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Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief by Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman

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Mourn We Must

***Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief* edited by Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman**

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017
\$37.95

Reviewed by **JENNA GERSIE**

In their introduction to *Mourning Nature*, editors Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman write that there is “a surprising lack of discussion around mourning related to environmental loss or dispossession” (5). In response to

personal experiences with deep and profound moments of grief for non-human entities and degrading landscapes and ecosystems (4)

and to contribute meaningfully to this conversation, the editors put together this 332-page collection, which engages with themes of grief, mourning, absence, place, and more-than-human loss. Importantly, Cunsolo asks in the prologue, “how can we embrace the pain to learn from it, express our grief, and then transcend?” (xx). This collection is not a catalog of what has been lost or the future losses we fear or imagine; it is a call to action to mourn, but then to use our grief as motivation for change.

Cunsolo writes,

This collection [...] is as much an ecological elegy and eulogy as it is a philosophical and intellectual contribution. [...] Perhaps [...] ecological grief and mourning may be ways to inform and motivate understanding, action, and change. (xxi)

While some chapters delve deep into the philosophical aspects of mourning and will be most effective in reaching an intellectual audience, many chapters include narrative elements and practical offerings of ways to mourn and use mourning practices to inspire political, social, and ethical change to protect what remains. This balance of philosophy, storytelling, case study, and activism contributes to the collection's readability.

Through their compilation of chapters, Cunsolo and Landman address how the work of mourning—engaging with what is lost, and, as Derrida suggests, “work to which we must always attend” (qtd. in Cunsolo and Landman 8)—can be extended to include the more-than-human (including animal, vegetal, mineral, geological, and hydrological) to help us reframe the way we think about and address the environmental challenges we face.

The chapters in this collection explore specific losses and human (and sometimes more-than-human) responses to those losses. Here we learn of changing soundscapes (Bernie Krause) and changing climate (Ashlee Cunsolo); the absence of buffalo on the Great Plains (Sebastian F. Braun) and the dwindling brown boronia and other endemic flora in Western Australia (John Charles Ryan); and the grief and depression experienced when place is lost (Catriona Sandilands). Despite these losses, a sense of hope is always on the authors' minds. For example, Lisa Kretz explores how emotion can motivate positive environmental action, and in the epilogue, though he notes “a deep regret, a profound sorrow” (318) at environmental loss, Patrick Lane gives a younger generation hope that they possess the tools to enact change.

While the mournable more-than-human bodies considered in each chapter vary, the chapters are always in conversation with each other; authors often reference other chapters within the book, and many authors return to the same writers and thinkers to explore both mourning and extending our practices of mourning to more-than-human losses. Specifically, several authors in the collection critique Freud's "anthropocentric mode of responding to loss" (Ryan 122) and instead refer to a Derridean sense of mourning, which, as Cunsolo and Landman write, is about

responding to the responsibility posed by the deceased and through grief, and of responding through our ethical and political choices. (10)

This Derridean sense of mourning, in its responsibility to the dead (as opposed to a focus on the self), is more easily applied to mourning more-than-human loss and inspiring action.

Moving beyond Derridean mourning, authors of many chapters reference Judith Butler's work on mourning. Butler questions what bodies count as grievable and why, and though "her critique is securely rooted in a consideration of the human subject" (Mark and Di Battista 235), her ideas are extended to environmental loss throughout the collection. For example, Cunsolo notes that bodies of

women, racial minorities, sexual minorities, peoples of different religions, certain ethnic groups, economically and politically marginalized groups, and Indigenous peoples, to name a few

have been "derealized" (170-171); these derealized bodies, as Butler writes, "cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never 'were'" (qtd. in Cunsolo 171). Cunsolo adds other-than-human bodies to the list of those that "do not matter in the public sphere" (170). Butler's work also indicates that the shared process of mourning can unify mourners; this implies that mourning creates community not only amongst humans who share in their grief, but also between humans and the more-than human—that mourning "honours the ecocultural interdependencies between people and place" (Ryan 139)—and that this creation of community can be "a powerful political motivator" (Cunsolo 12).

A question, therefore, is how we can bring those who are not mourned in dominant discourse into our mourning practices to motivate political and ethical change. In addition to any personal grieving or mourning rituals we may engage in, several community-based mourning practices and elegies are offered. Cunsolo and collaborators co-edit a film, *Lament for the Land*, about people's responses to environmental changes in Nunatsiavut. Nancy Menning describes the ways that several religious practices are in line with mourning more-than-human loss, including when humans are complicit in that loss. The London House Sparrows Parks Project—the cultivation of meadow habitat for declining populations of house sparrows across parks in London—shifts the public gaze, as Helen Whale and Franklin Ginn suggest, to what is absent. Jessica Marion Barr describes ecologically elegiac artworks that contribute to making more-than-human loss a part of public conversation. And Andrew Mark and Amanda Di Battista produce podcasts that engage others in conversations of death,

loss, and mourning the more-than-human.

In the final chapter, Glenn Albrecht gives us language to articulate feelings of environmental grief and loss. His term “solastalgia,” referenced by authors throughout the collection, describes “a deep form of existential distress when directly confronted by unwelcome change in [one’s] loved home environment” (292). Albrecht expands the “psychoterratic typology” to articulate “Earth-related emotions” (292) and to move us forward, to empower us “to bring about change towards the conditions of life that support and nurture positive mental and physical health” (301)—conditions that cannot be distinguished from those that also support environmental health.

Mourning Nature offers readers an understanding of losses, ideas for collective mourning practices and environmental activism, language to articulate our feelings of environmental loss, and, most importantly, hope, which each author insists is present. The collection itself is therefore placed as a work of activism that draws attention to themes of environmental loss and mourning and contributes to the much-needed public discourse on these topics.

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