadness is not set apart from heteronormative oppression—instead they are jointly encased in an overarching state of grieving.

*Queer Ecologies* is important on many levels of queer and ecological thinking. Problems and triumphs of emotion, fear, oppression, freedom, and understanding flow throughout, making this volume essential to the current

discourses of sexuality, human and other-than-human interconnectivity, and environmental malaise.

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## The Once and Future World: Nature as it Was, as it Is, as it Could Be

By J.B. MacKinnon, Random House Canada, 2013 \$29.95

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REVIEWED BY SARAH MAY LINDSAY

J.B. MacKinnon’s *The Once and Future World* aims to displace utopian ideas of a ‘perfect’ pre-*Homo sapiens* planet, as well as fictional past accounts of societal peace with ‘nature’. Indeed, MacKinnon paints a powerful temporal trail of ecological loss, expertly situating social phenomena within the larger context of systemic, planetary destruction. Fundamentally, in *Future World*, human societies have perpetually maimed much that was ‘natural’ under the guise of ‘progress’; MacKinnon more precisely explains progress as anthropocentric ‘greed.’ What was once ‘natural’ bears little resemblance to current environmental conditions, as problems such as species extinction, pollution, climate change, habitat loss and poverty are the new normal. *Future World* seeks to reconnect humanity with ecology, pointing to the impossibility of disconnection: humans are in and of our ‘environment.’

This is a work of non-fiction, yet the content and beauty of the author’s prose would lead you to believe you are a reading an account of another place, another time, another world altogether. MacKinnon gently prods the reader with intriguing historical myths of “what once was” while vehemently seizing his audience with warnings of

what will be. This, however, is not a tale steeped in desperation or melancholic messages of the end of days. There are triumphant stories of resilience despite apocalyptic change. Take, for example, the alternate telling of the fate of Rapa Nui’s (Easter Island’s) human citizens. The familiar fable is that the island’s Polynesian settlers harvested the native tree species population to the point of extinction despite their complete reliance on the trees’ existence for their own survival. Excess and greed thus fueled and determined the settlers’ own demise. MacKinnon offers up a competing, increasingly probable fate for at least the humans of Rapa Nui. In this version, the native trees are still culled, yet the Rapa Nuians remain in healthy numbers, having *adapted* to the environmental shift through alternate (rock) gardening practices and the routine consumption of the rat “pests” they had (unknowingly) brought with them from the mainland.

Neither telling has been concretely “proven.” MacKinnon uses these alternate accounts strategically, cautioning that greed in human societies may manifest as a complete disregard for nonhuman animals and the environment, or that, conversely, species annihilation in places of limited and competing re-

sources (i.e. anywhere on earth) is not inevitable. The latter tale is, then, a story of human ingenuity and resilience, not folly—or so it seems.

These two opposing tales describe precisely the metaphoric fork in the road at which we are positioned today. In scenario one, humankind continues its global assassination of all that is Other, bringing to fruition an end day where all life collapses in permanence. Alternately, working with incrementally fewer resources amidst continuous decimation, the human species adapts and persists indefinitely.

MacKinnon's collection of societal triumphs and dramatic environmental change lead the reader toward what the author observes to be an injurious, deep-seeded social condition. Central to the phenomenon of disconnection is human distance from the nonhuman world. Here, this nature includes other species as well as aspects of our physical environment. MacKinnon appropriately identifies the importance of social relationships and contrasts this with the troublesome dominant belief in the inapplicability (indeed, ridiculousness) of nonhuman/human connectivity in Western society. Motivating this move away from symbiotic human and non-human life is knowledge, or, more accurately, a societal, insidious tendency toward a lack of knowledge. Ignorance here is often a choice. MacKinnon suggests that although the discontinuity of human societies prohibits sweeping

statements, one key condition has been well documented over and over: human cultures choose to forget. We rewrite and overwrite what is or was 'normal' within our lives, our connections with other lives and the relationship between the two. By shifting the baseline, we experience "environmental amnesia," where what was, is erased and replaced with a perpetual 'new' reality. Indeed, St. Augustine's inquiry—"How then am I to find you, if I have no memory of you?"—is easily answered with our silent proclamation that this is of no real concern; we will forever endure.

MacKinnon challenges this Utopian ontology with faith—however tenuous—in humanity's ability to gain sight through knowledge and a belief that anthropocentric power could prove essential rather than caustic. Tapping into the 'unique' human ability to survive, thrive, resurrect, rework, and revive, we could shed our falsely amnesiac tendencies for a global rewrite of sorts.

This work, then, should serve environmental and social justice scholars well as an accessible place to situate and grow anti-apocalyptic discourse. MacKinnon's assemblage of well-placed, research-based analogies and historical accounts in *Future World*, collectively and cleverly persuade the reader that, as a species, humans alone have the capability to not restore, but to rewire—"rewild"—our world. From this perspective, all may not be lost (or forgotten).

and reimagine such notions of Canadianness. In this way Francis offers an insightful and thought-provoking perspective on the topic, and contributes to the broader task of generating an "imaginative reconsideration" of Canadian cultural mythology.

This book draws from a rich and diverse body of theoretical work. As a whole, the analysis is grounded in Michael Billig's concept of banal nationalism, which describes the relationship between common national symbols and identity formation. However, Francis pushes this idea forward by connecting to her earlier writings, and the wider literature on haunting and the notion of public secrets. Here, Francis offers a broadened perspective on banal nationalism, recognizing the counter-narratives (ghosts) that, while systematically concealed, are ever present within the evolution of such national symbols, and Canadian society as a whole. Francis also draws on the writings of Derrida and Benjamin in her approach to acts of revelation, or "outing a ghost." Based on the work of these scholars, Francis asserts a need for careful and self-reflective practice in any acts of exposure, as the risk of distortion and/or appropriation of the cause can generate a perpetuation of injustice.

This theoretical framework serves a dual purpose, as the objectives of the book are twofold. First, Francis applies this lens in order to carry out her analysis of the four specific national images. Through an examination of historic documents, relevant literature, and personal interviews, Francis traces the evolution of the prominent colonial discourses surrounding these objects, and simultaneously draws out the shadowy underrepresented counter-narratives, or public secrets. She then applies these same ideas in looking at the artistic interventions that expose public secrets and "play with and against the very notion of belonging." More so, while not referenced directly, *Creative Subversions*, as well as several of the artistic works highlighted in the book (e.g., the *Lesbian National Parks and Services* performance) can also be situated within the field of queer ecology, as Francis problematizes the heteronormative lens

## Creative Subversions: Whiteness, Indigeneity, and the National Imaginary

By Margot Francis, UBC Press, 2011 \$32.95

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### REVIEWED BY FLEURIE HUNTER

*Creative Subversions: Whiteness, Indigeneity, and the National Imaginary* looks at the process through which commonplace national symbols carry, as well as inform, cultural narratives of identity and belonging. The author, Margot Francis, analyzes how seemingly neutral and benign Canadian iconography—the beaver, the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), Banff National Park,

and the image of the "Indian"—act to reinforce certain ideas about race, masculinity, and sexuality, as they propagate the dominant "white, Anglo-Canadian historical memory." This is achieved by first offering a critical examination of the historic and contemporary discourses surrounding these symbols, followed by a look at the efforts of various contemporary artists to challenge