Book Review/Compte rendu

Glasberg, Elena, *Antarctica as Cultural Critique: The Gendered Politics of Scientific Exploration and Climate Change*. 2012. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 174 pp. $85.00 hardcover (978-0-230-11687-0)

Antarctica as Cultural Critique adds to the rapidly expanding literature on the lived aspects of the world's polar regions. This relatively short and dense book delves into the theoretical aspects of climate change in a way rarely attempted in the literature. It moves beyond the politics of representation to achieve a better understanding of the sheer materiality of the snow and ice in this vast southern region. To do this, it focuses on literature, photography, and even capitalist marketing practices such as IBM's 2000 vision of Antarctica as a "great location for an E-marketplace" (p. 78) and represents a unique contribution to cultural sociology and social theory.

This book deconstructs the commonly held view of Antarctica as a desolate and inhospitable region, devoid of an indigenous population. Glasberg takes great pains to portray Antarctica as a space of politics connected to unresolved territorial claims (primarily including Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, Norway, United Kingdom, and United States), capitalism (through E-commerce and other failed efforts to capitalize on the region), and empire (through historic exploration). Against this geopolitical backdrop, Glasberg addresses how Antarctica has been affected by human presence over centuries and up to the present. Encapsulating the central orientation of the book, Glasberg writes that Antarctica, as it is usually represented, "is a frozen wasteland that according to Western notions of embodied presence in real time cannot be profitably inhabited" (p. 33). The author is interested in nonrepresentational (or nonrealist) narratives that confront the materiality of the south while understanding how that materiality has been constituted over the past century through spatialization, commodification (photography, bottled water), and conquest as "the colony at the end of the world" (p. 104).

Antarctica as Cultural Critique develops an ambitious and nuanced thesis that Antarctica is a space of hope because it is only lightly inhabited (and thus perhaps a possible future frontier for a rapidly expanding global population), while stressing the ways it is densely populated. This

irony highlights the symbolic weight attached to Antarctica via visual mediation as a blank space fit for social action (which, I might add, is much like the Arctic in this sense). She shows "the problem of the human body on ice" through media such as photography that demonstrate "the complexity of human presence" (p. xvi). This is a carefully argued and beautifully written book that defies precise disciplinary location: it considers Antarctica in relation to often-muted human (gendered, racial, materialist, and geographical) constructions of this imaginative region. She implies that we have all been to the Antarctica, if only in our (polar) imaginations of environmental consciousness connected to climate change, or through a "spatialization" (that is, the "slicing up" of the space through social constructions [p. 10]) that often makes Antarctica seem closer to outer space than that of the rest of planet earth.

As already mentioned, the book tries to move beyond representation to speak directly to the issue of materiality that has preoccupied geographers in recent years. It outlines a compelling and unusual critique of feminism by taking aim at various female explorers who have professed to do polar exploration in ways that subvert the men that came before them, such as, most famously, the Norwegian Roald Amundsen and British Robert F. Scott and the race for the pole in 1911–12. It becomes clear that Glasberg is suspicious of those subaltern women, such as Bancroft and Arneson's 2001 continental crossing (see: www.yourexpedition.com) (p. 42), who profess to journey across the Antarctica and leave no footprints or garbage (both in the literal and metaphoric sense), as did their male counterparts who mapped and named the space as they travelled. She argues that this sort of passive-aggressive competition within feminism continues to locate women on the margins of history and to leave us with a hollowed out feminism to boot: "[f]eminism, it seems, must arrive at the same place as masculine historical narrative in order to produce its own version of the globe, but in this, it is always belated, secondary to the 'fact' of masculine origination" (p. 38). In short, this is always a losing game for those interested in exploring the earth in our so-called "post Heroic Era" given the urgency of climate change (p. 129). "Perhaps, in following this discontinuous, at times self-creating and at other times self-erasing path, there is a chance for ice to be just ice" (p. 130). Glasberg affirms that her goal is to understand the materiality of Antarctica beyond representation.

In what is perhaps the most politicized chapter of the book (Chapter 2), Glasberg offers a close reading of Ursula K. Le Guin's 1981 short story about the Antarctica called "Sur" [meaning South]. Glasberg states that "Sur" "has been almost embarrassingly generative for the project of this book" (p. 19). In the story, Le Guin inserts women into the ex-

peditions of the Antarctica, and conducts a "feminist fantasy of prior arrival" by asking: "what if South American women had discovered the South Pole?" (p. 20). This question guides the main intervention of the book, with many female explorers implying that women would have left no trace or footprints in the course of discovery. Glasberg problematizes this response, and thus critiques feminism more broadly. She argues that the idea that women leave no trace in their travels risks "reinscribing a global feminist discourse apathetic to subalternist politics," and thus a form of feminist foundationalism struggling with its "origins and originary acts" (p. 21). For Glasberg, "Le Guin's female expedition cannot entirely escape history, and it constitutes in itself a type of history. Although Le Guin's women leave no signs that will be recognizable to later explorers, they do leave inscriptions for one another on the ice" (p. 38). In this way, Glasberg labours to show that feminism is also a form of inscription or writing — in this case an inscription on ice "for one another" — that never successfully traverses the politics of domination or representation that it arguably seeks to overcome. Feminism, too, must write itself and will in turn leave its own footprints in the snow.

Antarctica as Cultural Critique promises to make a lasting contribution to polar studies and even sociology. It reminds readers of the value of conducting area studies with a focus on how spaces are represented in art, writing, photography, and literary constructions. However, as discussed, it also tries to understand how we can move beyond representation to understand materiality (ice, snow, water, etc.) in the Humanities and Social Sciences. This book would be most suitable for graduate students and senior researchers interested in questioning conventional narratives surrounding climate change and the polar regions. My primary criticism of the book is closely related to its greatest strength: its level of abstraction. While, as I have tried to show, the theoretical interventions can open up new ways of thinking about the polar regions, the history of feminism, and the effects of climate change, the book would have benefitted from inclusion of local observations from the real natives of Antarctica, which we learn are mainly scientists, explorers, and everyone who harbours images of Antarctica in one form or another. This book is concerned with rethinking the geographical materiality of the Antarctica from a subaltern and feminist perspective, but in this respect it would have been helpful to hear the subaltern break through the narrative to speak with her own voice.

University of Alberta Barret Weber